

EDITORIAL

HISTORY AND HERITAGE: A SPECIAL ISSUE ON FORMER AMERICAN BOARD MISSION STATIONS IN SOUTHERN KWAZULU-NATAL¹

Vukile Khumalo
University of KwaZulu-Natal

When we were young, sweet Mango tree,
We invaded you with virgin glee²

Perhaps, only a few former students who went through mission schools would disagree with the above epigraph by H.I.E. Dhlomo about Adams College—sweet Mango tree. More likely to share Dhlomo’s statement would be the two generations that attended Adams College before it was taken over by the apartheid government in 1956. And, the most visible of the two generations are Dhlomo himself, Es’kia Mphahlele and Mazisi Kunene. The three essayists are among a few twentieth century South African scholars who thought through the meaning of the profound impact of Christianity on African culture from nineteenth to twentieth century. Through their commitment to scholarship, these three giants of African letters claimed the twentieth century as their own. In this introduction we join a conversation—broadly conceived—between Kunene and Mphahlele on the deep meaning of the Christian missionary impact on consciousness, culture and spirituality. This exchange of ideas was made possible by Ntongela Masilela’s publication of his manuscript entitled, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* in 2007.

The two writers share more than their feelings (or belonging to) about South Africa and passion for creative work. First, both Kunene and Mphahlele attended Adams College before the apartheid government took over the institution in 1956. As Ngonyama shows in this volume, Adams College occupied a special place amongst its staff and students. Second, the Kunene and Mphahlele chapters in Masilela’s manuscript demonstrate both “insider and outsider” views of how Adams College nurtured its students. Most importantly, the two scholars represent some of the finest intellectual traditions South Africa produced in the twentieth century. Kunene and Mphahlele belong to a group of scholars whose writings went beyond the immediate conditions under which they wrote and addressed the very question of human existence. For us to appreciate their thoughts, we need to join the conversation.

Reflecting on Ntongela Masilela’s manuscript entitled, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, Es’kia Mphahlele suggests that to understand Dhlomo’s intellectual projects one needs to appreciate the conditions that nurtured them. One such environment was at the mission schools. It was within the mission schools’ premises that such intellectuals sharpened their pens and developed a particular outlook on life. The intellectual passion that moved these notable writers was to some

¹ We acknowledge funding from the National Heritage Council to do research on six former American Board Mission Stations in southern KwaZulu-Natal. However, the arguments and conclusions reached in the following papers do not reflect the opinions and policy positions of the National Heritage Council.

² Nick, Visser & Tim Couzens, Herbert I. E. Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), 343.

degree inspired by missionaries' understanding of education, which to a great extent had inspired missionaries' commitments to Southern Africa in the first instance. Mphahlele argues that the guiding principle of education for most mission schools included among other things the following aims;

- to inspire us to higher levels of Christian morality;
- to teach "scripture" lessons (later to be called, more precisely, "Biblical Studies") as an instrument of indoctrination to impress upon our minds that God Himself wrote the Bible;
- that we should learn to regard church attendance, whatever the denomination, as an inviolable spiritual discipline;
- that intellectual excellence, wherever it existed, should bring us near to the Christian God rather than draw us away as a result of our "vanity";
- to teach that to be a Christian was to be civilized; that "education" alone could not contribute to this civilization.³

The mission schools identified the mind as the most critical part of the body that needed development. Of course, none of this was neutral, Kunene cautions; the mind is both very fragile and powerful. Therefore, to control those who were conquered it was necessary to focus on the mind.⁴

This process of "indoctrination" as Mphahlele sees it, extended to the metaphysical level. It was at this level of imagination, for Kunene, the "forward soldiers of the mind... demonize[d] the beliefs of the conquered, and reduce[d] the mind to an instrument possible of churning out only evil thoughts and ideas."⁵ So, as time progressed, this process of "indoctrination" enabled those who had power to assimilate and control Africans. At the core of this process of "indoctrination", argues Kunene, was the replacement of the already existing ways of seeing and interpreting the world by the introduction of colonizing national religions, their life style, their language, their songs, and their manufactured ways of living.⁶

But, the irony of all of the confidence on the part of the mission project was, as Mphahlele suggests,

"...the mission school became a stimulant for intellectual growth, there was space for one to question some of these myths and assumptions, as long as one avoided confrontation with the missionary authorities."⁷

³ Es'kia Mphahlele, Afterword to Ntongela Masilela's *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc.), 211.

⁴ Mazisi Kunene, Historical and Metaphysical Mediation on H.I.E. Dhlomo: After Ntongela Masilela's Monograph in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, 227.

⁵ Mazisi Kunene, Historical and Metaphysical Mediation on H.I.E. Dhlomo: After Ntongela Masilela's Monograph in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, 227.

⁶ Mazisi Kunene, Historical and Metaphysical Mediation on H.I.E. Dhlomo: After Ntongela Masilela's Monograph in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, 214.

⁷ Es'kia Mphahlele, Afterword to Ntongela Masilela's *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, 212.

Dhlomo made a similar observation to that of Mphahlele a much earlier when he wrote the following lines,

In youth and health, symbolic tree,
Your fruit we grabbed with greedy glee!

Papers in this volume proceed from a premise that the fields of cultural studies are rich and vast. In its vastness, it allows for a broad range of ideas and reflections to flourish. Therefore, it is in this context that the following group of young scholars seeks to contribute in an on-going debate that the above scholars rekindled. Through archival and field research on the history and legacy of missionaries' activities in southern KwaZulu-Natal, the contributors to this volume enrich the debate on the work of missionaries at the time when the alumni of mission schools seek to reflect on the meaning of the missionary legacy in post apartheid South Africa. The Historic Mission Schools project led by retired Bishop Njongonkulu Ndungane is one such initiative. In many ways this project has been prompted by a shared view that the mission schools are neglected. Such a view is akin to how Dhlomo felt when he returned to Adams College after years of travelling,

Here, voices mocked: 'What have you done!
What laurels won, thou plaintive one
Since, years ago, you left this place?'
Then felt I like one in disgrace!
For no achievements brought I home
From travels wide beneath this dome;
Empty of gift back home I came!
And, looking back, I blushed in shame!⁸

In the chapters that follow, contributors are also aware of the fact that, as Mphahlele reflects, "yesterday, a police-free and home-made campus life made it possible for us to institutionalize our ideas within the constraints of missionary sanctions, albeit not to the extent we would have wanted."⁹ I sum, the mission endeavours opened a space where young minds experimented with new ideas and sought to model their world using some of the language and signs produced in what the Comaroffs have termed a "the long conversation".¹⁰¹¹

Missionary activities in KwaZulu-Natal: A Historical Context

In his book on preachers and peasants in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand, Norman Etherington writes, "...the Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions estimated in 1880 that

⁸ Herbert I.E. Dhlomo, *Collected Works*, 343.

⁹ Mazisi Kunene, Historical and Metaphysical Mediation on H.I.E. Dhlomo: After Ntongela Masilela's Monograph in Ntongela Masilela, *The Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, 214.

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¹¹ For a recent take on the Comaroffs' seminal work on missionaries in Southern Africa, see Zolani Ngwane, "The Long Conversation": The Enduring Salience of Nineteenth-century Missionary/Colonial Encounters in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 3, No. 1 (1 March 2001), pp65-75 (11).

the number of missionaries in Natal was proportionately greater than in any other community on the globe two or three times over.”¹² This statement immediately raises questions; namely, why did mission societies choose this region of Africa and, what impact did the large number of missionaries have on African societies? Scholars have suggested that most Christian mission societies were attracted to this region of Africa because of the existence of a centralized African state which was, at the time, the Zulu kingdom. This was especially true with regards to the American Board Mission for Foreign Mission (ABMFM) and the London Mission Society (LMS). Through the works of Rev. John Philip based at the Cape Colony, these mission societies heard and learnt about the political structures of African societies.¹³

Once mission societies became aware of the political structures of these polities; they devised strategies of how to penetrate these societies. In the case of the Zulu kingdom, American missionaries, who were in constant contact with the LMS, planned to introduce their missionary activities to the king. The purpose of such an introduction to the head of the kingdom was, they hoped, that once converted, the Zulu king would in turn encourage his people to spread the Christian gospel throughout the continent of Africa. As the literature on nineteenth century South Africa demonstrates, this sense of optimism never materialized; not only in the Zulu kingdom but in other parts of southern Africa as well. With the exception of the Basotho kingdom, where Moshoeshoe worked with Catholic missionaries,¹⁴ the relationship between African kingdoms and mission societies in southern Africa was not cordial. For instance, in the case of the Zulu kingdom, all three independent kings—Dingane, Mpande and Cetshwayo—were never at ease with the presence of missionaries in the heart of the kingdom. In general, these kings saw missionaries as potential political rivalries.¹⁵ King Mpande of the Zulu kingdom is often quoted to have said, “... they cast off their allegiance to their king, and were of no use to me, and after a while the missionary with my people and cattle left the country”.¹⁶ He said these words after Rev. Grout and some of his followers had left the kingdom to settle in the Colony of Natal in 1842.¹⁷

When missionaries realized that leaders of African societies did not want to allow their people to convert to Christianity, they focused their efforts in regions that had fallen under British rule. Hence the two of the most British of colonies, the Cape and Natal, received the lion’s share of missionary activities. Yet, even in these colonies, the relationship between settler governments and mission societies, as I illustrate below, was not without tensions.

As settler governments consolidated their power with the aim of having total control over African societies, they came into conflict with mission station residents and mission societies. In the case of the

¹² Norman Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa*, 4.

¹³ J. Dexter Taylor, *One Hundred Years of the American Board Mission in South Africa 1835 - 1935* (S.L.: S.N., 1935), 8.

¹⁴ Joy Brain, ‘Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream: The Roman Catholic Church,’ in Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, (eds.) *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 198.

¹⁵ For further reading, see Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) vol. 1.

¹⁶ Cited in Norman Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa*, 75.

¹⁷ Aldin Grout, “A Narrative of the Establishment of the American Mission in Natal”, Read before the Annual Meeting of the Society, at Durban, on Friday 13th June 1856, 9 - 10.

Cape Colony, disagreements ensued over the franchise.¹⁸ In Natal, mission station residents demanded fair treatment befitting of all subjects of the Queen, Victoria.¹⁹ Towards the end of nineteenth century, mission societies were well established – with the exception of the Free East Africa Mission²⁰ -- and they owned vast tracts of land. In most parts of South Africa these lands were generally referred to as glebes, mission reserves or mission stations. Through the ownership of land, missionaries attracted a following of people who, for a variety of reasons, had fallen out of favour with their leaders. The gravitation of people towards mission stations in most cases antagonized missionaries against chiefs and kings. Tensions between African kings and missionaries sometimes became very acrimonious and extended into open confrontation. Certainly, this was true of Aldin Grout, an American Board Missionary, and king Mpande KaSenzangakhona, a Zulu king who ruled the Zulu kingdom between 1838 and 1872.

As more Africans converted to Christianity, new communities emerged. These communities used the bible as one of the texts that guided them through their journeys in life. However, not all Africans converted. A vast section of the African population continued to uphold and practice their religions. The influence of missionaries (now including Africans) was made more profound by the fact that they were literate. Literacy helped them to document and challenge colonial governments using letters and petitions. Not surprisingly, the propagators of segregation in nineteenth century Natal such as Theophilus Shepstone—a Diplomatic Agent to Native Tribes—never welcomed this political culture.²¹

Furthermore, as the economic situation in South Africa changed into a capitalist system, mission stations became centers of economic experiments. In the early years of these mission settlements, Amakholwa (Christian believers) residents became involved in farming and trading. Having capital and skills gave these groups of people capacities to found their own newspapers and which resulted in some of these becoming critical in shaping people's opinions at the turn of the twentieth century.

In addition, the twentieth century saw the appearance of a massive literature that sought to reassess the work of mission societies. Much of the literature is ambivalent on the legacy of mission work. While scholars who have produced this literature acknowledge the fact that most missionary societies worked with oppressive settler governments, they also suggest that, perhaps, what is equally important is the fact that mission societies created a space where Amakholwa could settle and use the resources of the mission stations.²²

¹⁸ Les Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society: The Ciskei Xhosa and the making of South Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993).

¹⁹ Vukile Khumalo Political rights, land ownership and contending forms of representation in Colonial Natal, 1860 – 1900, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, vol. 21 (2005).

²⁰ Frederick Hale, (ed.) *Norwegian Missionaries in Natal and Zululand: Selected Correspondence, 1844 – 1900* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1996), 12.

²¹ Keith Breckenridge, Power without Knowledge: Three Nineteenth Century Colonialisms in *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* vol. 24 (2006), David Welsh, *Roots of Segregation in Natal*. For the twentieth century advocates of segregation, see Saul Dubow, 'The Elaboration of Segregationist Ideology', in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, (eds.) *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995), 145.

²² These scholars include Norman Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835-1880*. Peter Delius, *The land belongs to us: The Pedi polity, the Boers and the British in the nineteenth century Transvaal* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1983). Sheila Marianne Meintjes: "Edendale 1850-1906. A case Study of Rural Transformation and Class Formation in an African Mission in Natal". (unpublished PhD thesis - London: University of London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1988). Les Switzer, *Power and Resistance in an African Society*. Vukile Khumalo, "We have always planted but the difficulty has been in getting the case crushed": Sugar Cane Production at Umvoti Mission Station, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, vol. 18 (1998).

However, other scholars disagree. They argue that missionaries undermined and ultimately destroyed African “culture” and, this disrupted social cohesion. Pitika Ntuli strongly suggests that “Christianity was used as a subtle battering ram to gain hegemony over the rest of the world. It portrayed a religious system based on perfection.” He continues, “...a perfect God against pagan gods [...] where complementarily existed, binary thoughts were introduced.”²³ The argument further suggests that the adoption of Christianity by the African elites corroded a long cherished African oral tradition and distorted African indigenous systems of knowledge.²⁴ Another view is that what the above assessment of the work of missionaries could not be the entire truth. Instead, the “long conversation” between European missionaries and Africans produced hybrid cultures. Indeed, what European missionaries and Africans fashioned was a new world characterized by new signs or symbols that were entirely different from what missionaries intended.²⁵

Contested Histories: Ambivalent Heritage

The first four papers invite the reader to travel to the worlds where the “long conversation” took place. Eva Jackson’s paper reminds us that the mission project was not just about matters of the afterlife, it also sought to create a world of commerce where the Amakholwa would play significant roles. As Ira Nembula took his samples of sugar cane to a Paris Exhibition in 1867, he demonstrated that his class was part of the new economic networks that drove the world. Indeed, just at the time when Nembula contemplated his movements, another group of missionaries established a new center farther south of Adams Mission. The missionaries named the center, Umzumbe. Scott Couper shows in his paper on Umzumbe Mission Station that the intricacies involved in choosing an appropriate name for the mission was not without introspection on the part of the missionaries. They did not impose a new name of the mission station on the residents of Umzumbe; instead they wanted the name of the new mission to evolve from the idioms of the local community.²⁶

Unlike mission stations located closer to the Port of Durban, Umzumbe’s distance from the emerging city implied that the mission station had to adapt in a rural environment. Bridget Portmann argues that this adaptation challenged the very basis of male authority. Between 1870 and 1920, Nomambotwe Khawula—a woman from a ruling lineage—was a major participant in

²³ Pitika P. Ntuli, *The Missing Link between Culture and Education: Are We Still Chasing Gods that Are not Our Own*, in Malegapuru William Makgoba (ed.) *African Renaissance* (Sandton: Mafube Publishing LTD, 1999), 191. See also Nozipho Majeke (Dora Taylor), *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (Cumberwood: APDUSA, 1952).

²⁴ Pitika P. Ntuli, *The Missing Link between Culture and Education: Are We Still Chasing Gods that Are not Our Own*, in Malegapuru William Makgoba (ed.) *African Renaissance* (Sandton: Mafube Publishing LTD, 1999), 191.

²⁵ For further reading on recent works on how Africans interpreted aspects of Christianity in South Africa, see Hlonipha Mokoena, *Christian Converts and the Production of Kholwa Histories in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Natal: The Case of Magema Magwaza Fuze and his Writings*, *The Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 23 (2005); Ian MacQueen, *A different form of protest: The life of Bishop Alpheus Zulu, 1905-1960*, *The Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 23 (2005) 151-178 and Scott Everett Couper, ‘Let My People Go’ A historical Examination of Chief Albert Luthuli and his position on the use of Violence as a Means by which to achieve South Africa’s Liberation from Apartheid, *International Congregational Journal*, vol. 5.1 (Fall 2005), 101 – 123.

²⁶ Scott Couper’s paper entitled, “A Short History of Umzumbe” will appear in the forthcoming volume on the Congregation Church of Southern Africa.

the activities of Umzumbe Mission. Perhaps, local oral histories of Nomambotwe Khawula and her life in her communities of Umzumbe and Dweshula awaits further exploration.

While Adams Mission was known in Natal—and possibly Paris—for its economic enterprise (Jackson), its name became much more significant as Adams College drew students from all corners of southern Africa. Among those who spent their early years at Adams College was H.I.E. Dhlomo. Mwelela Cele reflects on Dhlomo's intellectual career.

Yet, it was due to these conditions, which allowed for the emergence of intellectual minds like Dhlomo to flourish, that the apartheid government identified these institutions as a danger to its national project of social engineering—known as apartheid. Percy Ngonyama narrates the rather sad chapter in the history of this historic institution. He argues that because of the role that Adams College played in the education of African children, that is, the space that it provided to young minds of Kunene and Mphahlele in the face of apartheid ideology after 1948, the College had to close or be taken over by the new Nationalist Party government. The story that Ngonyama tells in this volume speaks to similar struggles that other mission schools in South Africa embarked upon after 1948 as the apartheid government made its power felt across the country.

While contributors to this volume underscore the significance of the past in the present, the two last papers seek to explore the future of these mission stations. Ntokozo Zungu, Vukile Khumalo and Gordon Fakude challenge us to think about the viability of these institutions for posterity. This is, of course, not an easy undertaking as the above histories of some of the mission stations and their education institution make clear. The first hurdle is the rather ambivalent and contested legacy of these institutions. Second, the long term investment in the infrastructure of these institutions is not assured. Notwithstanding these significant challenges, Gordon Fakude sees economic and social roles for these institutions beckoning in a not too distant future.