

Literary Space/Creative Practice:
Reading *Ityala Lamawele* in English Today

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Abstract: The new English translation of S.E.K. Mqhayi's *Ityala Lamawele* (*The Lawsuit of the Twins*, 1914/2018) is a major cultural event. Seen against the background of its long and complex history as a published work, however, it raises several important questions for readers today. Above all, by bringing the tensions between the intermediaries who shape the space of the literary and the creative practice of writers sharply into focus, it obliges readers to ask who conceptualizes the literary, by what means, and to what effect? The article concludes by considering how the new translation creates opportunities for rethinking Anglophone literary and African studies in productive ways.

Keywords: literary space, creative practice, translation, interculturality, Achebe, Coetzee, Mqhayi

'Did you not hear the great news of the coming Book?' Or, as the author first published these words, 'Aniyivanga n'imbalasane yomQulu ozayo?'¹

Asked by Dumisani, official court *imbongi* or praise poet of the historical King Hintsa (1789-1835), this question forms part of the poem that concludes the most widely circulated version of S. E. K. Mqhayi's (1875-1945) celebrated work of isiXhosa literature *Ityala Lamawele* (*The Lawsuit of the Twins*, 1914). As the context makes clear, Dumisani is alluding to the visionary speeches the wise elder Khulile gives just before his death. Among other things, Khulile refers to 'a Book, a Volume with many parts gathered into it, that will come from the west, carried by foreign nations emerging from the sea.'² This 'Book', he adds, will tell of 'the resurrection of the dead' (69). A key figure in the story of the lawsuit—he intervenes decisively in the judicial proceedings—Khulile is a vital repository of oral history, including customary law, a prophet who warns of the 'pandemonium' to come, and an advocate of creative engagement with Christianity and the new literate order it presages (69). 'You must look to the Book,' he insists, 'study it in the morning and in the evening, because help will come through greater understanding' (70).

Mqhayi's choice of 'yomQulu' ('umqulu' is the modern basic form) is suggestive. In context it means, as Pamela Maseko explains, 'something voluminous, consisting of volumes, the Bible' (xi). Given its literal sense—'roll' as in 'a roll of cloth or material'—Mqhayi may also have wanted the word to signal a precolonial worldview. Looking back from a distance of almost a century to a turning point in Xhosa history, he does not have Khulile or Dumisani use 'iBhayibhile', say, or 'incwadi', the more general isiXhosa word for 'book,' terms developed after the arrival of 'the tribe with the very smooth hair' (77). While the former is a loanword from English, the latter is an ingenious poetic extension of the root word 'cwadi', which refers to the *Boophone disticha*, a bulbous African flowering plant with a brown, papery stem. That the stem looks like the densely packed leaves of a book no doubt explains this figurative elaboration, though other factors may also have been at play. As some of the common English and Afrikaans names indicate—'poison bulb'/'gifbol' and 'sore-eye flower'/'seeroogblom'—

the *Boophone disticha* not only has a book-like stem. It is poisonous and bad for the eyes.³ The precolonial ‘yomQulu’ sidesteps these anachronistic, potentially ambiguous associations. Writing about the arrival of Christianity in his own voice in the preface, Mqhayi opts for ‘yeliZwi’—‘the Word’, as the 1966 *New African* translation has it, or ‘the Gospel’, on the 2018 rendition.⁴

The book in which we can now read Khulile and Dumisani’s spoken words affirming the advent of ‘the Book’ embodies Mqhayi’s own refusal to choose between Xhosa traditions and the new faith, orality and literacy, preserving the best of the past and embracing the transformative potential of the new. A curatorial project designed, as he put it in the preface, to save ‘the language and mode of life of the Xhosa people’ from extinction, it is nonetheless framed interculturally: it begins with an epigraph about the birth of twins from *Genesis* 38:28-29 (3). Not all Mqhayi’s biblical allusions are so conciliatory, as we shall see. As the editors of the new Oxford ‘Africa Pulse’ translation note, *The Lawsuit of the Twins* in their version also testifies to the complexity of Mqhayi’s relations with publishers and, indeed, literature.

The unabridged edition of *Ityala Lamawele* consists of the story of “ityala lamawele”—the lawsuit of the twins—itsself, plus various poems and pieces about Xhosa culture, history and leaders. As the focus of the Africa Pulse series is literature—fiction, poetry and drama—only the fictional story, namely of the court case, is presented here. (iii)

With its sixteen chapters, *The Lawsuit of the Twins* in Thokozile Mabeqa’s 2018 translation is, in other words, a version of the abridged 1927 school edition, which cut a number of passages throughout and dropped the final ten chapters of the much expanded sixth edition, also from 1927—the original 1914 version had only nine chapters.⁵ This made it a more coherent work of historical fiction or fictionalized history—so more ‘literary’ in a certain sense—but it also made it less controversial both for the publisher, Lovedale, South Africa’s oldest mission press, and for the governmental prescribing bodies of the time. As Jeffrey Peires notes, the excised historical passages include ones about ‘the death of Hintsa, and the dismissal of Governor B. D’Urban who was held responsible’ as well as ‘praise-poems and comments on the Zulu rebellion of 1906.’⁶ For Mqhayi, then, having *Ityala* become a prescribable work of ‘uncwadi’ in the late 1920s—the isiXhosa word for ‘literature’ derives metonymically from ‘incwadi’—meant negotiating a local publishing environment marked by the tricky figural ambiguities of the *Boophone disticha*. Inevitably, this history haunts the latest English translation too.

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What does *Ityala/Lawsuit’s* complex publishing history teach us about reading Mqhayi—perhaps even reading as such—today? Whether we are talking about its multiple isiXhosa iterations or its English translations, I would argue the century-long bibliographical record highlights the importance of two key frames of reference: I’ll call one ‘the space of the literary’, and the other ‘the creative practice of writers’. In this case, as in most others, the distinction is needed not just to disentangle the two perspectives conceptually but to reflect on their interplay or, perhaps more accurately, on the tension between them. At one level, this involves the possible tension between the critical metalanguage of commentary or framing paratext, on the one hand, and the creative language of *Ityala/Lawsuit* itself, on the other. At another level, it involves the potential friction between the intermediaries who shape and regulate the space in which *Ityala/Lawsuit* circulates, mainly publishers, educators, editors,

critics, and translators, and Mqhayi's own creative practice as writer for whom writing was part of a much larger project. Reacting against a mission-educated generation of intellectuals who switched to English in the 1880s, he made it his life's work to defend, reform, and enrich isiXhosa as an *imbongi*, writer, and language activist. Hence perhaps the wry, defamiliarizing comments of the messengers who announce that 'a white tribe had been seen' towards the end of *Lawsuit*:

It comes from the sea; it is a tribe that looks as though it regularly attacks other tribes. Their language is so complicated, no one understands it. As for fighting, they are powerful people who fight using the heavens; the heavens thunder once, smoke and fire explode, and then something falls in the distance. (72-3)

Mqhayi's larger project, which was at once linguistic, cultural, ethical, and political, inevitably casts a shadow over the English renderings of his work, giving a new inflection to the old Italian adage *Traduttori traditori*. So how do we read Mqhayi in English today? Mindful not only of the familiar promise and perils of translation, I would argue, but of the way these affect how we understand, even shape, the interplay between the space of the literary as it evolves over time and Mqhayi's own creative practice.

The challenges begin with the question of genre. In the 1914 preface, Mqhayi called *Ityala* a 'balana', which Collingwood August translated as 'short tale' for the *New African* in 1966, and Thokozile Mabeqa as 'novelette' for Oxford in 2018.⁷ In a subsequent preface, added in 1931, Mqhayi introduced two further designations. At that point, he called the first nine-chapter edition of 1914, which focuses on the fictionalized lawsuit, 'umzekeliso' (a parable), and the unabridged, twenty-six chapter sixth edition of 1927, which crosses fiction with history, literature with biography, and narrative with anthology, 'incwadana' (a booklet).⁸ Last published in 1940, this expanded edition is now a rare book—Ntongela Masilela's *New African Movement* website does, however, include a scan of it.⁹ The result? Mqhayi's inventively hybrid parable-booklet has all but disappeared, materially and conceptually. The only version of his project currently in print, whether in isiXhosa or English, is the exclusively (narrowly?) literary *Ityala/Lawsuit*, the 'novelette' based on the sixteen-chapter 1927 school abridgement. In 2015 Lovedale Press and Marang Publishers both re-issued isiXhosa editions, and OUP South Africa's annotated, simplified, and further reduced school reader, which first appeared in 1998, still forms part of its Xhosa Literature for Beginners series. To do justice to the diverse character of Mqhayi's evolving project, then, the unabridged sixth edition would need to be republished in isiXhosa, ideally with a full scholarly apparatus and a parallel English translation.

In the meantime, the new Oxford translation affords plenty of opportunity for rethinking Anglophone literary and African studies in productive ways. Most immediately, Mabeqa's *Lawsuit* asks to be read alongside *Stitching a Whirlwind: An anthology of southern African poems and translations* (2018), also part of the 'Africa Pulse' series, which includes a new translation of Mqhayi's major First World War poem 'The Sinking of the *Mendi*' by Antjie Krog, Ncebakazi Saliwa, and Koos Oosthuysen. Rejecting any misplaced 'loyalty toward Britain' and turning on the proverbial condolence 'from the old people'—'Akuhlunga lungehlanga'/'It does not happen without happening'—this is among the poems Mqhayi included in the unabridged *Ityala*.¹⁰ Also part of the series is Mqhayi's utopian *Don Jadu* (1929, trans. 2018), which balances *Lawsuit's* historical vision by imagining the ideal community to come. 'With Christianity and education as guides,' Ncedile Saule explains in the introduction

to Mabeqa's new Oxford translation, 'Don Jadu views all people of the country as a community progressively committed to a future in the contemporary world under the decisive leadership of black people.'¹¹ Characteristically, Mqhayi is also guided by the precolonial knowledge embedded in the isiXhosa language, both using and transforming it in the process of fashioning his communal vision.

Drawing out these connections creates various opportunities for comparison and contrast across the Oxford series. They also point beyond it, inviting a reconfiguration of the wider Anglophone canon: reading *Lawsuit* as an anticipatory parallel to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for instance, or as a productively challenging co-text for J. M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999). While Achebe staged the consequences of the Ibo encounter with the British in the 1890s through Okonkwo's tragic story, setting his twenty-five chapter decolonizing novel against the 'reasonable paragraph' in the fictional District Commissioner's *Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, Mqhayi undertook an exercise in cultural reclamation almost half a century earlier, reaffirming Xhosa legal traditions while offering a judicious reflection on the 'pandemonium' and promise that followed the arrival of the British in the Eastern Cape in the early 1800s.¹² 'He would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day,' Coetzee has David Lurie reflect in *Disgrace*, 'but preferably not reduced to English.'¹³ Given Lurie's location at that point in the narrative—he is just outside Grahamstown (now Makhanda), the old frontier of the British Cape Colony—he could do well to start his promised but never realized listening exercise with *Ityala*. For one thing, there are elements of Makhanda (c.1780-1819), the celebrated Xhosa warrior and prophet, in Mqhayi's fictionalized Khulile. For another, *Disgrace* alludes obliquely to the intricacies of Xhosa kinship relations, inheritance, and even twinning via the figure of Pollux, the brother of Petrus's wife. 'Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe?', Lurie comments with characteristic acerbity to his daughter Lucy, 'Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?'¹⁴ While again foregrounding Lurie's many limitations, Coetzee slyly uses this constellation of names to bring various intercultural possibilities into play: Castor and Pollux, the twinned half-brothers from Greek and Roman mythology, set alongside the potentially twinned Mncedisi ('the helper') and Nqabayakhe ('the obstacle'); Pollux, who, as the son of Leda and Zeus, is the consequence of a mythic rape, and Pollux, the possible father of Lucy's unborn child, who is twinned with David, the seducer, and so on.¹⁵ Like *Ityala/Lawsuit*, *Disgrace* is a book of twins and a book about complex inheritances.

The language question Coetzee evokes invites other lines of enquiry too, pointing as it does to the arguments over English most famously associated in the African context with Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Considering Mqhayi's own commitment to preserving and transforming isiXhosa—as well as its 'worldview'—he represents a productive complication of the debate, since he is evidently not an Anglophone indigenizer like Achebe, but nor is he a straightforwardly Ngũgĩ-style linguistic nativist. 'Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world', as Ngũgĩ has it in one of his most quoted formulations.¹⁶ The vehicular verb-metaphor 'carries', which downplays the lived realities of linguistic and cultural change to which Mqhayi was especially alert, makes this sound like a strong preservationist argument, but it is worth remembering that linguistic decolonisation for Ngũgĩ has always been a twofold project: while it certainly means reclaiming African languages (Gikuyu in his case), it also means opening them up to world literature (and vice

versa) through translation. It is difficult not to think Mqhayi would have found a way making both these initiatives work in concert with his effort to protect and revitalise isiXhosa.

Following the threads and translation quandaries of another of Mqhayi's biblical allusions opens a further critical dialogue, this time with Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). For the *New African* version of *Ityala* in 1966, August rendered one key sentence from the 1914 preface as follows:

The language and culture of the Xhosas is gradually disappearing because of the Word and the enlightenment that have come among us—which things have come from the nations of the West, the sons of Gog and Magog. (5)

A footnote explains that 'the West' is 'not being used in its modern meaning' (presumably its Cold War sense): 'it is being used to describe white people—who came out of the West, i.e., all white people' (5). Contrast this with Mabeqa's new Oxford translation:

The language and mode of life of the Xhosa people are gradually disappearing because of the Gospel and the new civilisation which came with the nations from the West, the sons of George (Gogi) and his wife (Magogi). (3)

Clarifying the last clause, the editors add a note explaining Mqhayi's play on words: 'The British King George V (Gogi) and his wife, the queen (Magogi)' (80).

The shifts from 'the Word' to 'the Gospel' for Mqhayi's 'yeliZwi' (literally 'voice'), 'enlightenment' to 'civilisation' for 'nokhanyo' ('light'), and 'culture' to 'mode of life' for 'nemikhwa' ('habits') are striking.¹⁷ But what stands out most in this comparison is the way Mabeqa's translation specifies Mqhayi's sardonically playful allusion to Gog and Magog, the biblical barbarian hordes who threaten the civilized order of the amaXhosa: not white people in general, but the male descendants of George V and the queen consort Mary of Teck. With these barbarians in mind, and given the immediate historical context, Mqhayi's allusive word play acquires a more precise cultural and political force. George V became King of the United Kingdom, the British Dominions, and Emperor of India on 6 May 1910, three weeks before the Union of South Africa came into being as a British-backed, self-governing, white-ruled dominion of the Empire. Mqhayi's sense of betrayal four years on, to say nothing of his ethical and political outrage, obscured in 1966, is restored in all its acerbic irony by Mabeqa's translation, giving a sharper edge not just to his parable about the dignity, rationality, and democratic inclusiveness of customary law but to the salutation with which he ends his 1914 preface. Addressing future Xhosa generations, he signs himself: 'Ndingowenu emigudwini yesizwe' ('I am yours in the struggle of the nation').¹⁸

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¹ S. E. K. Mqhayi, *The Lawsuit of the Twins*, trans. Thokozile Mabeqa (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2018), 77; *Ityala Lamaweke* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1940), 61.

² Mqhayi, *Lawsuit* (2018), 69. Most subsequent references to this edition in the main text.

³ I am grateful to Pamela Maseko for these etymological details.

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- ⁴ Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), v; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3; S.E.K. Mqhayi, 'The Case of the Twins', trans. Collingwood August, *The New African* (January 1966), 5.
- ⁵ For a detailed account of *Ityala*'s publishing history, see S. E. K. Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and Biographical Writings, 1902-1944*, ed. Jeff Opland (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), 18-19.
- ⁶ Jeffrey Peires, 'Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited', *English in Africa*, 7.1 (March 1980), 78-79.
- ⁷ Mqhayi, 'Case' (1966), 5; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.
- ⁸ Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), vi.
- ⁹ See Ntongela Masilela, New African Movement, <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafire/writers/mqhayi/ityala/whole.pdf>; accessed 29 September 2020.
- ¹⁰ Megan Hall, et. al, *Stitching a Whirlwind: An Anthology of south African poems and translations* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2018), 80-83.
- ¹¹ S.E.K. Mqhayi, *Don Jadu*, trans. Thokozile Mabeqa (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2018), ix.
- ¹² Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London, Ibadan, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1962; 1976), 148. Achebe also reflects on the question of twins and customary law, albeit in very different ways to Mqhayi.
- ¹³ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), 117.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 200.
- ¹⁵ *Mncedisi* comes from the verb *ukuncedisa* ('to help or assist'), so could be translated as helper or assistant. The name *Nqabayakhe* is more complicated. It is a compound of the verb *ukunqaba* ('to be scarce/rare') and the possessive *yakhe* ('his/her'). The derived noun *inqaba* has various meanings ranging from 'a fortress, stronghold, or place of refuge' to 'a 'problem, obstacle, or impossibility.' So, on the twinning logic and set alongside *Mncedisi*, *Nqabayakhe* could be translated as 'his obstacle or hinderance.' Thanks to Koos Oosthuysen for clarifying these semantic intricacies.
- ¹⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986), p. 16 and pp.102-104. For a further discussion of Ngũgĩ's position in this debate, see <https://artefactsofwriting.com/2019/10/13/on-language-breytenbach-ngugi/>; accessed 29 September 2020. See also Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Chinua Achebe, *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (London: Penguin, 2011).
- ¹⁷ Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), vi; 'Case' (1966), 5; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.
- ¹⁸ Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), v; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.