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BOOK FORUM

Communal Intellection and Individualism in the African Novel

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Of her recent *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*, Jeanne-Marie Jackson states:

> If the book has a grand claim, it is that African intellectual traditions are rich in work where a separate space for the thinker corresponds to a separate space for the thought—where ideas, that is, are granted a force and even ontology of their own by a turn to narrative designs that advance individual integrity, as against porosity or dissolution.[1]

The advancement of individual integrity as an alternative to the dissolution that concludes so many African novels is a compelling (and, in Jackson's sophisticated analysis, convincing) idea. But I am nevertheless left wondering why so many African novels of ideas do end in states of dissociation and disassociation "in which intellection signals not just social illegibility but literal death"?[2] I wager that if we approach novelistic form as deeply entangled in aesthetic, cultural, contextual, historical, and philosophical codes, we can trace a historical arch of the genre's formal limitations for intellection in African contexts that explains this tendency. To illustrate this claim, I wish briefly to discuss S. E. K. Mqhayi's *Ityala lamawele* (*Lawsuit of the Twins*), first published in 1914 with the missionary Lovedale Press and widely considered to be the first isiXhosa novel.

To call *Ityala lamawele* a novel is to stretch the description of that genre a little far. The original 1914 text comprised a mere nine chapters and was no longer

[1] Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 3.
[2] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 27.

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than nineteen pages. The 1915 edition extended the novel to twenty chapters and sixty-six pages and expanded the fictional story to include historical chapters pertaining mostly to Xhosa chiefs.[3] In the fullest (fifth) version of the isiXhosa text, Mqhayi included four poems and "notes on various people and organisations introduced by a poem entitled '*Ibacu*' (Destitutes)."[4] Today, only the abridged version, which covers the first sixteen fictional chapters, is in print, leaving the contemporary reader with the impression that these chapters were imagined as a self-contained novella. The material history of the book presents a far more liquid relationship to the novel form.[5]

It was not only the form of the novel but the very medium of written isiXhosa that was still fluid when Mqhayi wrote the text. IsiXhosa orthography underwent major shifts across the years that the text was reissued. Indeed, Mqhayi himself was involved in the isiXhosa subcommittee of the African Orthography Committee in 1929, which despite the disapproval of its most established isiXhosa speakers, adopted a substantial revision of the existing orthography.[6] Jeffrey Peires summarizes the outcome of this revision as such: "The awesome effect of the 'New Orthography' was to turn every literate African into a functional illiterate. Even Mqhayi and [his contemporary, T. B.] Soga, who had sat on the Xhosa sub-committee, could not (or would not) write their manuscripts correctly in [it]."[7] This orthographical shift had even larger consequences on the material history of *Ityala lamawele.* Lovedale editor W. G. Bennie,[8] who was "an enthusiastic convert and propagandist of the New Orthography,"[9] abridged Mqhayi's text for schools, cutting out substantial historical chapters and censoring sections that included material the church disapproved of.[10] In the process Mqhayi was lured into an agreement on the publication of the shortened edition, without knowing that "Lovedale Press intended to drop the full edition in favor of the abridged version. On 28 September 1939 he wrote [Lovedale principal R. W.] Shepherd an alarmed letter saying that he had heard that the last impression of the full edition (in the Old Orthography) was out of print, and adding that 'I do not want this edition to die away.'"[11] Sadly, it did, and with Mqhayi "induced to

[3] Jeff Opland, "Introduction," in Jeff Opland and S. E. K. Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and Biographical Writings, 1902–1944*, trans. Jeff Opland (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001): 1–28, esp. 18.

[4] Opland, "Introduction," 19.

[5] The miscellaneous nature of *Ityala lamawele* is not unlike the near contemporaneous *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) by J. E. Casely Hayford, which Jackson describes as "a syncretic mix of philosophical treatise, fictional vignettes, political manifesto, and autobiographical history" (50).

[6] Jeff Opland notes that "No newspaper accepted the bizarre characters that formed such an inhibiting element of that new orthography." See Opland, "Introduction," 24.

[7] Jeffrey Peires, "The Lovedale Press: Literature for the Bantu Revisited," *History in Africa* 6 (1979): 155–75, esp. 161.

[8] Bennie was the grandson of the Scottish missionary and linguist John Bennie, who produced the first written transcriptions of isiXhosa.

[9] Peires, "The Lovedale Press," 161.

[10] Including praise poems, "witch-craft in the Old Testament" and critiques of the church; see Peires, "The Lovedale Press," 165.

[11] Peires, "The Lovedale Press," 166.

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agree to this abridgement for financial reasons" because he was at this time "living entirely by his pen and was chronically short of money,"[12] there was not much he could do to salvage his full text. I argue that it was not only the Lovedale editor, Bennie's, political and religious convictions that influenced his editorial cuts to the text, but also the cultural assumptions of literary form: to Bennie, the text was more coherent as a novella and was, as such, reduced to that form.

That Mqhayi was financially reliant on his writing, when he was, first and foremost, an *imbongi* (a poet in the established oral Xhosa tradition) is itself telling: print was of course deeply entangled with the monetization of culture. This was a radically different understanding of the role of literary expression to that Mqhayi would have known in his capacity as an *imbongi* as is evidenced in Xhosa poetic form itself. Xhosa poetry makes extensive use of praise poems, which are allegorical, symbolically dense, and "not narrative: they do not tell a story."[13] Karin Barber argues about such allusive poetry that:

> The actions and events that gave rise to them are not recuperable from the words themselves. They hint at narratives but do not tell them... . The "obscurity" of such epithets lies in the fact that the narrative expansion lies outside the text itself. The knowledgeable listener has to know the story in order to make full sense of the epithet.[14]

Although Xhosa oral tradition does include narrative forms in storytelling or oral histories, what is notable about the praise poem is that it makes meaning only in relation to an assumed shared knowledge of the community of listeners. This communal sense-making is taken for granted: one's belonging in and of the community (and its histories and stories) is prerequisite for understanding. As the work of *thinking* through literary form became impacted by the creation of orthographies for southern African languages, mission education toward literacy in indigenous languages and English and Afrikaans, and by the growth of newsprint and book publishing industries, this structure of belonging required by a form such as praise poetry becomes fundamentally dislocated. An audience outside of the community will find only obscurity in the very local references of this poetry, and this fundamentally restructures the potential for thinking *as and with* a community through oral poetry.

We might say that the structure of address in praise poetry illustrates the philosophy of *ubuntu* (a precolonial Bantu moral philosophy often simplified to its axiom "I am because we are"). The *imbongi*'s intellection is dependent on the audience's shared cultural knowledge. But I would like to push this idea a little further to suggest, along with Leonard Praeg in his *Report on Ubuntu*, that the ontological sense of belonging that is the *a priori* fact of community in which *ubuntu* is a mode of thought ended with "the dual fragmentation of individual

[12] Peires, "The Lovedale Press," 165.

[13] Opland, "Introduction," 10.

[14] Karen Barber, "Text and Performance in Africa," *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* 66 (2003): 324–33, esp. 328; cited in Opland, "Introduction," 10.

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and social that marks the modern moment."[15] That is to say, "We gain the recognition of individuality by losing the givenness of belonging; inversely, we gain the givenness of individualism by denaturalizing the assumption that we belong."[16] Mqhayi's writings exhibit his personal experience of this historical shift in which colonial modernity cataclysmically interrupts African history and belonging and the kinds of communal intellection we see in the praise poem tradition.

The dual yearning to return to a sense of African belonging and the intellectual enjoyment of and engagement with a world of letters runs throughout Mqhayi's *Ityala lamawele.* We see it from the first page, where Mqhayi prefaces his entire text with a quote from Genesis 38:28-29. In this biblical story, during the birth of the twins, Pharez and Zarah, one child's hand emerges first and the midwife ties a red thread around the wrist to indicate that he is first born. But the baby then retracts his hand and is ultimately born second, thereby creating a crisis of primogeniture. Mqhayi adapts this story to Gcalekaland (present-day Eastern Cape) during the rule of the Xhosa king Hintsa (1789–1835). Here, the customary act of midwives cutting off the first joint of the small finger (*ingqithi*) replaces the biblical red thread, but in all other aspects the plot of the birth is the same. The intertext here is no longer embedded in local history, as we see in the praise poem form, but the making local of the biblical tale addresses not only the bible to the Xhosa reader, but Xhosa tradition to an imagined universal reader.

This duality continues in the common claim that *Ityala lamawele* is "a defense of Xhosa law before European administration,"[17] which Mqhayi's comments in his 1914 preface loosely suggest. Yet, in the same preface, Mqhayi overtly addresses himself to *the Xhosa nation.* He writes:

> It is up to young Xhosa males and females to look carefully at precisely what will disappear when these wise and distinguished expressions and customs of their origin vanish completely. These are therefore deliberate endeavours to resist the wave that will demolish the whole nation. You, too, should strive to support these attempts.[18]

The bold second-person form shows the urgency of Mqhayi's plea to a young Xhosa generation standing at the verge of the annihilation of their

[15] Leonhard Praeg, *A Report on Ubuntu* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2014), 198.

[16] Praeg, *A Report on Ubuntu*, 198.

[17] S. E. K. Mqhayi, *Ityala lamawele*, Encyclopedia Brittanica Online (https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ityala-lamawele). See also B. Andrzejewski, S. Pilaszewicz, and W. Tyloch, *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys* (Warzaw: Wiedza Powszechna State Publishing House, 1985), who read the novella as a defense of "traditional Xhosa forms of justice against denigrations by South African whites"; cited in Abner Nyamende. "The Conception and Application of Justice in S. E. K. Mqhayi's *Ityala Lamawele*," *Tydskrift vir Letterkunde* 47.2 (2010): 19–30, esp. 19. Maseko sees it as a defense of "the intricacies of African law and its similarities with Western law"; see Pamela Maseko, "Introduction," in S. E. K. Mqhayi, *The Lawsuit of the Twins*, trans. Thokozile Mabeqa (Cape Town: Oxford University Press South Africa, 2018): v–xii, esp. vi.

[18] Mqhayi. *The Lawsuit of the Twins*, 3.

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"distinguished expressions and customs" through the colonial encounter. Given the material history of his own text that I have elaborated previously, this was a prescient observation that the publication's editorial history would itself bear out. Mqhayi's 1914 preface is already knowingly melancholic, recognizing as it does the lost belonging of the generation he addresses.

Over and above the fact that a dispute of primogeniture between twins is a universally recognizable way for Mqhayi to elaborate a local understanding of justice underscored by the moral philosophy of *ubuntu*, the twin characters also allow him to engage a divide at the levels of address and form through the level of plot. Jeanne-Marie Jackson notes a similar "motif of 'twinning'" in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* (2017), which uses "an explicit theme of twins to hook on to the problem of a twinned interpretive design."[19] Jackson also notes another set of twins used to illuminate the negotiation of a split between missionary culture and Shona custom in Stanlake Samkange's *The Mourned One* (1975). Here, one twin, Ocky, destined for death by Shona custom, is saved only to end up—unjustly—on death row, where he is to be put to death by a different, colonial custom. Samkange's unlucky twin protagonist "is able to penetrate [both Shona and missionary worlds] with encompassing and exacting precision,"[20] and in so doing, Samkange, Jackson argues, here is able to avoid imposing an either/or interpretative frame on this novel. Rather, he enables a moral rumination on both the Shona and missionary worlds that the plot plays out in.[21] Interestingly, the model that Ocky uses to find this balance between both worlds is the activity of debating, a "quintessentially British colonial" endeavor[22] that he learns at the Waddilove institution where he receives his missionary education.

Mqhayi, too, admired a real version of such an institution: the Lovedale Literary Society's debate nights, where he even staged a drama version of *Ityala lamawele.*[23] But unlike Samkange, Mqhayi does not find a structure for thinking, for rigorous moral discussion and justice, in debate in its European forms. Rather, he invests in showing us how discussion and debate form part of the deliberations of the Xhosa court through the trial of the twins. This debate moves toward social cohesion rather than abstract intellectual resolution.

[19] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 109. Indeed, over and above the example of *Kintu*, there numerous contemporary examples of twins in African novels. Some examples include Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005), Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), Chris Abani's *The Secret History of Las Vegas* (2014)' and Sue Nyathi's *The Gold Diggers* (2018).

[20] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 85.

[21] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 85.

[22] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 88.

[23] As recorded in the Minutes of Lovedale Literary Society, May 24, 1945, Mqhayi said of this production that "it was for amusement as well [to bring] light to those who did not know anything about pure African life"; cited in Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of* The Pilgrim's Progress (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 126. We might postulate that it is this statement from 1945, shortly before Mqhayi's death, that has produced the narrative of this text being directed at non-African audiences: evidence, perhaps, of yet another stage in the text's material plasticity. Indeed, the made-for-television series directed by Zinzi Kulu and released as a DVD collection in 2008 should also be considered part of this history of adaption and adaptation.

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The entire structure of the plot of the first sixteen chapters of *Ityala lamawele* drives forward a model of the importance of social cohesion (here the very form of *ubuntu*), which resolves in the chapter titled "Unity Is above the Law" (*Lawsuit of the Twins*, 56). After significant discussion with and advisement by the community, king Hintsa finally gives his verdict as to which of the twin brothers is to be considered his father's heir and firstborn. This verdict is, however, rhetorically complex and leads both plaintiff and defendant to believe that the king has ruled against them. Both twins accept the king's ruling and head home in the spirit of acceptance. This ultimately leads the brothers to move beyond their differences and to work together for the overall betterment of the homestead. In a philosophical elaboration of *ubuntu* written with his wife, Samkange made similar observations about the role of the African court: "In passing final judgement, the African court will take into consideration an element which the Western court would consider quite extraneous and irrelevant, and that is whether the judgment or sentence reconciles the parties to the dispute."[24]

But what Mqhayi cannot attain in his written text is a structure of *ubuntu* thinking itself.[25] In narrating the tale, he has to tell us how this thinking might operate. Although commentators have noted "Mqhayi's brilliance at crafting a story that draws from the oral art forms so characteristic of Xhosa society,"[26] the written narrative is a melancholic form, already marking in its address the end of the possibility of a Xhosa mode of thinking the world.

The literary form of *Ityala lamawele* was to prove all too porous to retain such a model of thinking and, with this case in mind, I wonder if we need not address the very *idea of ideas* to the formal and material histories of their expression? In a time in which African novels remain dominated by colonial languages, global publishing and a distribution cycle that continues to underemphasize African readers and audiences, I wonder if the novel isn't cracking under the weight of its own historical baggage? Although all of Jackson's examples do enable an "agile negotiation between private minds and public spaces,"[27] are these examples not in the minority compared to those African novels that fall into the divide in their own form and structure of address? In the era of Web 2.0 and almost universal access to mobile technology, other formal and affordable alternatives that are reengaging everyday life on the continent today are flourishing. How these forms will enable a structure for ideas and intellection is anyone's guess, but I suspect that we are on the edge of seeing that structures emerge in ways that will

[24] Stanlake Samkange with Tommie Marie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy.* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Graham Publishers, 1980), 44; cited in Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 93.

[25] Indeed, Jeanne-Marie Jackson draws a similar conclusion about Samkange, arguing that "hunhuism for Samkange is not quite *representable* in novel form during Zimbabwe's extended liberatory moment, because, on the simplest level, it is nowhere to be found in its full, lived expression." See Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 95.

[26] Maseko, "Introduction," vii.

[27] Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 2.

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be once again syncretic, multi-modal, multi-lingual, and deeply entangled in smaller scale, comprehensible societies and communities.

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