

of accuracy, in paragraph two of Scheps's complaint, he should add "thirteenth-century theologians" to his mention of others and note that they are not cited to "elucidate thirteenth- and fourteenth-century poetry" but rather to elucidate certain features of a mythology which was common at that time even among groups as diverse as the Dominicans and Franciscans. (6) Scheps says, "We must inquire as to the general composition of medieval audiences for whom vernacular or public art was created." I agree.

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### Xhosa Tribal Poetry

To the Editor:

Jeff Opland's comments on Xhosa poetry ("*Imbongi Nezibongo: The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition*," *PMLA*, 90, 1975, 185–208) are particularly interesting to the Africanist, but are additionally an effective reminder to all critics that poetry has its roots in oral tradition and performance. Given the scholarly quality of much of his analysis, I was distressed by his tone and by what he left unsaid. At best, his attitude toward the Xhosa is patronizing, but considering the political realities of South Africa, there are more troubling implications in the manner he treats his material.

Throughout the article, Opland refers to the "Xhosa tribal poet." When anthropologists define "tribe," "tribal," and "tribesman" clearly, these terms may have value. However, anthropologists are not even in agreement about their meaning, and when amateurs use them loosely, they often reinforce Western stereotypes of non-Western societies. As the title of Moravia's recent book reminds us, one of the most common questions non-Africans ask Africans is "What tribe do you belong to?" The average Westerner sees Africans only as tribesmen (primitive) or de-tribalized (Western) individuals. The point is: both before European contact and today an African might well be a member of a nation or a state rather than a "tribe" in any sense of that word.

Anthropologically, we might speak of the 3.5 million Xhosa as a nation comprised of several "tribes," but the complexities of racial stratification in South Africa today make such a distinction useful and important *only* to the white South African government which continues to impose "tribal" identity on the South African people to consolidate apartheid rule. The black man who would think of himself as South African, or simply African, is reminded of his assigned "tribal" identity by the "pass card" the law requires him to carry.

Even if we could accept Opland's use of "tribe," to speak of a "Xhosa tribal" anything would be redun-

dant. Further, nothing in his performer-oriented typology is specific to Xhosa. The Xhosa and the Zulu, both Nguni people sharing a mutually intelligible language, share *izibongo* (praise poetry). More important, Africans do not speak of "tribes," a term derived from European ways of examining societies. Because Westerners have used the term loosely to categorize Africans, and in a calculating manner to control them, it has become pejorative.

Were it simply a question of usage, Opland's article would not warrant a sharp critical response. However, the tenor is what we might have expected from a nineteenth-century ethnographer discussing "his" people. Chadwick, whom he quotes, could still talk in the 1930's from an ethnocentric bias about "higher cultures" and "great cultures." Leach, Lévi-Strauss, and other contemporary anthropologists have shown how such an attitude is untenable; yet throughout this article we hear reminders that Opland has gone down into the Bantustans (reservations—in a sense, the South African equivalent of our cotton fields) and captured with his tape recorder the "spontaneous poetry" of a simple folk. His academic colleagues are always referred to by their last names, but Opland patronizingly refers to a young informant as "little Ziyanda" (p. 191), more tellingly to an older man, Wilson Mkhaliphi, as "an illiterate pagan," and then most amazingly refers to him, not simply by his first name, but as "Old Wilson" (p. 191). If Opland were interviewing a contemporary Western poet such as Pablo Neruda, would he describe him as "a proud man who answered my questions in English patiently, carefully, intelligently, and confidently" (p. 199)? We are given an even less liberal view of the African in the stereotypic description of Nelson Mabunu as "a mild, soft-spoken man who wears glasses and seems to be developing a paunch" (p. 196). We would never accept this *Time* magazine approach to an article on "Donne and Ecclesiastes"; why must we expect anything less in an article on oral literature?

Finally, Opland acknowledges the very important protest element in the poetry which is now being written, but he does little more. His silence is possibly the result of limitations imposed on him as a scholar working in a pigmentocracy controlled by strict censorship laws. By law, white and black cannot meet on equal terms, so it is startling and speaks well for his ability in the field that his informants even gave him protest lyrics. After all, the consequences for "stirring up trouble" are severe. Over three hundred blacks are under a ban forbidding the printing or performance of their work. Perhaps Opland is trying to protect his informants and not his own position, but whatever his reasons, specific commentary on the social factors that have helped to influence contemporary *izibongo* are as conspicuously absent as would be lines blacked out by a South African censor.

Regardless of what the artist or critic feels should be the relationship between art and politics, the pass laws, the Bantustans, and the censor's ink impose a relationship in the South African context. As the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has repeatedly pointed out, it is not a question of commitment, but of commitment to what. It is unfortunate that Opland's commitment to the peoples of South Africa appears limited only to a naïvely romantic view of the "tribal poet" as an endangered species, that it does not extend to a holistic view of the essential problems of a racially stratified society—problems that have helped to shape the poetry no less than they have impinged upon the lives of the people. Mabunu's eloquent *izibongo* puts questions before Opland that we never see answered:

What do you want me to say, fair-skinned one . . .  
 Why do you want this information.  
 Information about the people?  
 When did you begin, men.  
 To concern yourselves  
 About the things of the people?  
 Because the day that the missionaries arrived  
 They carried a Bible in front,  
 But they had a breechloader slung behind. (p. 199)

There is more abuse than praise in this poem, and until Opland takes full cognizance of this fact he will have done little to show the West the significance of *izibongo* in "man's intellectual history."

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*Mr. Opland replies:*

Objections to my article are raised under two headings: "the tone and what was left unsaid." Under "tone" Richard Priebe finds offensive my use of the term "tribe" as well as my "patronizing" style. "Tribe" is a term sanctioned by scholarly usage, employed by the ethnographers I have consulted, and, in my experience, free of any derogatory connotations. It is certainly meaningful to the people themselves: for example, considerable animosity still exists today among certain circles in the Ciskei between the Mfengus and the Rharhabs. Following established practice, I have in my article called such units "tribes" (other Xhosa-speaking tribes are mentioned in n. 6); even if no self-respecting anthropologist would use the word today, scholars in other disciplines might still find it useful and generally meaningful. Or are we all now to talk of the twelve clans or family bands of Israel?

In presenting my informants to my readers I consciously chose to adopt an anecdotal style designed to suggest something of the human relationship that exists between folklorist and performer. If my attitude to my

informants were patronizing, they would hardly tolerate my frequent visits or entertain my questions with patience. No description of any informant could be a stereotype, since each is an individual: my description of Nelson Mabunu, for example, as "a mild, soft-spoken man who wears glasses and seems to be developing a paunch" is accurate, and was intended to convey the contrast with the "agile and athletic" performer he suddenly and dramatically became during that interview (p. 199).

Priebe asserts that "the essential problems of a racially stratified society" have "influenced" and "helped to shape" the poetry I describe. This is an interesting hypothesis, one that I would wish Priebe or any other qualified person to develop in a scholarly article; unfortunately, I am not equipped to do it. My interest is in the comparative study of oral literatures, as I thought I made clear in my article. There is much more that can and must be said about the material I present, but I did not feel that this general article was the place for exploring in detail all these interesting and important bypaths. As I said, "In this article many questions have been left unanswered, and many topics have perhaps been treated too summarily. The intention, however, was merely to show the interaction of the different kinds of poets in the Xhosa community, their influence on and relation to one another" (p. 205).

I confess to being somewhat taken aback by the readiness of American Africanists to criticize adversely anything South African that is not black or banned; their zeal often outpaces their discretion. To cling to the belief that all white South Africans support their government (or that all black South Africans oppose it) is indeed naïvely romantic, however fashionable or necessary it may be for one's existence as a teacher of African Studies in an American university. I wish to extend a public invitation to Priebe to travel to South Africa and join me in my field work. Perhaps then his view of my article would be more balanced, and perhaps then his scholarly criticism of the material I present would be better informed.

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### Holden and Psychoanalysis

To the Editor:

I would like to comment on James Bryan's psychoanalytic reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* (*PMLA*, 89, 1065–74). I pass by Bryan's silence about psychoanalysis as an object of satire in the novel and his dubious assumption that Holden is in a mental hospital, to remark on what seems to me his misreading of Holden's relationship with Phoebe.