Away with Good Bantus: De-linking African language literature from culture, ‘tribe’ and propriety

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Abstract
This paper argues that the ‘institutionalisation’ model used by universities to spearhead the intellectualisation of African languages is a non-starter for taking African languages in new creative directions. The major constraint for African language literary culture is that written output has historically been heavily bent towards conservative themes, in which cultural pride and propriety take centre stage: that is, a literature that speaks to ‘Good Bantus’. I argue that the literary tradition, particularly in schools and universities, has been marked largely by three characteristics: (i) the close linkage between ethnic identity and language; (ii) use of African language as cultural reclamation and pride; and (iii) narratological stagnation and lack of inventiveness in literary production. To bring life into African languages in the academy requires aesthetic inventiveness and transgression. For this to happen, literary regeneration ought to be at the heart of the African language intellectualisation project promoted by the academy.

Keywords
African languages, intellectualisation, isiZulu, literature, multilingualism

There is much debate in policy and scholarly circles about the intellectualisation of African languages.1 Although there are some notable endeavours at various institutions, there appears to be more talk about intellectualisation than actual practice. In attempting to give prominence and relevance to African languages, South African universities have attempted an ‘institutionalisation model’ in which African languages come to be used in the administrative and academic life
of the institution. In reality however, intellectualisation has not seen much success, with the exception of the University of Zululand, the dual medium Sesotho sa Leboa-English education degree at University of Limpopo, and recent production of full theses in isiXhosa at the University of Cape Town (Kamwendo et al., 2014; Ramani and Joseph, 2008).

Though still exceptional, the above examples follow a well-worn path for how African languages are brought into the ambit of mainstream knowledge production and intellectual advancement. In this paper, I argue that this ‘institutionalisation model’ of promoting African languages fails because it reproduces conservative scholarly practice associated with African languages teaching and literary culture. What is necessary for intellectualisation in African languages is not merely institutionalisation, but a re-framing of the kind of the ‘native subject’ or ‘implied reader’ that the African language literary tradition has historically constructed. At its heart intellectualisation ought to be a project of literary regeneration, a project to push the boundaries of discourse. This requires that scholars move beyond an administrative and lexicographic type of approach that sees intellectualisation endeavours revolve around university signage, dual-language circulars and terminological and lexicographic quibbles. Intellectualisation should expand the imaginative scope of academic work, and it is new literary production that has the potential to challenge scholarly conservatism and expert gatekeeping that has characterised African languages scholarship.

Notwithstanding resource constraints, I argue that the major hindrance to the intellectualisation of African languages is that textual production (fiction and non-fiction) has historically been heavily bent towards conservative themes, in which cultural pride, propriety and identity take centre stage – that is – a literature that speaks to ‘Good Bantus’. In schools and universities, this narratological tradition has been marked largely by three characteristics: (i) the close linkage between ethnic identity and language, (ii) use of African language as cultural reclamation and pride and (iii) narratological stagnation and lack of inventiveness in literary production. Intellectualisation efforts that do not effectively de-link African languages from these three suffocating tendencies will fail to bring African languages properly into the centre of scholarly production in South Africa.

A history of censorship

The historical marginalisation and under-development of printed African languages through multifarious forms of censorship and control have been extensively written about (Maake, 1992; Mhlambi, 2009). From missionary control and supervision to the Verwoedian era of linguistic tribalising, African language book writers struggled under oppressive conditions to innovate, dissent and break new ground in writing. Moreover, there has been a rigid and overwhelming focus on grammar in the African language teaching tradition because this had been necessary for missionaries transcribing and compiling orthographies (Maake, 1992: 163). Perhaps, the most long-lasting effect of missionary work in African languages
was the standardisation of dialects and their association with imagined tribal identity, an association which morphed into state policy in the Bantustan era through both the education system, and more especially ethnically separated broadcast radio.

The effect of this history has been that the print culture of African languages have been largely used as ideological tools of creating ‘good and proper Bantus’, the literature

Concerned itself with escapism, fantasy and mystic primitivism, noted for its typical ‘safe’ historical themes. The writing tended to recapitulate previously explored safe themes; the depiction of the conflict of cultures, the dramatization of the move from the agrarian societies and cultures into the world of the cities and the attendant overthrow of the system of values and mores that animated the older world. And underlying these themes would be a strong incessant didactic Christian moral outlook. (Mhlambi, 2009: 7)

Literary conservatism in white South African writing such as in the plaasroman or farm novel genre was characteristically silent on colonisation, presenting idyllic landscapes, where supreme white men timelessly own the land in a social order of patriarchal ruralism. Invariably, the narrative arc of these stories is for nostalgia for a resilient countryside in the face of modernity (Coetzee, 1986). Of course to read the ‘conservative’ Afrikaans text as being ideologically totalising and ideologically impermeable has its limits (Coetzee, 1997). However, the engagement with these themes took a radical turn in the 1960s when new generations of Afrikaans writers began subverting and exposing the implicit nationalist volksideology of the farm novel though literary experimentation (Devarenne, 2009).

Literary subversion of this kind has never happened with African language literature, not even in the post-1994 era and as such, African language literature suffers ‘narratological stagnation’ where new and fresh literary approaches have been slow to emerge in publishing. This argument might be considered narrow because tabloid-style isiZulu newspapers in KwaZulu-Natal have been flourishing; in them, it could be argued, is evidence of thematic inventiveness. This is even more evident in television dramas where taboo topics are regularly broached especially in youth entertainment (Mhlambi, 2009). But this is the essential point, that there is a great divide between popular usages of the language and their use in the realm of scholarship, book publishing and teaching. The spectre of the ‘grammar’ obsessed missionary approach to African language haunts our university African languages departments still; asphyxiating creative potential.

This ‘narratological stagnation’ or aesthetic rut in which African language writing finds itself, is not remedied by institutionalisation. Far from it, the languages are instead viewed as a form of ‘cultural reclamation’ and ‘restoration’ in the face of a history of cultural dispossession and assimilation amongst elites. This reclamationist project has its roots in political defiance. When the African press first emerged in the Eastern Cape mission stations during the 1860s, the ‘Xhosa writers
took a radical step from the beginning, aligning their writings with the political issues of the time’ (Maake, 1992: 165). Through this emerged a robust and independent tradition of African nationalist writings of very strident engagement with the politics of the colonial state. Part of defiance was to actively record and engage Africa orature through long form prose, poems, folktales, histories in the newspapers and in that way place intellectual value on that which the missionaries considered heathen (Kaschula 2008; Opland, 2004). Furthermore, African newspapers promoted proficiency in multiple African languages as part of the emerging African nationalist politics of the early 1900s.

While the African nationalist ethos remained defiant in writing, particularly poetry, African language writing would in some way, be subtly usurped by the Verwoedian project which very explicitly channelled African language books into an ethnically segmented Bantustan schooling system (Maake, 1992). Separate development ideology in broadcast further entrenched the association of language with ethnicity (Lekgoathi, 2012). In reality of course, Black South Africans, hardly maintained the linguistic or ethnic divisions as prescribed by the state; most especially where radio was concerned. Anti-apartheid intellectuals, however, abandoned African languages for the purposes of intellectual discourse, in part as a means to advance Pan-African and global struggles, but also to neuter the toxic effects of Bantustan tribalisation. Ironically, then, English writing would become the vanguard of liberation intellectual culture, leaving African language ‘preservation’ in the hands of state policies. The result is that over time, even African intellectuals have failed to tackle the history of literary apartheid which sees African language texts studied largely separately from each other and from English and Afrikaans; there is a failure to reconstruct the collective South African literary canon as being plural forms of one unitary system. As such, the Verwoedian alignment between African language literatures, geography and ethnicity has been slow to undo.  

### Moral didacticism: Propriety and sobriety

Early African nationalist writing in the colonial state must, of course, be understood within the context of British mid to late 19th century assimilationism, in which educated Christianised Africans came to see themselves as loyal British subjects to whom all the rights of civilised ‘men’ must accrue (Bickford-Smith, 2011). While on one hand rejecting the devaluation of African orature as ‘heathen’, African writers also simultaneously embodied and modelled upright and proper Christian Victorianism on the other; a Victorianism most embodied in the civic politics of teetotalism and the rejection of all alcohol with its destructive influences (Mills, 1980). Thus emerged a core theme in African languages writing revolving around temperance, sobriety and moral rectitude which are seen as antidotes to the corrupting influences of modernity and urban life. Mhlambi (2009) notes that ‘in isiZulu literature, the adoption of a city identity and the attendant loss of cultural values are associated with a slide to criminal life’. Vulgarity and ribald language
which is present in everyday discourse was frowned upon in writing, ‘verbal taboo, the legacy of mission school writing heritage, has for decades been widely practised as an attempt to remove distasteful features from Xhosa literature. Writers were encouraged to avoid using ‘bad language’ (Mkonto, 1996: 2). Very few African language writers have been bold enough to reject didactic propriety as both a literary theme and a mode of self-censorship. Where writers have attempted to tackle risqué and taboo themes such as sexuality and rape, they have been criticised for failing as novels, as being ‘badly conceived’ in terms of plot and character development (Sithole, 2012). Thus Sithole argues ‘engagement with important issues, however, does not guarantee the novel’s success’ (Sithole, 2012: 55). Traditional book writers thus fail to expand literary boundaries unlike African language journalists and scriptwriters who in writing for popular audiences regularly engage with themes of moral ambivalence, political dissent, taboo, flights of fancy and sexual pleasure through vernacular idiom. Thus, even if African languages are institutionalised through medium of instruction teaching in schooling as Prah (2009) and others have suggested, we do not necessarily solve the problem of narratological conservatism that constrains the kind of conceptual openness necessary for intellectual engagement.

**Intellectual culture**

This historical trajectory of conservatism and suppression has resulted in African language speakers being alienated from formally printed literature (Kaschula, 2008). I argue the dominant literary tradition speaks to their ‘implied reader’ through sanitised renditions of language and reality. The contemporary intellectualisation movement in universities has shied away from the question of literary stagnation; instead African language departments remain stolidly fixed in the ‘grammar teaching’ and ‘preservationist’ method. What is necessary is to do away with the ‘Good Bantu’ implied by the literary tradition. As a starting point, we can start by breaking down the barrier between ‘high’ literary forms and ‘popular’ culture in African language teaching at university and draw on texts from a range of media – radio, television, internet and daily newspapers (Mhlambi 2012). Scholarly theorising needs to also break the history of literary apartheid that has resulted in the division of South African literature by language. Thus, intellectualisation requires a heavy push for translation between the various languages to facilitate the theorisation of literary frameworks that can handle the plurality and intersectionalism of South Africa’s related storytelling traditions. Lastly, African language literary production and scholarship needs to boldly use vernacular idiom to theorise the transgressive, and I dare say, the erotic.

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2. I have here drawn from Edwards and Ngwaru’s (2011) notion of the implied reader as the kind of subject or audience the writer or publisher has in mind when producing texts.
3. See Finlayson and Madiba (2002) who argue that apartheid language policy resulted in South African indigenous languages being viewed in isolation to other related languages across Africa.
4. Mhlambi (2009) argues that contemporary writers have started to broach taboo topics. However, these are only a handful.

References


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