

H.I.E Dhlomo's brilliance as a writer, dramatist, poet and politician knew no bounds: A Reappraisal

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“For Dhlomo intellectual practice, be it by means of words, paint or through musical notes, was a commitment to ethics that would facilitate the possible transformation of the world into a better place to live in.”¹

When Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo, commonly known as H.I.E. Dhlomo, died during a heart operation on 23 October 1956, the South African literary firmament lost one of its brightest stars. He was only fifty-three and seemed to have the whole world at his feet.

A true man of letters, Dhlomo was one of the foremost dramatists of his era. Dhlomo also wrote poetry, short stories and essays. He was an educator, librarian, journalist, politician, actor, and violinist. His way with words was legendary.

On Dhlomo's death Martin L. Khumalo, a columnist for *Ilanga lase Natal (The Natal Sun)*, said Dhlomo had been a writer whose “magic pen could transform ordinary phenomena like the rain into some mysterious occurrence that would hold you gaping for a long while, wondering why you did not appreciate this treatise any earlier”.²

Body of work

Dhlomo crafted stage productions that communicated important messages about South African historical icons and issues. He wrote plays about Nongqawuse (*The Girl Who Killed to Save*), Prophet Ntsikana, King Shaka, King Dingane, King Cetshwayo, King Moshoeshe. His plays on issues included *The Pass: Arrested and Discharged*, *The Workers*, and *Malaria*. All the aforementioned plays were published in 1985 in a book titled *Collected Works: Dhlomo, H.I.E* edited by Nick Visser and Tim Couzens.³

Popular among his poems is the epic poem *The Valley of a Thousand Hills*, a precursor to Mazisi Kunene's epic poems *Emperor Shaka the Great* and *Anthem of the Decades*. Through poetry he paid homage to and significantly acknowledged his intellectual sparring partner, the immensely gifted Zulu poet and author Dr B.W. Vilakazi, whose works include *Inkondlo ka Zulu (Zulu Poetry, 1935)*, *Amal' E'zulu (Zulu Horizons, 1945)*, a Zulu-English dictionary (with Professor C.M. Doke), as well as three novels. Dhlomo often described Vilakazi as the “cultural Bhambatha of his people who waged great battles for their cultural glory”.⁴ The real Bhambatha kaManciza was a warrior chief of the Zondi, of the Mvoti division of the Colony of Natal who led the Zulu

¹Interview of Ntongela Masilela on H. I. E. Dhlomo by Phakama Mbonambi, March 10, 2009.

²Martin L. Khumalo, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 17 November 1956.

³ Visser, Nick and Couzens, Tim (ed.), *Collected Works: Dhlomo, H.I.E.*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985.

⁴<http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafre/writers/vilakazi/vilakaziQ.htm>

rebellion of 1906 against the imposition of the poll tax. Dhlomo was thus paying his intellectual rival the ultimate accolade.

Among the many people he wrote poems about was Revered Dr John Langalibalele Dube (Mafukuzela), the founder of Ohlange Institute, and *Ilanga Lase Natal*, first President of the African National Congress (ANC). About Dube he writes:

Dr J.L. Dube

*Great son of streams and valleys African!
Mafukuzela! Thou of warrior frame;
Whose rare achievements proved the Black Man can!
You thought and taught and wrought us into fame.
No scars of war alone adorn your brow;
For Beauty, Song and Fire of vale and hill,
Of our rich idiom – how the gods endow! -
The pages of your story wondrous fill.
Blest leader, thou, to fight and midst the glist
Of battles fierce – great scholar, author, sage -
Find time the Muses fair to serve. Our mist
Of ignorance you raised, Light of our age!
In pangs of birth we stood when he began;
'Twas dark! God spoke!
And there arose this man!*⁵

Dhlomo's short stories included: "An Experiment in Colour", "Euthanasia by Prayer", "Farmer and Servant", "He Forgave Her". Most of his articles and essays were published in *Ilanga Lase Natal (The Natal Sun)* (1923 - 1953), *Umteteli wa Bantu (The Mouthpiece of the People)* (1924 - 1932), *The Bantu World* (1934 - 1937) and *Inkundla ya Bantu (Bantu Forum)* (1944 - 1945). His articles and essays were mostly about political and cultural matters, and they inspired and restored the dignity of black South Africans. He wrote his articles using his name, but also used pseudonyms such as "Busy Bee", "X", and "Peregrino of the Crossroads."

According to Nick Visser and Tim Couzens, editors of *H.I.E Dhlomo Collected Works*, Dhlomo wrote "some twenty-four plays, ten short stories, over a hundred and forty poems, several essays in literary theory and criticism, an unpublished anthropological work entitled *Zulu Life and Thought*, and journalistic articles numbering in the thousands."⁶ When his older brother R.R.R. Dhlomo (author of the first novel in English by a Zulu writer: *An African Tragedy* (1928))⁷ became the editor of *Ilanga* in 1943, H.I.E became the assistant editor. R.R.R. Dhlomo was a brilliant author in his own right whose work deserves greater recognition.

⁵Visser, Nick and Couzens, Tim (ed.), *Collected Works: Dhlomo, H.I.E*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985, 363.

⁶Visser, Nick and Couzens, Tim (ed.), *Collected Works: Dhlomo, H.I.E*, xii.

⁷ R.R.R. Dhlomo was the editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* from 1943 to 1962. He wrote Historical novels in Zulu: uShaka, uDingane, uMpande, uCetshwayo and uDinuzulu. His other books are *Izikhali Zanamuhla*, *Ukwazi Kuyathuthukisa*, *Nomalanga kaNdengezi* and *Izwi Nesithunzi*.

An intellectual odyssey

Until the late 1920s there were no public libraries that black South Africans could visit. However, the private library of Dr Killie Campbell in Durban was open to all races. Campbell had a passionate love for South African history and its people and zealously collected works and manuscripts of extreme rarity and historical value about the Natal region in particular and Southern Africa in general. For someone with a keen mind like Dhlomo, the library was a godsend. In a 1944 article entitled *The Campbells And African Culture* Dhlomo wrote the following: “Miss Campbell has one of the finest---perhaps the finest--private libraries of Africana. Unlike some collectors, Miss Campbell's effort is a work of love. She takes a living practical interest in her work and is never so happy as when she helps visitors and scholars in her library. The library is a paradise for all lovers of culture and literature. It contains many rare items. Books, periodicals, cuttings, letters, pictures which it would be difficult if not impossible to get today, make the mouths of scholars and writers water when they visit the library.”⁸ Today, the library, which is in Berea, Durban, is called the Killie Campbell Africana Library and is part of Campbell Collections at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

According to Historian Tim Couzens in his excellent Biography of Dhlomo entitled *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo*, from 1932 Dhlomo was closely associated with the Johannesburg Bantu Men’s Social Centre, and he was “appointed Librarian – Organiser under the Transvaal Committee of the Carnegie Library Service for Non-Europeans.”⁹ The Bantu Men’s Social Centre Library was a receiving depot of the Carnegie Non-European Library. As a librarian – organiser Dhlomo was in charge of the centre’s library. In 1941, leaving behind his family in Johannesburg, Dhlomo moved to Durban to become the librarian of the Ndongeni Bantu Library at the Durban Bantu Social Centre.¹⁰

Like its counterpart in Johannesburg, the Durban Bantu Social Centre was meant to be a social, educational and recreational venue for blacks, a place where according to its official founding aims, “...worthy character may be encouraged and developed. Bantu men may spend leisure time instead of roaming the streets.”¹¹ On the surface these centres were benign creations with noble goals, but a closer look reveals that they were a means of social control in a society that limited black freedom. The Durban Municipality established a structure to control black people in Durban. This structure was built on the revenue generated from the Municipal beer monopoly. The Municipal beer monopoly criminalized all small producers of liquor and turned them into ‘unlawful’ liquor traders. The beer monopoly generated for the Municipality significant revenue, which, in turn, was used to finance the development of the local state apparatus of control. Profits from

⁸ Dhlomo, H.I.E, Ilanga Lase Natal 5 February 1944

⁹ Couzens, Tim, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo*: Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985, 109.

¹⁰ Couzens, Tim, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo*, 110

¹¹ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (22 March 1933 Meeting)

Beerhalls made possible the founding in 1916 of a Municipal Native Affairs Department.¹²

With the exception of the Lutheran Church (Emaplangweni) in Milne Street, the American Board Congregational Church (Ezihlabathini) in Beatrice Street, Hostels, Beerhalls, the Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) Club, the International Club and the Catholic Thrift Club in Durban, before 1933 there was no place for social activities for black people in the city of Durban. This raised a concern among city fathers with regard to how black urban labour was going to be kept occupied and under control even when not at work. The perception at the time was that black people, men in particular, had too much time on their hands, making them to idly roam the streets. According to Paul Maylam, there was serious anxiety about the developing proletarian consciousness and organization that seemed to be embodied in the ICU.¹³ The city fathers felt that black urban labour needed to be monitored and controlled in order to avoid political and social unrest. The concern was serious to the extent that it gave birth to the idea of the establishment of the Durban Bantu Social Centre. The City Council also appointed a Welfare Officer whose responsibility included investigating complaints, grievances, and organizing social entertainments, sports and recreation. Sports and recreation became the main part of the strategy for diffusing unrest.¹⁴

But the plan of using these centres for social control backfired as leading intellectuals of that era turned them into a hub of political activity and resistance against oppression. The centres became powerful platforms that launched political and intellectual activism. At the Durban Bantu Social Centre, Dhlomo was known for organising lectures delivered by other prominent intellectuals of the era. Don Mthimkhulu headmaster of Adams College delivered a Lecture on Bernard Shaw, Jordan Ngubane editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* and assistant editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* delivered a Lecture on African Youth and Intellectual Awakening, and W. Mseleku delivered a lecture on Delinquency. For H.I.E Dhlomo Ndongeni was the symbol of allegiance and courage that was betrayed, and a symbol of unity that the Ndongeni Bantu Social Centre Library hoped to cultivate.¹⁵ H.I.E Dhlomo himself was one of the Intellectuals that delivered Lectures at the Bantu Social Centre. According to the Constitution of the Bantu Social Centre females were not permitted to be on the premises of the Centre except on guest nights but a “lady” guest could come to the waiting room and lounge at the entrance where refreshments would be provided.¹⁶ However during a Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee meeting of the 31st of August 1933 Reverend Mtimkulu (Bantu Vice Chairman of the Bantu Social Centre Executive Committee) mentioned that all “Native” Dance Halls within the area of

¹² Maylam, Paul and Edwards, Iain (ed.), *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*: Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996, p6

¹³ Maylam, Paul and Edwards, Iain (ed.), *The People’s City: African Life in Twentieth-Century Durban*: Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996, p8

¹⁴ Marks, Shula, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism, and the State in Twentieth –Century Natal*. Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986, p82 – 83

¹⁵ Couzens, Tim, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo*, 246-247

¹⁶ Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (12 October 1933 Meeting)

Durban had been closed and as a result of that a number of “Native” Women should be expected at the Bantu Social Centre on certain occasions.¹⁷

In his outstanding monograph, *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E Dhlomo*, the writer and academic Ntongela Masilela, talks about the Zulu Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s and highlights Dhlomo’s leading role in this reawakening.

In an interview with *Wordsetc*, Masilela refers to Dhlomo as “a writer for all seasons.”¹⁸ “His prose or poetic form or dramatic structure is a synthesis of philosophical wisdom and sociological analysis. Given this, there is always a lucidity of imagination in his writings. While his writing is quintessentially poetic in nature, in many ways it is always in service of historical knowledge.”¹⁹

In addition to Dhlomo, Masilela, in *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E Dhlomo*, pays homage to his intellectually gifted contemporaries such as the literary colossus B.W. Vilakazi; journalist Jordan K. Ngubane, a columnist for *Ilanga Lase Natal (Natal Sun)* and *Bantu World* and editor of *Inkundla Ya Bantu (Bantu Forum)*; politician Henry Selby Msimang²⁰; Ngazana Luthuli²¹, one of the first black educators at Adams College and later editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal*; Chief Albert Luthuli, the president of the African National Congress (ANC) and the first African to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; Zulu music composer Rueben T. Caluza; and Anton Lembede, the President of the ANC Youth League.

The New African philosophy

In terms of his life philosophy, Dhlomo belonged to a group of people that classified themselves as the New Africans. They embraced modernity. They believed that the contact between Africa and other parts of the world was not going to end but rather would advance. They felt very strongly that this contact had to be celebrated and its benefits amassed. According to historian, Paul La Hausse “New African was itself an innovative reading of an old idea first outlined in 1912 as the New Bantu and further developed in the popular struggles of the late 1920s as the New African.”²² For instance,

¹⁷Beatrice Street Bantu Social Centre Minutes Book 1933 – 1940 (31 August 1933 Meeting)

¹⁸Interview of Ntongela Masilela on H. I. E. Dhlomo by Phakama Mbonambi, March 10, 2009.

¹⁹ Interview of Ntongela Masilela on H. I. E. Dhlomo by Phakama Mbonambi, March 10, 2009.

²⁰Selby Msimang was a clerk and typist to Pixley Ka Isaka Seme. He assisted Pixley Seme at the time when he founded the ANC. Msimang accompanied the first President of the ANC John Langalibalele Dube across South Africa during a fundraising tour. Selby Msimang was present at Kimberly in 1913 at the ANC meeting that resolved that there ought to be a deputation to England. Selby Msimang was also a founder of a Newspaper called *Messenger Moramia* and provided editorial services for it. He was the founder member of the Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) (when it was still abbreviated I.C.W.U and he was its first President). For six years he was the Natal Provincial Secretary of the ANC and for many years he was Secretary for the All African Convention. He contributed in various Newspapers such *Ilanga Lase Natal*, *Bantu World*, *Inkundla ya Bantu (Bantu Forum)* etc.

²¹ He was one of the first black African educators at Adams College from 1900 to 1915. He was an able assistant to Rev. Dr. John Langalibalele Dube. Ngazana Luthuli was the editor of *Ilanga Lase Natal* from 1915 to 1943. Ngazana was the Coordinator of Ohlange High School during Dube’s absence.

²²La Hausse, Paul. *Restless Identities: Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-C.1936)*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2000, 269.

while Dhlomo was proud of his Zulu culture and heritage, he was not a Zulu nationalist but regarded himself as a New African.

According to Dhlomo, “the new African knows where he belongs and what belongs to him; where he is going and how; what he wants and the methods to obtain it... What is this New African’s attitude? Put briefly and bluntly, he wants a social order where every South African will be free to express himself and his personality fully, live and breathe freely, and have a part in shaping the destiny of his country; a social order in which race, colour and creed will be a badge neither of privilege nor of discrimination.... He is opposed to such well-entrenched traditional institutions as the Ministry of Native Affairs and the Native Affairs Department with their spawn of petty ignorant chiefs, Native Representative Council, the Bhunga System, separate systems of education, of revenue and taxation, etc., etc. He knows the evils and contradictions and waste brought about by this system. He knows that Councils chosen undemocratically by Government puppets cannot represent African thought, attitudes, progress; he knows how they prevent progressive Africans from leading their own people. He is determined to expose and battle against these contradictions and dangers.”²³

A political mind

Dhlomo was an active member of the ANC and part of its think-tank. In 1939, Dhlomo, along with journalist Jordan K. Ngubane, Manasseh Tebatso (M.T.) Moerane (former President of South Africa Thabo Mbeki’s maternal uncle and editor of *The World*), Ashby Peter (A.P.) Mda and others established the National Union of African Youth (NUAY). The union’s stated goal was galvanising the youth to participate in politics, a means to achieving freedom someday. The NUAY is a forerunner to the ANC Youth League.

Dhlomo was also one of the brains behind the election of Chief Luthuli to the position of the ANC President in Natal in 1951 and nationally in 1952. In this effort he worked closely with Jordan K. Ngubane, Masabalala (M.B.) Yengwa (Chief Luthuli’s right-hand man) and others.

An appreciation

While he may have lived so many decades ago, Masilela strongly believes that Dhlomo is still relevant today and merits being celebrated here in South Africa and beyond. “He took intellectual culture very seriously. For him intellectual practice, be it by means of words, paint or through musical notes, was a commitment to ethics that would facilitate the possible transformation of the world into a better place to live in. His unyielding conviction in intellectual excellence stems from his beliefs that ideas do indeed matter. He believed that ideas are more important than politics or, for that matter, more than military strength. He wanted to build a strong civil society that would withstand political aberrations that now and then manifest themselves proving that human beings by nature are imperfect. This is the reason his columns, be they in *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People) or in *Inkundla ya Bantu* (Bantu Forum) or in *The Bantu World*

²³Dhlomo, H.I.E, “Racial Attitudes: An African View-Point” *The Democrat*, November 17, 1945; “African Attitudes to the European,” *The Democrat*, December 1, 1945.

or in *Ilanga lase Natal* (The Natal Sun), were constantly larded with ideas and ethical principles. ”²⁴

Masilela discerns a common thread in Dhlomo’s newspaper columns: ideas and ethical principles. “I think his belief that a truly democratic civil society is achievable through ideas and ethics is what makes H.I.E. Dhlomo relevant today, in fact our contemporary, be it in South Africa or beyond our borders.”²⁵

Origins

Dhlomo was born on 26 February 1903 in a place called Siyamu, near Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. From 1922 - 1924, he studied teaching at the Amanzimtoti Training Institute (renamed Adams College) in southern KwaZulu-Natal. He was a product of the American Board Mission school and throughout his life excelled at English, both spoken and written.

In March 1931 Dhlomo married Ethel Kunene, who, according to Couzens, described him as “a quiet man, very much reserved... He continued to be a bookworm.”²⁶ The marriage failed when Dhlomo moved to Durban in pursuit of his intellectual odyssey. After his death, he was buried at Chesterville cemetery in Durban.

In one of his many writings, Dhlomo commented that “one thing, so far we have been guilty of, (is) neglecting our cultural men. They write and write, but very little is written about them....”²⁷

²⁴ Interview of Ntongela Masilela on H. I. E. Dhlomo by Phakama Mbonambi, March 10, 2009.

²⁵ Interview of Ntongela Masilela on H. I. E. Dhlomo by Phakama Mbonambi, March 10, 2009.

²⁶ Couzens, Tim, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Work of H.I.E Dhlomo*, , 65.

²⁷ Masilela, Ntongela. *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E.Dhlomo* (Trenton: Africa World, 2007). See also H.I.E

Dhlomo, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, October 25, 1947.