

Historical matter of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho

Thunderous Woman's Voice

Recently an astonishing Xhosa woman poet was rediscovered and put on the map.

Ntongela Masilela talks about the poetry of **Nontsizi Mqgqwetho**, a poet, political philosopher and intellectual of the New African Movement.

Nontsizi Mqgqwetho was one of the strongest literary voices produced by South Africa in the 20th century, yet we do not possess any biographical knowledge of her.

We do not know when she was born and when she died. What we do know is that her extraordinary poetry, in all manner revolutionary, both politically and artistically, appeared in the pages of the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People) from 23 October 1920 to 5 January 1929. Then as auspiciously as she appeared, she vanished from our intellectual and cultural history, leaving behind poems which are terrifying in their brilliance because they demand to be appreciated with the utmost moral seriousness.

She published 103 items, of these six are prose-poems or philosophical accounts and the rest are poems; 35 of them were written in the year of 1924. This has to be a blessed year in our cultural history. It demands comparison with 1994 in our political history. The incantatory power of her poetic imagination gives difficult pleasure which is rarely demanded in our time. The wisdom in them puts you in a state of perpetual amazement and awe that our country has produced our first political philosopher in Nontsizi Mqgqwetho.

Jeff Opland, the preeminent

scholar of Xhosa literature, deserves to be commended for having painstakingly worked for two decades in assembling her poetry in a book *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho*. His scholarship is impeccable.

HISTORY AS PERPETUAL CHANGE

The book is a great pleasure to read and to hold in one's hands. In the very first published poem she mentioned the Chizama clan to which she belonged and which gave her a rootedness in its cultural lineage, and the seventh poem is a tribute to her mother who was recently deceased. Yet Mqgqwetho never revealed much about herself because by inclination she was not a poet of the subjective self but was preoccupied with the historical self.

She had an uncanny consciousness of history in the making, of complex ideologies shaping the outcome of historical processes. She sought to capture the unending form of history as perpetual change determined by contending forces of permanence and transience. She wanted to convey the quality of the temporary historical moment.

In this sense she was a modern poet with a depth that perhaps no other poet previous or after her, had in our cultural and intellectual history. Many of her poems were shaped by two ideological forces,

which were seemingly in opposition to each other and yet apparently reinforced each other: Christianity (ethics) and African Nationalism (African languages).

NEW AFRICAN MOVEMENT

Her poetry talks through issues in order to resolve them rather than being meditative poems contemplating an ordained nature of things. Her poetic voice articulates things that are changeable through action because they are historically made. This defines her understanding as a modern one belonging to the New African Movement, of which she is a preeminent member.

The New African Movement consisted of African intellectuals who used civilisation, education and Christianity to bring about the entrance of the African masses into the modern age of the 20th century. Most of the New African intellectuals were educated by European missionaries. Although appreciative of their mission education, these intellectuals came to resent and eventually resist this process of acculturation into Europeanism. This resistance entailed a complex process of rejecting Europeanism and white domination, while embracing European modernity with the intent of transforming it into African modernity.

The New African intellectuals were preoccupied with the

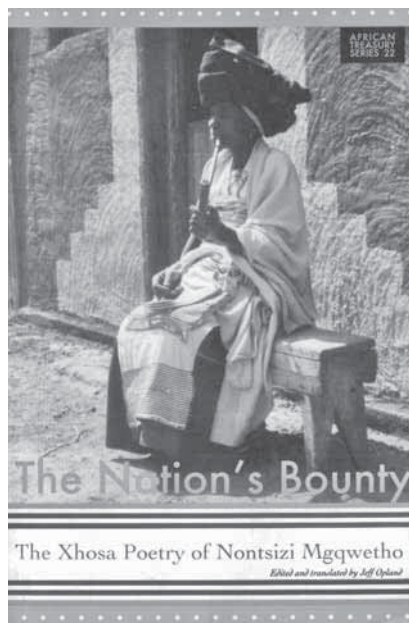
contradiction of whether it was possible to embrace European modernity, while struggling against its colonial and imperialist expression.

Mgqwetho emerged from this tradition. She is probably the most revolutionary poet South Africa has ever had in the sense that she sought to change consciousness through the artistic form rather than mimicking in poetry progressive ideologies. Her uniqueness is apparent when she is viewed in profile with other poets who preceded her in the evolution of the New African Movement.

William Wellington Gqoba and Isaac Williams Wauchope were members of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s within the New African Movement, and SEK Mqhayi (1875-1945) belonged to the following constellation who published in *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People). Mgqwetho belonged to the *Umteteli wa Bantu* constellation, which followed the generation of SEK Mqhayi.

The poetry and essays of Gqoba which appeared in missionary newspapers such as *The Christian Express* in the 1870s described the struggle between European modernity and African tradition in terms of an unending struggle between the absolute goodness of the former and the absolute evil of the latter. Nonetheless, Gqoba was an important figure in the New African Movement who fascinated the brilliant Xhosa novelist AC Jordan.

Gqoba and Wauchope were reverends of the Church, but Wauchope was more secular in viewing the European 'civilising' mission as accompanied by economic exploitation, political domination and racial oppression of the African people. In one poem he decries that the European gave the African the Bible in order to bribe and steal his land.



SEK Mqhayi began a linguistic revolution in the early years of the New African Movement. He established through practice that African languages were just as capable as European languages of representing and articulating the complex nature of modern existence.

The Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s had confused the role of European languages as *entrance* facilitators into modernity. Mqhayi overthrew the ideas of his predecessors around the relationship between tradition and modernity. His predecessors viewed traditional societies as problematic while Mqhayi found modern societies equally contradictory. Mqhayi's other achievement was transforming the traditional Xhosa izibongo poetic form into a modern one thereby enlarging its possibilities.

Mqhayi published his poems in *Izwi Labantu* in the 1890s and 1900s, as well as in *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion) in the 1910s. For these achievements he was designated as a 'National Poet' by RV Selope Thema, DDT Jabavu and Guybon Bundlawana Sinxo in the pages of

The Bantu World in the 1930s: in effect, as the foremost poetic voice of the New African Movement.

This was the linguistic and philosophical lineage that Nontsizi Mgqwetho inherited. There was however a big difference between her and Mqhayi. He was mainly engaged with the contradictions around tradition and modernity, even if in support of modernity, while Mgqwetho was mainly concerned with the historical moment of modernity.

This historical context is important because next to the poems of Mgqwetho in *Umteteli* were essays by RV Selope Thema and Henry Selby Msimang on the social responsibilities of New African intellectuals, writers and artists to African people.

In the same newspaper and at more or less the same time, Pixley ka Isaka Seme (main founder of the African National Congress in 1912) formulated some of the earliest reflections on the nature of African nationalism.

Situated in this historical context, it is not surprising that Mgqwetho's poetic voice was mainly philosophical and questioning. She sought to forge an awareness of African patriotism and African nationalism in the consciousness of dispossessed and disenfranchised African people. Her poems carried an uncharacteristic fearlessness and an astonishing sense of intellectual integrity.

Mgqwetho's poetry will always be contemporary in every particular moment of South African history. She seems to have been a member of the African National Congress, a member who was sharply critical of its periodic lapses and failures. Here is a stanza of a poem of 2 February 1924 in isiXhosa and its translation into English:

*Natso ke ne African National Congress
Esasiyibonga kwapuke nembambo.
Sebehamba ke beyibuza kwakuti
Besiti kanene kodwa yatshonapi*

*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?"*

Since the political struggle between President Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma over control of the African

National Congress, the defeat of Mbeki in Polokwane in December 2007, and his subsequent forced resignation in August 2008, many South Africans have been asking this question originally posed by this great poet many decades ago. Her contemporary vision is unsurpassed. ^{LB}

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In 1920, Mqgqwetho published a poem in 'Umteteli wa Bantu', which was an attack on the editor of the ANC newspaper, *Abantu-Batho*, LT Mvabaza, who had accused *Umteteli* of dividing the African people. In rage, she spoke of responsible leadership, which should not use the masses of people as sacrificial lambs. (English translation next to Xhosa):

*Kudala! Mvabaza ndakubona
Uyimazi elubisi luncinana
Olungasafikiyo
Nasezimvabeni.*

*Umteteli wa Bantu
Kudala akubonayo
Uyimvaba engenawo namanzi
Eyode izale onojubalalana.*

*Abantu bayaphela
Kukufunzwa eweni
Kuba abanamnyangi
Obabhulel' imithi.*

*Iminyanya yakowethu
Ayibambani neyexelegu
Ndandithetha ukuthi ni
Xa ndandisitsho?*

*WenaMvabaza uluyenge-yenge
Olweza luphethwe ngesikotile
Lwafika eRhawutini
Lwabona soluyinkokeli.*

*Sifunze kakubi!
Sifuna izibuko
Abantu bayaphela
Kukufunzwa eweni.*

*Hawulele! Hule!
Funz' eweni baseJeppe
Abamemeza ingqina
Kodwa bengayiphumi.*

*Yatshona! IAfrika
Ngoofunz' eweni
Utsho obonga engqungqa
Engcwabeni likayise
Hawuhule.*

*Mvabaza, I have long had my eye on you,
Cow yielding dribbles of milk
That barely trickle*

*Into the milk sack.
Umteteli wa Bantu
Long saw through you:
You are a sack without water
Left to breed tadpoles.*

*Our people are being sacrificed
Incited by agents provocateurs,
Lacking the wise people who know,
To show them the right way.*

*The ancestors who guide me
Will have nothing to do with those of a bungler
What then did I mean,
When I said what I said?*

*Mvabaza, you are a shifty opportunist
Carried along on a plate
When you arrived in Johannesburg
You suddenly became a leader.*

*We have made a bad start!
We seek a ford to cross over
We are suffering high casualties
Because of reckless rabble-rousers.*

*Aha! I told you!
Agents provocateurs of Jeppe
Who command us to charge
While they stay in the trench.*

*Africa is perishing
Because of reckless leaders
So says the poet who performs traditional rites
At the grave of her father:
I have spoken.*