

Iziganeko zesizwe: Occasional Poems (1900–1943).

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Iziganeko zesiswe: Occasional Poems is a chronological collection of S. E. K. Mqhayi's occasional poems documenting significant events of local and international importance from 1900 to 1943. Included in this collection are Mqhayi's poems on Easter, Christmas and reflections on the past and coming year spanning four decades. Although Mqhayi is a well-known and celebrated Xhosa writer, poet, biographer and historian, this volume brings to the fore Mqhayi's poems in newspapers which would have largely been lost to the public arena and academia if it were not for this collection.

Furthermore, Jeff Opland and Peter Mtuze took on the mammoth task of translating each poem into English. Now, Mqhayi's work can be read by non-Xhosa speakers who can also engage with his views and do comparative work with other authors writing in the same period as Mqhayi. In the introduction Opland admits that there were challenges in the translation process and that they took a democratic approach to translation. My only criticism of the book is the inconsistencies in the translation of some words and phrases. In the poem "Ikresimesi ka 1906" ("Christmas 1906"), the Xhosa phrase "*Nik' abafaz' ukubinq' omfutsha-*

nana" is translated as "give women various tasks" whereas in the poem "Ukufa ko 1906 nokungena ko 1907" ("The end of 1906 and the start of 1907"), the same phrase is translated as "give women a state of readiness". A similar phrase appears in the poem "U1908 no1909" ("1908 and 1909") "*Nabhinqa emifutshana*" which is translated as "You girded yourselves here and then".

This inconsistency is quite disturbing with the translation in the last instance being literal whereas in the first two instances the translation was the inferred meaning of the phrase, even though the same phrase is rendered with two different meanings in English. There is no footnote to explain this. The collection can be used as a great object of examination in translation studies by looking at the challenges in translating works of literature, especially poetry. Despite these instances, I believe the overall translation of the work into English is commendable and renders most poems beautifully and poetically and comes very close to doing justice to Mqhayi's poetic prowess.

The strength of this volume is that it exposes the reader to Mqhayi's ideas and views on socio-political events ranging from the Frontier Wars, the sinking of the Mendi, the visit of the Prince of Wales to South Africa, the First and Second World War to the concept of time through the eyes of a Xhosa poet. His poems also provide an alternative if not counter account of how some black South Africans who embraced Christianity perceived it in relation to colonial domination yet found ways to sift Christianity from European

culture which was positioned to replace Xhosa culture. This Mqhayi did with such ease from a young age when his teachers refused him leave to go through the Xhosa rite of passage into manhood, *ulwaluko*, because they saw the practice as barbaric and ungodly. Mqhayi defied his teachers and went through this process and returned to school to receive a stern warning; but as Opland explains in the introduction, Mqhayi could not conceive of becoming a servant to his people and nation and to the gospel without first becoming a man in the fashion of his culture.

In a number of poems in this volume Mqhayi tackles the issue of presenting European culture as Christian and Xhosa culture as barbaric; he goes to the extent of saying that Xhosa people are yet to receive teachings about Christ alone without European culture embedded in the gospel and imposed on them. In this regard, he cites the great Xhosa prophet Ntsikana's sayings and hymns which point to the need for Africans to seek out God for themselves instead of relying on European missionaries.

The end of year and beginning of the New Year poems are the gems in this collection. After several of these poems Mqhayi begins to question the concept of a year and time from a Xhosa perspective. He becomes self-reflexive about his own easy adoption of the European concept of a year. In the last poem he writes about the end of the year and the coming of the New Year where he reiterates what many rural Xhosa people often asked when Xhosa people who had been through formal education became excited about the end

of the year or celebrated the New Year. The rural people ask Mqhayi where the old year is going. What is it going to do there? Where does the New Year come from and what has it come to do? In order to make this concept relatable to rural Xhosa people at the time he begins by personifying the outgoing year to an old man dying who summons his son, the New Year, to give him advice on the role he is about to take on. The outgoing year summons his son, the New Year, and gives him advice on what makes a good year, what humans expect from a year and how he can never fully please them even though he might give them rain and bountiful harvest. The outgoing year concludes that humans always blame the year rather than their own actions and those of their fellow humans in how they treat each other and steward the earth and that although his son, the New Year, can do all he advises him to, humans are complex beings who can never be satisfied.

Although Mqhayi wrote to newspapers under the pseudonym *Imbongi yakwaGompo* (The East London poet), he was given another pseudonym by the editor of the newspaper *Abanto-Batho*, Cleopas Kunene. Mr Kunene began publishing Mqhayi's work under the pseudonym *Imbongi yakwaGompo neyēsizwe jikelele* (The poet of East London and the whole nation); his reason for giving Mqhayi this new title is that Mqhayi's work transcends local concerns, he wrote about issues of national significance, a title which Mqhayi graciously accepted. This collection is another example why Mqhayi should not only be celebrated

as a great Xhosa writer but as one of the greatest South African writers.

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