

Folk Poetry and Folksong

Xhosa Oral Poetry. Aspects of a Black South African Tradition. By Jeff Opland. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Cambridge studies in Oral and Literate Culture number 7. Pp. xii + 303, preface, references, indexes, photographs)

This book, written in clear English, adopts an "interdisciplinary approach" (p. xi) to the study of oral poetry among the Xhosa-speaking peoples of southeastern South Africa (i.e. Xhosa proper and Cape Nguni). Based on extensive field and library research, the work concentrates on the poetry (*izibongo*) of the "court poets" or "bards" (*iimbongi*). The scope and quality of the descriptive and analytical data and of the translated textual examples make *Xhosa Oral Poetry* a significant contribution to the understanding of the eulogistic genre (often called praise or heroic poetry) in South Africa, which is now one of the most comprehensively studied oral traditions of Africa. Although not intended as an edition of Xhosa texts (p. x), the work does include many selections (see Index of poems cited, pp. 301-303) in English translation (the original is given only "when necessary," p. xi; e.g., when an aspect of style analysis requires it).

Chapters 1 and 2 review the documentary evidence (European travel and missionary sources dating back to the early 19th century; analyses and collections of texts by native Xhosa speakers) illustrating the diverse and intensive practice of different forms of oral poetry among the Xhosa. In these chapters, which are encumbered by long extracts from various writings and by the repetition of certain data and arguments, the author characterizes the triple intersecting tradition of poetry centering on individuals, clans, and chiefs. He establishes the contexts and interplay of "memorization" (traditionalism) and "creativity" (originality) in the making of this poetry.

Chapter 3 covers a wide range of topics relating to the bards in general: the informal process of learning the poetry and becoming a bard, the gift for improvisation, the freedom in the use of ribald language and criticism, and the political role as praiser and critic. In Chapter 4, the author provides the biographies and discusses the art of four male bards. These chapters shed new light on the personality, artistry, position, and functions of these highly gifted individuals in Xhosa society.

Chapter 5 reveals the critical role of poetry in the belief system and rituals surrounding ancestral cult, chieftainship, and cattle and locates the *izibongo* poetry within the context of the eulogistic genre. As a "medium of communication between the living and the ancestral shades" (p. 130), *izibongo* have a ritual force. They always have a eulogistic purpose, describing the physical and moral qualities of subjects and events and placing subjects in a genealogical context (pp. 146-151). The contents of Xhosa eulogies are analyzed in terms of six features found in funerary eulogies by Greek and Cretan women (pp. 147-149).

In Chapter 6, Xhosa poetry is examined in the light of schemes advanced by Albert Lord and Walter Ong. Following a detailed summary of Lord's major theoretical arguments, the focus is on three features (the formula, the theme, and the effect of writing on oral tradition) "to learn more thereby about aspects of the Xhosa tradition" (p. 152). The author notes, for example, the presence not only of repeated phrases (comparable to formulas) but also of stylistic tropes and free improvisation. In the absence of precise studies on the principles that guide the Xhosa meter and line (pp. 159, 162), however, no clear conclusions can be drawn. The author then discusses and examines the applicability of seven criteria of Ong's paradigm for primary oral cultures (pp. 183-193).

The final two chapters deal with the effects of writing, printing, and literacy on traditional Xhosa poetry and with the impact of political and economic factors on Xhosa tradition.

The book was intended to be "a preliminary analysis" (p. x). As a general criticism, many of the major points made about the training, artistry, and position of the poets and about the scope, form, and content of the poetry are obscured by the excessive quotations, verbatim renditions of interviews, and summaries of theories. No clear-cut synthesis of the essential aspects of this poetry is provided; the data and conclusions are scattered throughout the work. Nevertheless

the data presented add not only to an understanding of Xhosa poetry per se but also to a better appreciation of the distinctive forms and functions of the eulogistic genre in Africa.