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The writing of Arthur Fula: Modernity, language, place and religion

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Arthur Fula's debut novel *Johannie giet die beeld* (lit: Johannesburg moulds the graven image) was well received in the beginning of 1954 but has in recent years been largely forgotten. The novel was promoted as the first "by a Bantu in Afrikaans", a designation that differentiated him, a third language speaker, from the typical Afrikaans writer who was ordinarily a white, first language speaker. The novel registers, in the tradition of the 'Jim-comes-to Jo'burg' novels, the migration of black characters to the urban areas with the persistent struggle between indigenous traditions and the presence of an unknown, even threatening Western modernity. In his second novel *Met erbarming, O Here* (With Compassion, Oh Lord, 1957) Fula made peace with the permanency of urban black Africans and their aspirations. This essay introduces the emergence of the autodidact Fula's authorship amidst a period of profound change and adaptation in South Africa during the 1950s, tracing his personal history, the circumstances of his writing and choice of language, and the reception of his debut novel. **Keywords:** Afrikaans literature, Arthur Fula, Black Afrikaans writing, 'Jim-comes-to Jo'burg' novels, South African literature

1

On a rainy and chilly Saturday morning, the conservators of the National Afrikaans Literary Museum and Research Centre in Bloemfontein, South Africa inaugurated a bust of the author Arthur Nuthall Fula (Britz). It was a moment of recognition long in the making. For years, the immediate past head of the Museum, tried to track down Fula's relatives to arrange an appropriate occasion to recognize the first black African Afrikaans author (Qoopane). The bilingual event—Afrikaans-English—of 14th May 2016 was his crowning achievement. Among those gathered were Fula's three surviving daughters and son, and a number of grandchildren and great-grandchildren (Qoopane). They appreciated the gesture even though their knowledge of the Afrikaans language was limited; none of them had read Fula's work in the original (Don Fula). They were not alone. Even among Afrikaans literary scholars his name remains relatively unknown and his literary works are consigned to oblivion.

There was a time, though, in the beginning of 1954, when Fula's story was told in several Afrikaans and English newspapers and magazines, especially in the northern parts of the country. His debut novel *Johannie giet die beeld* (lit: Johannesburg moulds the graven image) had just been published. For the Afrikaans reading public it was

a unique experience. Initially 5000 books were printed, followed by a second print run of 3000 books (Fula, Letter xiv). In the small Afrikaans readers' market this was a much higher than usual print run for the average novel in the 1950s. Fula became an overnight sensation (Staff reporter; NALN biography 2). In the idiom of the time his book was promoted as "a novel by a Bantu in Afrikaans" ("'n roman deur 'n Bantoe in Afrikaans").¹ Indeed, the publisher's announcement gives us a sense of the perceived anthropological uniqueness of the text. It at once proclaims the novel and at the same time differentiates its author from the typical Afrikaans writers who were ordinarily white, first language speakers.

2

The emergence of modernity in South Africa around the turn of the twentieth century can directly be attributed to the industrial and technological change that gold and diamond mining, the Anglo-Boer War, the formation of Union and the expansion of education precipitated. These changes impacted South Africans of all backgrounds, no less black South Africans who migrated to burgeoning cities like Johannesburg in the centre of the country. The key bearer of the modern was the Christian Church in its alliance with colonial capitalism while mission education played an inordinate role in the lives of urban black Africans. Much of these developments are evidenced in the writing of black South Africans where the conflict between the traditional and the modern is often played out: "The story of Christian emergence has its counterpart in acts of remembering; in other words, in narratives about traditional society or traditional society in its earliest encounters with colonial intrusion." (Attwell 67)

Arthur Fula was born in 1908, around the same time as some of the early pioneering Zulu writers such as R. R. R. Dhlomo (1901–71), H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903–56) and Benedict W. Vilakazi (1906–47). They, and several other black African, and indeed white Afrikaans writers of the first decades of the twentieth century recount in noteworthy works the period of economic modernization, and political and social transformation. For instance, the critic Jordan Ngubane viewed H. I. E. Dhlomo's epic *Valley of a Thousand Hills* (1941) as "a symbolic representation of the progress achieved by African people in modernity" (in Masilela, "New African" 336). Among the prominent black intellectuals from the southeast Cape were members of the Jabavu family: John Tengo (1859–1921), D.D.T. (1885–1959) and Noni (1919–2008), all of whom became notable writers or editors in the southeast Cape region and beyond. John Tengo became the editor of *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (The Xhosa Messenger) in 1876 and established *Imvo Zabantsundu* (Black Opinion) in 1884. Noni Jabavu became closely identified with the New Africans or the progressives and wrote *Drawn in Colour: African Contrasts* (1960) and *The Ochre People: Scenes from a South African Life* (1963), both autobiographical accounts of contact between indigenous Africanity and Western modernity. Among the previous generation of black African writers

were Sol Plaatje (1876–1932), the author of inter alia *Mhudi* (1930), the first novel in English written by a black writer; S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875–1945) and Thomas Mofolo (1876–1948), the author of *Chaka*, who wrote primarily in their mother tongues, Xhosa and Sotho respectively.

Among the intellectuals and prominent writers was R. V. Selope Thema, the editor of the Johannesburg-based newspaper *The Bantu World*, “a great synthesizer of world historical experiences and visions” who influenced writers who would become prominent during the 1950s (Masilela, “Theorising” 90; “New African” 35). A new generation of urban-based, relatively well-educated black African writers emerged around *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, at about the period when Fula published his Afrikaans novels. Most of these writers such as Todd Matshikiza, Arthur Maimane, Ezekiel (later: Es’kia) Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi, Nat Nakasa, Lewis Nkosi and Can Themba among others depicted an urban world influenced by social trends informed by contemporary technologies like film, photography, modern theatre and music, the increasing repressive implementation of apartheid and the opposing volatile liberatory politics of urban South Africa. All of these writers were committed to writing in English and their writing narrated life in inner city townships like Sophiatown (in Johannesburg) or Marabastad (in Pretoria) which had become synonymous with the undeniable presence, if not permanency, of black Africans in the city, the singular space of the modern. The literary critic Ntongela Masilela (“New African” 334) attributes Peter Abrahams’ short stories *Dark City* (1942) and his novel *Mine Boy* (1946) “central in persuading *Drum* magazine to switch from celebrating ‘tradition’ in its earliest copies to emphasizing ‘modernity’ thereby capturing the zeitgeist of the 1950s.”

Arthur Fula, somewhat older than the generation of *Drum* writers, registers in his first novel the beginnings of urban migration and his characters’ persistent struggle between indigenous tradition and the looming presence of an unknown, even threatening Western modernity. In his second novel he has made peace with the permanency of urban black Africans and their aspirations to make a decent living in a rapidly industrializing Johannesburg. In this essay I intend presenting the emergence of his little known authorship amidst a period of profound change and adaptation in South Africa.

3

Much of the scant information on Arthur Fula was published and republished in various early commentaries (see Fula, Letter; Herdeck 193; Jahn, et al.132). He was born on 16th May 1908 on the southeast coast of South Africa, in East London and died of a stroke on his 58th birthday in 1966, in Soweto, Johannesburg. In 1910 his parents, Samuel and Alice (née Stuurman) Fula (Don Fula), migrated north to George Goch close to Johannesburg, where twenty four years earlier gold was discovered.

He received his school education at the Siemert Coloured School² and apparently continued to pursue teacher's training at the Eurafrikan Normal College (Lasker vii).³ However, he did not complete his primary school teacher's diploma. From the age of 17 he worked as a clerk, a miner and a labourer on two different gold mines. From his late-twenties until his early forties he worked as a cabinet maker at a local furniture factory.⁴ The factory went out of business and Fula tried to establish his own workshop, but it also failed (Lasker vii). For a period of time he was unemployed.

By 1952, after a spell of teaching, he was employed as an interpreter at the Johannesburg magistrate's court (Lasker vii; Staff reporter). Notwithstanding his lack of any formal qualifications as an interpreter Fula was exceptionally well qualified for the position. He was a multilingual person, a true polyglot. Apart from his mother tongue, Xhosa, he also spoke Zulu, and Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi. He wrote and spoke English and Afrikaans fluently and at the Alliance Française he learnt French (Staff reporter; Trekker; Lasker vii; see also Willemse).

For much of the twentieth century, literacy was particularly low among the broader black population, especially the black African sector of the South African population, whose educational advancement was curtailed by legislative restrictions, limited access and dismal infrastructural provision.⁵ Well-educated literary luminaries such as R. R. R. and H. I. E. Dhlomo or Vilakazi who received high school or university education were outliers. Most black South Africans and that may have included Fula, in the first half of the twentieth century did not have access to or even completed their primary schooling. With the failure of his carpentry venture Fula, during his time of unemployment, saw writing, one skill not reliant on external generosity, as a distinct economic possibility. In a biographical note he writes:

Ja, gedurende daardie vertroebelde periode van my lewe het ek baie dinge geleer. Ek het my getroos deur te redeneer. Ja, hulle het die geld, maar ek besit die pen, en in die pen lê my bestemming. Ek sal win. Weer het ek my verdiep in my letterkundige werk deur nog 'n roman te skryf. (Qtd. in NALN biography 1)

(During those troubled years of my life I have learned many things. I comforted myself. Yes, they have money, but I have the pen, and in the pen lies my destiny. I will overcome. I committed myself to my literary work by writing another novel.)⁶

Some of Fula's early writing includes letters to the press, several poems, and short stories; most of them remain unpublished and may have been lost to posterity. The largely self-educated Fula dates his conscious writing activities to the mid-1940s when he completed two novels in English which he tried to get published in "[...] Engeland, en Amerika. Selfs op die vasteland van Europa, het ek probeer maar alles [was] tevergeefs gewees." (Fula, Letter iv) ([...] England and America. I have even tried on the continent of Europe but all this was in vain). He even approached

international charity organizations without any publication success:

Verenigings, as ook (sic) mense daar in die buiteland wie (sic) voorgee tot (sic) die wêreld, dat hulle neem belang in die voorspoed van die Bantoe, het ek genader om steun, sonder sukses. Hulle het nie geld daarvoor nie, of hulle is te besig, en dus het hulle nie tyd nie. My (sic) is (sic) so teleurgestel gewees, dat ek byna daardie manuskripte aan die brand gesteeek [het]. (Fula, Letter iv–v)

(Societies whose people pretend to the world that they care for the well-being of the Bantu, I have approached, without success. They don't have money for it, or they are too busy, and therefore they do not have time. I was so disappointed that I wanted to burn those manuscripts.)

In spite of this disappointment Fula continued his writing, fired up by his belief that his voice must be heard, even after his death. What prevented him from burning his manuscripts was, on his own account,

[...] wat my vermy (sic) het [om my manuskripte te verbrand], is die gedagte [...] dat al slaag [die manuskripte] nie gedurende my leeftyd nie, dit kan miskien gebure (sic) dat dit 'n boodskap sal wees tot (sic) die [...] nageslagtes, wat die Bantoes gedink het van die beskawing, die oorloë, die vrede, as ook (sic) die oplossings vir die huidige wêreld probleme (sic) betreffende die mensdom in die algemeen. (Fula, Letter v–vi)

([...] the thought that even if [my novels] do not reach their audience during my life time, it may happen that they may be a message to those following after us of what the Bantus thought of civilization, the wars, the peace as well as the solutions for contemporary world problems regarding humanity in general.)

At the beginning of his writing career Fula contemplated writing in Xhosa, as he puts it, "'n werk in 'n Bantoe taal (sic) saam te stel" ("to write a work in a Bantu language"), but he soon realized that the market for such books was limited: "maar toe ek rond kyk op (sic) die leesstof wat my mense lees, het ek ontdek dat hulle belang stel in Engelse werke. Wie sou dan iets lees in die Bantoe tale (sic), het ek [ge-]redeneer." (Fula, Letter vi). ("I looked around at the material my people were reading and I discovered that they were interested in works written in English. Who would want to read something in the Bantu languages, I argued.") In the midst of this dead end, Fula's unemployment and undisclosed "domestic problems" made his life even more difficult.

During his extended period of unemployment Fula whiled away his time at "the Bantu library" (presumably the well-known Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg). This fact in itself is remarkable, since he worked for most of his life as a labourer, a miner and a woodworker—jobs not readily associated with reading as a

leisurely pursuit. It is also illustrative of his quest for self-education. Already at the age of 27 he showed himself to be an avid reader and writer contributing a letter with refined opinions to the editor of *The Bantu World*. It can therefore safely be assumed that he was a fairly regular visitor to the Centre, the only such facility available to black residents in the region.

It is instructive to contrast the novelist Peter Abrahams' experiences at the Bantu Men's Social Centre with that of Fula. Abrahams (1919–2017) was directed to the Centre as a school boy at the age of fifteen and the world of books set him on a path of discovery. He read voraciously, especially books related to the "American Negro." To these writers he owed "a great debt for crystallizing [his] vague yearnings to write and for showing [him] the long dream was attainable [...] [He] realized, quite suddenly, that [he] was rapidly moving out of [his] Coloured world [...]" (197). His "lust for learning," he records in *Tell Freedom*, also meant that he changed his language, a step that for him represented a broadening of his world: "Because everyone at the Social Centre spoke English, it became a habit with me. I thought in English. It took the place of Afrikaans as my first language. My range of words expanded, and with it, the range of my thoughts." (202)

In contrast, it was at the Social Centre that Fula conceived of the idea of writing in Afrikaans. Fula failed to find an English publisher and serendipity led him to Afrikaans writing. His choice for Afrikaans, in reality his third or even fourth language, as his primary literary language, came about incidentally.⁷ During the time of his unemployment he "[lees]vir ontspanning 'n Afrikaanse tydskrif [...] by die Bantoe biblioteek (sic)" ("read an Afrikaans magazine for recreation at the Bantu library") and toyed with the idea of contributing a short story to an Afrikaans magazine.⁸ The choice was not self-evident. Fula says, "Ek het gely om (sic) vrees en vooroordeel (sic) [...] Later het ek [ge-]redeneer dat ons spreek woord (sic) lui: 'Hoe diep 'n rivier is, is gewoonlik getoets deur die wandelstok.'" (Fula, Letter iv). ("I was anxious and prejudiced [...] later I reasoned that our saying goes: 'the depth of the river can only be judged by a walking stick'") Fula tested the waters of Afrikaans publishing and the rest is history: in 1954 and 1957 respectively his Afrikaans novels, *Jôhannie giet die beeld* and *Met erbarming, O Here* were published.⁹

Whereas English, the language of Empire and all things worldly, was perceived as the vehicle of modernity as illustrated in Abrahams' experience of the Social Centre Afrikaans became for Fula a mode of the powerful, a secondary vehicle of the modern. The overt choice against "the Bantu languages" that he became aware of among his potential readers was a choice against tradition. For someone whose primary instinct was the valorization of tradition the choice for Afrikaans was pragmatic rather than one of cultural identification: "If the Afrikaans-speaking people are to learn to know and understand us—we black people—then our writers must write in Afrikaans." Fula saw himself as stepping into a void that,

according to him, other black African writers such as Vilakazi, the Dhlomos, the Jabavus or the *Drum* writers did not recognise: “For years I have been waiting for the ‘big ones’ of my people—the men with titles who are better educated and better situated than myself—to do this. I have waited in vain.” (Staff reporter)

4

Fula’s name is generally not mentioned in summaries of Black South African writing of the 1940s and early 1950s even though his tenor and orientation are similar to those authors associated with the New African movement (see Masilela). Besides the actual novels, and several contemporaneous Afrikaans language reviews of his novels, very little critical appreciation exists in other indigenous South African languages or in English. Fula is a liminal writer, not present in indigenous African literary consciousness and on the fringes of Afrikaans literature. Interestingly, with reference to his presence in Black literature, publications published outside South Africa contain more information about Fula than local ones. Brief commentaries are published in Janheinz Jahn et al. *Who’s Who in African Literature* (1972) and David Herdecke *African Authors. A Companion to Black African Writing* (1973). In fact, shortly after its publication *Jôhannie giet die beeld* was translated into German and Finnish as *Im Goldenen Labyrinth: Erzählung aus Johannesburg* (In the Golden Maze: A Tale from Johannesburg, 1956) and *Kultaa ja kurjuutta* (Gold and Misery, 1960) respectively. Carrol Lasker’s English translation *The Golden Magnet* was only published in 1984 by Three Continents Press.

The Swiss librarian and Africana collector, Peter Sulzer (1917–2009) wrote an informative chapter on Fula in his unpublished manuscript *Südafrika im Spiegel der Afrikaans Literatur* (South Africa as mirrored in Afrikaans literature, 1965) (see “Peter Sulzer”). In this invaluable source the author presents us with the fullest description of Fula as a personality and writer that we have available. Sulzer writes that he and Fula corresponded over a period of eight years, and that the writer often sent him manuscript material, poetry, short stories and drafts of novels. Some of these were published in Sulzer’s collections *Südafrikanische Prosa und Lyrik* (South African Prose and Lyric, 1961) and *Südafrikaner erzählen* (South African Tales, 1963). On a visit to South Africa he even visited Fula at his place of work. He recalls their meeting as follows:

[...] indem mir einer von ihnen den Weg zum Gerichtshof wies, wo die nichteuropäischen Verbrecher abgeurteilt werden, und mich dort nach vielen Irrgängen durch ein Labyrinth von Trappen Etagen and Wandelhallen in dem Zuhörerrraum eines Gerichtssaales führte. Hier wurde ein Sotho sprechender Dieb verhört; der Gerichtsdolmetscher, der seine Aussagen und die des Richters ins Englische übertrug, hieß Arthur Fula. Während der Pause begrüßte ich den Autor des “Goldenen Labyrinthe” im gang. Fula war sichtlich überrascht und erfreut, dass ich, unangemeldet, in Südafrika

aufsuchte, nachdem wir bisher nur schriftlich miteinander verkehrt hatten. [...] Er sah abgearbeitet aus, war ziemlich schäbig gekleidet, aber seine Augen schienen voller Leben zu sein.¹⁰ Er reichte mir beim Abschied immer wieder seine grosse, schlaffe Hand. Wie oft mochte Fula schon die Hand eines Weissen in Oeffentlichkeit gedrückt haben. Ich war ihm dankbar dafür, das er mich so freundlich empfing. (Sulzer, *Südafrika* 381–2)

([...] one of the colleagues showed me the way to the court where non-European criminals are sentenced. After straying through a veritable labyrinth of stairs, floors, corridors and foyers I eventually landed up in the courtroom. A Sotho thief was standing trial and the court interpreter, who translated the statements of the accused and the judge into English, was none other than Arthur Fula. During the break I greeted the author of *Johannie giet die beeld* in the corridor. Fula was clearly surprised and delighted that I had come to South Africa unannounced, as we only had written communication in the past. [...] He looked overworked and his clothes were rather shabby, but his eyes appeared to be full of life. He offered me his large and limp hand in farewell. How often might Fula have shaken the hand of a white man in public? I was thankful that he received me in such a friendly manner.)

What makes Sulzer's unpublished chapter particularly valuable is his firsthand report on Fula's unpublished manuscripts, his novel, *Dogter van die Zoeloe* (The daughter of the Zulu), an autobiographical text, *Die lotgevalle van 'n naturelle-skrywer* (The trials and tribulations of a native writer), and a Xhosa text *Lahliwe* (Thrown away) and the short stories "Matsiliso van Phomolong" (Matsiliso of Phomolong) and "Ulindipisi" (Runderpest), as well as several poems. None of the original Afrikaans texts survived and Sulzer's quotations and summaries give us a mere glimpse into them.

5

For South Africans, the first five decades of the twentieth century was a time of tremendous change, only equaled by their most recent past. Locally and internationally fundamental changes were under way. Thousands of people migrated to the goldfields of Johannesburg which held out the promise of social advancement; rural people from all backgrounds sought their fortune in the city. Many, in the process, fell by the wayside, displaced from the stability of old traditions, tribal rituals or established social connections. The formation of Union and the exclusion of nonwhite people from the governance of the country dominated the political landscape. The powerful emergence of Afrikaner nationalism, especially since the 1930s and the white election of 1948 which the Afrikaner nationalists won, and subsequent legislation placed the country on the road to increased racial conflict. Opposition politics, particularly among the broader black community, converted itself into active resistance, away from the placatory politics of delegation and quiet diplomacy. For people like

Fula who did not express himself overtly on contemporary politics, these were years of exclusion or at the very least of an uneasy in-between-ness.

Fula's best known work *Jôhannie giet die beeld* is set against these years of transformation and adaptation. The title refers to Isaiah 40: 19 in the 1933 Afrikaans Bible translation. The King James version reads: "The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains". In her translation Carrol Lasker draws for the title, i.e. *The Golden Magnet*, on the image of the big city as an attraction, foregoing, like Fula's Finnish and German translators, the direct reference to the original Biblical verse. The central theme of the novel refers to the experiences of migrants to the city, looking for work and life opportunities. Fula (Letter ii-iii) explains the theme of his first novel as follows:

'n Xhosa spreekwoord lui: "Iemand wie (sic) reeds in die weg gewandel het, ken daardie pad," d.w.s. neem raad van iemand met ondervinding. As ook (sic) lui 'n ander spreek-woord: "Die persoon wie (sic) weier om raad te neem [,] hoor gewoonlik deur die warm wind", d.w.s. [h]y wie (sic) nie wil geraai (sic) word nie, is verplig om te luister wanneer onheil hom tref. So seggend bedoel ek dat ek darem iets weet van die weë as ook die valle wat bestaan in ons groot goud stad (sic) van JOHANNESBURG. Toe ek die werk saamgestel het, het ek beoog om my rasgenote, as ook andere [te] probeer maan omtrent wat hulle te gemoet (sic) sal kom in die goud stad.

(A Xhosa saying goes that someone who walked the road knows the way, i.e. take advice from someone with experience. Another saying goes that he who does not accept advice will usually hear through the hot winds, i.e. he who does not accept advice will be obliged to listen when misfortune befalls him. With that I'm saying that I know something about the ways and troubles of our existence in our big city of gold, Johannesburg. When I put this work together I aimed to tell my people, as well as others about what lies ahead for them in the big city.)

The big city novel is not unknown in the South African literature. Previously, writers such as R. R. R. Dhlomo (*An African Tragedy*, 1928), John J. B. Khafula (*This Thing got to Stop*, 1946), S. V. Petersen (*As die son ondergaan* [When the sun sets], 1945), and Peter Abrahams (*Mine Boy*, 1946) wrote about similar themes. The best known of these "Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg" novels are obviously *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948) by Alan Paton and *Swart Pelgrim* (1952; *Dark Pilgrim*, 1959) by F. A. Venter. The novels, and especially the latter two, developed a basic pattern, namely that of the rural male who comes to the city and gets confronted by its extremes, and he is faced with a simple choice: moral decay, social deviance and physical destruction or an escape from it as an act of self-preservation.

Jôhannie giet die beeld tells of two young friends, Maringo and Karlos, who arrive from Mozambique in Johannesburg, looking for work. They start out as miners and

shortly after their arrival meet up with characters representing different sectors of the city: the religious, moderates, hedonists, and criminals who are involved in all sorts of underworld activities. Karlos makes bad choices and eventually lands up in prison, causing grief to his mother. Maringo who himself also makes an initial misstep redeems himself, becomes studious, turns to the ministry as an evangelist, and returns to his rural world to lead an exemplary life, with the future prospective of returning to the golden city to do mission work.

Fula propagated the idea of return to the land for some time before the publication of his first novel. As early as 1936, he advanced the view in *The Bantu World* that the “religion which we have practised today is foreign. It is not that of our ancestors and that is why we suffer”. Fula’s solution was a return to the land so that if “we set that right we will be a people, yes, a nation. The best course for our people is to go right back to the very old men of different tribes and ask them concerning the tribal rituals of olden days.” (Fula, “Ancestral Worship” 16) In an interview published eighteen years later in the newspaper *The Star* he maintains this view: “My people must get back to the country. There is only tragedy for them here in the city.” (Staff reporter) In the novel, Fula casts the same sentiment in lyrically terms: “Once again [Maringo] had had to adjust to a [changed] life [...]. But the trees, the animals, the colorful freshness of this wide world had remained the same and finally he could breathe easily, after the city’s suffocating crush. Again he had wandered on the land, beside the water and past the cattle pens.” (Fula, *Golden* 115–6)

Yet, given that the main character in *Jôhannie giet die beeld* harbours the future prospect of returning to the golden city to do mission work renders Fula’s proposed solution less absolute. Already in this character’s return to the old world of tradition and the soil combined with the modernity of Christianity lurks the future syncretism of his second novel *Met erbarming, o Here*. Further, Fula’s position in his debut novel has evolved from his earlier position published in *The Bantu World*, a newspaper edited by R. V. Selope Thema. Thema, in the words of Masilela “never wavered [...] [to] call for the destruction of African traditions, which he passionately despised since he associated them with ‘backwardness’, ‘heathenism’ and all sorts of ‘foolishness’”. Fula, implicitly, did not accept Thema’s principled position, neither as a personal point of view nor as a resolution for the key problematic of his novel. The view advanced in *Jôhannie giet die beeld* denotes a midway. It is his attempt at resolving the unbearable contradiction that Thema’s position represents.

Throughout his life Fula lived with the tension between modernity and the indigenous traditions of tribal rituals and belief in ancestral worship, a belief brought to a head in his second novel where an intelligent young woman character Adriana, also known as Naledi, represents his syncretic solution. On the death of her father the main character is left destitute and her childhood dream of becoming a medical doctor is thwarted. Adriana is forced to leave school and goes into domestic service

as a way out of her difficult situation. A well-loved nurse and a sympathetic white woman come to her rescue and through their support and with sheer personal determination she completes her secondary schooling, trains as a nurse and eventually becomes a medical doctor, much loved in her community. Having completed studies in Western medicine she seeks out a *sangoma*, a healer, to guide her into the mysteries of traditional medicine. She now prefers her traditional name, Naledi, meaning “Star” to her Western name, Adriana. As a well-known figure her views are often sought and on occasion she propagates greater co-operation between black and white people. The novel ends with Naledi’s wish for a child of her own with her lawyer husband.

This somewhat meandering novel is wholly situated in the big city; Fula had overcome his initial view expressed in *Johannie giet die beeld* of the city as a degenerate place where black migrants cannot survive unscathed. He now obviously accepts the permanency of black people in the city, and that good people could live in the city. Adriana/Naledi, the name is not incidental, becomes the bearer of one of Fula’s abiding interests: the co-existence of traditional practices along with Christianity.

In his prose works the theme is often revisited. In his short stories “Vader Kalashe” (Father Kalashe) and “Matsiliso van Phomolong” (Matsiliso of Phomolong) the debate between indigenous tribal rituals and Christianity is played out, just as in the novel *Dogter van die Zoeloe* (Daughter of Zulu). According to Sulzer (382–3) the text tells the story of Sibusisiwe, the daughter of a *sangoma*, who falls in love with Velile. The relationship reveals the struggle between modernity and traditionalism and falls apart under the strain of family members from both sides, from within their defined positions as Christians and traditionalists. Velile eventually marries a literate woman, while Sibusisiwe converts to Christianity and marries a medical doctor, who after the completion of his studies goes on study to traditional medicine, a move that agrees with *Met erbarming, O Here* where Adriana/Naledi also explores the co-existence of these two knowledge systems. It seems that Fula, in later life, pivots towards syncretism, a mixture between old and new, where indigenous traditions are adapted to a modernizing environment. This is not a moment of sheer assimilation with a ruling political and social order but rather an attempt at keeping alive a positive, essential African identity amidst fundamental changes in the surrounding political and economic environment. Today, we recognize this moment as one of liminality: the old world is disappearing, the new one has arrived and those living through it find themselves at odds.

For Peter Sulzer (*Südafrika* 386) Fula’s poems stand at a higher level than his prose works such as “Father Kalashe” or “Matsiliso of Phomolong”. However, little, if any, of his poetry is available in Afrikaans. Truth be told, none of the original versions of Fula’s poetry in Afrikaans exist or are accessible. In some of the poems that are available through Sulzer’s translations, themes, similar to his novels and short stories are revealed, i.e. the tension between the rural areas and the city, evil and good, and

romantic pastoral imagining. The loss of Fula's original work, not only the poems, but also his other work, is a severe loss, since no records apparently exist. In a letter to the Afrikaans poet Barend Toerien the librarian Sulzer (Letter) writes that he, after receipt of the material, returned it, after he made copies of it, and at a later date he "could not find his copies."

6

We do not know how the black readers' community reacted to Fula's work; besides several press statements there is no evidence of critical commentary. In his letter to a member of a reading club Fula wrote that his acquaintances tried to dissuade him from writing in Afrikaans, but he said his ears were "doof op daardie tyd teen (sic) sulke praatjies gewees" ("deaf to such talk"). After the appearance of his debut some, in his own words, congratulated him with the words: "Man jy het goed gedoen. Veels geluk". ("Man, you've done well. Congratulations".) Others insulted him, and even threatened him with violence, because he exposed the "die swakheid van ons mense" ("the ills of our people."). He could not escape the snide remarks of those who were critical of his role as an Afrikaans writer:

"[D]aar loop die man wat die kultuur van sy eie mense verag het en daardie van andere nasies op bou(sic) deur daartoe by te dra. Hy is 'n NASIONALIS. Hy behoort (sic) tot die BOERE. Fula is 'n NASIONALIS."

("There goes the man who despises his own people and shore up other nations by contributing to them. He is a NATIONALIST. He belongs to the BOERS. Fula is a NATIONALIST.")

There were those who praised him as the man upon whom they have "waited", "whose pen writes so well in the Afrikaans language" (see also Staff reporter). Then there were those who encouraged him not only to praise the rural areas but also to explore the "advantages" of the city. Some wanted to see Fula as a protest writer "om die Afrikaans sprekende (sic) mense in kennis te stel in hulle eie taal van ons griewe" met die hoop dat sou hulle dit in hul moedertaal hoor, hulle "sou luister en dan die jukke wat swaar op ons skouers druk [...] onthef") (Fula, Letter vii-ix; see also Staff reporter); "to give notice to the Afrikaans speaking people in their own language about our grievances" with the hope that should they hear about these in their mother tongue "they will listen and remove the yokes from our backs."

Fula, in his very being, could not be a protest writer. At a time of fundamental political and social change in the 1950s, Fula who was obviously conservative in his social beliefs, was caught in the middle. Here was a culturally sensitive man who would not commit him expressly one way or the other, at least not publicly, to an overt political position. Yet, in a remarkable passage in *Johannie giet die beeld* he allows

one of his morally positive characters to formulate views that gently remind us of the apartheid injustices of the time:

“Muruti, you speak of the general condition of the world, but here also we are not at peace. We Bantu have many problems and difficulties and it seems to me there is no solution for them. In any case, who will listen to us?” [...] “Do you know, Muruti, the white people at my job say that we have no brains. They say we are more foolish than children.”

The Honorable Ditsebe answered reassuringly: “Well, brother, it is fruitless to reason with those people—most whites think that. They live in the past. They have much against the Bantu. We can guess very well what it is. But they do not want to perceive that times have changed. It is now a fact that our land is part of the world, and our Bantu population is therefore also a part of the world. Things that happen in other places in the world reach us too and yet we are regarded as the most trivial people on the world scene.” (Fula, *Golden* 92–3)

Fula’s conservatism prevents him from seeking a militant or radical solution. In this he was not alone. The political tradition of the first half of South Africa’s existence as a political union was one of gentle persuasion, of assimilation and most political parties, and indeed some of the early black African writers shared similar beliefs. For Fula, like many conservatives in times of stress, the solution to political and social problems was not activism but the quietism of religious belief, “the friendly brotherhood of all people.” His Reverend character says: “At the moment I am full of hope and confidence, because I feel that the solution cannot be sought among people. The destiny of the entire human race lies in the hands of the Great Father. He sees all and who is compassionate. This I read in the Holy Scriptures—the greatest Book of all times.” (Fula, *Golden* 93)

In the Afrikaans literary community Fula’s debut was met with enthusiasm, mostly because of the fact that someone with his social and linguistic background originally wrote the text in Afrikaans. For critics like T. T. Cloete (77) there is an additional positive feature, namely that *Jôhannie giet die beeld* “’n boek sonder wrok en sonder verwyte is, ’n boek waarin die kontras nie is: blank x Bantoe nie, maar: goeie Bantoe x slegte Bantoe.” (“is a book without any vengeance and resentment, a book in which the contrast is not: white x Bantu, but good Bantu x bad Bantu.”) He appreciates the “beheerste stem van sy roman [wat] oortuigend en weldadig aandoen” (“controlled voice of his novel that convinces and comes across as well-meaning”). It is especially the goodwill of Fula that emerges from the newspaper clippings of 1954. For the columnist *Trekker* it is “soete musiek in my ore om vir die eerste keer met ’n naturel oor Afrikaanse geestesgoedere te gesels. By Fula [is] geen van die pretensies van die Bantoe wat sy geleerdheid op Fort Hare of Lovedale ontvang het en net uit Shakespeare en Byron wil aanhaal nie.” (“melodious music to my ears to speak with a

native about the Afrikaans spiritual heritage. With Fula there is none of the pretence of the Bantu who got his education at Fort Hare or Lovedale and only quotes from Shakespeare or Byron.”). Trekker has further appreciation for the man Fula:

Hier [...] ’n naturel is wat die ekonomiese stryd van de Boere aan die Rand van naby leer ken het. Toe hy na die staking van 1922 by die myne gewerk het, het [Fula] eenkeer vyf sjielings aan ’n Afrikaner geleen om brood vir sy gesin te koop toe ’n Engelsman hom weggejaag het.

Here is a native who got to know the economic struggle of the Boer on the Rand up closely. When he worked on the mines during 1922, Fula once gave five shillings to an Afrikaner to buy bread when an Englishman chased him away.

While the novel may indeed have intrinsic value the critic Rob Antonissen wonders whether the overall positive reaction from Afrikaans literary critics was not “gekon-disioneer [...] deur die welwillendheid van die skrywer [...] Wat sou ons reaksies [...] gewees het, as Fula ons, blankes, nie op so ’n manier sou verskoon of ontsien het nie?” “conditioned by the goodwill of the author. [...] What would our reactions have been, if Fula did not absolve us or let us off the hook, as he has done?” (Qtd. in Willemsse 123)

7

As a third language speaker and autodidact, Arthur Fula reaches beyond the social and political boundaries which in time seemed virtually unbridgeable. As a writer he worked with literary models that were limited, which he with his natural story-telling talent converted into tales that give us an insight into a relatively unnoticed worldview in the changing environment of the 1950s and the emerging syncretism of the modern world. The different reactions that his publications received from black and white readers give us a sense of the ambivalence that a writer like Fula encounters in societies like a modernizing South Africa.¹¹

Notes

1. I retain the original racial labels, since these reveal the political positions and social orientations of the period. At the time, the term “Bantus” referred to indigenous black (primarily Bantu-speaking) South Africans to be distinguished from “Coloureds”, non-Bantu speaking South Africans of indigenous and European extraction, or “Asians” referring mostly to South Africans of Indian extraction.
2. If as Lasker (vii) avers Afrikaans was the language of instruction in the Siemert Coloured School, the school would have been an early adopter of mother tongue educational instruction. The language of instruction in such institutions was English, with Dutch /Afrikaans taught as a subject. Fula who evidently had a knack for languages in all probability picked up his fluent Afrikaans from his playmates and later, his fellow pupils. At the beginning of the 20th century the social divide between nonwhite people on Johannesburg’s gold fields was fairly fluid, and Fula would have had relatively unfettered access to the Siemert Coloured School. On the other hand, Fula’s parents’ choice to send him to a school designated for Coloureds may have been an informed one, considering the choices on offer for

a black African pupil. Coloured schools—there were 22 with 3741 pupils in the whole of the Transvaal Province—followed more or less a curriculum similar to those for white pupils. The curriculum for black African students was directed at creating a class of low-level manual labourers (see van Rooyen 99, 405, 410).

3. Lasker (vii) states confusingly that Fula attained “a Std. IV Certificate in 1930” (that is at age 22) and that he started working in 1925. While it is plausible that he commenced his working life at the age of 17, it is further unclear whether he completed a Standard IV certificate, a primary school certificate, which represents six years of primary schooling, or a Form IV certificate, which is a secondary school qualification, that represents at least eleven years of primary and secondary schooling. She also mentions that he attended the Vrededorp School, which according to van Rooyen (404) became the only primary school for Coloureds in 1918 to have included a secondary section. No other source references this particular school as part of Fula’s education. If he attended the Vrededorp School, he would have had the opportunity to attain Form IV. This is not clear though. In general, most pupils did not progress beyond Standard IV, and in 1922 only 76 pupils made it to the secondary levels of Vrededorp School (van Rooyen 405). It is more likely that Fula attained a Standard IV certificate rather than a Form IV certificate. The state of black schooling in Transvaal generally was dismal, racially biased with relatively few employment prospects. Schooling for black Africans in particular was at best uncertain, of low quality and based on extremely low expectations. According to van Rooyen (409ff) the threshold for black African teachers’ education was “Standard III” or the minimum age of 15 years. Besides confident assertions in various literary commentaries, as yet no documentary proof of Fula’s schooling has been located.
4. If Fula attained a Form IV qualification he would have been able to qualify as an artisan. Under the onerous provisions of the Apprenticeship Act, Act 26 of 1922, Standard VI, eight years of primary and secondary schooling, was the minimum qualification to be apprenticed as an artisan. Very few, if any blacks, qualified to become artisans since the policy deliberately advantaged white youth. There is no evidence that Fula became fully apprenticed as a carpenter or cabinet maker.
5. Sir John Adamson, the Transvaal Director of Education in the first decades of the twentieth century, designed a curriculum for white boys which included the two official languages, Dutch and English; Woodwork; Science; Mathematics and Draughting; History and Geography” (van Rooyen 99). Education for white pupils was free and compulsory up to primary school level (van Rooyen 56, 60–1). Schools for whites were state schools; the schools for blacks generally were mission schools with voluntary attendance and limited state support (van Rooyen 60, 405). In 1912 Adamson designed a curriculum for black African pupils to reflect the “native point of view taking into account their desires, aspirations and possibilities”. The pupil’s mother tongue was replaced as a medium of instruction with either Dutch or English after the first three school years. Boys could choose between the following “industrial subjects”: “(i) gardening and the upkeep of trees (ii) agriculture, tilling of soil and irrigation (iii) the building of roads and footpaths (iv) native industries such as pottery, mat and basket weaving (v) the use and handling of common tools.” (van Rooyen 410)
6. All translations in this article from the original Afrikaans or German are mine.
7. Judging by Fula’s available writing such as his 1936 letter to *Bantu World* it is obvious that his written English was probably more fluent than his written Afrikaans as evidenced in extant manuscript material. We do not have any documentary evidence of his written competency in his mother tongue Xhosa (or another Nguni language such as Zulu) or the Sotho cluster of languages such as Sesotho, Setswana and Sepedi) but we can assume that it would have been more accomplished than his English writing.
8. Lasker (vii) suggests that Fula’s writing career took shape when he won “a consolation prize in a newspaper essay competition.” In his cited letter Fula does not refer to the award but there is a clear indication that he submitted a short story to an unidentified “Afrikaans magazine.”
9. In comparing Fula’s hand-written manuscript and published version of *Met erbarming, O Here* it is obvious that the white Afrikaans editor, Prof P. J. Nienaber, played a considerable role in organizing, editing and finalizing the text. One can safely assume that the same happened to his first novel. There is no doubt, however, that the initial Afrikaans language manuscript, the tenor, the development and intricacies of these tales are uniquely Fula’s.
10. Fula’s shabby appearance was due to his practice of washing his suit by hand rather than having it dry-cleaned—much to his family’s mirth. This, according to them, was indicative of stinginess (Fula celebration).
11. Based on my nomination, the President of South Africa awarded Fula the Order of Ikhamanga in Bronze posthumously for “excellent achievement” in literature on 27 April 2017 (*National Orders Booklet 2017* 8).

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