

# CHANGING THE SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY CANON

It is common, when thinking of a literary archive in the South African indigenous languages, to focus only on the knowledge of literary heritage of a few authors and their selected writings. In particular, writings that were used at the point of the introduction of literacy for didactic purposes are the only considered as a literary canon of the language.

It is also common that these selected writings are studied and appreciated only for their literary attributes or as far as they are able to tell us about the biographies of their writers.

The meaningful value of a literary archive is embodied in a letter written in the newspaper *Isigidimi*, in 1887 by Wellington W. Gqoba. Writing in his capacity as an editor, he says,

"But there are reasons for me not to remain idle but to deal briefly with minor aspects of ... chronological stories of our national stories ... motivated as I am by national envy in doing so. My fervent desire is that our history should be well known and brought into print because all nations who possess a history continue to live and do not die even if they are fragmented.

"We are taught the events of the nations of Greece, Rome, Egypt, of the English and so on, who they were and what they are today. Thus, they are very much alive, because even we who never shared their experiences or saw them, at least today we know something about them. Through their historical books, we see them, we discuss them and make an example of some of their sayings and habits as reflected in their present day legacy."

Gqoba argues that a literary heritage reflects and preserves the national, social and cultural identity of a nation. He posits that from these we can deduce the knowledge and intellectual thoughts of the society on whom the writings are based, knowledge that can be shared with other nations.

He is the author of the first volume in the Opland Xhosa Literature Collection Series. Most of his works, which appeared mainly in *Isigidimi* were copied and collected by Professor Jeffrey Opland and form part of Opland's Library Collection. The Gqoba volume was published in 2015 and was translated and co-edited by Opland, Maseko and Kuse. The works reflect, through various literary genres, the intellectual thought of the isiXhosa-speaking Nguni people of the Eastern Cape, reflecting the African ways of knowing.

As Series Editors, Opland and Maseko are driven by the possibilities that these works can add to the body of knowledge in various disciplines in the academy. They say it is sad that the academy is silent about African intellectual thought when Africa is teeming in its presence. The right to speak your language, as enshrined in the Bill of Rights, is not enough, if one cannot use it to understand, share and process knowledge in the context of one's past experiences, and ways of knowing. This comes from the view that a language is a repository and the way people think about their environment.

"It is this", says Pamela Maseko PhD, who is the Associate Professor of Sociolinguistics at the Rhodes University's African Language Studies, "that makes the Presidency's presentation of the Order of Ikhamanga (silver) to Professor Jeff Opland so important."

The Ikhamanga citation speaks of an excellent contribution to the different disciplines in the academy, for example of history and the work that Opland has done in the collection and preservation of the "stories" of amaXhosa. "Your work exhumes stories of the dead and brings them to life so that the living can continue to learn and benefit."

Maseko elaborates, "Professor Opland's work in this area goes back more than 30 years, maybe longer, but we are talking about works written by missionary educated Africans in the 19th and 20th century just after the acquisition of writing.

Needless to say, we are inordinately proud of our recent research collaboration with him through the Opland Xhosa Literature Collection."

The Series from this collection is a collaborative project between Opland Xhosa literature collection, Rhodes University and University of KwaZulu Natal Press.

The collaboration was bolstered by funding from the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) and more recently by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation. Maseko leads the NIHSS Catalytic Project on "Concept Formation in African Languages" and the Mellon funded research project on "Language as source of indigenous epistemologies."

This resulted in publication of three volumes. These are William Wellington Gqoba *Isizwe Esinembali: Xhosa Histories and Poetry (1873-1888)*

and D.L.P. Yali-Manisi *Iimbali Zamanyange: Historical Poems* both published in 2015, and John Solilo Umoya Wembongi: *Collected Poems (1922-1935)* published in 2016. The next two volumes, S.E.K. Mqhayi: *Iziganeko Zesizwe: Occasional Poems (1900-1943)* and *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (second edition) are in print.

The context of the writing of these works is significant in the literary history of South Africa. When the isiXhosa-speaking Nguni people acquired the skill of writing through missionary education that was introduced at the turn of the 19th century, they seized the power of ink to write, in their native language, about various issues, using newspapers that were less regulated at the time than the missionary-controlled publications.

They wrote freely without missionary censorship and influence about matters including their history, norms, beliefs and values. They commented in the media about the colonial rule, the cultural prejudice of the missionaries over the indigenous culture and social practices, and the erosion of indigenous practices. They also wrote about the value of the western education and practices, they also wondered how such education could suppress indigenous practices that have sustained a society for centuries. The writings, aimed at both the young and the old, reflected the manner in which amaXhosa made sense of their world, both past and present, and also of how they imagined the future. Maseko adds,

"Working with Prof Opland as the Series Editor and co-editor of two of the volumes, I marvel at the knowledge, the intellectual thought and the African Xhosa ways of knowing harboured in those texts. It is also a mystery that such informative works that talk back to western-derived knowledge could be hidden for so long. The academy and both the local and global society is poorer without these.

"However, there is growing research interest, both locally and internationally, in this work. Postgraduate students across disciplines are working on disseminating it further. This is necessary in the unearthing of African thought and ways of knowing. This is also critical in developing the value of a language and the society that speaks it. The value of all powerful languages is developed and maintained in this manner.

"As Gqoba wrote more than

a century ago, nations with a literary history remain powerful and influential even when they no longer exist. Their knowledge is shared and emulated. Importantly though, in the South African context, such works can shed some light into often obscure past of the indigenous population, a past that is generally often related in the context of the colonialism, or 1652," says Maseko

The RU-NIHSS and the Mellon-funded research has enabled collaboration not only between Opland and Maseko at RU, but between different institutions both locally and internationally. These collaborations are essential in facilitating intellectual engagement with these texts, as with the University of Cape Town's Catalytic Project of Precolonial history, a project housed at the Centre for African Studies under the leadership of Professor Lungisile Ntsebeza. It is a historical-sociolinguistic project, and seeks to use these texts for linguistic evidence that could shed light into the historical and sociocultural practices of the isiXhosa speaking Nguni people.

Another collaboration at UCT is with Dr Jacques de Wet from the Sociology Department, whose project examines the changes and continuities, over the past century, in the meanings and uses of selected sociological terms in isiXhosa, and relates these meanings to changes and continuities in the socio-cultural experiences of isiXhosa-speaking people.

The collaboration with Prof Bassey Antia of the University of the Western Cape is in relation to language and cognition – using multilingual learning strategies in facilitating effective learning in a context where linguistic diversity is a norm. In this context, it is not only language as a medium of communication that is important, but the knowledge embedded in the languages. The last collaboration is with Dr Zelaem of University of Fort Hare's Computer Science department.

Maseko states, "Rhodes University (RU) has two PhD degrees, based on this work, that have been awarded this year. I personally have a few postgraduate students who are working on this literature, and one of the PhDs has been awarded at the RU graduation will hopefully be converted into a book, and become a volume in the Series. I am also working on a book project where I am



Prof Pamela Maseko is currently an Associate Professor in the School of Languages and Literature, African Language Studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. She is presently on a 6-month Writing Fellowship with the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study. She previously worked as the co-ordinator of the South Africa-Norway Tertiary Development Project on Multilingualism in the same institution, and at the University of Cape Town and the National Language Project. She has served as a member of various provincial and national task teams on matters related to languages and their role in access and success in higher education for students

speaking language other than English. She is an Executive Member of the African Languages Association of Southern Africa. Her PhD is in Sociolinguistics and her research interests include language policy and planning, with a focus on multilingualism and language in education. Her research on language policy and planning, and language practices in South African higher education has been published in journals and as book chapters both locally and internationally. She co-edited two of the volumes in the Series Wellington Gqoba: *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry 1873-1888* DLP Yali-Manisi: *Iimbali Zamanyange: Historical Poems*

investigating knowledge captured in the language used by these renowned isiXhosa writers, to make sense of the past, and understand the present, especially in contesting the widely-held negative assumptions about the sociocultural and other practices of the society speaking the language."

Because language is verbal expression of a society's view of life and its socio-cultural practices, Maseko's project seeks to study the language concepts, as used in the writings just at the time of contact with writing to understand the way of life of amaXhosa, their values and norms in the precolonial state. In this way, her project seeks to reconstruct the precolonial, and make sense of the present.

It is common that scholars get immersed in an area of

study because of personal encounters related to what they are studying. Clearly, her own learning experiences have fuelled a lifelong passion for and commitment to preserving isiXhosa. Having been hauled out of one language and symbolically 'baptised' in another, it sharpened her sensitivity to the ideological imperatives of dominant languages.

"It was," she muses, probably what launched her quest. "I experienced first-hand how language and society interact. How certain languages are given prestige and take dominance and others are dominated and marginalised. I became aware of the power of education, how institutions can maintain and transmit some languages and knowledge to construct power and prestige while craftily

marginalising others." On the other hand, Maseko confesses to being "mildly annoyed" by those who harangue others with moral claims about indigenous languages. There are, she posits, far more important claims to be made about the value of indigenous languages in terms of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses. Overall, this Xhosa Literature Series is responding to the issues Maseko raises in the following ways:

Firstly, it starts a process of the construction of a isiXhosa literary archive. It also initiates the establishment of a canon of isiXhosa writings, a process that should contribute to the modification of literary canon in the academy.

Secondly, it should facilitate

the study of these works in relation to the intellectual contributions of their authors and how this can help us to understand the past and contemporary society.

Writings by isiXhosa scholars have been studied as biographical works to shed some light on the life of the writer, as well as for literary criticism. The focus on biographical and literary appraisal overlooks the intellectual contributions of these authors. Lastly, because language is verbal expression of a society's view of life and its socio-cultural practices, the study seeks to study the language concepts so as to understand the way of life of amaXhosa, their values and norms in the precolonial state. With this, it is possible to reconstruct the precolonial, and make sense of the present.

## Hot off the printing presses and already a valuable resource

One of the most satisfying aspects of collaborating on and co-editing three recently published books on Xhosa history and poetry is the interest they have generated in doctoral studies worldwide, according to Associate Professor Pamela Maseko PhD, who is an associate professor Rhodes University's African Language Studies.

"Although only recently published, both William Wellington Gqoba: *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa histories and poetry (1873-1888)* and D.L.P. Yali-Manisi: *Iimbali Zamanyange: Historical Poems* are already serving as an invaluable resource for my own doctoral students and others globally.

"I love that they are effectively gaining knowledge of Xhosa history, culture and values unfiltered by Western perceptions and assumptions," she adds.

Among her own students, a recently awarded PhD degree based on the work, is tipped to become one of the volumes in the Series.

She says the value of William Wellington Gqoba's writings rests in how they address the culture of the Xhosa people, their language, politics and cultural practices. Bearing in mind, these were previously distorted by missionaries with a Western understanding of our history."

"The stories emanate from either first-hand experience or knowledge gleaned from the wise people of his community and his writings seek to affirm



On Friday (28 April 2017) Professor Jeff Opland received the Presidency with the Order of Khamanga: Silver award for his outstanding contribution to the field of history and an impressive body of works in literature. The award reads: "Your work exhumes stories of the dead and brings them to life so that the living can continue to learn and benefit. The Ikhamanga flower (more commonly referred to as the stralitzia, crane, or bird or paradise flower) is one of the world's most recognisable flowers and is indigenous to the Eastern Cape. The Ikhamanga is the central motif of the Order of Ikhamanga and symbolises the unique beauty of the achievements of South Africans in the creative fields of arts, culture, literature, music, journalism and sport. Opland is visiting professor of African Language and Literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and

identity by drawing on the past. They stand on the brink of mobilisation to resist white control and to construct social, political and religious independence of European colonialism."

The book assembles and translates into English all of William Wellington Gqoba's clearly identifiable writings. They, in turn, offer an insider's perspective on an African nation in transition, adapting uncomfortably to Western mores and morality.

Maseko tells of how Christian missionaries

introduced European notions of education and literacy to the Xhosa-speaking peoples along the southeastern seaboard of South Africa from the end of the eighteenth century.

It was Dr J.T. van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society (LMS), who first taught a Xhosa person to write. He was followed by Joseph Williams and John Brownlee, who established his mission station on the Tyhume River in 1820.

Brownlee was soon joined by agents of the Glasgow Missionary Society, and the

Tyhume mission evolved into the Lovedale Missionary Institution, which opened its doors to black and white students in 1841. All this early evangelical and educational activity fell within the territory of the Xhosa chief Ngqika, who served as a teacher, until removed from the station and from missionary influence by his disgruntled councillors.

Ntsikana son of Gabha, one of Ngqika's advisers, probably had some form of contact with Van der Kemp. By the time Williams arrived, he had

established a dedicated community to whom he taught hymns he composed and regularly preached to in his own style of Christian worship.

Ntsikana died in May 1821, while on his way with his disciples to join Brownlee, and, in dying, urged his followers, under his sons Kobe and Dukwana, to complete the journey to the Tyhume mission.

He would be an enduring influence, revered as a charismatic prophet who foretold the arrival of white settlers. Although he

encouraged acceptance of some of European innovations, this was to be on Xhosa terms, instead of wholesale conversion by the missionaries.

He stressed the need for the community and the nation to remain as tightly unified as a compressed, compacted ball made from the scrapings of the inside of a pelt, imbumba yamanyama, a phrase that now serves as one of South Africa's national mottos.

Professor Maseko notes that, for the most part, his disciples served the missionary

enterprise faithfully. "They and their descendants played crucial roles in the development of literacy and in the early development of Xhosa literature in print."

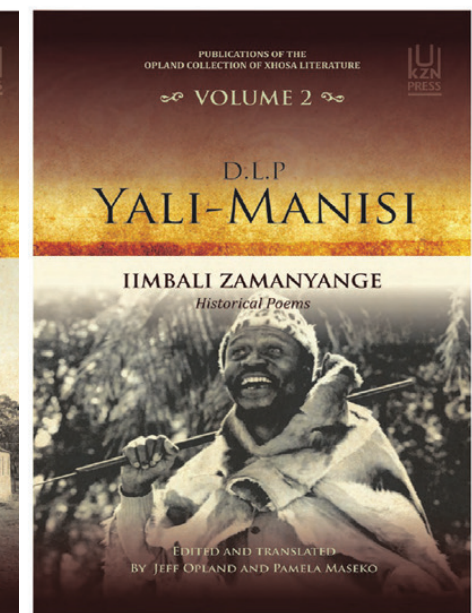
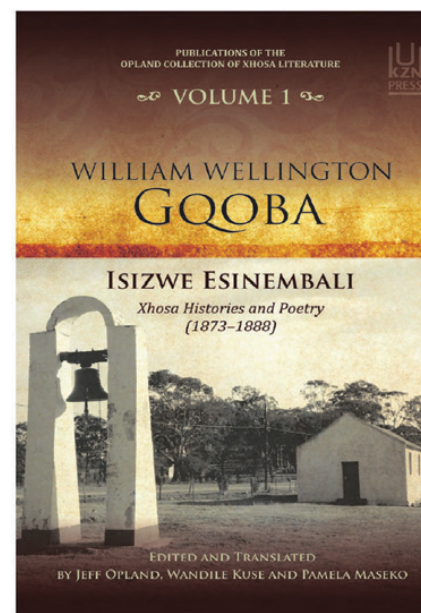
DLP Yali-Manisi: *Iimbali Zamanyange: Historical Poems* is a collection of praise poetry by David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926-99). A Thembu imbongi, he was the most powerful exponent of the art of praise poetry in the Xhosa language in the second half of the twentieth century.

His literary career was,

however, blighted by circumstances beyond his control, and he died in total obscurity.

"Manisi's reputation waned as he struggled to reach his audience in the apartheid era. The poet, a lifelong supporter of Nelson Mandela and the author of the earliest poem in his praise was never able to fulfil his ambition of performing a poem in honour of Madiba in a liberated South Africa," Maseko mentions ruefully. "Manisi loved to extend his praise poetry into explicit narrative. He also displayed an extraordinary capacity to compose poetry while performing. The volume presents eight of his narrative poems in isiXhosa and in English translation. Four of them are drawn from his earliest published books, together with the complete text of his epic poem on the War of Mlanjeni, published in 1983."

There are three remarkable spontaneous poems produced with little forethought. The poems address events in the first 80 years of the nineteenth century, and feature blunt assessments of figures such as Ntsikana, Ngqika, Nonesi, Sandile, Sir Harry Smith, Nongqawuse and Sir George Grey. David Livingstone Yali-Manisi clearly anticipated the restoration of black control under those freedom fighters imprisoned on Robben Island and viewed them as heroic as the crane-feathered warriors of the nineteenth century. "His poetry plucked the past to inspire resistance to present injustices," she says.



Research Fellow in the Department of African Languages, University of South Africa, Pretoria. The Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature is an academic library, assembled in the course of Professor Jeff Opland's research into Xhosa folklore, especially praise poetry, and the history of Xhosa literature. Its contents include field recordings of Xhosa poets (1969-85), books and pamphlets in isiXhosa, and copies of literature published in ephemera. The Publications Series draws on material in the Collection, and presents diplomatic editions with English translations of significant works in isiXhosa, for the most part previously unrecognised or unavailable as published books, and studies of material in the collection.