

## On method: African materials

Peter D. McDonald

‘Did you not hear the great news of the coming Book?’ Or, as the author first published these words, ‘Aniyivanga n’imbalasane yomQulu ozayo?’<sup>1</sup>

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.’<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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. Yet, 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Hintsá, 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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.

\*

*Ityala/Lawsuit's* complex, century-long publishing history highlights what I take to be the central methodological lesson of the four essays in this special issue, a lesson bred of their specific African sources and preoccupations but relevant to, indeed vital for, any field of literary enquiry. To address the many questions Mqhayi's bestselling prose work raises, whether in its multiple isiXhosa iterations or its English translations, we need to keep two methodological frames in mind: I'll call one 'the space of the literary', and the other 'the creative practice of writers'. Ideally, any worthwhile critical or scholarly

enquiry would consider both—and their interplay—but the distinction is worth clarifying.

In different ways, all four essays show that the space of the literary, understood in a first, relatively straightforward sense, is material through and through. Whether we are talking about the Okigbo manuscripts Nathan Suhr-Sytsma examines, or the published titles on which Rachel Bower, Christine Okoth, and Asha Rogers focus, the primary archive comprises a collection of documentary materials that bear witness to various kinds of physical and intellectual labour: Okigbo's revisions in blue ink; Sergeant and Nwoga's editorial decisions as anthology makers; and, in all cases, the work of the publishers and printers who produced the physical books. The latter include Mbari (Ibadan) for Okigbo's *Heavensgate* (1962), Evans Brothers (London) for Sergeant's *New Voices of the Commonwealth* (1967), Longman (London) for Nwoga's *West African Verse* (1967), and Heinemann's African Writers Series (London, Nairobi, Ibadan) for Laing's *Major Gentl and the Achimota wars* (1992). Yet, even within this physical archive, there are differences. Whereas the Okigbo manuscripts were initially artefacts of his private labours, the books were created as public commodities—the former can, of course, be bought and sold but that was not their *raison d'être* as physical documents. This makes the line between the private life of the manuscript and the public life of the book look clear cut, though, as Rogers demonstrates in her analysis of Rive's inscribed books, the two spheres can sometimes intersect. A complex story about the many forms of sociability animating a literary career emerges from the simple graphic conjunction of the dedicator's signature and the publisher's imprint on the inside pages of Rive's books.

As commodities, the books are material in a further sense, that is, worldly, because they were created for particular markets, or, more accurately, they were made possible by a market economy in which educational institutions, rather than individual book-buyers or reading communities, played a formative role. As the 1927 school edition of Mqhayi's *Lawsuit* shows, this has long been the case in African literary publishing, and, as Okoth notes in her account of the online *Major Gentl*, it remains true for many digital resources today. Laing's novel now forms part of the selected AWS available on Chadwyck-Healey's subscription service, mainly via university libraries. Unlike the less predictable retail sector, these relatively stable institutional markets have obvious attractions for commercial publishers. Yet, as Okoth also demonstrates, they remain subject to the volatilities of wider capital flows, reflecting the vulnerabilities and structural asymmetries of the global economy—think only of the impact the economic crisis of the 1970s had on the networks linking Heinemann to Nigerian and Ghanaian educational departments and so to multinational oil companies, notably Shell and BP. Partly for these reasons, some African publishing initiatives—Ntone Edjabe's Cape Town based *Chimurenga* (2002-) is a good example—seek to create alternative but no less worldly spaces outside the market economy, soliciting support from sponsors and

establishing other, often equally precarious networks of dependency—in Edjabe’s case these include the German Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the Goethe Institute.

Moving from the documents to the networks on which their very existence as material (which includes digital) artefacts depends opens up a range of questions about the intermediaries who create the real-world space of the literary (editors, publishers, printers, educators, etc.) and the larger political, economic, institutional, and technological systems that underpin it. At the same time this move shows how the material—physical or worldly—is more often than not conceptual as well. This raises other kinds of question. While the adjective ‘African’ in the Heinemann series provoked much debate throughout its thirty-year history, the alternative designations—from the apparently simple ‘West African’ to the more obviously debatable ‘Commonwealth’, to say nothing of ‘Anglophone’—proved no less contentious. As all four essays show, however, it is the literary itself that poses the knottiest difficulties not just because the category is essentially contestable but because the conceptual question ‘What is literature?’ cannot be treated separately from the socio-political one ‘Who decides?’ This is universally the case, though, in some contexts, it is often overlooked or systematically disavowed. Given the history of colonialism, the conjunction is axiomatic in African contexts—recall the fate of Mqhayi’s *Ityala* in its school edition.

‘Because in Africa we recognize that art is in the public domain, a sense of social commitment is mandatory upon the artist.’ The next sentence, which Suhr-Sytsma also cites, continues: ‘That commitment demands that the writer pay attention to his craft, that he not burden his public with unfinished or indecipherable works.’ The Nigerian critic Chinweizu Ibekwe made these observations in an essay entitled ‘Towards the Decolonization of African Literature’, which first appeared in the Uganda-based literary magazine *Transition* in 1975. The idiom and implied critical self-understanding is characteristic of the moment: the critic not just as arbiter of the literary in conceptual terms but as legislator of its socio-political value. By implicitly determining the agonistic meaning of ‘Africanness’, ‘literariness’, ‘publicness’, even ‘materiality’, defined principally against ‘the West,’ ‘Chinweizu’, as he signed himself, does more than take issue with Okigbo’s *Labyrinths* (1971)—his ostensible target. Affirming the supremacy of his critical metalanguage, he performs the prerogative to police the space of the literary in ‘materialist’ terms. Unsurprisingly, given the strategic and relatively abstract nature of such interventions, some of his targets, notably Wole Soyinka, did not let his claim to speak for Africa go unchallenged. ‘Pretenders to the crown of Pontifex Maximus of African poetics must learn to mind the thorns,’ Soyinka countered wryly in the same issue of *Transition*.<sup>7</sup> This is a relatively modest example—a single judgement framed in a particular critical idiom published in a literary magazine—but, as Bower notes in her account of Sergeant’s *New Voices* anthology, the same prerogative sometimes guides editors in their selection and presentation of materials. ‘What is most significant here’,

she comments in reference to Sergeant's treatment of Echerou's 'Prologue', 'is that although there are other ways to read the poem, this particular [materialist-allegorical] reading is *brought to the fore* by the *New Voices* anthology itself.'

Publishers, editors, journalists, reviewers, critics, scholars, theorists, and educators are among the main authors of the metalanguage in and through which the space of the literary is shaped and reshaped conceptually over time. Since all these roles are in principle open to writers as well, some play an influential, occasionally leading part in this process too—Soyinka is a case in point—using the various forms and media through which this framing language finds expression: manifestos, critical essays, reviews, prefaces, interviews, etc. Yet, as the primary producers in the literary field, their principal concern lies with the languages, forms, and media of literature itself—for now let's say 'fiction, poetry, and drama', to recall the preface to the latest edition of Mqhayi's *Lawsuit*. This is where their creative practice as writers enters the picture.

Given what I have said so far about the material-conceptual space of the literary, this shift in orientation requires some explanation. Rogers outlines the problem in the opening of her essay:

Academic debates about how best to take the measure of the distinctive characteristics of a literary work and the larger forces that shape its meaning typically fall between two posts: those practising the kind of close textual analysis, which, for all its attention to linguistic and other formal features, can risk eliding the material conditions of production and circulation; and those advocating historical or sociological approaches that risk obscuring aesthetic specificity.

This is an elaboration of the distinction Gisèle Sapiro draws between 'internal analysis' and 'external analysis,' which in turn derives from Pierre Bourdieu's nuanced, post-Marxist literary sociology. Yet, as Rogers recognizes, this characterization of the methodological challenge brings risks of its own. For one thing, like the older rivalry 'Historicism versus Formalism', it encourages an overly neat binary with 'linguistic and formal features' on one side, and 'the material conditions of production and circulation' on the other. This makes it look like 'literary' considerations are exclusively 'internal', while 'historical/sociological' ones are all 'external'. For another thing, by emphasising 'aesthetic specificity', it underestimates the unpredictability of literary writing as a creative form of thought, and, by focusing on the 'larger forces' that shape meaning, it leaves little room for the generative potential of writing itself.

So what might it mean to engage with the creative practice of writers in terms that avoid these pitfalls? Suhr-Sytsma and Rogers offer two instructively related but different models. At one point Suhr-Sytsma discusses a manuscript showing Okigbo

reworking, via an English translation, a Yoruba proverb about a child and a sage in ways that reflect his indebtedness to the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. This looks like ‘internal analysis’ in the tradition of genetic criticism, the procedures and results of which only make Okigbo look more inadequately ‘African’ according to Chinweizu’s strictures. What this evidence reveals for Suhr-Sytsma, however, is how Okigbo’s multilingual and intercultural understanding of his ‘literary material’, which included the profoundly writerly Mallarmé and Yoruba oral traditions, was ‘constituted by his schooling, his reading of predecessors and contemporaries, his exposure to cultural discourses such as the trope of decadence, his investment in the political projects of Nigeria and of Biafra, and his experiences of the arts, including music.’ This looks like ‘external analysis’, except for the fact that Suhr-Sytsma reaches this conclusion using manuscript evidence detailing Okigbo’s creative practice as a writer. The real payoff? Okigbo, on this account, looks less like the ‘alienated bourgeois’ of Chinweizu’s critical imagination and more like an inventive writer re-thinking, and encouraging his readers to re-think, ‘Africanness’, ‘literariness’, ‘publicness’, and ‘materiality’ at a turning point in the continent’s history.

Tracing the public life, rather than the genetic evolution, of Richard Rive’s short story ‘The Bench’ allows Rogers to consider the interplay between creative practice and the space of the literary differently. Like Bower, she considers the framing effects of anthologies, specifically Langston Hughes’s *African Treasury* (1960), but to this she adds *Peaceful Heroes* (1962), a collection of one-act plays, and the textbook *A Two Way Mirror: Differing Perspectives on the World* (1978). Using these materials, she shows Rive’s story being repackaged or, in the case of the play, wholly adapted for a US school readership and, in the process, turning into an aid for teaching and activism ‘in the era of post-war anti-colonialism, anti-racism and civil rights.’ She could have ended there, making her essay a study of textual circulation and appropriation. Yet, in an innovative move not unlike Suhr-Sytsma’s, she turns this more familiar story on its head, using it highlight those elements of ‘The Bench’ that ‘failed to travel.’ Here the first part of the story, which is generally overlooked, acquires a new significance, demonstrating as it does Rive’s engagement both with stylistic modes of literary modernism—notably in his depiction of ‘the fluid movements of Karlie’s mind’—and with the philosophical language of existentialism. Reflecting on the US reception, where the story tended to figure either as a predictable exercise in social realism or moralizing humanism, Rogers comments: ‘We fail to judge the significance of Karlie’s subsequent political action in the second half without properly recognising the interior space of his personhood set against the conditions of social existence in the first.’ To which I would add: without properly considering the various traditions of thought—literary, philosophical, political, and more—with which Rive engaged as a writer and which he sought to transform via the

medium of the short story, we miss the generative potential of his writing and so perhaps everything that makes him worth reading.

\*

I began by sketching the complex publishing history of Mqhayi's *Ityala/Lawsuit* to illustrate the tension between the space of the literary, understood in material-conceptual terms, and the creative practice of the writer. In Mqhayi's case, this tension brings with it the added complications of translation. Reacting against a mission-educated generation of intellectuals who switched to English in the 1880s, Mqhayi made it his life project to defend, reform, and enrich isiXhosa as an *imbongi*, writer, and language activist. This primary commitment, 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? 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 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.<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> The result? Mqhayi's inventively hybrid parable-booklet has all but disappeared from view, 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 hybrid character of Mqhayi's evolving project, then, the unabridged sixth edition would need to be re-published 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 transforming Anglophone literary and African studies in productive ways. For one thing, Mabeqa's *Lawsuit* asks to be read alongside *Stitching a Whirlwind: An Anthology of Southern African Poems and Translations* (2020), 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. This is among the poems Mqhayi included in the unabridged *Ityala*. Also part of the series is Mqhayi's utopian *Don Jadu* (1929, trans. 2019), which balances *Lawsuit's* historical vision by imagining the ideal Xhosa community to come. Drawing out these connections creates various opportunities for comparison and contrast across the 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 challenging context for J. M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999).

Following the threads and translation quandaries of another of Mqhayi's biblical allusions opens up 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 particular 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').<sup>12</sup>

---

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

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

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Pamela Maseko for these etymological details.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Peires, 'Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited', *English in Africa*, 7.1 (March 1980), 78-79.

<sup>7</sup> See Wole Soyinka, 'Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Transition', *Transition*, 48 (1975), 38-44.

<sup>8</sup> Mqhayi, 'Case' (1966), 5; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), vi.

<sup>10</sup> See Ntongela Masilela, *New African Movement*, <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafrrre/writers/mqhayi/ityala/whole.pdf>; accessed 6 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), vi; 'Case' (1966), 5; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Mqhayi, *Ityala* (1940), v; *Lawsuit* (2018), 3.