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THE LANGUAGE ISSUE IN SOUTH AFRICAN
EDUCATIONAL LITERATURE:
THE CASE OF ORATURE

by Bheki Langa

My task in exploring the issue of language and literature in South Africa in the classroom is, indeed, easy if one considers the fact that a consensus seems to be growing among numerous African writers and intellectuals about the need for using African languages as modes of literary and educational transmission (to mention only two areas), even as these writers and intellectuals teach, write and deliver speeches in a foreign language--namely, English. Some are also well versed, so to speak, in Afrikaans, the other foreign, official language of South Africa.

Another fact simplifying my task is that one no longer has to argue for the wisdom and urgency of committing massive amounts of resources, talent and time in order for the issue to be adequately addressed and properly implemented. However, if one considers the fact that the political train is moving so swiftly that within the next three to five years the political landscape will have changed drastically, then by that time the sluggish language train unfortunately will have been immeasurably outdistanced. One factor putting a heavy brake on the language issue is, of course, lack of majority rule as well as the artificial scarcity of available financial and human resources because of Apartheid. In addition to the impediments created by these factors is the problem of the apparent absence of a forcefully articulated official position, or even a halfway-implemented project, on the language issue on the part of significant liberation movements who could be expected to be implementors of educational programs in the post-Apartheid era. It is no wonder, then, that many post-colonial nations of Africa are just now beginning to seriously wrestle with the language issue. Many of the movements which subsequently became governments had, while struggling for independence, no African language policy, either. Some francophone countries such as Senegal even opted for an extremely anti-African-language educational system which completely forbade the teaching of African languages.

In South Africa, another obstacle arises out of a position still taken by a significant number of influential Black South African writers and intellectuals, which in the 1950s was in tandem with the prevalent political attitude that favored English as the only instructional and official language. That position was a reaction to the ruling South African regime's imposition of Afrikaans and African languages as, respectively, official and instructional languages, with Afrikaans assuming a monopoly as medium of instruction later in an African

perceived as a means of limiting our access to metropolitan culture and literature as well as access to national and international commerce. Es'kia Mphahlele in 1962 argued, for example,

Now because the government is using institutions of fragmented and almost unrecognizable Bantu culture as an instrument of oppression, we dare not look back. We have got to wrench the tools of power from the white man's hand: One of these is literacy and the sophistication that goes with it. We have got to speak the language that all can understand--English. But the important thing always is that we daren't look back, at any rate not yet.¹

Although I agree that African cultures have been significantly fragmented, especially in urban centers, his assertion that they are unrecognizable is highly exaggerated, for they are still very robust in many places in the country and in much of the literature written in the African languages. It would have been helpful had Mphahlele explored more deeply the phenomenon of what he calls fragmentation, especially in terms of African languages, since they have shown that rather than being fragmented, they have the capacity to incorporate foreign linguistic material in their own lexical terms with no fragmentation of their syntax or cohesion. Mphahlele also exaggerates when he alleges that English is the language that all can understand. Kelwyn Sole, for example, cites a study conducted by Linda Wedepohl entitled *A Survey of Illiteracy in South Africa* in which she estimated that about one third of Africans over the age of fifteen were not literate in their primary language, and that even larger numbers spoke or read no English whatsoever,² not to mention thousands of others with only a functional knowledge of that language.

A corollary of the intellectual reaction reflected in Mphahlele's remarks is reflected in the number of prominent Black South African writers and intellectuals of mixed ancestry who only speak English and Afrikaans. This poses a number of problems for the African-language issue, particularly the issue of Afrikaans, the language many of them speak and write in. And even though some of them, being sensitive to the existence of a large Afrikaans-speaking working class, may have consciously or unconsciously reshaped Afrikaans so that it both reflects a proletarian cultural image and subverts the values of the Afrikaner-dominated status quo, such subversion and linguistic manipulation belong to the exclusive domain of Colored literature, for a number of African writers have done the same just as successfully, in both English and Afrikaans. Moreover, such reshaping of either English or Afrikaans does not even address the issue of the legitimacy of African

languages which are spoken by the majority of South African citizens. Afrikaans, especially, is a very touchy issue, for it was the imposition of Afrikaans as an instructional language at pre-college levels which, on June 16, 1976, led to the massacre, exile and imprisonment of thousands of our Black youth who were protesting such an imposition.

Furthermore, as has been astutely argued by Ngara and Irele,³ both of whom have studied analogous situations in Zimbabwe and West Africa respectively, the bending and reorientation of a foreign language even by such illustrious people of African letters as Achebe and Armah has several implications, none of which necessarily contributes to the perpetuation and development of African languages. For one, Irele argues, syncretization or manipulation of the European lexicon tends to contribute largely to the writer's need for an emotionally and ideologically fulfilling linguistic medium and to the enrichment, diversification, and development of the European language in question.⁴ There is also a host of other issues such as the cultural baggage carried by the foreign language including, in particular, the question of who the writer's audience is and whether that audience could be expanded through translation to incorporate an audience with only a working knowledge of the foreign language. Another question is whether or not some of the translated material can be described as an authentic or progressive literature.

For me the issue of African languages as preponderant carriers of African literature in a post-Apartheid South Africa is inextricably linked to the principles for which our people have long struggled and suffered. That issue means cultural empowerment, which is inseparable from political empowerment. I am not so naive as to believe that mere adoption of African languages automatically translates into transmission of authentic and progressive African cultural values, for our experience with Apartheid is full of distortions of African culture in the service of our own political and economic subjugation. I do believe, however, that the transformation of the present political equation in our favor can spawn a progressive language culture provided it is carefully researched, implemented, evaluated and continually re-evaluated, for culture and language are dynamic.

The issue of the use of African languages is not only a question of political and cultural empowerment; it is also a question of democratization for African languages. They must be able to assume their proper historic role in the general life of the nation by widening the spheres of influence and participation in national affairs for the majority of the population, who are mostly speakers of one African language or another. Against this political and cultural backdrop the place of orature, which is an indigenous African literature, must be favorably

viewed. It must also be viewed in its historical evolution with preponderant European influence and articulation.

European scholars, especially anthropologists and philologists, have conducted extensive research and made impressive collections of orature from Africa. And in spite of the reactionary and ulterior motives which often lay behind these scholarly exploits, a number of European scholars did appreciate and acknowledge the genius of African orature. The research and collection had two important consequences. From the point of view of content, the ethnographers in particular found out that African orature was functional insofar as it was one of the principal transmitters of positive African cultural values. This revelation led to another issue, that is, whether African orature was simply functional or also an aesthetic literary phenomenon with structural elements hitherto attributed only to European literary forms. The concern about aesthetics revolved largely around issues of form and structure. As writers like Chinweizu have so well demonstrated in their critiques of European evaluations of African orature, misgivings associated with the formal and aesthetic value of African orature had to do with a number of issues, particularly transcription. Most published scripts were not only inadequate reflections of actual oral literary experiences, they were also, to borrow Malinowski's phrase, "mutilated versions" of the original events. Invariably the translations did not in any form reflect the narratives' nonverbal elements, context or expressive and musical qualities, and hardly anything was revealed about the artists and their stature or competence in the expressive milieu.

Poor transcriptions meant, therefore, that for years structural analysis lagged far behind content analysis. For some European scholars such as Freudian scholars, content analysis was the overriding issue since their main concern was to validate Freud's postulations about the universality of the Oedipus complex. Content was also important to the cultural evolutionists who had gone outside of Europe to "discover" so-called unadulterated models of savages; they wanted to validate their hypothesis that all human beings evolved through three identical stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization, the European peasants being in the middle stages, while the gentry, of course, occupied the top.

Ironically, of all the European explorers in search of these so-called pure savages, Malinowski, a disciple of Freud, unintentionally gave valuable and far-reaching insight into the expressive format or forms of narrative discourse in a society of Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific. Malinowski observed that

the text, of course, is extremely important, but without context, it remains lifeless. . . . The interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in

which it is told. The stories live in native life and not on paper and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish, he has given us but a mutilated version of reality.⁵

Malinowski's observations also unintentionally addressed morphological concerns about oral narratives in general, and from then on they were analyzed and understood not as mere written transcriptions, but as an art form that could only be fully appreciated on the ground, so to speak, in the actual performance and in a context with its own culturally specific taxonomy, values and expressive format. Although other morphological studies such as Vladimir Propp's work on Siberian narratives and Levi Strauss' studies in structuralism have been important in the analysis of oral forms, I believe that they tend to abstract the art form from the concentered experience and into superorganic entities which, ironically, are most foreign even to their cultural experiential roots. It has been partly as a reaction to the deconstruction of orature that more and more scholars today subscribe to the concept of "native standards" or local taxonomy in their analysis and understanding of orature. Fortunately South Africa has had, for some time, numerous distinguished scholars such as Daniel Kunene, Mazisi Kunene, the late A.C. Jordan and others whose works on the structure and cultural content of southern African epic poetry and oral narratives are internationally renowned and recognized. If, as these scholars have discovered, performance and context are the heart and soul of orature, then the body containing them has to be oral presentation.

In terms of South Africa, what this means is basically that the most effective way to expose the literary corpus is through the medium of African languages. First of all, this means that from the very onset of their schooling, young people would be exposed to a communal, value-transmitting, aesthetically-pleasing, dynamic cultural medium on equal footing with non-African literary forms. Further, since much of the art form is presently carried by individuals unschooled in Western educational institutions, such as the elderly, an orature curriculum would bring to the educational system many people with a deep grasp of African cultural values and a broad knowledge of African languages which are the primary carriers of African culture. Thus there would be no artificial language barriers between the school and the community which ought, in any case, to have a positive relationship insofar as the school ought to reflect and perpetuate progressive communal values, among other things. Simply put, oral literature is the most natural African literary form in an educational system promoting the preponderant use of African languages. In fact, a resurgence of African

oral literary forms could have far-reaching implications which have already been significantly realized in a number of outstanding imaginative written works, such as Mazisi Kunene's *Emperor Shaka The Great*, Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, and in books written in African languages such as Subusiso Nyembezi's *Inkintsele Yase Mgungundlovu*. All these writers have acknowledged their indebtedness to orature. As Irele points out, there is a need for an historical understanding of the continuity of written African literature from African orature, an understanding, he says, which does not yet exist in most of Africa, precisely because of the non-prestigious status accorded African languages.

I am aware that some people might make the argument that since there is no African *lingua franca* in South Africa, any policy which promotes the use of a single African language, or even several, will inevitably lead to ethnic conflict. Fortunately, southern African indigenous languages can be classified basically into two groups, si Suthu and Nguni, and a speaker of any language within each group can pretty much understand most, if not all, the languages within that particular group. Hence there would be no need for massive translations. Moreover, the science of translation is such that not only would works in African languages be effectively translated into other African languages or even European languages, but also the translated orature or written literature would be of high caliber because part of any program to legitimize and re-establish the primacy of African language would have to involve, as earlier stated, a lot of work and research to develop artists and translators. Also it seems to me that ethnic division, even though it exists, is not as bad as some people would have us believe. Credit should not only go to the liberation movements, which have painstakingly cultivated unity among various African peoples, but perhaps also in part to the millions of Black South Africans whose lack of ethnic prejudice, in a highly industrialized context, has translated into perhaps the highest level of intermarriage anywhere in Africa.

Another important part of the future language dispensation must definitely be, for all South Africans, multilingualism with fluency in two languages from each of the two linguistic groupings, Nguni and si Suthu. There must come a time when the issue is not whether Africans should be instructed or cultured in the medium of English or Afrikaans. The issue has to be an immediate expansion of the use of African languages by all South Africans as a reflection of the African reality in a country which, after all, is in Africa. Certainly this is a possibility which must become reality if Africans are to be truly in charge of their affairs in a new, politically progressive South Africa. Without the will to plan and carry out such a program and to commit substantial financial and personnel resources, a post-Apartheid, majority-ruled government would repeat the same mistakes which presently plague most

governments in Africa. These mistakes are a direct result of a nonexistent or short-sighted African-language policy, of mass movements before and of governments after independence. That error continues to perpetuate a neocolonial legacy in those countries; it also thwarts the aspiration and reach of millions of people who have been censored out of the cultural, economic and political benefits enjoyed by the exclusive, Westernized few. How can that be real freedom?

¹Cited in Jaques Alvarez-Pereyre, *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1985) p. 4.

²Kelwyn Sole, "Oral Performance and Social Struggle in Contemporary Black South African Literature," in David Bunn and Jane Taylor (eds.), *From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs and Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) p. 254.

³See Immanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on African Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1985) and Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

⁴Irele, *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁵Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Society* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1926) pp. 29-30.

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