

**XHOSA POETRY.** Xhosa is the lang. spoken by a group of peoples who settled along the southeastern coast of South Africa. It is a member of the Bantu family of langs. widely distributed throughout the southern continent and is closely related to neighboring Nguni langs. such as Zulu, Swazi, and Ndebele. Poetry in Xhosa is principally transmitted through three media, each with distinctive hist. and features: the spoken word and the printed word in books and newspapers.

Xhosa oral poetry (*izibongo*) is of one kind: it is praise poetry, commonly found in Africa in forms such as the Yoruba *oriki*, Bahima *ekyevugo*, or Shona *nhétémbo*. It consists essentially of a set of names that can be expanded into a line or a variable number of lines. The names that form the core of these verses and stanzas can be \*metaphors (often drawn from the animal kingdom) or compound names such as Stamps while Fighting (*Lwaganda*) or Watch the Red Dawn (*Jongumsobomvu*) or the names of relatives or ancestors. Nelson Mandela, e.g., is known by the praise name of one of his royal forebears, Madiba, a name that is expanded into the praise verse *uMadiba owadib' iindonga*, "Filler who filled gullies," because the original Madiba united the estranged factions of his people. The core praise names, which may be used as alternative names in ordinary discourse, commemorate poetically physical features, actions, or attributes. These units—praise names, verses, and stanzas—are the "praises" that constitute a "praise poem."

Praises may be composed about domestic animals such as dogs, cattle, or horses or about inanimate objects such as motor cars; traditional praise poems about birds once formed a common stock. At various times, praises may be composed by any member of the community about him- or herself or by his or her associates and assembled to form a personal praise poem; there are also traditional poems about clans, which consist of the names and praises of the clan ancestors. *Izibongo* may be uttered to encourage animals or people to express pride or gratitude. The clan praises, or the praises of ancestors, may be cited as invocations in ritual contexts. The order of the praises varies from one performance to the next: *izibongo* are not linear in structure; rather, they are unified in presenting facets, not always flattering, of the subject of the poem. Nor are *izibongo* explicitly narrative: the elliptical \*allusions, often cryptic in their compression, may be clarified by narrative if explanations are sought, but not in the poetry itself: *izibongo* are a set of shorthand references that encapsulate a person's evolving career or defining qualities or establish his or her relation to others. They are expressions of individual and communal identity.

*Izibongo* of members of the royal family are performed by men who present themselves as praise poets (*iimbongi*, singular *imbongi*). They undergo no formal training in poetry, any more than ordinary members of the public do: they appear on ceremonial occasions and are tacitly absorbed into the royal entourage. They are poets of the chieftdom, not appointees of the chief. They wear hats and cloaks of animal skin and carry two spears or clubs. Through their poetry they mold social

cohesion, uphold social norms, criticize excess or injustice, and mediate between ruler and ruled. The presence of *iimbongi* at royal courts is attested by visiting missionaries as early as 1825 and can be documented throughout the 19th and early 20th cs. The greatest of all *iimbongi* is widely acknowledged to be Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875–1945), who produced an *izibongo* in honor of the Prince of Wales on his visit to South Africa in May 1925. During the apartheid period, when many chiefs were co-opted under the government's homeland policy, many *iimbongi* declined to celebrate illegitimate rulers; but since 1994, the trad. has undergone a resurgence and national recognition, with *iimbongi* performing at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president and appearing in television commercials. Women, formerly barred as *iimbongi*, now perform poetry in public. An ed. and trans. of the oral poetry of the *imbongi* Bongani Sitole (1937–2003) was published in 1996, and a biography of the *imbongi* D.L.P. Yali-Manisi (1926–99), with trans. of his poetry, was published in 2005.

Christian missionaries transcribed the Xhosa lang. and printed it for the first time in 1823. In the first decade of the 20th c., they began publishing original works of creative lit., but these books were mainly designed for use in schools. Submissions to mission presses that did not conform to Christian ideology or were considered too political were rejected or bowdlerized. Later commercial publishers were also constrained to satisfy the requirements of government departments, since there was a limited readership for Xhosa books outside educational institutions. Xhosa authors, obliged to censor themselves, were further disadvantaged when the spelling system was revised in 1936 and submissions that did not conform to the new orthography were rejected; this unpopular orthography was revised yet again in 1955. Xhosa lit. in published books is thus skewed, restricted in content and directed at students. It encouraged Western genres such as drama, which does not exist in Xhosa oral trad., and Western forms of poetry. Lyrical poetry was solicited for early anthols. and narrative poetry for junior classes; poetry in Western stanzaic structures and rhyme, alien to Xhosa trad., was favored.

The earliest volumes of poetry published under such restrictions were John Solilo's *Izala* (1925) and Mqhayi's *Imihobe nemibongo* (1927). To bypass the ideological control of the press, eds. and poets occasionally paid for the printing of their own books: W. B. Rubusana (1858–1936) paid for the printing and distribution of his pioneering anthol. *Zemk'inkomo magwalandini* (1911), which included the earliest collection of traditional *izibongo*, now long out of print and available only in an abridged ed. that excludes the poetry; D.L.P. Yali-Manisi paid for the printing of his second volume of poetry, *Inguqu* (1954), which includes the earliest poem in praise of Nelson Mandela, then under banning orders.

Perhaps the most successful early poet who wrote in Western mode was J.J.R. Jolobe (1902–76), who published two volumes of poetry, *Umyezo* (1936) and

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*Iliha* (1959), as well as a volume of poetry for younger children (1952). The dominant poet who wrote largely in the style of traditional izibongo remains Mqhayi. In addition to *Imihobe nemibongo* (1927), he wrote a set of poems about the king Hintsa (1937) and *Inzuzo* (1942); his novel *Ityala lamawele* (1914) includes more of his poetry. Michael S. Huna published two epic poems, on the cattle sickness (1966) and on the prophet Ntsikana (1973), while in recent years Peter T. Mtuze has been prominent as an ed. and poet. Poets are now free to adopt Western or traditional style.

Newspapers and journals in Xhosa were issued by mission presses as of 1837. They sought to encourage contributions from readers but initially accepted poetry only in Western form. This restriction lapsed after 1884, with the appearance of secular newspapers under black editorial control, which served as major vehicles for lit. until the middle of the 20th c. A large proportion of this literary output was in poetry, written by adults for adult readers, free of ideological restrictions. Many poets who contributed to newspapers never subsequently published books; some of the poetry that appeared in newspapers was later included in pub. books; the vast majority of the newspaper poetry awaits collecting and publication. But it is to this medium that one must turn to find the unrestricted voice of the Xhosa poet in print.

The first generation of poets whose reputations were made in newspapers included M. K. Mtakati (fl. 1880s); Isaac Williams Wauchope (1852–1917); Jonas Ntsiko (d. 1918), who wrote under the pseudonym Uhadi waseluhlangeni; and William Wellington Gqoba (1840–88), all of whom adopted Western form. As ed. of the newspaper *Isigidimi samaXosa*, Gqoba published obituary poems, as well as two long serial poems that for many years remained the most

sustained poetic achievements in Xhosa. Presented in octosyllabics as formal debates on education and on Christianity, they included strong expressions of social crit.

As of 1897, Mqhayi began contributing poetry to newspapers, mostly in traditional form, under a variety of pseudonyms. He is the most prolific Xhosa poet in this medium, publishing poetry regularly until 1944, the year before his death. Hundreds of his poems await republication, though a start has been made with an ed. and trans. of his historical and biographical articles (2009), many of which include poems about people. From 1920 to 1929, Nontsizi Mqwetho published nearly a hundred poems in a Johannesburg newspaper, the first woman to write Xhosa poetry on a considerable scale. Her poetry is highly critical of ineffective black political leadership and immoral behavior among urban blacks; of white territorial dispossession, political control, and economic exploitation; and of male dominance over women. As a woman, she could not function as an imbongi, nor would her poetry have been suitable for publication in book form; but the medium of the newspaper empowered her and gave her access to her public. Her poetry was collected, translated, and republished in 2007.

■ W. B. Rubusana ed, *Zemk'inkomo magwalandini*, 2d ed. (1911); J. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry* (1983); *Qhii-wu-u-la!! Return to the Fold!! A Collection of Bongani Sitole's Xhosa Oral Poetry*, ed. and trans. R. H. Kaschula and M. C. Matyumza (1996); J. Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* (1998); R. H. Kaschula, *The Bones of the Ancestors Are Shaking* (2002); J. Opland, *The Dassie and the Hunter* (2005); N. Mqwetho, *The Nation's Bounty*, ed. and trans. J. Opland (2007); S.E.K. Mqhayi, *Abantu besizwe*, ed. and trans. J. Opland (2009).

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