

The Ambivalent Engagement with Christianity in the Writing of Nineteenth-  
and Early Twentieth-Century Africans in the Eastern Cape.

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**Declaration**

I declare that this is my own work and all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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### Abstract

Until recently much of the literature recording the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Eastern Cape focused purely on frontier conflict and missionary activity, ignoring the evolving culture of the colonized people. But as Somande Fikeni declares, “[i]t is important when celebrating the country’s heritage to look beyond battle sites, monuments and wars and to pay attention to South Africa’s intellectuals and knowledge producers” (quoted in Hollands 4). This is indeed the central purpose of my research.

This thesis seeks to examine the influence of Christianity on early South African writing by Africans and the ambivalence with which Christianity is often treated in their work. In South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, Christianity played a central role in the development of African literature through the influence of mission schools and printing presses. Thus from the outset the development of written literature was inseparable from the spread of Christianity. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing by Africans reflects this: Christian idioms, biblical stories and images colour their work and yet are not employed unthinkingly. Each of the writers whom I will explore has a complex and at times ambivalent relationship with Christianity, and they use religious discourse for a variety of ends, some of them clearly at odds with their origins in the “civilizing mission” of Europe. According to Yunus Momoniat, “Their works . . . are the beginnings of an engagement not only with the world of words on a page, but also with the politics of literacy itself” (1).

The subject of this research is three Xhosa writers from the Eastern Cape: the Reverend Tiyo Soga (1829-1871), the renowned novelist and “National Poet” S. E. K Mqhayi (1875-1945), and the little-known poet Nontsizi Mgqwetho (Dates unknown, writings 1920-1929), who is described by Mbeki as “the most prolific woman Xhosa poet of the twentieth century” (6). The reason for focusing on the Eastern Cape is because the Xhosa “were the first Bantu people to be exposed to Christian proselytising and to receive a literate education” (Gerard 24). As a result much of the early literature in

isiXhosa consisted of translations of the Bible and other Christian tracts, and such “improving” texts as *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In other words, it is in this work that the first roots of the influence of Christianity in southern Africa can be traced.

## Introduction

The impetus for this study derives from two related sources, best rendered by way of quotation. In the second edition (2006) of *The Post-Colonial Reader*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin aptly point out that

[d]ebates concerning the traditional and sacred beliefs of colonised, indigenous and marginalised peoples have increased in importance in post-colonial studies. Indeed, it would be true to say that it remains the field of postcolonial studies in most need of critical and scholarly attention. Since the Enlightenment the sacred has been an ambivalent area in Western thinking that has uniformly tended to privilege the secular. As Chakrabarty and other critics have reminded us, secularity, economic rationalism and progressivism have dominated Western thinking, while 'the Sacred' has so often been relegated to primitivism and the archaic. (7-8)

The religious beliefs of colonised peoples are not of course restricted to the 'archaic' or traditional; or rather, tradition is constantly evolving and — as Terence Ranger has famously pointed out — can even be 'invented' to order. This, to a certain extent, is true of the rapid assimilation of Christianity in parts of Africa and the varieties of religious syncretism that subsequently developed. These processes have undoubtedly suffered from critical and scholarly neglect.

The second quotation comes from the late Es'kia Mphahlele:

As present-day writers we need to go out in search of the myth and redefine it. In order to do this we need to know our literary heritage. We shall never attain such education at school, unlike the Afrikaans-speaking child who is brought up on the writers of his race. Those who [were] in charge of our education have made sure that we should never know our heroes, political, literary or educational, so they stuffed us with the history of heroes who conquered us, whose ideas we are supposed to honour. (Mphahlele 57)

In post-apartheid South Africa today, with the ongoing emphasis on the notion of African Renaissance, there is an urgent need to “go back” to the past to recover what was lost, muted or distorted under colonial rule. Thabo Mbeki explains that “an African Renaissance is a call to rebellion” (3), to rebellion against the distortions of the existing historical record. This is of course not a new project: early African writers were from the outset involved in the process of recovering and memorialising African history, heroes and literature in writing. The only way they believed they could do this was “through the appropriation of that which had enabled Europeans to triumph: modernity. Hence the obsession with Christianity, civilisation, and education by the new African intelligentsia” (Masilela 90).

The authors dealt with in this study — Tiyo Soga, S. E. K. Mqhayi and Nontsizi Mqgwetho — all believed that Africans had to incorporate into their very identity both education and Christianity: importantly, not only to make sense of the African past and present condition but in order to have hope for the future and for Africa’s renewal. The result, as Duncan Brown points out, is that among Africans “Christianity has become a powerfully, if not always unproblematically, indigenised form of expression and identification” (23). As ensuing argument will reveal, the Christian faith is neither merely a ‘tool’ used by the colonisers to subdue Africans through conversion, nor is it simply a tool used by Africans to subvert and dismantle the master’s household. It is capable of fulfilling both of these roles simultaneously, while performing a number of other functions too.

### **Objectives of the study**

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in South Africa, and more specifically in the Eastern Cape, Christianity affected and influenced every area of life. As Richard Elphick points out:

Starting with the missionary campaign to Christianise African societies, some of the most intimate matters of white and black culture in South Africa — initiation, marriage, divorce, sexuality, association with people of other races,

and even dress and drinking patterns — have been debated at length and with passion, largely in Christian terms. Also, until the 1950s, churches and missions controlled almost all schools for Africans and, to this day, many private schools for the largely white elite. So, too, social work, medicine, and nursing all were, to varying degrees, sponsored by Christian missions and churches. And the literature of Afrikaners and Africans was, until the Second World War, largely shaped by churches, missions, and publishers with Christian agendas; both literatures, like that of English-speaking whites, were replete with Christian motifs and allusions. (1)

The objectives of this research are (a) to identify and describe the influence of Christianity in the life and writings of Tiyo Soga (1829-1871), Mqhayi (1875-1945) and Notsizi Mqgwetho (Biographical details unknown, wrote from 1920-1929); (b) to examine the ambivalence towards Christianity in their writings, focusing on Soga's *Journal and Selected Writings* and hymns; on Mqhayi's poetry and novels, and on Mqgwetho's collection of poetry *The Nation's Bounty*. And thus (c) to ascertain whether, and to what extent, their voices were enabled or stifled by Biblical teaching and Christian idiom, and to what extent they forged a genuine syncretism with traditional African cosmology and beliefs. Michael Chapman rightly observes that

as far as academic interpretation is concerned, attention to a spiritual turn, whether in the body of literature or the body politic, would be to depart from the abstractions of Northern institutional discourse — to depart from the 'alterities', the 'diasporics', the 'liminalities' — and shape a language attuned to an appreciation of what is powerful in the expression of human experience. (73)

To do otherwise would be to neglect a significant body of African literature which has shaped and still influences contemporary African culture in South Africa.

### **Theoretical framework**

This research is informed by postcolonial thinking, but not in any doctrinaire or theoretically dogmatic way. The research involves the close reading and analysis of the above-mentioned works, making eclectic use of the techniques of literary criticism and

discourse analysis. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out in *The Empire Writes Back*,

The strength of post-colonial theory may well lie in its inherently comparative methodology and the hybridised and syncretic views of the modern world which this implies. This provides a framework of 'difference on equal terms' with which multicultural theories, both within and between societies, may continue to be fruitfully explored. (37)

The writers investigated in this project are typically postcolonial in that they “were primarily concerned with writing back to the centre, actively engaged in a process of questioning and travestying colonial discourse in their work” (McLeod 25).

The notion of ambivalence which is central to this research and permeates the primary texts is explored with the help of theorists such as Homi Bhabha. As I will show, the fact is that “texts rarely embody just one view. Often they will bring into play several different ways of seeing without always deciding which is the true or most appropriate” (McLeod 50).

Finally, the “re-writing and re-education” project to which all of these writers in their different ways claim to be committed will be critically scrutinised.

## Chapter 1

### Tiyo Soga: Model 'Kaffir' Convert or Black Nationalist?

#### 1.1 Cultural context

One can hardly talk of the history of South African literature without acknowledging the major role that Christianity has played in its development. From the time that indigenous South African literature was reduced to writing by European missionaries in the eighteenth century, its development was inseparable from the spread of Christianity. Black South African literature was permanently marked by the “legacies of Bantu and missionary education, both of which disrupted the continuities there might have been between the black subject and the practices of literate culture” (Attwell 180). Yet as Ntongela Masilela points out, early South African writers did not recognise this as a problem and were “insistent on the role of missionaries in bringing modern African development into being, including their invaluable work concerning African languages, literature, mythology and anthropology” (56). H. I. E. Dhlomo describes this period as follows:

It is a time when an old indigenous culture clashes with a new civilisation, when tradition faces powerful exotic influence. It is a time when men [and women] suddenly become conscious of the wealth of their threatened old culture, the glories of their forefathers [and foremothers], the richness of their tradition, the beauty of their art and song. It is a time when lamentations and groans, thrills and rejoicings, find expression in writing. It is a time when men discover in their history, great heroes [and heroines] whose activities are near enough to be of interest and meaning, but remote enough to form subjects of great, dispassionately passionate creative literature. It is a time when men realise they can preserve and glorify the past not by reverting back to it, but by immortalising it in art. (quoted in Masilela 56)

This, precisely, is the fraught and ambiguous project to which the writers with which this research is concerned were committed: they sought to preserve African thought, history and culture in written literature at the same time as working in an environment with a strong Christian ethos. Former South African President Thabo Mbeki has pointed out in a National Heritage Day newsletter that in his first article in the missionary-owned newspaper *Indaba*, Tiyo Soga emphasised “the critical importance of having an African newspaper not only as a truthful reporter of relevant news to the African oppressed, but also as a vital weapon in the struggle to reassert the identity and the pride of the African people” (Mbeki 2). Thus from the outset, modern African writers were involved in a process of re-writing, re-education and self-definition, by “rebell[ing] against the image of themselves created by the Other” (Mbeki 4). Africans “had to regain possession of their history, their value system, their customs, their heroes and heroines, their literature” (Mbeki 4). This ambition remains a work in progress.

This research focuses on writers from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries from the Eastern Cape, because it was during this period that the Xhosa became “the first Bantu people to be exposed to Christian proselytising and to receive a literate education” (Gerard 24). Furthermore mission stations were the first to foster “a written form of Xhosa and possessed the first printing presses in the Eastern Cape, [which] became the cradle of Xhosa literature” (Ngqongqo 227). As a result much of the early literature in isiXhosa consisted of translations of the Bible and other Christian tracts, and such ‘improving’ texts as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The attempt on the part of writers to negotiate this cultural context in order to speak ‘authentically’ has been vexed and contested. As David Attwell puts it in *Rewriting Modernity*: “There are debates about...the place of black people in Christianity, about the value of written narrative as a way of claiming historical continuity and identity, about art and aesthetics, about gender, about the value of tradition, about the meaning of selfhood, about social imagination” (9). These are the issues that the writers with which this research is concerned engage in their writing. They are from the outset far from “the duped and agentless victims of processes beyond their control” that they are often portrayed as being (De Kock 13). Their writing shows a strong and patient commitment to “centering silenced voices” despite the development of African writing being slow and

beset with hurdles for aspiring writers (Satyo 39). It must be noted that writers were not free to publish as they pleased, for “missionary authorities would be reluctant to print material that did not conform to their own notion of what was good for the community for whose education they felt so responsible” (Serudu 1140). As Piniel Shava points out, during this period “written literature arose mainly in response to missionary initiatives” (6). Stephen Gray further explains that “the publishing policy of the Lovedale Press...was clear cut...using its printing works for the general propaganda of the Christian message... a missionary press could not contemplate printing a manuscript unless it is conformed in some way to its general policy” (173). This was to produce “good books for youth and age, for the Lord’s Day and week-days” (Shepherd 400).

For example, Tiyo Soga, perhaps the first major modern African intellectual, was refused leave to retire from the mission in order to, as he puts it, “endeavour to lay the foundation for a native literature of which our people are in great need” (quoted in Ndletyana 27). This of course would only have been possible subject to the prescriptions and confines of the policy of the Lovedale Press. The following article that Soga published in the *Indaba* newspaper illustrates his zeal for the development of African literature as a means of immortalising traditional African culture:

Our veterans of the Xhosa and Imbo 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 must be recounted. What has been preserved as tradition must be [word missing]. Whatever was seen, heard or done under the requirements of custom should be brought to light and placed on the national table to be sifted for preservation. Were there not several tribes before? Where is the record of their history and customs good or bad? Had we no chiefs in days gone by? Where are the anecdotes of their periods? Were these things buried with them in their graves? Is there no one to unearth these things from the graves? Were there no national poets in the days of yore? Whose praises did they sing? ...we should bring to light all this great wealth of information... Let us resurrect our ancestral fore-bears who bequeathed to us a rich heritage. (“A National Newspaper,” *Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 9 X)

Attwell rightly argues that “Soga embraced the civilising mission but sought to establish a new point of departure within it, one that placed an African consciousness and identity within the larger framework of modern history” (47). The fact that Soga’s request to retire

from mission work in order to pursue his vision for an African literature was declined partly accounts for his ambiguous position in South African intellectual history. Masilela suggests that “the reason for this ambivalence is that he has been considered by some of his compatriots to have been a moderniser, through his alignment with Christianity to which his father had converted earlier, and others criticise him for having been a betrayer of traditional society” (1). Another contributing factor to this view is the fact that in their texts the missionaries claimed Tiyo Soga as their very own product — the fruit of their labour. De Kock points out that shortly after his death Tiyo Soga became “a textually objectified figure; he featured in verbal as well as written stories about the miraculous possibilities of conversion” (174). However, the point I wish to highlight is that “his own writing suggests how difficult it was for him to live in the space between this public textually constituted persona, and his more ambivalent, private sense of self” (De Kock 174). Therefore in intellectual and national history Tiyo Soga was initially seen and identified as an exemplary African convert, to borrow Reverend Couzins’s term, a “model Kafir missionary”, destined “to carry the Nguni people into modernity as a textual signifier of missionary success” (De Kock 172). It is no wonder, then, that during this period he was seen by much of traditional Xhosa society as a renegade.

Instead of abandoning his vision for African literature, however, Soga — under the pseudonym “Defensor” — wrote opinion pieces for various newspapers in which he was forthrightly condemnatory of the treatment of black people in South Africa as well as critical of European missionaries enforcing and valorising Western culture and civilisation over African tradition and history. To the *Indaba* newspaper Soga “contributed seven articles, some of which were under the pseudonym *Unojiba wase lunhlangeni* (‘An enthusiastic enquirer into cultural origins’)” (Williams 150). According to Soga the newspaper was “a beautiful vessel for preserving the stories, fables, legends, customs, anecdotes and history of the tribes” (“A National Newspaper,” *Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 9 X), and it was through his contributions to the newspapers of the day that he sought to accomplish this. Interestingly, in contemporary South Africa, this is the Soga who is evoked and celebrated: Tiyo Soga the progenitor of black consciousness, pioneer of black Nationalist thought and the founder of black theology in South Africa. It seems

that it is Soga's ambivalent position and the different roles that he played that make him such a flexible and elusive figure. The implications of this ambiguity must be explored.

## 1.2 The ambivalence of the colonial subject

In order better to understand the apparent polyvocality characteristic of Soga's writings it is necessary to have a closer look at the concept of ambivalence, which is central to this research and permeates the texts that will be analysed. Homi Bhabha's notion of the ambivalence of the colonial subject will be introduced as it points to the fact that "texts rarely embody just one view. Often they will bring into play several different ways of seeing without always deciding which is the true or most appropriate" (McLeod 50).

First, instead of defining the relationship between the coloniser and colonised in terms of fixed binaries as some theorists have done, Homi Bhabha highlights the intricacies of this relationship and its openness to ambivalence. His starting point is that because of his encounter with colonial power the colonial subject becomes displaced. Bhabha uses Jacques Derrida to explain the situation: "This displacement does not take place, has not taken place as an *event*. It does not occupy a simple space. It does not take place *in* writing. This dis-location (is what) writes/is written" (quoted in Bhabha, "Signs" 193). In other words the ambivalence of the colonial subject cannot be simply reduced to a single event or encounter, nor is the colonial subject always intentional or conscious in writing about this dislocation: rather, the dislocation writes itself into what is written. From this assertion Bhabha goes on to point out that the "dislocation" that "writes" is "produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses" (153). Soga's writing is a case in point: Soga internalises and uses missionary discourse to put his point across and to create a space for an alternative voice from within, as a way of "centering silenced voices" (Satyo 132). In *Civilising Barbarians* de Kock puts it like this: "the African progeny in the age of missionary education in the age of high imperialism were able to internalise the language of civility and use it, in a kind of mimic counter-text, against the inconsistencies of its purveyors in the colonial context" (140). This mimic counter-text lends itself to hybridity, which Bhabha defines as "the sign of colonial

power, its shifting forces and fixities” as well as “the articulation of the ambivalent space” (154). Because of its mixed or middle position, hybridity communicates this ambivalence. It allows for “other ‘denied’ knowledges to enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition” (156).

This is what takes place in Soga’s writing when he uses Christian idiom to validate his argument. When he campaigns for the recognition of chieftainship among mission people he invokes Biblical teaching, asserting that “Our chiefs who are White and our chiefs who are Black ... are people to whom we owe a debt of gratitude and loyalty.” He goes on to state that “The chieftainship of this world was established by God. So says the Bible which the Christians claim to follow. It says those who oppose the authority of the chiefs and reject them oppose and reject the ordinances of God.” (“Christians and Chiefs,” *Indaba* 2.6, June 1864: 353-354 X). One can see from this example that “the words of the master become the site of hybridity” (Bhabha “Signs” 162); and the “book”, in the form of the Bible, Bhabha says, “retains its presence, but it is no longer a representation of an essence: it is now a partial presence, a (strategic) device in a specific colonial engagement, an appurtenance to authority” (157). Thus “the display of hybridity – its peculiar ‘replication’ – terrorises authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” (157). It is through this that an opposition to the dominant ideology and discourse is set up. However, Bhabha is quick to point out that hybridity does not “resolve the tension between two cultures” (156), and as Williams opines, Soga’s is “a personality poised between cultures” (9), and it is this that produces “the ideological ambivalences that riddle [his] narratives” (Bhabha 149).

From the above analysis the usefulness of Bhabha’s notion of the ambivalence of the colonial subject to an understanding of Soga’s writing is very clear. Commenting on early African writers and the space they tried to negotiate in their writing, De Kock aptly points out that “it is quite clear that their responses were constrained by the limits of this ‘civil’ discourse”; thus “when Africans adopted missionary discourse and used it to fight for the equality implicit in the promise of ‘civilisation’, ‘civilisation’ itself proved to be the most ambivalent signifier of all” (140). This poses a challenge to Bhabha’s emphasis on the linguistic agency of the colonial subject, whilst ignoring the fact that the mode of resistance used is limited to and hence is completely reliant on the language of the

dominant discourse. This in turn invites the pertinent question of whether linguistic subversion is truly useful and whether it stifles or enables the colonial subject's voice? The colonial subject "may well *aim* to oppose colonial representation and values, but whether it *fulfils* these aims remains a hotly debated issue in the field" – and one that this research will explore (McLeod 34).

### 1.3 Soga in song: The hymns

Today Soga is possibly best known for his hymns, because much of what he wrote under pseudonyms in newspapers such as *Indaba* and *Christian Express* has not infiltrated public discourse and knowledge. The fact is that because of his dependence on financial and other support from the church, Soga could not afford to be entirely outspoken about the state of affairs in the country and the racial and cultural tensions that existed. Consequently "Soga's literary influence was [mainly] felt in lyrical compositions – he compiled a book of hymns in 1860" (Ndletyana 28). For him to pursue this avenue as an alternative outlet for his "re-writing and re-educating" project was not surprising, for as Donovan Williams points out, there was a "missionary tradition of hymn writing, started by John Bennie in the [eighteen-] twenties". In writing hymns in Xhosa Soga was following in the footsteps of Ntsikana (110). His hymns became well known and were sung throughout the region. Many of them are in the Xhosa hymnal of the Wesley Methodist Church and are still sung today, which confirms Chalmers's judgement that Soga "composed some of the best sacred songs yet published in the kafir language" (1877, quoted in Williams 110).

Soga's hymns were simultaneously religious and politically subversive, as Gideon Khabela explains:

Tiyo's hymns created an ethos that was religious, cultural as well as political. It was cultural because it articulated the cultural life of the Africans. Its rhythm, melody and style expressed an artistic rebellion against the imposition of the dead Western forms of music. It was political because it rejected the white cultural values and affirmed the political "otherness" of the African people. Through "the Songs of Zion", a new political consciousness

was initiated and every Sunday continued to be created – one antithetical to colonial domination. (Khabela 120)

Through Soga's writing one sees that, despite the strict missionary censorship of black writing, writers found creative ways of voicing alternative views: as David Attwell points out, "often a distinctly secular subtext underpins an overtly Christian text"(67). Khabela identifies two basic themes that run throughout Soga's hymns, namely "the light" and "the promise" (130). The light represents Christianity and education, without which Soga strongly believed the Xhosa nation would be doomed and not receive God's promised salvation. He saw education as a practical working out of the Christian faith. Through education black people's abilities could be proved and social advancement made possible. This idea was widely held and evident in early Xhosa literature. A dialogue between Student and Lazy published in the first Xhosa periodical *Umshumayeli wendaba* ('The Messenger') illustrates this. Lazy inquires:

Lazy: Is the book like a person? What is it?

Student: Here, it's what I've got in my hand.

Lazy: Can it talk?

Student: It does talk to people who can read it. Can you see these lines in this book?

Lazy: Yes I can see them.

Student: Well, these lines are the marks which I said are words. This is the news.

Lazy: Are these lines the way the book speaks?

Student: That's right. And so, that's the way it's all done, and the book keeps them for a long time. They do it that way with the ancient history of the Whites. It was put in books long before we were born and kept there until today so that people of this generation should know the history of those older generations, and further, the things we do, if they're put in books, will be known by succeeding generations after we're gone.

Lazy: Wow! I want to study too.

Student: You must, so that you're not called lazy anymore. (Opland and Mtuzze 71)

The dialogue emphasises the benefits and power of education, beginning with literacy and the industrious attitude it both requires and produces. William Wellington Gqoba, the editor of the missionary-owned newspaper *Isigidimi* from 1885, wrote a poem of some

1,800 lines titled *Ingxongxo enkulu ngemfundo* ('Great Debate on Education'), in which he also uses allegorical names for each participant in the debate. The poem is a debate on the benefits of white education. Various debaters demonstrate their scepticism and disdain for education, but by the end of the poem Ungrateful, the greatest sceptic of them all, admits defeat and endorses education:

I've been wholly whipped and beaten,  
Truths have vanquished all my problems,  
Plenteous is this education,  
I have reached an understanding. (*Isigidimi samaXhosa*, 1 August 1885: 61;  
translation by Jeff Opland)

The poem ends with him saying "go seek learning" and "love the White people" (61). Through the dominant ideas of the time one sees the compatibility of education and the virtues of the Christian faith, which also emphasises the equality of all races: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.28). It was the realisation of this ideal of equality and brotherhood that Soga strove to achieve. He was determined to see the upliftment of black people through what he saw as the only tool for their total (political, socio-economic and spiritual) liberation. Some therefore claim that Soga "quickly grew into a staunch defender of the much-maligned African masses" (Ndletyana 22).

In *The Making of the New African Elite in the Eastern Cape*, Ngqongqo asserts that "the educated, Westernised Africans have overcome everything put in their way by the imperialist, colonist and racist oppressive white rulers. They used white churches, white newspapers, white schools, white culture, white politics and at times white weapons, to free the African" (257). Attwell puts it this way: "in Soga's case, the adaptation of mission discourse in the English language would entail a transculturation and transvaluation into African terms of the aims and instruments of colonialism's civilising mission" (33). It therefore remains to examine the ways in which Soga's writing reflects his ability to play "such diametrically opposed roles at the same time" (Attwell 35).

Throughout the hymns, when Soga writes about freedom or the promise of salvation it is not clear whether it is only in the spiritual sense that he intends the terms. The first verse in hymn no. 35 illustrates this:

Yes, we have the hope,  
That it will be morning soon;  
The time to make us happy  
Will be revealed. (Khabela 133 X)

The hymn was written during an extremely turbulent time in Xhosa history, shortly after the 1857 Cattle-Killings which saw the Xhosa nation become even more vulnerable to colonial domination. Thousands of people came to seek help at the Mgwali Mission station that Soga had established. Thus “the spread of the gospel and the pain and misery of the Xhosa people combined in Tiyo Soga’s hymns to form central theological themes” (Khabela 136).

Like many missionaries during this time, Soga saw the tragedy that had befallen his people as providing fertile ground for sowing the seeds of Christian civilisation and education. In the same year that he wrote this hymn, Soga penned a letter to the Secretary of the Committee on Foreign Missions of the United Presbyterian Church on the state of the mission after the Cattle-Killing tragedy. In it Soga commented that “adversity was proving a good School-master to them” (quoted in Williams 48). Soga hoped that this dilemma would lead to a huge conversion among the amaXhosa, which would in turn lead ultimately to liberation from colonial rule. The hymn continues:

Your saving word  
Gives blessings. (Verse 3)

Oh, how sweet it is!  
It refreshes;  
As we hear this news,  
We should give thanks. (Verse 5)

Through his hymns Soga’s ‘conflict’ of interests emerges and the fact that he occupies two, sometimes conflicting worlds, becomes apparent. The “saving word” is what he

proposes will deliver Xhosa people from their misery: it “gives blessings” as opposed to the destruction wrought by the words of the young prophetess, Nongqawuse. Clearly the 1857 Cattle-Killings were a disaster for the Xhosa nation and Soga saw them as such. At the same time he could not help but see them, as he put it, as an opportunity for the “future salvation of my countrymen, both in the physical and moral point of view” (quoted in Williams 140). The constant use of the pronoun “we” in his hymns shows his identification with Xhosa society, demonstrating that their pain is equally his pain, even though he is “poised between cultures” (9).

Soga’s position concerning the Cattle Killings is possibly best demonstrated in Herbert Dhlomo’s play *The Girl Who Killed to Save*. In this drama Soga does not speak and only arrives in the final scene, a few months after the disaster. He is introduced to a gathering of a few Christians in a hut by an unnamed missionary who thinks of the failure of Nongqawuse’s prophecies in the following terms: “Out of bitter shall come forth sweet. Out of decay will spring the new shoot” (28). He introduces Soga as “Tiyo Soga, the new African missionary from Scotland. Your own man [...]” (40). In this way the missionary immediately positions Soga as one who identifies with Africans’ sufferings and is looking out for their best interests, even though he is “the new African missionary from Scotland”(40). The scene ends with everyone in the hut singing a hymn – Tiyo Soga’s *Lizalis’idinga Lakho*, “Fulfil your promise”. Though in the play Soga is silent, his presence and his hymn speak. Jennifer Wenzel argues that “the presence of a hymn by Tiyo Soga contributes to the profound ambivalence of Dhlomo’s play” (51), and that his “role in the entanglements of Dhlomo’s own ambivalence is even more complex.” (57) As a result the play ends “neither in politicised clarity nor in Christian triumphalism, but in profound ambivalence” (62).

Mission stations were often seen as the spiritual arm of the colonial government. They were initially established on condition that they would not be a site of political activity but purely serve the spiritual needs of the population. This explains the Lovedale Press’s policy of not publishing anything with political content. Despite this, Soga’s compositions carried a subtle political message. The extent to which the underlying political message of his hymns (that today may seem obscure or ambiguous) was clear to black people at the time is witnessed by the fact that his famous hymn “Fulfil your

promise” was sung at the formation of the South African Native National Congress (which later became the African National Congress) in 1912, and was considered a “national anthem” (Khabela 141). Though the overt burden of the hymn is an appeal for the spiritual salvation of all nations, a political salvation is suggested as well. Verse 3 of this hymn again points to Soga’s unwavering conviction that the happiness of black people lies in their acceptance of the Christian message:

Rule! Rule! Lord Jesus  
Through you will come happiness;  
Through our confusion,  
Lands have been corrupted. (Williams 196 X)

This verse shows Soga’s belief that “it was only when God took over the reign of government in Kaffraria that peace and happiness would come” (Khabela 143). As he argued:

Had the Europeans never set their feet in Kaffirland – & allowed only the missionaries to introduce the gospel – wonders would have been wrought – & no *doom* of the Kaffir race would be pronounced – There is a distinctive civilisation – that civilization when it comes into contact with Barbarians – seeking to profit by their ignorance, which in fact – seeks its own good – not their good – this civilisation must come into collision with the natives & of course the natives must fair [sic] worse – It has been thus in Kaffirland – The gospel has been interfered with, the vices of civilisation, have been introduced. Give me the gospel *alone* to any people [...] In civilisation alone it would ultimately conquer – & it would be unattended by those of the civilisation I complain of. (quoted in Williams 39- 40)

Khabela argues that the verse quoted above expresses Soga’s “political conviction that God will take over the rule from the hands of the colonists and give freedom to the Xhosa” and “raise the nation from the shackles of semi-slavery” (144). Thus in his hymns Soga sometimes addresses God as “Lord of my liberation” (Hymn no.120). The hymn (38) continues:

Behold our Fatherland  
And forgive its sins  
Don’t release your wrath

Lest all its people die.

Father, don't destroy us  
For slighting the truth. (Williams 196 X)

It is interesting to note that Soga does not blame the state of the nation on only one group of people, but regards guilt as collective, possibly alluding to various contributing factors such as the frontier wars, the supporters of Nongqawuse's prophecy and the resultant famine that took place during this period. He concludes the hymn pleading:

O Lord bless  
The teachings of our land  
Please revive us  
That we may restore goodness. (Williams 196 X)

Contrary to his missionary colleagues Soga believed that there was much that was to be valued and learned from the teachings of traditional Xhosa society, to the extent that he solicited God's blessing upon them and prayed for the restoration of the "goodness" that had been overlooked and disregarded. De Kock points out that

his position therefore seems to have combined a reverence for Xhosa culture and history which would have been alien to the typical missionary attitude, with an implicit endorsement of the power and correctness of the new Western order of literacy of which he had become an agent. (181)

In his hymn-writing as well as in other texts, it is clear that Soga strove to accomplish what Dhlomo describes as the duty of the African writer, to "mirror and tell of the people, reveal their soul and suffering, expose their exploitation, fight by their side, sing their tribulations and triumphs, their naked practical experiences and their hidden, flaming unconquerable spiritual valour" (quoted in Masilela 67). This Soga did in the best way he knew how, which was by being true to himself, that is, being, as Saayman puts it, "consciously African and Christian at the same time"(63).

## 1.4 Of two worlds

Donovan Williams, one of Tiyo Soga's biographers, describes him as "an educated black man torn between two worlds – that of Western Christian civilisation on the one hand and African traditional culture on the other" (Williams xvi). Soga's article in the *Indaba* newspaper entitled "Christians and Chiefs" illustrates this point. The article responds to allegations that Christian converts disregard chieftainship and no longer pay the respect due to chiefs or greet them accordingly. Soga writes:

Are these things true? Are these people who say these things right or are they wrong? ... You Xhosas, Thembu's and Fingo's who have accepted the word of heaven should not be accused of lack of respect to those who deserve respect as chiefs or lack of honouring those who deserve honour. ("Christians and Chiefs," *Indaba* 2.6, June 1864: 353 X)

Soga goes on to use the Bible in order to preserve and re-affirm the dignity of this ancient Xhosa institution:

The chieftainship of this world was established by God ... In this Book it is clearly said, 'fear God and respect the king.' Again it is said, 'Give to them what is due to them – to one who merits honour give honour... We want to know if you greet your chiefs with their traditional salutations you who are converts to Christianity, you the dwellers in Mission stations. If you no longer do this what caused you to abandon this fine practice? ... Raise your hats to chiefs and respectable people. To White gentlemen bow your heads gently even though you do not utter a word. Do that to White people who deserve this... This 'Morning Sir' of the Xhosa people whenever they see a White face is very annoying. (*Indaba* 2.6, June 1864: 353 X)

Although Soga did not follow all the practices of traditional Xhosa society, he embraced those he found to be in harmony with Scripture, and applied the same rule to Western culture. He acknowledges that "Europeans brought us many things which are a blessing and a boon" (Williams 167). Nevertheless, as Williams points out, "cultural conquest did not make a blind disciple of [Soga]" (121). Soga himself is quick to point out that "the White people themselves were not born with these blessings;" rather "they discovered

and acquired them gradually and in that way advanced in civilisation.” In *Indaba* he argues that “There was a time in their development when generations of their people were the laughing stock of the more civilised nations who had overcome them in the battlefield” (“Intoxicating Liquor” *Indaba* 1.11, June 1863: 166 X). Soga condemns Europeans for some bad things which he wishes they had “left behind so that they should never be seen or heard of or touched in this land” (1.11, June 1863: 166 X). Soga uses the Bible to rebuke Europeans and to validate his argument by pointing out that “We hear from the Book you brought us that, ‘Woe to him by which stumbling is caused’ ” (167 X). He is using the very principles brought by Europeans to Africa to keep them accountable to “the Book,” as well as to safeguard fellow Africans against the vices of civilisation. Whenever a situation warranted it, Soga used his unique position of being immersed in but not fully belonging to either of the two worlds that he occupied. Williams is therefore correct in asserting that “Basically, then, Tiyo Soga wanted to preserve Black territorial and cultural integrity.... [In order for this to occur] Black society would be purged of all that was obnoxious to Christian morality, but not at the expense of intrinsic institutions and values which gave it cohesion and security. And, above all, not at the expense of Black dignity” (122).

As mentioned before, Soga did not embrace all traditional Xhosa practices. One that he greatly abhorred was the coming of age initiation rite that Xhosa males have to undergo in order to be recognised as men in their society. Because Tiyo Soga did not undergo this crucial ritual he was continually taunted and isolated from Xhosa culture and often labelled as a destroyer of Xhosa culture. Perhaps his marriage to a Scotswoman Janet Burnside shows the extent of this isolation and “set the hallmark on his acceptance of Western culture” (Williams 26).

In his book *The Essence of Xhosa Spirituality and the Nuisance of Cultural Imperialism* Peter Mtuzze criticises Tiyo Soga for what he describes as not trying to “explore the good points in African religion and culture so as to establish which could be adopted and adapted to the new religion and culture”(68). He takes issue with Soga because “he strongly opposed traditional doctors, polygamy, lobola and initiation rites. Although he greatly admired chieftainship...[h]e could not convince the white

missionaries of the importance of the institution in African society” (68). As an alternative to Soga’s stance Mtuze cites J. A. Calata’s views which are as follows:

when it is said that the churches must accept the circumcision rite, what is meant is that all the good things in it must be regarded as a good custom and the custom should be upgraded to a level at which it could be harmonized with the church, and all customs that degrade a person as a Christian should be dropped. (quoted in Mtuze 79)

Mtuze supports his argument by referring to Vide Kuse, who explains the conflict between African culture and Christianity as follows:

When the Gospel and culture encountered each other this happened in certain ways and had various effects on different people. In the main “Gospel” and “Culture” became polarised, one assuming superiority or ascendancy over the other, or looking down at the other as demonic, bent on destroying or stultifying any good in the other. This meant a total rejection of the status quo for the new incoming thing. Many Blacks opted for a midway position where they would practise Christianity by day and observe things of culture by night. (87)

Consequently Tiyo Soga, along with many other elite Africans at the time, for neither valorising Xhosa culture in all its forms nor opting for the midway position outlined by Kuse, was accused of “having weakened the fighting spirit and power of traditional Africans and consequently accelerated conquest” (Ngqongqo 248). But even though the early Xhosa intellectuals have been (rightly or wrongly) blamed for much of the breakdown of Xhosa tradition, it is also true (as Ngqongqo has noted) that they “took it upon themselves to preserve traditional Xhosa culture and history...and helped to sustain it by preserving it on paper” (258). Their unique position and how they responded is best articulated in terms of the three evolutionary phases that, according to Frantz Fanon, the colonised writer undergoes. He describes the first phase as follows:

In the first phase, that native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. (178)

Tiyo Soga's renown for his strenuously literal translation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a case in point. Where other writers saw it as an opportunity to experiment with the text, Soga was extremely careful to stick as closely as possible to the original without the slightest degree of deviation (see below).

Fanon posits a second phase in the evolution of colonised intellectuals, in which the following occurs:

the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is. This period of creative work approximately corresponds to that immersion which we have just described. But since the native is not a part of his people, since he has only exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only. 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 aestheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies. (179)

Some of the features of this phase can be seen in Soga's writing, more specifically, in his letter in the first issue of *Indaba* newspaper. Here he "recalls the earlier life" of the Xhosa and calls for its preservation in writing: "Let all our stories, folk and fairy tales, traditional views, and everything that was ever seen, heard, done, and all our customs, let them be reported and kept in the national container" ("A National Newspaper," *Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 9 X). Instead of advocating the return and practice of these old legends and customs, Tiyo Soga promoted the newspaper as a "secure container that will preserve our history, our stories, our wisdom" (*Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 9 X). And in order to accomplish this, Soga employed as a vehicle of expression "a conception of the world" which was not originally African but "discovered under other skies" (Fanon 178): not only writing itself, but the entire cultural tradition and idiom enshrined within its heritage.

In the third and final stage that Fanon refers to as the fighting phase the following occurs:

the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honoured place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener

of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. (179)

Soga's writing does not reach this stage, however; he does not become "an awakener of the people" nor does he "lose himself in the people and with the people" (179). He simply advocates the preservation of African thought, history and culture. From his perspective, "the people's lethargy" reflects their resistance and reluctance to adopt foreign forms. Though many a time accused of being a betrayer of Xhosa customs, Soga was the one who publicly rebuked mission people and Christian converts for refusing to recognise and salute their chiefs. He also promoted a return to traditional salutations and suggested that "Xhosarising foreign words like ... molo (good morning), rhyindarha (gooi dag), rhyinanai (gooin nag)...should be eliminated from our language." He rather advocated the use of the "more familiar greetings of KwaZulu (Zululand) from where we originally came" (Soga belonged to the Mfengu tribe of the Zulus, which because of the outbreak of war in Zululand had fled south to the Eastern Cape) (*Indaba* 2.6, June 1864: 354). Soga implored his readers, saying:

We should revive and bring to light all this great wealth of information. Let us bring to life our ancestors; Ngconde, Togu, Phalo, Rharhabe, Mlawu, Ngqika and Ndlambe. Let us resurrect our ancestral forebears who bequeathed to us a rich heritage. (*Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 10)

In this way the seeds of a national literature were being sown, for Soga believed that "These annual volumes [of *Indaba* newspaper] in course of time will become a mine of information and wisdom which will be a precious inheritance for generations" (*Indaba* 1.1, August 1862: 10). His ideas were revolutionary in the sense that at a time when many people resisted foreign influence and perceived it as breaking down tradition; he was forward-looking and saw the positive possibilities of acculturation. Bhabha goes a step further in pointing out that in his writing the colonial subject uses his position to create an oppositional voice from within the rules of recognition, which "enables a form of subversion ... that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds for intervention" ("Signs" 154). Thus though Soga engages with foreign practices and ideas

(expressed in books and the Bible), he does not do so uncritically. He uses the cultural repertoire of the coloniser to question imperial dominance and to assert and validate an African identity. As George Heaton-Nicholls suggests, Soga “steal[s] from the Whites the knowledge that has made them powerful” (27), thus showing the power and possibility of using “the master’s tools [to] dismantle the master’s house” (quoted in *Abbandonato* 1108).

It seems that although the aim of African writers may throughout have been the upliftment of Africans, the only means at their disposal happened to have a “western content and a westernising effect” (Ngqongqo 2). It is then not surprising that, as Ngqongqo notes, men like Soga

took Christianization and education as a means of advancing the Xhosa nation. Although they were assimilated [socially] into western culture, they meant to empower themselves, so that the whole Xhosa people could overcome adversity...to make use of the conqueror’s tools to defeat him and in turn rebuild and help other Africans who had lost in their resistance to colonial rule. (2)

In no way is this better articulated than in Soga’s defence of the Xhosa nation in a letter to the *King William’s Town Gazette* entitled “What is the Destiny of the Kaffir Race?” The letter responds to John Chalmers’ polemical article under the same title in which he predicts the extinction of the Kaffir race because of their “indolent habits,” their “desire to keep things as they were” and because “their business seems to be to preserve their old slothful habits whilst their present circumstances call loudly for an improvement” which “undoubtedly will lead to ruin” (91). In tune with a contemporary chorus of negative, possibly Social Darwinist thinking, Chalmers goes on to vent his frustration at the slow rate that education was spreading among the Xhosa and how lightly the Xhosa esteemed education and civilisation, which he believed to be “steps to greatness” and without which “no nation can be great” (92). The article demonstrates Chalmers’s disillusionment with the lack of significant response to missionary efforts among the blacks, which he believed meant that “every year must witness their sinking until they lose their nationality and become the offscourings of society” (92).

Soga read this article and before responding to it in print, recorded in his journal his strong reaction towards his missionary colleague as follows:

One of our missionaries — wiser than his predecessors, has pronounced in an article in the Natives periodical — on the doom of my Race. Without disputing his superior Sagacity and foresight, I should like to know — for myself — Whether in this doom is included Kaffir races of Tambookies — Mapondos — Mapondomisi — Mabomvana — Galeka's — Zulu's — Maswazi — These are all pure Kaffir races — I venture to say the process of destruction will take a very long time to accomplish its work — The Bible is the only Book whose predictions to me is law. (quoted in Williams 93)

These views which seem to express his ambivalent relationship with dominant ideology (white and Christian), Soga expanded on in an article published in the *King William's Town's Gazette* on 11 May 1865, which he wrote under the pseudonym "Defensor" and under the title "What is the Destiny of the Kaffir race?" The views he expresses in this article have been described as the "first evidence of African consciousness on the part of a Black in Southern Africa" (Williams 97), and have earned Soga such titles as the Father of black Consciousness and black theology in South Africa. His argument goes as follows:

Africa was of God given to the race of Ham. I find the Negro from the days of old Assyrians downwards, keeping his 'individuality' and 'distinctiveness' amid the wreck of empires, and the revolution of ages. I find him keeping his place among the nations, and keeping his home and country. I find him opposed by nation after nation and driven from his home. I find him enslaved — exposed to all the vices and the brandy of the white man. I find him in this condition for many a day — in the West Indian Islands, in Northern and Southern America, and in the South American Colonies of Spain and Portugal. I find him exposed to all these disasters, and yet living — multiplying and 'never extinct'. Yea, I find him now as the prevalence of Christian and philanthropic opinions on the right of man obtains among civilised nations, returning unmanacled to the land of his forefathers, taking back with him the civilisation and the Christianity of these nations (see the Negro Republic of Liberia). I find the Negro in the present struggle in America looking forward — though still with chains on his hands and with chains on his feet — yet looking forward to the dawn of a better day for himself and all his sable brethren in Africa. Until the Negro is doomed against all history and experience — until his God-given inheritance of Africa can be taken finally from him, I shall never believe in the total extinction of

his brethren along the northern limits of the land of Ham. The fact that the dark races of this vast continent, amid intestine wars and revolutions, and notwithstanding external spoliation, have remained 'unextinct', have retained their individuality, has baffled historians, and challenges the author of the doom of the Kaffir race to a satisfactory explanation. There has been observed among these races the operation of a singular law, by which events have readjusted themselves when they threatened their destruction. I believe firmly that among the Negro races of South Africa events will follow the same law and that therefore neither the indolence of the Kaffirs, nor their aversion to change, nor the vices of civilisation, all of which barriers the gospel must overthrow, shall suffice to exterminate them as a people. (*King William's Town's Gazette*, 11 May 1865)

Throughout his argument Soga illustrates the repeated triumphs of "the race of Ham:" despite being "opposed by nation after nation and driven from his home ... and exposed to all the vices and brandy of the white man," he remains "unextinct" (*King William's Town's Gazette* on 11 May 1865). Soga's inclusion and defence of all black people in the continent and abroad shows what David Attwell calls "Soga's nationalism" which "involves both a claim to a universal history and an affirmation of the value of the particular" ("The Transculturation of English" 6). Though Chalmers's argument about the extinction of the 'kaffir race' was directed at the particular, namely the Xhosa, Soga's rebuttal not only points to the unlikelihood of Xhosa extinction, but of the black 'race' as a whole, distributed across numerous national territorial boundaries. It is clear once again that in this letter Soga uses "western content" and "a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies" (such as Biblical teaching) to justify his argument and mount a defence of the integrity of black people in general. He did not use Christian idiom merely means of engaging in the "rules of recognition" or as a counter-text to colonial discourse. He genuinely believed in its spiritual relevance to black people, as well as its utility as a way of maintaining and gaining "Black territorial integrity" and liberation (Williams 97). As Attwell points out, "Despite appearances, Soga's use of biblical metaphor was forward-looking, for 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism produced a reevaluation of the curse of Ham which the Vatican came to accept." Thus "Soga capitalises on this revision, using the curse of Ham to claim full access to God's grace and to envision the full participation of Africans in human progress" (11).

In sum, Soga was fully immersed in Christian beliefs that, rather than stifling him enabled him to raise his voice to defend his people, to preserve what he deemed good in traditional culture and work for their liberation. Yet this was not the whole of his identity. Positioned thus simultaneously in two sometimes conflicting worlds, Soga's writing demonstrates an attempt and commitment to be fully and "consciously African and Christian at the same time," making him a pioneer and perhaps the prototype of a new African Christian identity (Saayman 63).

### **1.5 Soga's progress: *Uhambo LoMhambi* – a translation of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa**

Apart from the popularity of his hymns, Tiyo Soga is most renowned for his meticulous translation into Xhosa of John Bunyan's famous book *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Isabel Hofmeyr describes it as "perhaps the most influential translation of all (in the Southern African language Xhosa)" (35), and A. C. Jordan remarks of the text's achievements:

Soga's translation was to exercise an influence on written Xhosa literature comparable to that of the Authorised Version on English literary history. His translation as well as its English original, was used to form a powerful theme in the lives of the African elite in the Eastern Cape. (quoted in Hofmeyr 116)

Many newspaper articles quoted and referred to Soga's *Uhambo Lomhambi* (*The Pilgrim's Progress*). Though Soga completely avoided politicising the text, these references were often used to point to the political oppression and difficulties of Blacks in South Africa. A classic example of someone who consistently politicised the text and used it to examine the nature of South African politics is the little-known Xhosa poet, Nontsizi Mqgqwetho. The title of one of her poems is a case in point: "The hill Difficulty that the black man scales". In this poem she rebukes leaders of the African National Congress who seek personal gain by pointing out that: "Vying for status is lethal poison/ internally sapping Congress...Envy's an obstacle up this hill/ money's another obstacle". She emphasises that "The hill can't be scaled! It's slippery" and concludes by saying "This hill Difficulty's beaten us, / we've tried and tried to scale it: / it can't be scaled by

blacks strapped with the millstone of custom” (Mgqwetho 94). Mgqwetho was writing in the 1920s, and indeed “the African elite used *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a political resource between the 1880s and 1940s, the heyday of the text’s influence” (Hofmeyr 117).

A more popular translation of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into Kele (a language of the Upper Congo) took the form of a serial which “gave readers only the narrative highlights and cut out the theological discussions” (Hofmeyr 84). In his translation Soga includes these doctrinal parts and they are “precisely rendered” (Hofmeyr 118). In other translations of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into African languages the idea of original sin – central to the text and represented by the burden on Christian’s back – is excluded. By excising the theological discussion which elaborates on this, African writers enabled their readers to “bypass those sections of Protestant thought which made no sense to them [such as the idea of original sin].... By adopting this strategy, African converts could redeem certain images in the story – like the burden on Christian’s back – and put these to work to explain the new and burdensome colonial circumstances they had to face” (Hofmeyr 85). For example Thomas Mofolo’s translation of the text into Sesotho “engages with *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to rescript local ideas of masculinity by entering a broad debate on Protestantism, gender, and empire” (Hofmeyr 24). As Hofmeyr emphasises, in translating the text, “the African mission elite frequently turned to Bunyan to articulate anti-colonial and, at times, anti-mission ideologies” (Hofmeyr 24).

In the Preface to *Uhambo LoMhambi*, Soga opines that “his own idea of the translation of such a work is, that it neither be too literal nor too free...both of these extremes the translator has striven to avoid”(12). He presents the book to his readers and expresses the hope that they will undertake the same journey as Christian, to reach the same destination, which is the Celestial City. He even goes as far as saying that the book is second only to the Bible (Soga 7, *my translation*). According to Isabel Hofmeyr, the translation of the text of *Pilgrim’s Progress* “offered a compendium of generic potentialities to explore and greater opportunities for intertextual rescripting” (87). Some translators have even gone as far as retaining “key Bunyan symbols, empty[ing] them of prior meaning, and then fill[ing] them with new political content” (87). But not Soga. This is possibly because it was only later and after his death that the South African

political situation worsened for blacks, and only then (from the 1880s onwards) that the book became “something of a public sphere in which political debates of the African elite [could] be pursued” (Hofmeyr 130).

Even as Soga offers a generally literal translation of the text and portrays the foreign story of the pilgrim as one which Xhosa readers and converts could learn from and emulate, he attempts to draw similarities and highlight points of relevance to the Xhosa context. For example, in telling his readers about John Bunyan’s “delinquent youth,” Soga includes among Bunyan’s sins “cursing people with property,” which is not in the original text (Hofmeyr 114). In the Eastern Cape, however, this “sin” was rife; “to curse the wealthy was to show evidence of envy and possibly even of practising witchcraft against the propertied” (Hofmeyr 115). Soga thus “sets out evangelically defined ‘universal transgression’ and then more locally defined variants: in this case, the ‘sin’ of the idle intimidating the industrious” (Hofmeyr 115). Though Soga did not explore the “generic potentialities” that the text offered, his translation was well received and “the quality of his translation was praised” (Hofmeyr 118). John Chalmers commented that: “he has adapted the shades of meaning peculiar to the Caffre [Xhosa] language to the niceties of English ideas” (1877, quoted in Hofmeyr 118).

In the way that Tiyo Soga translated *The Pilgrim’s Progress* so as to preserve its integrity, his ambivalence once again emerges. Through the translation of this text and in his activities as a missionary, Soga sought to propagate the Christian message throughout Xhosa land. A free or politicised translation would have undermined his project. And it was around this time that he declared: “Indeed, all things considered, the prospects of all missions in Kafirland were never better” (quoted in Williams 140). In this regard Soga proves to be the “model Kaffir missionary” that John Chalmers, his first biographer, proclaimed him to be.

### **1.6 A Voice from Within: Christian idiom, a bane or a blessing?**

As has been shown, Christian discourse played a very significant role throughout Soga’s writing. He viewed the liberation of the people of South Africa as conditional on their

acceptance of Christianity and Christian civilisation. His writing demonstrates the tension between his sense of Christian mission and his championing and asserting an African identity and culture. By using Christian discourse to validate the latter project in an environment dominated by missionaries and infused with Christian teaching, Soga could not but be a voice from within. As Thabo Mbeki affirms, Soga and many elite African writers were continuously involved in a process of re-writing and re-education by “rebell[ing] against the image of themselves created by the Other.” As a result they “had to regain possession of their history, their values system, their customs, their heroes and heroines, their literature” (Mbeki 4). Soga’s success in this attempt has been rewarded through the award to him of a National Order in 2001, namely, the Order of Ikhamanga in Gold, for his exceptional contribution to literature and the struggle for social change.

Because of his unique status Soga was in the perfect position to centre “silenced voices” (Satyo 39), thereby clearing the way for “other ‘denied’ knowledges to enter upon the dominant discourse” (Bhabha 156). Though not ignoring the limits of linguistic agency as the colonial subject’s mode of resistance, in that the colonial subject is constrained by the language of the dominant discourse, one may conclude that Christian discourse effectively provided Tiyo Soga with a voice. Moreover, Soga’s work will remain relevant and worth interrogating so long as there are “debates about religion, especially the place of black people in Christianity, about the value of written narrative as a way of claiming historical continuity and identity... about the value of tradition, about the meaning of selfhood, about social imagination” (Attwell 9).

Though de Kock cites Soga’s position as one of “irreducible ambivalence” on the grounds that “Soga was neither a perfect convert nor adherent of what might be styled as ‘black consciousness’” (207), I venture to say that Soga occupies an ambivalent position not because he is neither a black nationalist nor a model convert, but precisely because he is both. It is noteworthy, as Attwell points out, “his first biographer of 1877 hails him as the ‘model Kaffir missionary’”, while the second, a hundred years later, dubs him “the father of African Nationalism” (Attwell 6). Tiyo Soga is indeed a man of two worlds, a significant and worthy part of South African history and literature. Though he has been given many labels, nowhere in his writings is there a suggestion that Soga had a problem with identity. He remains a dissident figure, prone to literary and political abduction, but

transcending any monolithic assumptions – a man for all seasons, a man ahead of his time. One has to agree with Leon de Kock when he writes: “I only hope that this story will not be abandoned. It lies open for many scholars to pursue. It will remain a history that should trouble us for as long as we profess to talk about a past in cultural or historical terms, and about a future which arises from the past” (192).

## Chapter 2

### S. E. K. Mqhayi: The People's Poet

#### 2.1 Mqhayi in context

Samuel

What is this movement,  
Among men and mothers?  
[what is this excitement about?]  
As if it is for a time of merriment?  
Ziwani's wife has given birth  
The village is full of joy

Horses are running about,  
To-day in this Gqumahashe;  
Even hoes are thrown away,  
The message is startling;  
Ziwani's wife has given birth  
To-day she is delivered of a bold one.

Let us rejoice with her,  
For we wept with her,  
Her petition has been received;  
Her groaning has been answered,  
She has been delivered of a son,  
And she said he is equal to ten sons.

Therefore we expect him to be preserved;  
We ask for all gifts for him;  
For those of the earth and heaven  
For those of the deep unto deep  
[And he be some help to the race]  
To be a strength unto the race. Amen. (Mqhayi 12)

This poem was written by Mqhayi about the significance and conditions of his own birth. He was born in 1875 to Christian parents and named Samuel because he was the answer to their prayers for a son. Mqhayi was also named after his grandfather “Krone” and later took the name of his great-grand father, chief Mqhayi, the son of Chief Ndlambe and councillor to Chief Ngqika (Opland x). The poet, novelist and historian Samuel Edward Krone Mqhayi became the model successor to the African writers who preceded him. What men like Tiyo Soga and Isaac Wauchope had advocated in their writings, Mqhayi to a great extent actually achieved.

Mqhayi, who started writing for publication from 1897, was viewed by his younger colleagues as “the literary bridgehead between tradition and modernity” (Masilela 2). Like other early African South African writers, he wrote within the strong Christian milieu created by mission education. And like Tiyo Soga, he had missionary censorship to contend with, and so had to find strategies for carefully “centering silenced voices” through his writing (Satyo 39). But as Satyo points out, Mqhayi “actively participated in the re-writing of South African history through his poetry and prose. He contributed a great deal to Xhosa literature in the newspapers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century [and after, and] did not hesitate to use his poetry and prose to dramatise the historical realities and distortions of his country” (Satyo 38). These realities are usefully summed up by Albert Gerard:

[c]ontact with Western civilization was also responsible for the chief original theme of African literature, the theme of acculturation, with its many subordinate motifs: industrialization and technical development, impact of city life and the new money economy on ethical behaviour, transformation of marriage customs and sexual mores, contrast between modern education and ancient wisdom. (Gerard 61)

All of these are themes with which S. E. K. Mqhayi grapples in his work.

It is equally clear that Mqhayi strove throughout his oeuvre to perform what Dhlomo described as the duty of the African writer: “He [or she] must mirror and tell of the people, reveal their soul and suffering, expose their exploitation, fight by their side,

sing their tribulations and triumphs, their naked practical experiences and their hidden, flaming unconquerable spiritual valour” (quoted in Masilela 67). Mqhayi’s ability to accomplish this is evidenced in the first two poems he published in the independent newspaper *Izwi Labantu*, “The Voice of the People”, in 1887. The contributions immediately earned him the titles “The Gompo Poet” (Gompo – a name for a part of East London) and soon after *Imbongi yeSizwe Jikelele*, “The Poet of the Whole Nation.” In his autobiography Mqhayi recalls how the editor of a paper in Johannesburg (*Batho*) justified the latter title by saying: “It is impossible for you to be the poet of a place, because we have discovered that you have embraced all the black races in yourself” (Mqhayi 28). Thus began Mqhayi’s rise to national prominence.

Mqhayi was nurtured in a context strongly influenced by both Christian and traditional Xhosa ways, and his writing reflects the resultant tension. Educated in a mission school, Mqhayi was “anxious to acquire learning” (*Dictionary of South African Biography* vol.1). In his autobiography *Mqhayi of the Mount of Glory*, he says “I also aimed especially at a good knowledge of the scriptures. I would pray in the veld until [I] wept...” (Mqhayi 20). In his adult life Mqhayi was admitted to the Congregational church, for which he eventually served as Secretary. This was at a time when many black ministers were breaking away from European-controlled denominations and forming their own churches. Mqhayi was in close contact with prominent ministers in the forefront of the secessionist movement, such as Reverend Elijah Makiwane and Reverend Jeremiah Mzimba, who baptized him and received him as a member of the Native Congregational Church. Of separatist churches he remarks: “These were the forerunners of other difficulties between White and Black that I myself would go through – in the government, church, education, and social structure in general.... This gave me my introduction to social questions, and the question of the relation of the races” (27). The separatist ministers and their cause had a significant effect on Mqhayi’s life, to the extent that even when he moved away from their immediate influence he remained a strong and active proponent of the movement. In his autobiography he notes: “On some Sundays the Native Church was empty; I not only put an end to that, but caused the large congregational church to be filled with people” (Mqhayi 29).

Although he was raised a Christian and remained one throughout, the Africanist leanings apparent in Mqhayi's separatist affiliation can perhaps be traced to his childhood. When he was just ten years old Mqhayi went with his father to the Great Place of amaGcaleka polity at Centane village, where he spent six years. It was here that Mqhayi "learnt much about Xhosa customs, refined Xhosa idiom, and proceedings at the court of the paramount chief" (*Dictionary of South African Biography* vol.1). The time he spent here later inspired him to write the great Xhosa classic *Ityala lamaWele* "The Law-Suit of the Twins" which was first published in 1914. The African education Mqhayi received while staying in the village of Centane gave him access to ancient Xhosa proverbs, wisdom and history that helped spur him on to literary greatness. A. C. Jordan describes this period in Mqhayi's life as crucial in his development as an African writer, noting:

It was there that he saw *imidudo*, *iintlombe*, *intonjane*, *imiyeyezelo amadini* etc. As he relates, he used to sit spellbound, listening to *inkundla* orations. It was there that he first listened to *izibongo* and himself began to 'lisp in numbers', praising favourite oxen, other boys or himself. It was there that he began to appreciate the beauty, dignity and subtleties of Xhosa, and to acquire the amazingly wide vocabulary that even Tiyo Soga would have envied. (Jordan 106)

Of this period Mqhayi later wrote: "I thank my father for taking me to Kentane, for it was the means of my getting an insight into the national life of my people" (19-20).

From this overview of his background, one can see how at an early age Mqhayi was introduced to both the Xhosa and the Christian perspectives, and became well-versed in their respective cultural idioms. Both were to permeate his work.

## 2.2 The pen, mightier than the sword

The year 1877 marked the end of the frontier wars and the military defeat of the Xhosa. According to Sydney Zotwana, “from a literary point of view the significance of the year 1877 is that from then on (up to 1960) the pen had to replace the spear as a means of resistance. Defeat in the battle files meant that it was left to the intellectual to carry the fight” (52). Isaac Wauchope’s (otherwise known as his praise name, Citashe) poem titled “Weapon” illustrates this:

Your cattle are gone,  
My countrymen!  
Go rescue them! Go rescue them!  
Leave the breechloader alone  
And turn to the pen.  
Take paper and ink,  
For that is your shield.

Your rights are going!  
So pick up your pen,  
Load it, load it with ink.  
Sit in your chair –  
Repair not to Hoho.  
But fire with your pen. (*Isigidimi samaXhosa*, 1 June 1882:5)

From the Christian education they received and the benefits that accompanied their elevated status, educated Africans began to see writing as a means of making sense of what was going on around them, and a weapon with which to counter it. Njabulo Ndebele aptly points out that “the poem [quoted above] signals a tragic realisation on the part of Citashe and his contemporaries of a dramatic and incontrovertible end of an era. No more the heroic wars and battles of old. In their place new forms of struggle, new techniques of survival had to be invented” (2). Writers saw the “the pen [as] representing several aspects of colonial modernity such as education, Christianity, journalism and political organisation” (Attwell 5). Rather like an army turning a captured weapon on its foes in battle, Africans began to use the “pen” in order to resist colonial domination. What was exceptional about Mqhayi’s writing was that “when most of the educated Africans in the

Cape as well as Europeans controlling Native education looked down upon Xhosa, Mqhayi stood up for our language and by pen and word of mouth created a Renaissance in our literature” (Sinxo 1). Mqhayi wrote prolifically, not in English but in isiXhosa.

The development of literature by African writers was subject to many constraints. Zotwana frames this in extreme terms by saying that the initial purpose of written literature was “to crush the past and any aspirations that were in conflict with those of the Christian church and British imperial designs” (iv). As a result, Xhosa literature’s origins are firmly “located in the history of Christianisation” (iv). But Mqhayi reacted against this orientation, seeking to “create space for alternative hi(stories/her)stories from the perspective of the colonised” (Satyo 34). He used the pen to give an alternative account of African history, customs and beliefs, as is clearly seen in his famous and controversial prose work *Ityala lamaWele*, “The Law-Suit of the Twins.” This work is part fact and part fiction. The story of the law-suit Mqhayi invented to show that Xhosa society has a traditional system of laws and legal proceeding that should be respected and acknowledged by Whites. The factual chapters are Mqhayi’s accounts of historical events affecting the Xhosa nation, and including brief biographies of Xhosa leaders. Because of Mqhayi’s views and versions of history only the first part of the book was published, as a set work for schools. While he was teaching at Lovedale (1922-1925), his views landed him in trouble and he was obliged to leave the college. Mqhayi refused “to swallow indiscriminately White representations of the African and thus [took] every opportunity to make his own inquiries” (Jordan Ngubane, quoted in De Kock 73). Because of the daring and pioneering nature of *Ityala*, G. H. W. Bennie dubbed Mqhayi “the unquestioned leader of the Xhosa writers of today” (Qangule vii).

### **2.3 uSamson**

In this section I have alas no option but to be guided entirely by the views of others concerning Mqhayi’s novel *uSamson* (1907), as there is no known copy of the book still in existence. One must regard this sad fact as a trenchant indictment of the long-term public neglect of literature in isiXhosa.

Mqhayi shows the subversive power of the ‘pen’ throughout his work, but notably in his first novel, *uSamson*. The novel is based on the biblical story of Samson, which Mqhayi uses as a metaphor for the black people’s struggle in South Africa. The biblical story can be summed up as follows: as the Israelites were under Philistine captivity, an angel appeared and prophesied to Samson’s parents that their as yet unborn son would begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines (Judges 13.1). By using the text as the basis for his first novel Mqhayi localises Christianity and makes it relevant to the black experience. In the South African context and to readers at the time it was clear who was in “captivity” and who the “captors” were. This work illustrates how “often a distinctly secular subtext underpins an overtly Christian text” (Masilela 67), and how Mqhayi’s knowledge of the Bible enabled him to speak effectively to his people.

In an advertisement about the book in the independent newspaper, *Izwi labantu* (“The Voice of the People”) on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1907, Mqhayi writes that “The story of SAMSON is aimed especially at South African youth.” Of the context in which the book was written, Mqhayi writes in his autobiography, *UMqhayi waseNtab’ozuko*, (‘Mqhayi of the Mount of Glory’):

At this time we were busy organising the people in order to be able to speak in one voice in political affairs, but found that nothing was more difficult for the Black races. Even the hard rule of some Municipalities failed to unite them. European ministers were losing confidence in us, a result of secession in the Churches, while the government seemed to be playing off one tribe of Natives against another. (Translated by Patricia Scott 28)

Mqhayi’s second advertisement for the book in the same newspaper a month later reads as follows:

SAMSON —  
A book with education  
A book with truth  
Suitable for Adults  
Suitable for youth. (25 August 1908)

However, I. W. W. Wauchope harshly criticized Mqhayi for deviating from the Biblical text. In the newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu*, he reviews the book as follows:

This booklet is aimed at the youth. Its author states that “he has quoted from this eternal book,” meaning the Bible. It seems to him the Bible is a book anyone can pick up and “quote” piecemeal, with evil intent, supplementing from imagination those places where there are felt to be errors or omissions.

About the political subtext of the book he goes on to say:

This story of Samson should be read by “the youth” knowing full well that it contains many things that do not appear in Scriptures, that it has an undertone foreign to Samson’s times, as it is quite clear that the author has “quoted” incidents from the times of modern heroes in order to mislead, and has added these to the story of Samson.... He just wrote off the top of his head and misread all the available Bible translations. This is very dangerous: clearly, if left to this author, the Bible is done for. (*Imvo*, 12 November 1907:3)

In spite of Wauchope’s harsh criticism and his misunderstanding of Mqhayi’s intention, the book grew in popularity, and letters to the editor accused Wauchope of jealousy. M. Sam Buqa wrote:

A word of thanks, Editor, in the name of teenage girls and boys, to the black nation that has produced the following books: *Indoda Yamadoda* “A Man among Men” by Rev. Bokwe, *Zemk’inkomo Magwalandini* “There go our Cattle, you Cowards!”, *uSamson* by Mr. S. E. K Mqhayi. Though everything appears quiet the youth are watching keenly and listening. These three voices of theirs are conspicuous. Pay no attention to long-fingered things. Long fingers grow on idle hands. They criticize the work of others while they do nothing themselves.

We would have responded to I. W. W. and engaged with him had he come up with a manly solution or perhaps even a book. Otherwise stand back and listen to the voices of men who serve their people. Listen, you in the wilderness. (*Izwi*, 10 Dec 1907: 4)

Wauchope’s proved to be a lone voice in the wilderness, as praise for the book poured in. Kleinboy Dyani from Cape Town wrote:

Now is the time, minister, for intelligent men to write beautiful books to aid the nation. As for Mr. Mqhayi’s book I can say he no longer has a book. This

book now belongs to all the black people of South Africa, for it has left his hands. It is now mine, and among the Shona of Zambesi, it belongs to one who is in the land of Zulu and Mzilikazi. (*Izwi* 10 Dec 1907: 4)

Mqhayi's configuration of the biblical narrative resonated with his intended readership and beyond, and *uSamson* had proved capable of portraying the political realities of black South Africans without being seen as a threat by Lovedale Press, who published the book at Mqhayi's own cost. Jeff Opland also points out that "Mqhayi's *uSamson*, unlike... [other] pious works, used biblical material to political ends: it was secular in intent" ("The First Novel in Xhosa" 108). Wandile Kuse emphasises that the book

offered a critique of South African society in the years following the Anglo-Boer War. [Mqhayi] conceived of the 'natives' as the impotent 'sleeping giant' who, in the words of Shakespeare's Mercutio, willed and wished 'a plague upon your houses'. The image was sustained by the Titan's act which brought ruin to the edifice constructed by the collision of liberal white men and reactionary racists at the expense of the indigenous peoples of South Africa. Mqhayi was always aware that the intrusion of Europeans into the patterns of behaviour and politics of Africans was not always gentle and altruistic. (50)

One gathers that in *uSamson* Christian idiom and biblical narrative enabled Mqhayi to speak to the people in a language they would understand, whilst avoiding strict censorship by the missionary press for the underlying political message. The Press's policy in this regard was summed up by R. H. W. Shepherd, when he turned down some of Mqhayi's work for publication: "As a missionary press, we cannot allow ourselves to become involved in political controversy" (Cory Library for Historical Research MS 16, 321c). The example of *uSamson* makes it clear that despite missionary censorship and the Christian milieu in which African writers found themselves, "it would be too dismissive to say they were completely entangled in oppressive forms of thought" (De Kock 76).

## 2.4 The people's poet

H. I. E Dhlomo claimed that “A great artist is more than the voice of his people. He is their very culture. And Mqhayi is such a man” (“Mqhayi,” *Ilanga lase Natal*, 1 September 1945). More generally, this representiveness can be seen as a feature of African literature: according to Alain Ricard, “the literature in African languages is the voice of the debates of the century concerning cultural conflict, religious, and, indirectly political conflict” (196). An examination of Mqhayi's poetry makes this very clear.

In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes Mqhayi's visit to his school, Healdtown, and the impact he had on the audience in performing one of his famous poems about the stars in the heavens being apportioned to different nations of the world (which illustrates his role as a historian and social commentator). Mandela describes the performance as follows:

Roving the stage and gesturing with his assegai towards the sky, he said to the people of Europe – the French, the Germans, the English — ‘I give you the Milky Way, the largest constellation, for you are a strange people, full of greed and envy, who quarrel over plenty.’ He allocated certain stars to the Asian nations, and to North and South America. He then discussed Africa and separated the continent into different nations, giving specific constellations to different tribes. He had been dancing about the stage, waving his spear, modulating his voice, and now, suddenly he became still and lowered his voice. ‘Now, come you, O House of Xhosa,’ he said, and slowly began to lower himself so that he was on one knee. ‘I give unto you the most important and transcendent star, the Morning Star, for you are a proud and powerful people. It is the star for counting the years – the years of manhood.’ When he spoke his last word, he dropped his head to his chest. We rose to our feet, clapping and cheering. I did not want to stop applauding. I felt such intense pride as that point, not as an African, but as a Xhosa; I felt like one of the chosen people. (Mandela 49)

It is clear Mqhayi took great pride in his identity as a Xhosa and inspired this pride in his audience. But although, like Soga, he was a staunch defender of African pride and integrity, he did not see himself and his people in isolation, separate from other peoples on the continent and in the world, but as inter-related and of equal importance. The poem

Mandela is referring to is titled “Silimela Son of Makinana” and the relevant section is translated as follows:

Summon the nations, let's apportion the stars:  
Let the stars be apportioned.  
You Sotho,  
Take Canopus,  
To share with the Tswana and Chopi,  
And all of those nations in loin cloths.  
You of kwaZulu,  
Take Orion's Belt,  
To share with the Swazi, the Chopi and Shangaan,  
As well as uncircumcised nations.  
You Britons, take Venus,  
To divide with the Germans and Boers,  
Though you are folk who don't know how to share.  
We'll divide up the Pleiades, we peoples of Phalo,  
That great group of stars,  
For they're stars for counting off years.  
For counting the years of manhood,  
For counting the years of manhood.  
I disappear! (Opland, “Two Unpublished Poems” 42)

Silimela was the chief of the Ndlambes to whom Mqhayi was related through his great-grandfather, Mqhayi's brother, Mhala; in the full poem Mqhayi praises him and traces his genealogy. In the first six stanzas the poem is concerned with Chief Silimela and the narration of local events and history. From the seventh stanza onwards (quoted above) Mqhayi does what was a first for an *imbongi* or “praise poet”, who usually confined his subject matter to “the local chiefs of his extended family and clan” (Kuse 184). He incorporates different nations into his subject matter. Veit-Wild argues that the inclusive shift in Mqhayi's writing can perhaps be attributed to his Christian education, as “early African Nationalism was informed by the ideas of liberal missionary teaching: the belief in black progress through education, in race-embracing humanism and harmony, in peacefully striving for the equality of all” – ideas which “mark[ed] the outlook of prominent writers of the first generation” (Veit-Wild 56).

The chief's name Silimela means Pleiades, “a constellation of considerable significance to the Xhosa, since they reckon the years of manhood from the time of

circumcision measured by the Pleiades” (Opland, “Two Unpublished Poems” 46). South African poet, short story writer and Xhosa imbongi (praise poet), Chief Ncamashe, explains that “Mqhayi plays on the identity of the name of this constellation and the name of his subject” (Opland, “Two Unpublished Poems” 48). He takes what is particular and of significance to the Xhosa (the apportioning of stars) and extrapolates it to refer to other nations in order to show what he thinks of them. He groups various nations according to a common trait. For example, He apportions Canopus to the Sothos, Tswanas and Chopis because they all wear loin cloths. The common trait is their dress – nothing explicitly negative is said about it. To the Zulu’s Orion Belt is given them to share with the Swazis, Chopis and Shangaans and all other uncircumcised tribes. What these tribes have in common is the absence of a cultural practice central to Xhosa society. To the people of Britain the morning star is given to divide with the Germans and Afrikaners because they are people who do not easily share among themselves and pick fights, an obvious reference to the Anglo-Boer war and the First World War. Mqhayi appears to blame Britain for these conflicts, thus providing commentary on events usually outside an *imbongi*’s scope. Finally, the tribes of Phalo are given “that great group of stars”, the Pleiades, because it is the constellation “for measuring the years of Manhood.” The notion of manhood in Xhosa culture has unusually potent associations with strength, bravery, wisdom and virility. Mqhayi is praising the Xhosa and extolling them above other nations. Opland points out that “the point of the apportioning of the stars is that the Xhosas revere *isilimela* (also the Chief’s name), the Pleiades, and through the pun Mqhayi succeeds in praising his Chief’s eminence, stature, and importance” (“Two Unpublished Poems” 51). In this poem Mqhayi fulfils one of the crucial elements of an *imbongi* which is “true patriotism, not blind loyalty to the chief, but loyalty to the principles that the Chieftainship does, or ought to stand for” (Opland, “Two Unpublished Poems” 112).

As we have seen, Mqhayi was proclaimed “The Poet of the whole Nation,” and Neethling and Mpolweni describe Mqhayi as a democratic forerunner, “a visionary, perhaps ahead of his time, who realised that a democratic dispensation was the only sensible way forward for South Africa” (Neethling & Mpolweni 135). Mona describes Mqhayi’s stance as:

Living evidence of a consciousness that was emerging among intellectuals of the late nineteenth century, that there was a need for a redefinition of identities. Mqhayi is an individual who, while recognizing that fact that he was a Xhosa, saw the need for a broader, national identity that was inclusive. (Mona 1)

Indeed, the allusions to other nations in Mqhayi's poetry demonstrate an even wider dimension to his thinking that seems to anticipate the inevitability of a global society (Kuse 183).

Mqhayi's position was much like that of Soga, a man of multiple identities – a proud Xhosa, a Christian, and a British subject. But despite the fact that Soga dealt predominantly with religious concerns in his writing rather than political ones, Mqhayi's writing portrays him as a committed social commentator increasingly involved in politics. Though he grappled with the ambiguities that beset many African intellectuals in his position, he was not afraid to be outspoken concerning his reservations about British power. Again this is illustrated in Mandela's autobiography, when he recalls the first time he came across Mqhayi:

[H]e raised his assegai into the air for emphasis...and accidentally hit the curtain above him... he ... faced us, and newly energized, exclaimed that this incident – the assegai striking the wire – symbolized the clash between the culture of Africa and that of Europe. His voice rose and he said: 'The assegai stands for what is glorious and true in African history; it is a symbol of the African as warrior and the African as artist. This metal wire,' he said, pointing above, 'is an example of Western manufacturing, which is skilful but cold, clever but soulless... what I am talking to you about is the brutal clash between what is indigenous and good, and what is foreign and bad. We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation.... For too long we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we shall emerge and cast off these foreign notions.' (Mandela 48)

Mncedisi Qangule points out Mqhayi "felt that in the same way in which the British and German nations achieved unity, the Xhosa, Zulus, Sothos and Tswanas should unite to form one big *ntu* or nation" (61). This Mqhayi demonstrates in the above abstract as he refers to black people collectively – "the culture of Africa," "African history," "the African as warrior," and "the African as artist" (Mandela 39). He goes on to point out that

what is Western is “cold,” “soulless” and “bad,” dismissing white people as “these foreigners” who have subjugated black people through “foreign notions,” “the false gods of the white man” (39). Here a hint of Mqhayi’s ambivalent engagement with Christianity is manifested: he appears to be equating Christianity with “false gods” and a “foreign notion,” yet as we shall see, elsewhere in his work he sees it as a unifying force among black people. The outspokenness in Mqhayi’s poetry shows that he was committed to his role as an *imbongi* – to telling the truth as it is. The young Mandela points out that he could not believe Mqhayi’s boldness “in speaking of such delicate matters in the presence of Dr. Wellington and other whites:” it “seemed utterly astonishing to us,” yet it enabled one to see “that an African might stand his ground with a white man” (49). Mqhayi became increasingly outspoken about political conditions in South Africa, and his ambivalent attitude towards Christianity grew steadily more apparent. As Ngqongqo points out, “with the increased racism of the second generation missionaries, the African elite also began to take their fate into their own hands. They began to be politically conscious and active” (Ngqongqo 254). By the time Mqhayi had gained national prominence, the African Nation Congress had been established – by a group of mission-educated Africans.

H. I. E Dhlomo turned the existing situation into a prescription when he later wrote that “African writers should not preoccupy themselves only with literary form; they should transform themselves into political and social reformers in the task of emancipation” (Masilela 39). This role was clearly fulfilled by Mqhayi, for “he did not hesitate to use his poetry and prose to dramatise the historical realities and distortions of his country” (Satyo 38). Ngugi insists that “every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is what and whose politics?” (Ngugi 1). One cannot easily answer this question in relation to Mqhayi’s work, for Mqhayi’s brand of nationalism was complex: it moved from the particular (being Xhosa), to national, to African (encompassing all black people), and even to a universal humanism – and back again. As Mandela comments, “I was galvanized, but also confused by Mqhayi’s performance. He moved from a more nationalistic, all-encompassing theme of African unity to a more parochial one addressed to the Xhosa people” (49). Perhaps it was simply that while Mqhayi’s brand of nationalism included all the people of South Africa (or of Africa as a whole, depending

on the context), he was particularly proud of his Xhosa identity: not at the expense of wider affiliations, but as a filiative anchor, a stable reference point in the rough seas of modernity.

Sindi Sayedwa asserts that:

the real greatness of Mqhayi... is to be found in his wholeness of view: as an artist of stature he praised, spoke and wrote of his africanness with pride and eloquence. But more than that he claimed the heritage of all South Africa as his own. (182)

A prime example of this is the national anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica*, to which Mqhayi contributed seven verses initially submitted to the *Umtleleli wa Bantu* newspaper in 1927. In the anthem Mqhayi asks for God's blessing on Africa while soliciting particular blessings for "chiefs", "the public men" and "the ministers of all churches in this land" (*Umtleleli waBantu*, 11 June 1927). A. C. Jordan has criticized this inclusiveness, arguing that "Mqhayi had a double loyalty. As a Xhosa he was loyal to the Xhosa Chiefs and their ancestors, and as a British subject he had to be loyal to the British king." Because he was "nurtured in Christianity and in the policy of the 'Old Cape Liberals,' he believed that the conquest of South Africa by the British was the working out of a Divine purpose." (Jordan 112).

Jordan's view is rather simplistic. Mqhayi was very well-informed about the politics of his time and did not merely accept British power; rather, he tried to make sense of the (inevitable) situation the Xhosa found themselves in as British subjects. His view of British power was indeed fraught with great ambivalence, and, as the satirical nature of his poetry shows, he was not uncritical or unquestioning of the British. Mqhayi's initial stance towards the British is best shown in his poem *Singama Britani* (We Are Britons), each stanza of which repeats the refrain "We are Britons." In the poem Mqhayi clearly pledges loyalty to Britain:

I chose sides and stood by the Queen  
Let the Boer die, we are Britons  
We are a women's army, we are Britons.  
(*Izwi la Bantu*, 13 March 1900; translated by Wandile Kuse)

The poem is making reference to the South African War and in this stanza it is clear which side Mqhayi supports. The date that the poem was published is significant, because it was the day that Bloemfontein was occupied by the British army, signalling a defeat for the Boers. Two years later Mqhayi wrote another poem titled *Ilizwe lixolile, Singama Britani!!* (The Country's at Peace! We Are British!) with the same refrain as its predecessor ("We're British!"). The poem is obviously a continuation of *Singama Britani* and professes continuing loyalty to Britain. The poem was written a month after the peace treaty of Vereeniging was signed, a treaty in which the Boers formally acknowledged their defeat. Mqhayi's poem goes as follows:

The country's at peace! We're British!!  
"It's peace," he declared.  
The country's at peace, they say,  
Weapons at rest,  
Passions abated,  
And anger ended.  
We vanquished the enemy,  
He fell frustrated;  
Today aggression's ended.  
We're British!! (*Izwi la Bantu*, 17 June 1902; Translated by Jeff Opland)

Mqhayi's allegiance to the British was consistent, for along with many other Africans he was of the belief that if they supported the British and they won, things would change for blacks in the colony: that they would no longer be treated with hostility by the Boers, and that they would be given their land, the vote and full rights as British subjects. Mona argues that "the black intellectuals of the time, seeking the freedom and equality of all South African races, were forced by the realities of the time to either seek temporary protection from the British or to form a power block with the British, who were less oppressive than the Boers" (Neethling & Mpolweni 136). However, as many Africans soon found out, the British were only paying lip service to democratic principles and soon forgot about their promise to black South Africans.

This resulted in great disappointment among black people and Mqhayi registered this in his poetry, expressing the view that "the British were forgetting their children in

Africa” (Steed and Sundkler 400). His most renowned poem of protest is “The Prince of Britain.” The poem shows Mqhayi’s disappointment at what was promised but never delivered, and his stance towards the British is openly critical, indicating that he was not as blindly loyal as Jordan suggests. The occasion for this poem was the Prince of Wales’s visit to South Africa in 1925. Mqhayi was asked by “the white administration...as national bard, to sing praises to the visiting prince, as the Africans would have done in the olden days” (Ntantala 13). The poem’s opening stanza introduces the prince to the audience:

Body-that-Smokes is the name I greet you by;  
Burning-Body is your pet name;  
Scourge-of-the Nation you are called in private;  
The praise-singer calls you Flasher-of-Lightning;  
Honour to you! (Translated by R. Kavanagh and Z.S Qangule)

In this stanza Mqhayi’s attitude towards the Prince is not entirely clear, but as the poem progresses it becomes obvious that he is not praising the Prince at all.

Go out, all of you, go out and identify him!  
Go out, all the nations, and identify!  
What kind of creature is this unknown monster?  
Never before seen, unfamiliar to all?  
Perhaps he may turn out to be Nabulele;  
Monster of the deep pools;  
Or Makhanda-mahlanu,–  
The snake with five heads, who comes as a whirlwind.  
Or it may be Gilikankqo,–  
The monster whose lair no man knows.  
Its body burns like a furnace;  
Its body like a flame;  
It spits sparks as if it were a steam-engine;  
It flashes lightning like the heavens;  
Honour to you!

In the above stanza Mqhayi calls upon “all the nations” to help him identify the Prince, to whom he refers as an “unknown monster.” The animal metaphors subsequently invoked are not at all positive or complimentary. The animals concerned are powerful but mysterious creatures from Bantu folklore which always appear in a negative context

(Jordan 114). “The snake with five heads” suggests Britain’s ability to have many faces, that is, to be deceitful. The snake (the Prince representing Britain) comes as “a whirlwind” which brings about destruction and chaos. The Prince’s body is described as “a furnace,” “a flame” that “spits sparks,” an image of danger, of something with the potential to set alight and destroy whatever it comes into contact with. Mqhayi concludes with a gesture of obeisance, saying “Honour to you!” But this deference is clearly occasioned only by fear of the destruction that the Prince is capable of wreaking, for Mqhayi also refers to him as a “Scourge-of-the-Nation”, the name that he is called in private. That this “private” name is here made public is an obvious gesture of defiance on the part of Mqhayi. The third stanza continues:

Here comes the Prince of Britain!  
Offspring of the female buffalo, Victoria!  
Young woman who is a god in the land of blacks,  
Spirit-like, priest of war, wizard,  
Here comes the boy son of George V;  
Of the Royal House, a boy coming to men –  
Dung-coloured, one eye flashes lightning;  
If is so much as touches you with a glance, it will blind you;  
The dung-coloured one, whom it is impossible to describe;  
Indeed it is difficult to scan him;  
There is no-one who can gaze at the calf of the wildbeast –  
And those who once tried collapsed unconscious.

(Translated by R. Kavanagh and Z.S Qangule)

Here Mqhayi attacks the idea that a “young woman” (Queen Victoria) can be “a god in the land of blacks.” He implies that she occupies an elevated position that she does not deserve. He also calls her a “priest of war,” another image for one practised in the arts of death and destruction. That Mqhayi then refers to the Prince as “a boy coming to men” is obviously meant as an insult as it implies that he is uncircumcised – an important point in isiXhosa culture. Yet the glance of this boy is dangerous as it “flashes lightning” and “will blind you”. Those who have tried to meet its gaze “collapsed unconscious.” (This is presumably a reference to the Boers who fought against the British and met their defeat in the Anglo-Boer war.)

The prince has been reduced by Mqhayi's rhetoric to something monstrous, an immature, dung-colored embodiment of hostility.

The last two stanzas of the poem capture the essence of Mqhayi's attitude towards Britain:

Hayi, the Mighty Britain!  
Here she comes with bible and bottle;  
Here she comes, a missionary escorted by a soldier;  
With gunpowder and guns,  
With canons and breachloader.  
Forgive me, O Father, but which of these must we accept?  
(Translated by R. Kavanagh and Z.S Qangule)

A. C. Jordan's translation of the last stanza of the poem clearly indicates the hypocrisy and double standards that Mqhayi saw as inherent in Britain's policy towards blacks in South Africa.

Ah, Britain! Great Britain!  
You gave us Truth: denied us Truth  
You gave us ubuntu (human dignity): denied us ubuntu  
You gave us light: we live in darkness  
Benighted at noon-day, we grope in the dark .  
(*Towards an African Literature* 114)

The "Truth" refers to Christianity and the whole panoply of values and practices that it purportedly embodies. But British policy denied blacks the equality and brotherhood preached in this "Truth". It denied them also the basic recognition of mutuality referred to here as "ubuntu," human dignity. Britain's "Truth" and "Light" has changed nothing, because darkness still prevails. Mqhayi's accusation of hypocrisy is stark and direct.

Mqhayi ends the poem by exclaiming:

Pass on, calf of the beast,  
Trampler who even now is trampling  
Pass on and return safely,  
Eater of our country's inheritance.

Long live the King!  
I disappear, I disappear  
Like the shooting star we once saw.  
(Translated by R. Kavanagh and Z.S Qangule)

It is clear that Mqhayi's attitudes towards Britain had changed dramatically: where once he had heaped excessive praise on the British, he now brooked no restraint in vehemently criticizing them. Mqhayi thus fulfils the function of an *imbongi*, which is not just to praise but to "publicly criticize excess or deviation in a person" and to express "true patriotism, not blind loyalty to the person" (Jordan 112). He tells the truth as it is, aptly referring to the Prince (personifying Britain) as a "Trampler" and an "Eater of our country's inheritance." The exclamation that brings closure to the poem – "Long live the King!" – is clearly ironic, a mocking salutation to a power to be feared but not respected.

The irony which informs the poem underscores the fact that Mqhayi was "not uncritical of proselytizers to the new ways of the alien civilization" (Kuse 183). He vehemently condemns the British attitude towards South Africa, especially towards blacks. In a poem he called this:

Human movement in search of land grabbing land from chiefs,  
Using the word of God as a tool  
An instrument to rule King and nations  
An education so inferior  
Became an institution to prepare slaves for new masters.  
(Ndletyana 63, translation by M. P Qanqubi )

Mqhayi suggests that Christianity as preached by the colonists is not true to the word of God, and in their hands is merely an "instrument to rule Kings and nations." Mqhayi highlights the hypocrisy of their actions in relation to what they profess. He is no longer naively optimistic about the motives of the White man and the 'good news' that he brings.

Mqhayi also criticizes Western education for not giving Africans human dignity, but rather serving to "prepare slaves for new masters." Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests that the reason that Africans were able to see through the vices of civilization was because "it was these very nations whose culture was built on Christianity and on the concept of rights and freedom of the individual, that denied

the same to the Africans” (quoted in Cook and Okenimkpe 17). Even though Mqhayi was a product of mission or colonial education, he was highly critical of it and even labelled it ‘inferior;’ although a professing Christian, he recognised Christianity’s implication in the subjugation of his people. De Kock points out that “This kind of ambiguity is an endemic feature of the written literature of the earliest generations of black writers” (De Kock 53). Mqhayi grappled with political issues that affected his African identity and beliefs, and these he filtered through the various positions he occupied as an educated African, a Christian and a British subject. It is clear that “Mqhayi reflects the spirit of his age and if the reflection we see appears complex that is a result of the complex nature of the time in which he lived;” and his poetry honestly reflects this complexity (Sayedwa 182).

## **2.5 *uDon Jadu***

Though Mqhayi was saddened by the state of the nation and the harsh treatment of black people by a foreign power, he did not stop believing that there was a better possibility, a brighter future. This is the view that Mqhayi portrays in his work of prose fiction, *uDon Jadu*. *uDon Jadu* is set in a new province known as Mnandi (Sweet Waters):

Mnandi is a Christian state, and Christ is the “President” of the Ancestral Spirits. Ministers of religion are officers of state, and their stipends come from the general revenue...Xhosa is the first language but English is an important language, and no one who is not strictly bilingual may hold office of state. Baby boys are baptised and circumcised in the Temple eight days after birth, and Holy Confirmation forms part of the initiation ceremony held in the Temple between the ages of fifteen and twenty. (Jordan 110)

Mqhayi perfectly expresses his ambivalent engagement with Christianity in the syncretism of traditional African cosmology and Christian beliefs that the book portrays. In *uDon Jadu* there is no struggle between African and Christian beliefs but a marrying of the two – something that Mqhayi strove to achieve in his own life, but not without

difficulties and tensions. This is will be discussed and illustrated with reference to his autobiography, *Mqhayi of the Mount of Glory*.

### **2.5.1 A call to unity**

The novel begins with the protagonist Dondolo (Don) taking a journey to visit his paternal aunt's home in emaRhanungeni. The novel is essentially about what he encounters on his travels and the lessons he learns from each encounter. Immediately as he leaves town two policemen on horseback approach him – one white, the other black. The white policeman asks for his pass document, to which Don replies “I have never carried that thing before” (Mqhayi 7, all translations of excerpts are my own in this section). The white policeman interrogates him: “Why? For what reason? What are you? Are you coloured?” (7). “I am a native” replies Don. The black policeman quickly dismounts and grabs Don ,saying “How dare you! You think you are going to break the law, on the pretext that you are natives! What is this thing?” He advances with handcuffs, but Don pushes him away, saying “Away from me, do not humiliate us so!”(7). In response to this, the white policeman retreats and says to his colleague “Let him go!” (7). From this encounter it is clear that Don regards having to carry a pass as an insult to his dignity and identity: why should he, as a loyal British subject, carry a pass, while white people do not? Through this encounter Mqhayi criticizes the system and shows how it dehumanizes the black person, more so the black policeman, for what he is made to do to his own people. The white policeman's sympathetic response highlights the abhorrent reaction of the black policeman and the unacceptability of the situation. As he carries on his way, Don thinks about this incident and says, “I left feeling sorrowful about my race” (8). He attributes the black policeman's behaviour to his having to be seen as trustworthy and doing his job well so as to keep it and feed his family. In attempting to achieve this, he overcompensates and humiliates one of his own. Mqhayi comments on this phenomenon in his autobiography *Mqhayi of the Mount of Glory*: “Many of us have become traitors to our people because of poverty, for our wages are low and produce fetches little” (28). Here Mqhayi seems to be offering critical commentary on what white rule and domination has reduced the black man to. Don concludes the incident with a

proverb, “*Akukho ukwayama ngomfo olambileyo*,” “one can never rely on or trust a hungry (poor) person” (8). By portraying the white policeman as behaving kindly and the black policeman cruelly, Mqhayi makes his point more complex. On the surface he is commending the white policeman’s (representing colonial power) behaviour, yet at the same time he is criticizing white power and domination and what it can result in: black disunity and blacks doing harm to their own people, a classic example of the divide and rule strategy.

Next on his journey, passing through a forest Don is accosted and surrounded by robbers, of whom three are black and one is coloured. In surrender Don puts his bag down and makes to take out a piece of paper; in fear the coloured robber shouts “He is taking out a pistol man! He is taking out a pistol!” (8). Hearing this, the robbers run away. Recovering from the incident Don continues on his journey thinking of the robbers: “thirsty for the blood of their countryman, they hide in forests seeking it – I became speechless” (8). He expresses his dismay (and gratitude) at how the coloured robber misled the others, as he was not carrying a pistol or a sharp object at all. He then likens the whole incident to the tendency of black people everywhere to come together, engage and reach consensus on a plan of action. But then when things are going well a foreigner (represented by the coloured robber) appears and disrupts the whole plan. Don realizes that the robbers could have succeeded in robbing and killing him, but were prevented from doing so by the “lies and cowardice” of the coloured thief (9). He then asks himself: “what is this propensity of our people, that when they do something they have a tendency to include someone from another nation [an outsider] instead of working together and succeeding? You see a foreigner disrupts the unity by seeing things that are not there, thus destroying the nation” (9). In this way Mqhayi advocates black unity rather than heeding the divisive counsel of foreigners. The coloured bandit serves a double purpose: he saves Don, but also provides an analogy for the tendency of black people unwittingly to accommodate outsiders at their own peril. The need for unity and black solidarity is a recurring theme throughout *uDon Jadu* and one that Mqhayi makes explicit at every stage of the novel.

The last encounter that illustrates this is when, on emerging from the forest, Don finds himself in an enclosed area full of ostriches, which he has learnt to fear from a

young age. He does all he can to avoid them by quietly searching for a way out. As he is trying to escape he bumps into two ostriches fighting fiercely. Seeing this as his chance to escape he hurries on. He states that “the instant the ostriches saw me they instantly forgot what they were fighting about and charged after the foreigner – me” (10). This incident gives Don insight into the state of the black nation and how they should learn from the ostriches. He says: “These made me think deeply, once seeing an outside enemy they [ostriches] leave their internal affairs and differences and attack the foreigner” (11). He is suggesting that only when black people unite and fight the real enemy can they accomplish great things. It is a clear call to unity as a precursor to liberation.

Though in *uDon Jadu* Mqhayi valorises unity between black people, it does not entail the complete exclusion of other races. Rather he believes that only when a strong sense of unity and solidarity is achieved between blacks can the inclusion of other races be fruitful and free of exploitation. In his characterisation, all races possess good and bad qualities – where a person of a particular race is portrayed with undesirable qualities, the positive action of another member of the same race counters the former, thus showing Mqhayi’s stance of non-racialism. He condemns bad behaviour and extols virtue in human beings, regardless of their race. A prime example of this is his encounter with the two Boer families.

### **2.5.2 Redeeming Christianity**

The first family whose farm Don stumbles upon after escaping from the ostriches chases him on horseback. The incident is described as follows:

When I looked back I saw a cloud of dust churning up. Noise that is unusual to me! A language I do not understand! Sharp piercing insults! A cracking of long whips. What is this?!...I listened intently at what was being said: “You imbecile! Stupid baboon! Foolish Kaffir!” Just when we were on that point, another Boer appeared! He came galloping on a horse. He reached the spot; on arriving he feigned to strike at me with a whip — speaking shoutingly, insulting like these! It transpired that this one is the father of those...at the time we are looking at one another, here is the family of this Boer, a mixed family, composed of boys and girls, untidy young people with dried discharge on their eyes and with even dirty noses, with a swarm of flies around them,

servants were also here...these people display a similar attitude towards me, all are giggling, laughing, enjoying it! (Mqhayi 200; Translation by Z. S Qangule)

Don is beaten up and locked up in a shed on the farm. Fortunately for him black mine workers returning home come to his rescue and direct him to a nearby farm where he is to find safety. As he reaches the property vicious dogs advance towards him. He says:

I braced courage to go straight because I could see the attitude as being on my side because even that man who had come close enough to me, was also warding off the dogs, throwing stones at them until they ran back home; as they reached home a gun shot rang out, it was the family head who had shot dead one of the dogs...The Boer turned and went to the house, he asked that I should be called in, I found him crying and he was praying and thanking God for my safety... and as he spoke he held me by the right hand accepting me as a brother (in Christ). Various types of rich dishes were laid on the table...the food was being served by a girl of this home and I was respectfully asked to help myself. The children at this home joined me together with their mother who speaks good Xhosa. I felt relaxed as these people made me feel at home...I conversed, dined and felt a new man. (Mqhayi 20; translated by Z. S Qangule)

The kindness and humanity of the second Boer family is juxtaposed against the harshness and cruelty of the first. The first family beats him mercilessly and locks him up while the second family protects him, welcomes him and dines with him. The second family is obviously a Christian family and the dining scene an allusion to the scripture, "he prepares a table for me in the presence of my enemies" (Psalm 23.5). Here Christian values are portrayed as a redeeming and unifying factor between the races. This also shows Mqhayi's inclusiveness and concern for harmony between the races, which he suggests is possible through embracing and practising Christianity.

### 2.5.3 Education: Precursor to black liberation

The primary way that Christianity was disseminated and propagated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was through missionary schools. Christianity and education became synonymous: educated Africans were those who had accepted Christianity and western values, the uneducated were those who were still “heathen” and resisted Christianity and education as destroyers of African society.

Near the end of his journey Don begins to champion education as a crucial ingredient in the upliftment of black people. He encounters two groups of herd boys herding cattle and asks them, “Do these cattle belong to your families? They nodded. I asked whether they go to school. They said no” (My translation, Mqhayi 20). Don asks them why they do not go to school: some respond that their parents do not allow them to; others say that they will never go to school because they do not want to. Don despises the fact that his people are reluctant to be educated whilst other races are educated. It is worthwhile to note that the mission schools were alone in providing education for black people, especially before Union. He speaks to the herd boys about the value of education as though speaking to grown men, to the point that he becomes tearful. He leaves them and approaches a bush where he offers a prayer for them.

Next on his journey he meets young girls socialising by the river and he purposes to talk to them about school. He asks them which of them go to school. The girls laugh and ask him why they should bother with school. He begins to preach to them on the subject of why indeed they should, and points out a nearby school that would be fitting for them to attend. Leaving them, he passes another bush where he kneels and begins to pray for the young girls to be educated. Here we see how Christianity and education are tied together, in the sense that education is seen as a blessing that God grants. Don feels that he is fighting a losing battle, and that only God can help the youth to be favourably disposed towards education. We also see that the way that Mqhayi portrays Christianity in *uDon Jadu* is different from the way he depicts it in his poetry, which would seem to indicate some ambivalence on his part. In his poetry it is presented as a tool to subjugate black people and make them slaves to a foreign notion, a “false god” of the white man. In

this novel however, Christianity is shown in a favourable light: it promotes good relations between races and helps to bring education and social advancement to black people.

Don finally reaches his destination and pays a visit to his aunt. He is given livestock as a gift — part of his inheritance — and is sent on his way back home. There he receives letters sent from places he has travelled through. The letters relate how the herd boys and the girls he met on the road are now at school and thank him for his advice. At the school to which he directed them, there is no longer only one teacher but five, and the school is being extended to accommodate the growing numbers. God has answered his prayers! At the beginning of the next chapter he receives another letter hailing him “National hero” and “Leader” for championing African unity and education (Mqhayi 26). The black policeman who mistreated him is now the overseer of an agricultural project and is paid well; the place where he was accosted by thugs was bought by a church and is now also a school surrounded by a community development centre. It is clear that education is linked to social advancement and the way forward for black people.

#### **2.5.4 Spiritual revival**

Because of his good reputation and growing renown, Don is invited by the mayor to the state of Mnandi (which means ‘sweet’). He takes his friends with him and there they help set up schools, community development centres, hotels, gyms, men and women’s clubs, youth groups, all funded and sustained by the community. He holds a series of meetings with the people of Mnandi to discuss development, and the constitution and laws that are to govern the state are read out. Throughout there is constant reference to God – either in thanksgiving or petition for the work being done. In the last chapter of the second part of the novel the meetings stop and a great spiritual revival follows: “people were repenting, confessing their sin” (54). Among these people was one of the robbers who tried to attack Don: he stands up, confesses that he is a murderer and, recognising Don, announces that today he is forsaking his old way of life because he wants to live for God. Here one sees that Mqhayi appears to view Christianity as playing a crucial role in bringing about sustainable social transformation in society: black unity and education alone are not sufficient. By the time Don leaves Mnandi it appears to be full of theological training

centres: he declares that development is achieved by “throwing one’s energy into all that builds a nation; by its people losing themselves in service, as the scriptures say: ‘For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it’ (Luke 9:24)” (55). Don who, one senses, definitely speaks for Mqhayi, views nation building as God’s plan and that labouring without God is labouring in vain. It becomes clear that Mqhayi’s voice is enabled and sustained by Biblical teaching and Christian idiom, and that he sees this religion as the key to a better society.

Because of all the development and the high standard of education in Mnandi, experts from “Japan, Scotland, England, America, Germany, Italy and Abyssinia” (55) come to Mnandi and report back on what is happening there. Mnandi becomes an independent self-governing state. The statement made at the end of the chapter is that black people must stop imitating white people, stand for themselves, and succeed by following their own traditions and customs, as exemplified in Mnandi. Yet the constitution of Mnandi follows the biblical model set out in the book of Judges, which is to elect someone for a certain period and thereafter hold re-elections, with the state making its own laws (58). Again Mqhayi’s ambivalent engagement with Christianity and his attempt to blend it with traditional African cosmology is apparent. This creates a certain level of ambiguity since the chapter begins with the assertion and championing of African traditions and customs. The people of Mnandi are to rule themselves according to their own laws and customs, but should nevertheless take that which is good from white people. As Don points out, “Christianity and development are not there to destroy customs and traditions that build a nation, rather those are the very things that will cause a nation to have life, abundant life” (59). It appears that Mqhayi believes that, in order for the state to function well, a genuine syncretism between traditional African cosmology and cultural values and practices and Christianity has to be forged. Christianity should not be forced on the people, but rather they should come to recognise the good that it can bring and voluntarily choose it. What is good and life-giving is to be extracted from both Xhosa and Western cultures and used by the nation.

### **2.5.5 God Bless the King!**

An interesting feature of the Mnandi state is that its leaders have to accept and submit to British rule. Don is selected as the first president because he has extensive knowledge of both white and black people, their proverbs and customs. In Mnandi there is an eclectic mix of languages and peoples – Khoisan, Coloureds and Afrikaners live there too. Upon his election Don quotes a verse from the Bible, “because the gracious hand of my God was upon me” (Nehemiah 2:8), and at his inauguration ceremony everything is done in the name of the king and British Empire. Once again, Mqhayi’s complex and ambivalent position as a British subject is made manifest. Mqhayi is, after all, the product of an era in which complete independence from mighty imperial Britain must indeed have seemed inconceivable.

The eyes of the world are on Mnandi and Don instructs its citizens to be united, to work together and learn what is beneficial from other races and languages. He continues: “You must keep your unity, hard work, education and Christianity, it is because of these things that today you are an independent state” (67). He ends the inauguration ceremony with the following words: “In the name of Great Britain and under the Prince of England... by the power vested in me, I hand this house and state the right to self rule under the wings of Britain! God Bless the King” (67).

In the last two chapters laws and rights regarding religion, term of office, education and marriage are laid down: “baptisms and circumcision are to go hand in hand” (70). Virginit testing as a cultural custom is prohibited. The last chapter opens with the following verse, “Whatever he does prospers” (Psalms 1:3). Don attributes Mnandi’s success to a number of factors, the first being respect and reverence for Britain, but also the fact that its citizens were allowed to vote “regardless of race and class” (73). Don is re-elected twice, serving as President for ten years before retiring. At the end of his term of office he wishes the people well and shouts “God bless the King!” (74). There are good relations between Mnandi and Great Britain: Britain defeats her enemies with the help of Mnandi and the King sends Empire delegates to thank the people of Mnandi. People from all over the world come to see Mnandi for themselves, and the novel ends with the following words “God bless the King!!” (77).

*uDon Jadu* is highly revealing of Mqhayi's internal conflict and the complex and multiple positions and identities he occupied. In the novel, the relationship between Xhosas and Britain is good and of mutual benefit, suggesting what Mqhayi saw as ideal. At the same time, Mqhayi's identity as a Xhosa and proud nationalist come through: he sees the good in African tradition and beliefs and wants to preserve them. Unity amongst black people is what is lacking and what makes them vulnerable to the vices of outsiders: until unity and pride are established among blacks, mixing with other races is neither desirable nor beneficial. Education that benefits and develops the people to be independent and self-sustaining is what Mqhayi advocates, for it is education that will propel them to greatness. Christianity is what holds these together, for through it blacks are affirmed and given dignity and good race relations are promoted. The difference between his earlier rejection of Christianity and his embrace of it here as crucial in nation building is that it is voluntarily followed and observed by black people, not imposed by the white man (who has distorted the religion and used it to oppress blacks). Christianity is to be put into practice to build, advance and unite the black nation, to the benefit of the whole world.

In *uDon Jadu* Mqhayi "endorses the possibility of a transculturated Christianity...together with an assertion of [the] right [of the African] to fashion the future for himself" (de Kock 58). A future is imagined "where everyone in South Africa is depicted as living in a utopian society, experiencing equal rights – a society where there is no injustice in 'country' or 'city'" (Kaschula 61). A state, in short, that is truly Mnandi, 'Sweet'.

## **2.6 Mqhayi the man**

Mqhayi's autobiography *Mqhayi of the Mount of Glory* charts his journey from childhood to manhood. In Xhosa culture this transition is represented by the ceremony of initiation into manhood involving circumcision. Missionaries were fervently against this practice as they saw it as intrinsically evil. Mqhayi, however, stands up for it and is determined to "become a man." He writes:

I know how hateful the circumcision school was to the ministers, but I had determined to be expelled rather than not become “a man.” In my own mind I felt that I was going to be a worker for my own people in my own country, a worker for the Gospel for social service, in politics, and in educational matters; and it was clear to me that I could not accomplish my work if I did not become a man. (Mqhayi 24)

As Ngqongqo points out, as part of the conversion process missionaries “used western education to inculcate western culture in Africans, thereby undermining and devaluing African culture and education”(17). Mqhayi did not see the need for Christianity to clash with African culture, and as is evident in his life and writings, he sought to forge a genuine syncretism between the two.

Together with his earlier upbringing, and his love for Scripture and the education he received at Centane village, Mqhayi’s work is coloured by two worldviews. Though having received a primarily western education steeped in western culture, Mqhayi strongly believed in the value of “African history, African literature and African grammar” (Ngqongqo 38). What is very clear is that “he had an independent mind which he eventually used for the benefit of his people within the colonial context” (Ngqongqo 39). Gerard notes that the writers “who rose to prominence at the end of the nineteenth century were characterised by their acute awareness of their people’s need for Modern education and pride in their own cultural achievements” (41). Consequently “the educated elite saw themselves as the ones to take the initiative. They had to remind and educate the westernized Africans about traditional African life, culture and history” (230). This commitment comes through strongly throughout Mqhayi’s work — an African account of African history is privileged and African traditions are portrayed as good and compatible with progress. As Ngqongqo aptly points out, “[t]he collection and committing to print of Xhosa traditional culture, poetry and history was a realisation by the Christian educated African elite at the Cape that these elements needed to be recouped and resurrected” (231). And “they were not satisfied with being passive recipients in activities pertaining to their mother tongue and culture” (234). Mqhayi worked in developing the Xhosa language and preserving its purity. He saw that “[t]he creation, development and popularisation of literature are central to any Western-style

elite as this spreads and reinforces the dominant beliefs of that group. Therefore, it was vital that the emerging African elite of the Eastern Cape imitate and adapt this process in order to reinvent Xhosa society in the new colonial, Western context” (Ngqongqo 237). And Mqhayi was able successfully to navigate this complex setting. As Attwell has put it, “black intellectual life in South Africa often seems to have the character of a Faustian wager”, with “the mission-educated intellectual toying with Christian Liberalism;[and] “the poet who experiments with European forms while writing in an indigenous language”, both of which are personified in Mqhayi (16). The inscription of Mqhayi’s qualities on his tombstone is perhaps a fitting testament to the literary contribution he made, the various roles that he played, and how in his life and writing Biblical teaching and traditional African cosmology and beliefs merged to form a genuinely new cultural identity.

Here lies  
Samuel Krune Mqhayi.  
Poet of the Nation, author of books,  
Royal councilor of all Xhosa people.  
Leader, true Christian.  
(Opland, “Abantu Besizwe” 1)

## Chapter 3

### Looking Back and Looking Ahead: The Poetry of Nontsizi Mqgwetho

#### 3.1 Introduction

Little-known poet Nontsizi Mqgwetho is described by Thabo Mbeki as “the most prolific Xhosa woman poet of the twentieth century” (6); according to Jeff Opland, she is “the first and only female poet to produce a substantial body of work in Xhosa” (“Introduction,” Mqgwetho xiv). Though very little is known about Mqgwetho, the calibre and relevance of her writing is undisputed: not only is her work a great historical resource but its subject matter also resonates with contemporary significance. Mqgwetho started writing her poetry to a weekly Johannesburg newspaper *Umteteleli wa Bantu* in 1920.<sup>1</sup> She made regular contributions to this newspaper until January 1929, when she “disappear[ed] into the shrouding silence she first burst from. Nothing more is heard from her, but the poetry she left immediately claims for her the status of one of the greatest literary artists ever to write in Xhosa” (“Introduction” xiv). Jeff Opland traced and collected these poems and with the help of Abner Nyamende and Phyllis Ntantala translated them into English. The result was the collection *The Nation’s Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mqgwetho*, which contains both the original Xhosa and the English versions of her poetry.

Mqgwetho’s poetry is infused with great ambivalence towards both Christianity and traditional African beliefs, which makes it difficult to “position” her in ideological terms. The titles of her poems alone indicate this. In her poem “The prophecies about blacks have now come to pass! Listen! Isaiah 19:2, 4, 8-10, 15-16, 20,” she draws heavily upon the Bible, calling Xhosa customs into question:

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<sup>1</sup> *Umteteleli wa Bantu* was a multilingual weekly newspaper launched in 1920 by the Chamber of Mines in Johannesburg. See Brian Willan, *Sol Plaatje: A Biography*: 251.

You do not have one custom that will save this house...leaders are in reality God's leaders: when they see that things aren't right they seek the advice of God, who is Custom. The prophecies about blacks have now come to pass, they have commenced. And so we must pray! The prophets of truth who will carry us across this "Stream of Despair," those prophets we have amongst us. No one is going to rise from the grave to tell us. Never!!! (Mgqwetho 216)

Rather like Mqhayi in *uSamson*, Mgqwetho views the political situation in which Africans find themselves through a Christian lens: for instance, she takes it for granted that her readers are familiar with Christian texts such as the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*,<sup>2</sup> making reference to them without explanation. But the reader of this poem is apt to be left curious, if not confused, as to the poet's view of African customs: why does she seemingly view them as useless and unable to help carry blacks across the "Stream of Despair"? The fact is that throughout her poems Mgqwetho assumes a series of different personae: sometimes she is a man, at other times a woman, a preacher, a sangoma, a Red<sup>3</sup> and a Christian. In the poem "Reds! Listen," for instance, she positions herself as a "Red among Reds," arguing:

Christians call us heathens but every home's unstable.  
When the Word appeared we were together, but you chased the whites to join them. Ngqika himself broke away, cheeks chafed with lies.  
Christians, because of your school education  
You're Christians by day, hyenas by night....  
(Mgqwetho 224: 9-12)

As Jeff Opland points out, throughout Mgqwetho's oeuvre it is evident that "despite her dependence upon and familiarity with the Bible ... she often denounces it. [At times...] the bible [is] an agent of dispossession" ("Introduction" xxii), and at other times it is portrayed as containing the only solution to Africa's problems. This latter attitude obtains in poems like "Where are leaders like Daniel?," "If a man can't rule his

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<sup>2</sup> Tiyo Soga translated the book into Xhosa as *Uhambo loMhambi*. A. C. Jordan remarks that "Soga's translation was to exercise an influence on written Xhosa literature comparable to that of the Authorised Version on English literary history" (quoted in Hofmeyr 116).

<sup>3</sup> Africans who had not accepted Christianity or Western education were referred to as Reds because of the red ochre they smeared on their bodies and karosses (later, blankets).

own house, how would he manage God's nation?," and "He's here! The Drum of the Cross." In defence of her ambivalence towards Christianity (and indeed in consonance with Mqhayi's and Soga's sentiments), Mgqwetho argues that "The truth must be treated fairly, / the truth must be heard from both sides: / the truth is there in the scriptures / and also within our blankets"<sup>4</sup> (196: 21-24). It is this outlook that informs Mgqwetho's poetry and makes sense of the multiple personas, ranging from sangoma to preacher, that she assumed in her attempt to indigenize Christianity and forge a genuine accommodation with traditional African cosmology. In "Why was the Bible created?" she asks:

Didn't Ntsikana tell you to study the scriptures? And you left the whites to study them for you. I'm not mocking the white when I say that. But it's written "Seek and ye shall find," it doesn't mean that someone else must do the finding for you. Listen then! (Mgqwetho 420)

Here she appears to repudiate Christianity as preached by "the white," and abjures Africans to search the scriptures themselves as preached by the first famous Xhosa convert, Ntsikana, in order to avoid exploitation and deceit. In Poem 30 she emphasises this further, stating that "[t]his gospel of theirs, designed to deceive us, stands as tall as I do down on my knees" (lines 43-48). From the outset Christianity is seen as a tool of oppression that Africans need to examine for themselves so as to identify and extract such truth as it may contain. It is clear that Mgqwetho's poetry reveals a complexity and fluidity of identities and allegiances that makes it fertile ground for exploring the kind of ambivalence with which this study is concerned. Underlying the Christian discourse, for instance, are strong themes of the need for African unity, for honourable leaders, and for a return to the ancient paths, as well as for solutions to bring these about.

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<sup>4</sup> Xhosa people who had not converted to Christianity wore blankets smeared with red ochre; thus in this context the blankets represent African tradition and wisdom.

### 3.2 A call to unity

In the poem “Come back, Africa! Awu!” Mqgqwetho uses the popular slogan of political resistance *Mayibuy’iAfrika*, “Come back Africa,” a clarion call for the restoration of Africa. She asserts:

For a long time now we’ve been calling, Africa.  
Hear our wailing, Garden of Africa!!  
Your crop was consumed and scattered by birds,  
But you stood firm and never left us.  
Our voices are hoarse from imploring you;  
We track through nations, appeal to phantoms,  
Nothing more than chicken’s scratchings,  
Eager at dawn, at dusk empty-handed.

We call to you from Table Bay  
We call to you from Algoa Bay,  
We call to you from Grahamstown,  
Clutching satchels crammed with half-jacks;  
drunk to death we call you home,  
we cover your eyes and proclaim you blind,  
you go right back to where you came from  
as we call you home from the deaths of depravity.

You say “Come back”? *You* must come back!!  
You’re profit to all the earth’s nations,  
they come from the north, they come from the south,  
from the east and from the west.  
Africa stayed! She’s nowhere else:  
look how the grass continues to sprout.  
Look at the springs still bubbling with water.  
Look all around, it’s all in its place! (Mqgqwetho 58:1-24)

The first two stanzas of the poem show a desperate cry for Africa’s restoration after being “consumed and scattered by birds”. Through “wailing” and “imploring” the “Garden of Africa” their voices have become hoarse; they have appealed to other nations but in vain. Although a foreign enemy came in and caused havoc, looking to other nations for help will bear no fruit, but is merely an “appeal to phantoms.” In stanza two the call for Africa comes from various places where educated Africans live; they call Africa home yet they

are “drunk to death” and their school-bags are “crammed” with alcohol; they call Africa back yet, as Mgqwetho puts it, they are sunk in “the depths of depravity.” In stanza three Mgqwetho shows that instead of calling Africa to come back “*You*,” the African, “must come back!!” Africa has not gone anywhere – it continues to flourish and all is in its rightful place. Thus the African should not be calling Africa to come back, but rather calling himself to return to his senses and to the old way of doing things, instead of forsaking tradition for the bottle. In the fourth stanza the poet asks:

Will you go to the grave with nothing achieved,  
raising your cry, calling “Come back”?  
If *you* come back first the nation will rise  
and news of its stirring will ring out to Jericho.  
But tell us, Africa, where else in the world  
Can any old fool say “Come home”?  
From my point of view, we bear all the signs  
as we stumble along in stupidity.

From the Buffalo’s banks we raise our cry,  
From the Tyhume’s banks we raise our cry  
For all the black nations under the sun,  
so Satan’s ashamed until his guts bust,  
You display no love, display no togetherness,  
you sit on the fence, won’t take a stand.  
Nothing but sell-outs, you set fires and run,  
betray your own people to bolster the Whites. (58: 25-50)

In these two stanzas the African is asked to assess his condition before calling on Africa to “Come back,” and the author suggests that until the African returns to his senses and does something about his present condition he will continue to “stumble along in stupidity.” How, Mgqwetho asks, can he call “Africa back” while he “display[s] no love...no togetherness” and “won’t take a stand,” betraying his own people? She implores fellow Africans to take responsibility for their present situation and to see how they are implicated in their own subjugation. Once they do, Africa will begin to succeed and “news of its stirring will ring out to Jericho.”

In the next stanza the poet becomes even more specific in pointing out what is wrong.

She asks:

Are you raising a cry, saying “Come back”?  
You’ll cry yourselves hoarse; *you* must come back!  
Gone are our customs for setting up homesteads,  
monarchy, values, nothing is left!  
You live like locusts left by the swarm,  
you’ve lost all pride, your sense of a nation,  
lock, stock and barrel, everything’s lost:  
you seek balm in the bottle that blots out all pain.

You say “Come back?” *You* must come back!  
You scratch your head in search of a scapegoat.  
Ntsikana warned you a long time ago,  
“Money’s the lightning-bird: leave it alone.”  
Child of the soil of far-flung Africa,  
what have you done to so offend God?  
Here the Chink sells you malt for your home-brew,  
there the Coolie buys up your empties.

Are you raising a cry? *You* must come back!  
Spurn advice and you’ll come a cropper.  
Always recall where you come from:  
seek the seers to tell you straight.  
Mercy, South African hills, while your people die  
strangers cart off your country!  
With cause we cry, saying “Come back”  
to induce birth pangs in her people. (60:41-64)

In these stanzas hindrances to Africa’s restoration are listed: the abandoning of African customs and values, the loss of pride and the waning of a sense of national identity. The African needs to go back to doing the things he did at first instead of “seeking balm in the bottle that blots out all pain,” which causes him to seek a scapegoat. Alcohol and the love of money have taken over his senses. The poet asks: “Child of the soil of far-flung Africa,/ what have you done to offend God?” – implying that his present situation of oppression is punishment from God and can possibly be reversed. She instructs her reader to “seek the seers to tell you straight,” those with spiritual insight who can find out

the root of the problem as well as the solution. In the ninth stanza the call for Africa to “Come back” is now apt, for it will serve “to induce birth pangs in her people,” to give life to a newly restored Africa. Only after Africans have reassessed themselves and their role in their current oppression, and returned to the ancient paths (“Always recall where you came from,” l. 59), can they rightfully call “Come back, Africa!”

Peace, Sun! Peace, Moon!  
Stewards of our Protector,  
bear the report to the One on High,  
plead our case in elegant terms.

Peace ! Awu!! (62:73-77)

In the final stanza the poet calls on the sun and the moon to convey the cry of Africa “to the One on High,” within whose gift it is to answer prayers after Africans have done all they can to set their house in order and call Africa back. The ultimate solution to Africa’s restoration lies not below – where ancestors and spiritual deities were believed to be – but on High, where the Christian God resides.

### **3.3 Christian Converts: “Christians by day, hyenas by night”**

In the poem “A Red debates with Christians” Mqgqwetho positions herself as a Red who offers a strong argument against Christian converts and their hypocritical and undesirable behaviour which is contrary to what they profess. She asks:

Where are your daughters? What do you say?  
They crossed the land in search of marriage,  
shamelessly shackled up with live-in lovers,  
cavorted in dances with young men in New Clare.

With eyes of porridge their mothers bemoan  
their absent children, who left them standing,  
advising blank air and pleading in vain  
with sons and daughters who’ve all been to school. (50: 1–8)

Because of the social mobility that education has brought, a generation of educated Africans have left their homesteads to go to the city to seek better opportunities for employment, sometimes against their parents' will or counsel. Here the accusation is that Christian converts do not honour their parents as their Christian faith commands. Instead they "left them standing, advising blank air;" and once in the city, instead of behaving in an upright manner they have "shamelessly shacked up with live-in lovers." The allegation that their sons and daughters have all been to school yet nevertheless behave in this way suggests that because they have been to school they should know better. Educated Africans and Christian converts were seen as synonymous because conversion was inseparable from education. As a result many Africans were labelled Christian by virtue of their education. In the next two stanzas Mqgqwetho suggests that education does not necessarily conduce to exemplary conduct:

Jails crammed to capacity, courts jam-packed  
with the learned products of school education;  
the judges in charge just hoot in derision  
at college certificates brandished by bums.

All our crooks are in school,  
all our thieves are in school,  
all our witches in school:  
by Nontsizi, I swear you should all be expelled! (50: 9-16)

Education is supposed to function as a moderator of social behaviour, but it appears to have failed. Those who do not conduct themselves appropriately should be "expelled" from the fold of the educated.

You wear red blankets in God's very house,  
you're Christians by day, hyenas by night;  
the pastor, the shepherd of God's own flock,  
scurries past you without a nod.

What do we make of this curious conduct?  
Which voice do we choose from among this babble?  
Pride is one of your Christian companions,  
God wears a cloak of crocodile hide.

You Christians are suckers for every fad,  
you cast off skin garments and dressed up like whites,  
your ears are tinkling for white man's booze,  
but whites won't touch a drop of yours. (50: 17-28)

Mgqwetho castigates the hypocritical conduct of so-called Christians and criticizes them for casting off the skin garments symbolic of Xhosa or African tradition. She scolds them for dressing up like whites and indulging in the "white man's booze," while also rebuking them for wearing "red blankets in God's very house" that is, exhibiting "heathen" tendencies though claiming to be Christian. She urges Christians to practise their faith in a form undiluted by the culture that came with it – that of "the white man's booze" and sexual promiscuity. She calls the faith they profess mere babble because it is not mirrored by fitting conduct. In the last two stanzas Mgqwetho moves from pointing out what they are doing wrong to highlighting the shallowness of their faith and what they lack:

You're bereft of love, bereft of all,  
yet you proclaim a God of love:  
that faith of yours stands just as tall  
as I do down on my knees.

If you ever try to come near us again,  
we Reds will roast you like meat.  
But I'm not saying the word of God  
is entirely barren of truth.

Peace! (52: 33-40)

The last two stanzas emphasize the crux of the poem's argument: it is not that the word of God is useless, but rather that Christian converts are apt not to practise what they profess. Though the poem is meant to be a debate with Christians, only the Red side of the argument is presented and Christians are permitted no defence. The implication is presumably that there is no argument that can rebut the accusations made, because they are true. Mgqwetho reminds the reader that the essence of her disgruntlement is with Christians and not Christianity itself; as she puts this in another poem, "The word of God's the very truth/ but we've treated it inconsistently" (310: 36-37). As we shall see,

Mgqwetho often explicitly identifies herself as a Christian, but is able to stand outside this identity and criticize it – notably its use by colonists to oppress Africans, and its abuse by Christian converts to serve their selfish needs for material gain, status and political advancement. Although securely grounded in a Christian worldview, she is quite capable of viewing the religion as a tool of cultural dispossession.

### **3.4 The essence of our distress: Hindrances to Black unity**

In the poem “The hill Difficulty the black man scales,” Mgqwetho adopts a frank tone to get to the root of the problems and hindrances confronting black people. The hill “Difficulty” is a reference to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*;<sup>5</sup> Mgqwetho empties it of its spiritual significance and uses it as a metaphor for the black struggle against oppression. She is open and candid throughout the poem, and asks her readers to meet her in serious debate.

Look! Today I want you to understand  
the essence of our distress.  
Compatriot, wrestle with what I say,  
meet me in sober debate.

The hill can’t be scaled! It’s slippery.  
I won’t mince words, I’ll bare my heart:  
up to this point in time,  
just what have blacks achieved?

Take the African National Congress:  
we once burst our ribs in its praise.  
Now we go round in search of it:  
“Has anyone seen where it’s gone?”

None can deny, I’m sorry to say,  
these questions have some point.  
But as for me, I’m not at pains  
to mock their efforts to date. (94: 1- 16)

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<sup>5</sup> It seems likely that Mgqwetho had access to the Xhosa translation of the book by Tiyo Soga, *Uhambo loMhambi* .

Mgqwetho cuts to the chase and does not mince her words. She asks blacks to look inwards, to examine themselves and give careful thought to their ways. What legacy are they leaving behind? After thus introducing the African National Congress she goes on to point out their faults:

Vying for status is lethal poison  
internally sapping Congress.  
Undermined by the envious,  
black people strive in vain.

This hill Difficulty's beaten us,  
we've tried and tried to scale it:  
it can't be scaled by blacks  
strapped with the millstone of custom.

Envy's an obstacle up this hill,  
money's another obstacle:  
and so we battle to scale it.  
Greybeard of ours, am I wrong? (94: 17-24)

The speaker seems certain of the strength of her argument, merely listing the organisation's shortcomings before asking a rhetorical question. The poem continues:

Uniting's an obstacle up this hill,  
so, burdened, we no longer praise it,  
like plains cattle lost in the mist,  
black as crows in our ways. That's us!

Why, my good man, are we slumped at the foot  
of this hill Difficulty black people scale?  
You've set your hand to many things  
but which of them persist?

Your loathing and goading of Reds  
are obstacles up this hill—  
yet how you covet their cash!  
Sweat all you like, you won't reach the top.

Unity's our only strength,  
what has more power than unity?

How long must we hack away at this,  
like novice diviners in groves of mimosa? (96:29-44)

In the above stanzas the poet introduces the notion of the need for unity as a first step forward. She harshly demands to see the lasting fruit of their many labours. Their “loathing and goading of Reds” are hindrances up this hill, for the “blackness” of their ways prevents them from reaching the top. Mgqwetho advocates unity as the only way forward, rhetorically asking: “what has more power than unity?” Clearly, she insists, if black people work together there is nothing that can stand in their way. We are reminded of the previous poem examined, in which the speaker argued that education alone would not do, and that something greater and more powerful was needed. In this poem the speaker’s rhetoric gains in intensity as she excoriates her readers for their lack of achievement:

This hill frustrates attempts to scale it,  
lions and leopards ring it;  
the hill stands firm, our people slip  
on slopes with carpets of cash.

You’ve set your hand to many things  
which continue to list and sink.  
You’ve all turned into Hottentots  
snoring their heads off, arse in the air.

This hill the black man scales is steep,  
it nearly daunted Christian;  
his mouth frothed with a sloven’s foam,  
his ears stuck out as he scaled this hill.

And so it is for blacks today:  
we sit on the fence, we won’t take a stand.  
We don’t even know why we squabble,  
but we bolt our fruit before it’s ripe.

Up to this point in time,  
just what have blacks achieved?  
How could you turn your back on the nation,  
with only its hands to cover its nakedness? (96: 45-64)

These stanzas are intended to inspire introspection and action from the reader, leaving no room for scapegoats or blaming others. Mqgqetho asks:

Did the whites instruct us not to unite?  
We stand on each other to reach above.  
What more can I say? Have I got it wrong?  
Did the whites instruct us to squander our funds?

Whatever, nitpicking tires us:  
if you don't all get together  
you'll never saddle a white.  
You don't even have the bridle and reins!

Sweat blood, you won't make the top  
of this hill Difficulty the black man scales;  
you've no love for the nation, only for bargains.  
That's the truth. Have I got it wrong?

Our customs abandoned, we're left empty-handed,  
in this generation apostasy's rampant.  
I said it before: scratched and bloodied,  
we won't make the top of this hill. Agreed! (98: 65-80)

The relentless argument of this poem makes it clear that for Mqgqetho blacks are their own worst enemy: until they confront and deal with themselves and their characters their actions will be futile. In another poem she commands:

All black nations must emerge,  
unity's our only strength:  
press on until you face each other,  
stop your bobbing and weaving. (163)

Unless they unite and return to their traditional customs rather than be lured by the vices of civilisation, Africans will never make the top of the hill. The legitimacy of white rule is questioned, and the reader is reminded of the divinely sanctioned authority of black leadership:

When was it you were  
elected to rule?  
We still have our chiefs  
established by God. (198)

Thus the achievement of unity and the acquisition of exemplary moral character through the true profession of the Christian faith are seen as precursors to black integrity, and beyond that, self-realisation and freedom.

### **3.5 A biblical model for leadership: “Leaders, shade for the nation with truth derived from God”**

Though a return to traditional African ways is advocated in the previous poem, a biblical pattern for leadership is proposed in the poem “Where are leaders like Daniel?” Though the source (the Bible) is “foreign” it is of course familiar to the assumed or intended reader, and a potential source of wisdom and guidance. Whereas in the previous poem the distress of the people was highlighted and a solution merely adumbrated, “Where are leaders like Daniel?” shows how and with what the result of the implementation of such a solution might proceed:

Look! Today I want you to understand  
the essence of our distress:  
we’re a flock ready for scattering.  
Agree with me, men! Mercy, ladies!

Where are leaders like Daniel—  
tell us, you clutch of yes-men—  
leaders who made no mistakes?  
Seek them out in forest depths.

Leaders, shade for the nation,  
with truth derived from God.  
What’s a bird with one black patch?  
Hyenas ravage the royal offspring.

Leaders free of foul habits—  
seek them: roll out a mat—  
leaders free of rash decisions.  
Awu! We're covered with chaff from the threshing-floor!

Leaders proven immune to flattery.  
who unravel intricate knots;  
when they perceive the mess we're in  
they'll confer with the God of Custom. (134: 1-20)

In this poem Daniel is used as a prototype of the kind of leadership that is needed and should be sought out in Africa. Leaders “free of foul habits ... free of rash decisions ... proven immune to flattery”, leaders “who unravel intricate knots” and “confer with the God of Custom.” Mqgqwetho implores the reader to “seek them out from forest depths.” The above stanzas contrast with the ensuing ones: having indicated what a leader should be like, the remainder of the poem describes and condemns the undesirable kind of leadership currently at the fore. In anger Mqgqwetho asserts:

We have no use for liars  
who've lost the nation's trust.  
I won't say it again, it's final:  
hyenas ravage the royal offspring.

We have no use for drunks:  
they spawn foreigners' servants,  
they fleece us when they need the bottle,  
all our work's flushed down the drain. (134: 21-28)

Again she asks:

Where are leaders like Daniel,  
like Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego,  
like Joshua, Aaron and Moses,  
who scolded the thundering skies? (134: 29-32)

It is instructive that the leaders listed here as worthy of emulation are all biblical figures with whom Mqgqwetho assumes her readers are familiar.

Those with love, God and unity,  
so creatures came out to bask in the sun;  
those whose prayers stopped the sun in its tracks,  
with eyes raised to snowy heights;

those whose deeds created refuge,  
not those whose smooth talk hides their hunger.  
Go, handsome man of far-flung Africa,  
Beat the path to heaven. (136: 33-40)

Biblical precedent is invoked in the exhortation that the “handsome man of far-flung Africa” should “Go” and blaze a trail for others to follow. Mqgqwetho goes to point out that:

A leader’s a shade-screened leopard,  
who appears in heaven’s raiments,  
quite clearly the Lord’s companion.  
I don’t say this to put you down.

Men, we need leaders like Daniel,  
because we’re ground underfoot.  
Let black people dance in our sight.  
Without seeming to do so I’ve praised him. Peace!! (136: 33-48)

A biblical paradigm of servant leadership where leaders give and add value instead of taking from the people is valorised. By outlining this paradigm Mqgqwetho at the same time repudiates the sort of leadership she sees around her that is in need of radical change. Nevertheless, in pointing to biblical figures who led in the name of God, Mqgqwetho insists that she does not mean to put African leaders down, but to inspire them to greatness so that black people can “dance in [their] sight.” In another poem she writes:

It’s perfectly clear that we’re lacking in leaders,  
not those who grow roots from squatting down motionless,  
but those in the mist whose roar makes the sun break through,  
who bustle about quite as active as vultures. (180: 41-44)

She ends this poem by calling on God to bless Africa and to:

Patch the network of cracks in the wall up with clay,  
so the surface appears chameleon-coloured,  
a sign to inspire our respect for each other. (180: 45-48)

Christianity or Christian servant leadership here is seen by Mgwetho as the solution to the leadership crisis she sees. No African leaders are mentioned or praised in the poem. God is seen as the sole inspiration of the desired leadership lacking in Africa, and it is the duty of the African to seek it out. Here Mgwetho has no qualms about using the Bible as her sole reference, fully immersed as she is in Christian lore and doctrine. In “If a man can’t rule his own house, how would he manage God’s house?” Mgwetho asks:

Where are leaders the likes of Joshua  
Who bore love and rose from a fall  
to manage the nation of God  
with poise beyond reproach. (256: 21-24)

She ends this poem by saying:

The people will perish empty-handed  
If a miracle doesn’t come soon.  
Today we locked horns. I’m not Nongqawuse  
who brought Xhosa mountains crashing down.  
Read the Scriptures! (258: 46-50)

Divine intervention is needed to pull Africa from her despair, but not of the superstitious Nongqawuse ilk which only wrought destruction. Hence she implores her readers to “Read the Scriptures!” and seek inspiration there. The sentiment is echoed in the poem “Take a look, dawn’s breaking:”

These are not Nongqawuse’s times  
who brought Xhosa mountains crashing down.  
Find support in the Scriptures. (232: 12-14)

The phrases “Read the Scriptures!” and “Find support in the Scriptures” are repeated in several other poems, and the words rehearse Ntsikana’s own entreaties to the Xhosa people. Ntsikana is known as the first Xhosa convert to Christianity and is seen as the father of the Christian faith among Xhosa Christians. He is regarded with great respect as the first Xhosa “to be Christian while remaining an African” (Mills 42). Thus his advice occupies a privileged and elevated place in the minds of black people trying to find their place in a fast-changing world. Duncan Brown agrees that Mgqwetho’s “model is not white missionaries, but the Xhosa Christian Ntsikana” (44). Thus Mgqwetho sometimes views the Bible as the ultimate source of wisdom: to follow its teachings is to identify with the wisdom of the great ones gone before, like the trusted and inspirational Ntsikana – leaders indeed like the biblical Daniel.

### **3.6 Christianity as a unifying force**

Unsurprisingly, the Bible in fact occupies an ambiguous position in Mgqwetho’s work, as a means towards unity amongst Africans as well as a way of dividing them and robbing them of their inheritance. Both positions are argued so persuasively in the poetry that the reader is apt to be convinced of the truth and value of both arguments. The very instrument that brought about division is what Mgqwetho claims will bring unity. As Opland aptly points out, “Mgqwetho is caught between two worlds; there is no solution to her dilemma” (“Nontsisi Mgqwetho” 181). She herself identifies this as the position of all black people: “we’re caught between two worlds: / the next generation will gaze slack-jawed” (Mgqwetho 112:18-19). It is an ambiguous and ambivalent situation dramatised in the constant shifting of identities and attitudes towards Christianity in her poems. As one reads more of her poetry it becomes clear that Mgqwetho is not always one thing or even many things at once, but rather in a perpetual process of becoming – what she valorises in one poem, she decries. A good example of this that will be discussed in detail is her view of the Bible. In a poem titled “We’re stabbing Africa!” she argues that “This nation rests on the law of the bible,” and goes on to list things that black

people have attempted but failed in because they have not adhered to biblical teaching (178:1).

In various poems Mgqwetho, like Soga, uses the Bible as her authority in asserting black territorial integrity. In “How do we differ from Cain?” she makes the following claim:

For you black person, was Africa made,  
it took six days to make,  
so this is *your* land of Canaan:  
heaven’s not yours, its for angels. (150: 25-28)

She continues:

Today you’re a stranger in Africa,  
you go about clutching at straws:  
groom your shield, this land of your fathers  
is now the playground of strangers. (152: 37-40)

In another poem she asserts the rights of black people to the land: “Lord, for long you’ve been our home:/ this land of Africa’s our land” (378: 29-30), and goes on to warn the colonists:

Those who came by ship shouldn’t fool themselves:  
the Prince of Heaven’s wide awake. (378: 31- 32)

Mgqwetho appeals to the Bible to assert Africans’ rights to Africa: according to her “theology,” Africa was given by God to Africans, but strangers have come in and made it their playground: their presence is thus both unwelcome and ungodly. In the above poem she also rejects the assumption that God arrived with the Europeans when she says, “Lord, for long you’ve been our home” – and on that basis makes the claim that “this land of Africa’s our land”. She even implies that by invading and taking land from Africans the colonists are flouting God’s law and will not go unpunished: “the Prince of Heaven’s wide awake.” In short, in her use of the Bible Mgqwetho “undermines the pervasive, but fallacious, assumption that Christianity is a ‘Western’ religion” (Brown 25).

Often Christianity is depicted as a unifying factor amongst Africans. To illustrate this, in a poem titled “Here’s the drum, the drum of the Cross!!” Mgqwetho refers to God as the “Collector of diverse households” and pleads:

Collect Africa by your blood  
so that you rule our people  
through the hunting shield of your Word. (140: 45-48)

The word of God is what Mgqwetho believes will unite and save Africa from total destruction. She tells her readers:

Go back to the books of the people of old,  
And stop being stripped by the whites everyday.  
Jehovah roared and will prophesy:  
They must stop besmirching your dignity. (234: 33-36)

Though Mgqwetho recognizes and shows disdain for white rule and oppression in Africa, she is in no way sympathetic towards Africans who disobey the word of God and expect success. This is shown in the title of the poem “A godless nation perishes,” which opens by quoting a passage from Psalms 90: 1-3:

Lord you have been our home from generation to generation, even before the mountains were set in place, before you created the earth and the world; from the beginning of time to the end of time, you are God. When someone fails to return to you, you round on him with destruction. (376)

In this poem the state of Africa is the result of Africans turning their backs on God. In a prose piece Mgqwetho voices similar sentiments. She says: “We can’t sit in silence, the country’s rotten. For the moment, please ignore Hertzogs: study the scriptures, Jehovah’s hand – beating us” (216). Here she insists that her people seek a spiritual rather than a political solution to their woes. Essentially, (South) Africa’s problems are not political so much as they are the result of the fulfilment of biblical prophecies (about blacks). As the title of the piece indicates “The prophecies about blacks have now come to pass! Listen!” Since the problem is a spiritual rather than a political one, a spiritual solution is required:

“The leaders we need now must come to us with wraps from Heaven and unravel problems which will obstruct us” (216). Mqgqwetho views the prophecies in Isaiah against the Egyptians as applying to blacks everywhere. She paraphrases the passage as follows:

The prophet Isaiah says Jehovah’s horse has gone past here with sweat. It dropped a rock that unsettled him: Look at those sods! To you black community: we will fight amongst ourselves alone, because it is written so. We will be encircled and ruled by hostile kings. Jobs will be wrenched from us. So it is written; exactly as it is now. Jehovah will make you shake and tremble with fear because you lack the resources Jehovah will send you to fight the enemy. Because of your oppressors, you will cry out to Jehovah for the first time and he will send you a Saviour. (216)

Mqgqwetho believes that by not heeding scripture Africans are implicated in their own oppression, as she says in the poem: “You have brought this on yourselves” (216). In the preface to the poem “Mene! Mene! Teke! Parsin!” Mqgqwetho quotes a verse from the book of Daniel and again applies it to the South African context – for her the Bible speaks directly to the black experience, and thus the political is the spiritual, and vice-versa. She quotes *Daniel 5: 25*: “God has made a complete accounting of your kingdom. You have been weighed on the scale and found wanting. Your kingdom is therefore confiscated and handed to the nations on your borders,” and goes on to paraphrase and construe the verse in terms of the socio-political situation in South Africa:

Now this seems to refer to you and to me, she argues. Take the fourth verse in the same chapter. It reads: “We drank wine and praised foreign gods of gold and silver, brass and iron, wood and stone” Isn’t that true? Look at the great variety of fripperies in this country. Reader take note! Would that same hand that wrote on those walls over there not write today on the walls of Africa? (200)

Reference to the great variety of “fripperies in this country” and the pursuit of material wealth in fact comprises the major burden of Mqgqwetho’s poetry. In most of her poems this is the essence of her distress: blacks vying for status, greed, the love of money more

than people, the use of alcohol, and licentious behaviour on the part of those claiming to be Christians. In “The Lion of blackness still roars” she declaims:

God is the toy of black behaviour,  
Paganism is rampant.  
Alas, black home, the lid’s on your pot,  
your fathers’ country rumbles and trembles. (222:35-38)

She reiterates:

We toyed with God while whites looked on:  
Today our country’s affliction itself. (222:44-45)

Even though the country is in a dire state, there is hope: Mgqwetho herself prophesies of Africa’s return to God, saying: “You will come back, like it or not – kicking and screaming, you will!” (216). To break out of the political/spiritual condition in which they find themselves, Mgqwetho constantly instructs her readers to “study the Scriptures” or “find support in the Scriptures.” “Didn’t Ntsikana tell you?” she often asks, or advises the reader to “follow Ntsikana’s words.”

Her constant refrain makes her message abundantly clear:

seek truth from those above,  
who died here and in the water. (378:27-28)

She charts the way forward:

Bear the report to the One on High,  
Burn your first son as sacrifice. (282:39-30)

A prayer is said:

Jehovah, replenish our days on earth,  
as you did in the time of our fathers.

We offer sacrifice! (338: 47- 48)

As Duncan Brown points out, in Mgqwetho's work "Christianity becomes a mode of spiritual power and personal articulation for African Christians" (25). In the Bible the source and solution of their distress is articulated. She sees the consistent application of the Bible as the only way forward, and gives reasons why her readers should take her word for it, saying: "I'm not Nongqawuse/ who brought Xhosa mountains crashing down. Read the scriptures!" (258: 50-51); or "find support in the Scriptures./...wake up and talk the same language,/ I don't preach a rebirth of cattle" (436: 35-36). Ntsikana's words are trusted and valorised while Nongqawuse's prophecies are called into question and held responsible for the destruction of the Xhosa kingdom. Mgqwetho writes: "The cliffs tinkled till a clear voice spoke that drove Nongqawuse into a frenzy. Ha-la-la! Where do we stand today? What wrought the destruction and occupation of this Africa of ours? (372).

From an analysis of these poems, Mgqwetho's strong Christian views emerge in bold relief. In her interpretation of the Bible, Africa's destruction is accounted for and promise of her glory guaranteed. Though she holds Ntsikana's theology in high regard, she views Christianity as unifying all blacks, not just the Xhosas who were the first to receive Christianity. She argues:

There is no Jehovah of Ntsikana alone or the Mfengu alone. Oh, no! There is only one Jehovah of all the black nations under the sun, united, commemorating the same thing and crying as one: so clap your hands! (300)

She elaborates:

Isaiah says: "come all of you"  
All the blacks are invited,  
Zulu, Xhosa, Mfengu,  
all are the same despite distinctions. (300: 13-16)

In an opinion piece she explains to her readers:

God was testing us through the whites, because for ages past he is the hunting party hunting souls. He does this to find out what hope resides in any one person. Furthermore, it is by God's design that every single nation in Africa should be here, because for ages past he forms one flock from diverse sheep, wanting all these flocks to bend to his truth. (432)

Thus in Christ, unity that transcends ethnic boundaries is found and an African solidarity inspired. In its unique way, Mgwetho's poetry shows that, as some writers have argued, "[c]onversion was not imposed; rather it derived from a realisation that Christianity was in some way appropriate to the new conditions of life in which converts found themselves" (Bredekamp and Ross 4). Yet as the following section will show, Mgwetho's work possesses and evinces a "sense of moral dichotomy and conflict" (Park 893), and in this her ambivalent and agonistic engagement with Christianity is revealed.

### **3.7 Christianity: the white man's cant**

Mgwetho's ambiguous view of the Bible is not very surprising given the South African context, where the Bible was used to lure Africans away from their customs and later to justify racial oppression. At the same time it provided Africans with a discourse to help them deal with their immediate situation, as well as to hope and work for a better future. This complex and conflicted response to the Bible on the part of blacks is well articulated in the preface to the poem "Where do we stand?:"

Examine closely that bible they use to access, "God's identity." After you suffered agony, they crushed you with it. It approached you walking backwards, not so? Made to stab at your heart? Through it offer yourself as sacrifice for your sins and you will not be disappointed. (372)

There is a clear understanding in Mgwetho's work that the Bible lends itself to a double purpose: though it was used to oppress, blacks should use it to overcome oppression. As Duncan Brown points out, for Mgwetho "Christianity becomes a

powerful mode for addressing inequality” as well as a basis for political resistance (37). In “Where does this teaching come from?” she questions the use or abuse of the Bible, quoting a passage from Matthew 28:19-20 then asking a series of pertinent questions:

Go and make disciples of all nations. Teach them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, teach them to obey all those things I commanded you as law. What have we learnt from the whites? Which are the laws the Almighty commanded the whites to teach us to obey? Is it the teaching of Hertzog and the Caesars of this country? If that’s the case, we just can’t see the way to heaven. Oh no! (400)

In the body of the poem Mqgqwetho portrays the nonchalant attitudes of whites towards black people and the Bible.

“We’re British: the Kaffirs can die!  
We’ll rip the candy from your mouths.  
We didn’t touch you: we’re British!  
A baby baboon’s no stranger to misery”  
Do you hear? (400: 11-15)

She laments:

Mercy, Africa strife-torn land!  
There’s little indeed we can take for the truth.  
Awu, we’re covered with chaff from the threshing floor!  
We cast off God, went in search of a wife.  
Think about it!! (400: 20-24)

At this point she questions the adoption of the Bible by black people.

The homestead of Africa raises a cry.  
Christians, where are your bibles today?  
Now their fiery breath  
Scorches those who received them. (402: 25- 28)

She argues that:

When the white appeared, all was normal:  
abnormality came with the bible.

There was nothing slack in his preaching:  
we saw we were totally routed.  
But when he washed the clay from our bodies  
Our old men despaired, took their blankets and left.

That's a grievous wound in Africa  
brought by the white man's bible.  
Today, we don't know who we are  
and our God has completely forsaken us.

Today Africa yields no milk.  
Is there no one among the elders  
to bear this report to the One on High,  
to burn his first son as sacrifice? (402: 36-52)

Often when linking the Bible with oppression Mqgqwetho refers to it as “the white man’s bible.” She makes a distinction between what the Bible says and what “the white man’s bible says,” or the Bible according to white oppressors. By this we recognize that Mqgqwetho is aware that “the ‘meaning’ of a text is not stable or unitary, but is the product of a reader’s engagement with it: the “white man’s bible” is not the published biblical text, but a meaning placed upon that text which is open to contestation and review” (Brown 39). According to Mqgqwetho blacks knew the God of the Bible before the “god of the white man’s bible” came. They accepted the latter, only to find it used against them: “Oppression was touted by glittering scriptures/ that taught us to cast off our blankets...” (168: 33-34). Sadly she realises that “we yielded sovereignty to no purpose,/ embraced the new, and lost our own” (168:44-45). This leads her to pose questions to her readers:

So do you see the god of the whites?  
What did you want from the god of the whites?  
He helped tie you down with the stone of ochre.  
Never again mixed soiled clothes with clean. (280: 25-28)

The God preached by the whites is not the God of the Bible but a god that they created themselves and in so doing contaminated the truly sacred. In “Show me the mountain that packed up and left,” the speaker asks:

Where is this God that we worship?  
The one we worship’s foreign:  
we kindled a fire and sparks swirled up,  
swirled up a European mountain.

This is the wisdom of their God:  
“Black man, prepare for the treasures of heaven  
while we prepare for the treasures of Africa!”  
Just as the wise men of Pharaoh’s land

commanded the Jews: “Use grass to bake bricks,”  
leaving them empty-handed at sunset,  
so it is for us black people now:  
eager at dawn, at dusk empty-handed. (128:28-40)

Despite what the oppression that has been wrought upon black people by the ‘wisdom’ of this foreign god, in this beautifully succinct and resonant poem Mqgqwetho encourages Africans not to despair nor to lose hope in God:

So come on home! Remember your God,  
a borer of holes in cracked ships,  
Ancient Bone which they sucked for its marrow:  
may it still yield them marrow in Africa.

So come back! Make a fresh start!  
Remember the Crutch you leaned on as lepers,  
let Him lead you dryshod through the Red Sea.  
Food from another man’s pot makes you fart.

Please listen!! (128:41-49).

She encourages her readers to remember God as they knew him, undiluted by the vicious influence of the white man’s bible. To illustrate this for her readers she often quotes Ntsikana, juxtaposing his words against the white man’s bible. His words are portrayed as the true utterances of someone who has searched the

scriptures and come to know God, while through the white man's misuse, "the bible's been turned into gall" – something bitter and detestable (372). The basic accusation is that of hypocrisy:

Long ago the whites brought the word;  
we're confused that it bends with the wind:  
over there it's with God, over here it flogs us.  
I'm quite confused: I'd better scam. (212: 9-12)

in that land of white lords and masters  
the bible speaks with a forked tongue. (208: 23-24)

The results are tangible:

They clapped shackles on you, Africa,  
hurled you down with bible and musket. (183: 14-15)

This misinterpretation of the bible enrages Mqgqwetho. She questions the discernment of Christian converts, because they have relied on the white man's interpretation of the Bible indiscriminately rather than seeking the truth therein themselves, as Ntsikana counseled. She asks:

Christians, where are your bibles today?  
I'd better stop: I get too angry.  
Truly, these people from overseas  
used them to rob us of house and home. (268: 13-16)

As much as the white man's bible is an agent of cultural as well as territorial dispossession, Mqgqwetho recommends it for African Christians, for them to seek and discern its truth themselves in order to usher in Africa's restoration. In order to inspire this vision she often asks blacks to think back, to go back to a time before the intrusion of the white man's bible and the oppressive culture that accompanied the arrival of Christianity.

She advises:

So listen, thinker,  
cast your eyes back,  
kindle your memory,  
talk of old ways,

lean on your staff,  
prick up your ears,  
spread your wings,  
consider times past,

and bring us the news once more  
of the days of Phalo and Tshiwo, Peace! (116: 69- 79)

She asks her readers:

what were things like in those days, please speak,  
when they cooked with pots of clay, let's hear?  
What were things like in those days, please speak,  
When women wore calfskin petticoats, let's hear? (208:5-8)

When blacks remember the glories of their past and see the hope that lies ahead through an African Christianity, Mqgqwetho hopes they will be propelled into action – to return to their ancient customs which brought about social cohesion. For Mqgqwetho there is no conflict between Christianity and African customs: as far as she is concerned, Christianity belongs in Africa and despite the white man's bible (Christianity according to European missionaries) she believes that the traditional and the Christian must be held together harmoniously instead of either being cast aside as evil. She rebukes those who do not:

You cast aside kingship, polygamy too,  
Ochre and custom in every village.  
What must we make of modern marriage?  
Wed and split in a day: where does this come from?

We sit on the fence, won't take a stand,  
The walking dead unfamiliar to God.  
It may be true, as you say, that the Xhosa like joking,  
But I have no intention of joking with you. (188: 25-32)

The rapprochement that she envisages between Christianity and traditional African cosmology is fitting and not in conflict with scripture. For Mgqwetho, adopting western culture is meaningless, akin to sitting on the fence; what is required is whole-hearted devotion to scripture and African customs, which she believes are given by God to promote social cohesion. She finally commands:

Act like a man! Bellow your cry!  
After you've fallen get to your knees  
And return to the days you wail for  
When you'll hear Ntsikana's words  
in the end! (190: 45-49)

Janet Hodgson explains Ntsikana's significance in this regard:

In contrast to later converts, Ntsikana continued to live among his own people. He adopted new beliefs, such as the doctrine of salvation in Christ, and new practices, such as regular meetings of non-kinship groups for worship and prayer. He maintained cultural continuity by filling elements of the Xhosa tradition with Christian content, most notably in his Great Hymn, [which Mgqwetho borrows from throughout her poetry] the first in Xhosa, which drew its symbols and images from everyday life. (72)

For Mgqwetho, Ntsikana articulated and enacted Christianity as it should be – not as it is practised by educated Africans, who will not read and interpret the Bible for themselves, but continue to be guided by the white man's bible, “designed to deceive us” (160: 43).

In conclusion, although the roots of Nontsizi Mgqwetho's engagement with Christianity cannot be adequately traced, their influence is lasting and profound. Christian idiom enables Mgqwetho's voice; it enables her to speak to all Africans regardless of ethnicity and use it as common ground upon which Africans can unite, reading “the bible against its ‘misreadings’” (Brown 84). Her reading of the Bible enables her to see her people in it. For her it accounts both for the present condition of subjugation and its resolution, and is the “foundational text of

Africanness” in which black territorial integrity and her identity as an African are affirmed (Brown 82). The distinction she makes between the word of God which is in the Bible, and the “hypocritical cant of the white man’s gospel” (230:47) helps clarify the source of her ambivalence. In all her poetry, Mgqwetho’s strong voice comes through – hers is the “anguished voice of an urban woman confronting male dominance, ineffective leadership, black apathy, white malice and indifference, economic exploitation and a tragic history of nineteenth-century territorial and cultural dispossession” (Opland, “Introduction” xiv). Though Africa as she depicts it is marred by distractions and difficulties of all kinds, she stubbornly insists on the reality of a hope contingent on radical change:

To conclude, my people, I’ll say this:  
Unless we completely turn our backs  
On these habits that I’ve mentioned,  
Africa will never come back.  
No, never!! (124: 37-41)

## Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that, as David Attwell puts it, the “legacies of Bantu and missionary education... disrupted the continuities there might have been between the black subject and the practices of literate culture” (80). But there is another way of construing the historical record, and that is to ignore what might have been (the nostalgic dream of “nativism”) and rather view the evolution of the “black subject” as exhibiting continuities of a different sort. As much as Christianity has been characterised by African historians and literary scholars as a ‘foreign’ religion, it is impossible to deny the extraordinary extent of its acceptance and indigenisation in South Africa. For Tiyo Soga, “Africa was of God given to the race of Ham;” S. E. K. Mqhayi prayed to “the God of his forefathers,” the first generation of converts to Christianity, until he wept; and in the work of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, God simply belongs in Africa. The fact is that the conversion of Africans to Christianity has largely been seen “in terms of a monolithic conception of the colonisation of consciousness, whereas [the example of these writers shows that] Christianity is far more dialogic in its experience” (Brown 40).

Musa W. Dube, a pioneer in the field of postcolonial biblical scholarship, makes the following argument:

Post- colonial readings of the Bible must seek to decolonise the biblical text, its interpretations, its readers, its institution, as well as seeking ways of reading for liberating interdependence. Liberating interdependence here entails a twofold willingness on the part of the readers: first to propound biblical readings that decolonise imperialistic tendencies and other oppressive narrative designs; second, to propound readings that seek to highlight the biblical texts and Jesus as undoubtedly important cultures, which are, nonetheless, not ‘above all’ but among the many important cultures of the world. (133)

The writers explored in this study all engage with Christianity in ways that involve re-reading, re-writing and re-education. They all produced biblical interpretations that subvert imperialistic tendencies by asserting agency: reading the Bible for

themselves against its ‘misreadings’ and finding in it freedom rather than oppression, and unity rather than division.

But the differences between them are equally instructive, and adumbrate a historical narrative of cultural adjustment and assertion. Tiyo Soga rejected those aspects of African culture such as initiation into manhood and polygamy that he believed were contrary to scripture: the Bible remained his final authority in all matters of life. And in important ways, the Bible remained for him the Bible of the missionary brotherhood to which he belonged. His unwavering belief that conversion and education mapped out the only path to liberation might seem naive or myopic to us today. But the logic was clear: black people had only to show themselves capable of acquiring and practising the cultural repertoire of their European conquerors in order to be accepted as their equals. Disillusionment was slow but inevitable: the recognition that the racism of whites was anything but logical, that their deep-seated fears and insecurities meant that the acculturated, “educated African” was viewed as even more of a threat to their status and sense of selfhood.

S. E. K. Mqhayi could incorporate this disillusionment into his increasingly politicised version of Christianity. By conceptually separating the religion from its colonial cultural associations – the African separatist church movement consolidated this in institutional terms – Mqhayi was able to be at once a professing Christian, a proud Xhosa, and an African nationalist. He was also a proud British subject who famously chastised Britain for the aggression, greed, selfishness and hypocrisy that characterised its imperial adventure.

Both Mqhayi and Nontsizi Mgqwetho sought to imagine and embody an identity in which Christianity and traditional African customs and beliefs were comfortably compatible: for them, “the Bible and the blanket [were never] at odds, despite what the missionaries or white churches might say” (Brown 47). Mgqwetho was a visionary whose points of reference were entirely biblical, and yet her poetry consistently addressed contemporary social and political issues. She deferred in all things to biblical precept and authority, and yet in a very real sense she exhibited *ownership* of the Bible, setting up this cultural capital in opposition to

what she dismissed as “the white man’s bible.” The power of her writing derived from the fusion of intense religious belief with political aspiration, a fusion that imbued life with spiritual meaning and endowed the goal of liberation with a millennial splendour.

All three writers “saw Christianity as an integrating force in developing a supra-ethnic African Nationalism” (Hodgson 87). Their writing evinces an evolving commitment to black people becoming agents of their own liberation through what they saw as “an intratext of self-definition, rather than intertext of cross-cultural encounter” (Brown 82).

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