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Editorial

Re-animating the works of Thomas Mofolo by engaging with the original Sesotho texts

“[T]ranslation is an intentional interaction [...] first and foremost intended to change an existing state of affairs.” (Nord 19)

A project around translation was established in 2014 at the University of the Western Cape’s Centre for Multilingualism and Diversities Research (CMDR) to engage with literary texts written in indigenous South African languages. The project, entitled “Re-animating and re-imagining African futures: a project for translating African language texts, ethical discourses and critical aesthetics in South Africa”, focuses specifically on texts in their original languages in order to introduce new debates around translation, translating from and between indigenous languages, and interpretation and its effect on current new and relevant knowledge creation.

Through sustained analysis, older texts (whether translated from the original or not) forged in earlier moments of historical engagement with intruding structures and ideological formations such as colonialism and apartheid, could open up new ideas and incubate an informed debate around current topics such as decolonisation, the Africanisation of the curriculum and institutions, and so forth.

Homi Bhabha uses the words of Salman Rushdie to underline the fact that new ways of thinking can begin to take place when the self is decentred. For this, Bhabha (227) foregrounds the interstitial, the in-between, which will “create the conditions through which ‘newness comes into the world’”. The place where he sees this happening most acutely is during translation. The moment one has a word in the source text for which one has no clear equivalent in the target text, then one should recognise newness: this is how newness enters the world.

Why then the choice of Mofolo’s work?

Antjie Krog became aware that in the list of the top hundred books written by Africans, a smaller list of twelve exceptional books was compiled. The only text by a Southern African writer on that list was not one by this area’s Nobel Prize winners, but Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*.

The background to the production of this list is as follows: during the Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare in 1998, writer and intellectual Ali Mazrui suggested a project to determine “Africa’s 100 best books of the twentieth century”. A jury, chaired by Njabulo Ndebele, considered over 500 nominations from the original list of 1521 nominations proposed by individuals and institutions all over the world. The nominations were subjected to rigorous criteria which included, amongst others, an assessment of quality, the ability to provide new information or insight, a continuing contribution to debate, and the extent to which a book broke down boundaries. The final list had to reflect a balance of regional representation, gender, historical spread and genres of writing. The top 100 list was launched in Accra, Ghana, on February 18, 2002 and the Awards Presentation Gala took place in Cape Town on 28 July.

The subsequent list of the best twelve African books of the twentieth century consists of Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958); Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (1979); Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (1988); Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (1945); Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka* (1925); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Oeuvre Poétique* (1961); Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967); Mia Couto, *Terra Sonâmbula* (1992); and Assia Djebar, *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (1985).

In this list Mofolo’s book is not only the oldest, but with the arguable exception of the Mahfouz trio (in Arabic), the only one written in an indigenous language. We later learnt that *Moeti oa Bochabela* (1907), *Pitseng* (1910) and *Chaka* (1925) were indeed the first published novels written in an African language in Southern Africa, and as far as we can establish, at least some of the first in all of Africa.

Within this context, Krog from the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Chris Dunton from the National University of Lesotho (NUL) convened a conference to engage with Mofolo’s original Sesotho texts as well as their translations. Two major desires underpinned the event.

First and foremost we wanted to “rectify” the scholarly habit of making authoritative interpretations based on translated versions *only*, and discarding the original without giving recognition that every translation is already an interpretation. We wanted all papers to deal as much as possible with the original texts.

Secondly, we wanted to bring together several diverse groupings working in various disciplines and/or African literature: scholars from South Africa and those from Lesotho, the country Thomas Mofolo hailed from. But the process also drew scholars from France and the USA into the mix. The translations of Mofolo’s *Chaka* (into English, French, Afrikaans and German) had generated their own scholarly interest in those languages and we were very pleased when two of the foremost scholars working in French on Mofolo (Chaka and Ricard) as well as the translator into the Afrikaans text (Swanepoel) delivered papers.

We were unable to get a German input, but found out that all the relevant letters

of the German translator of *Chaka* were housed at Stellenbosch University (a possible future project). We were also keen to learn more about the effect and influence of Mofolo, not only in Sesotho literature, but also in Africa.

Our applications for funds from the National Research Foundation (NRF) and a special fund of the Minister of Higher Education and Training in South Africa to bring Daniel Kunene (1923–2016)¹ as a keynote speaker from the USA to Lesotho were unsuccessful, but the University of the Western Cape provided funds for some local speakers and the National University of Lesotho offered conference facilities and additional funding. Njabulo Ndebele could not participate in the conference but promised an interview. So, from 2 to 4 March 2015, thirty scholars from Southern and West Africa, the USA and Europe assembled at the National University of Lesotho. We were lucky to have four Basotho scholars taking part who are trilingual, either in Sesotho, English and isiZulu or in Sesotho, English and French. A team of young black South African scholars strengthened our capacity in isiZulu and brought isiXhosa on board. Two scholars from the USA and one from France attended the conference. Afterwards, one of the participants, Franci Vosloo, described the event as follows:

It is March 2015. A small group of scholars are gathered outside the Trading Post, Roma, Lesotho, a world centuries removed from the environment Thomas Mofolo describes in his Sesotho novel, *Chaka*: “*ke naha e talana ...; mobu ke selokwe ...; jwang ke seboku, tlanyane; metsi le makgwabo ...; dinoka di teng ...*” [it is a greenish land ...; the soil is black ...; the grasses are red grass, curl leaf; the water is marshy ...; there are rivers ...] (Mofolo, *Chaka* 5; *Chaka*, trans. Swanepoel 10). Mofolo the writer is the object and subject of translation in its broadest sense. The narrative of a minor translation project unfolds like the far-off Maloti Mountains at dusk. And the settling dust at dawn, after the boys have picked up their plastic-knitted ball and headed home. There is always a narrative. There is always more than one narrative. Multiple narratives. Multiple tongues. And then there is Translation.

To set the tone, Stephen Gill, the curator of the Morija archives, was asked to talk about Mofolo’s life. To everybody’s surprise he said that he initially thought there was nothing more to add to Kunene’s excellently researched work on Mofolo, but suddenly found a great deal of new material, and also managed to track down and interview direct relations of Mofolo. How “new” the material was became very evident when he described Mofolo’s marriage to his first wife Francina Mats’eliso Shoarane. Despite it being documented by Kunene, a family member who attended the opening of the conference expressed his shock and surprise to learn that Mofolo had another wife and that *his* family member was actually the second wife. In the essay included here, Gill traces oral history as well as the very first mentioning of the Mofolo clan in missionary annals up until Mofolo’s first marriage, enriched with the beautiful passages by Alfred Casalis of the couple’s intellectual bond.

Another important concern underpinning the conference was the dearth of translations *between* indigenous languages (isiZulu is translated into English and vice versa, but how often does it get translated into Sesotho?) What hoards of wisdom are in effect locked away from Southern Africans who cannot read or hear a particular language?

The lack of translations between African languages is not just a matter of concern for writers and scholars, since translation is a vehicle through which members of different communities can arrive at a better understanding of, and respect for, each other. Translation has to do with the breaking of padlocks and chains, with listening to each other and learning to respect one another's points of view, with arriving at "newness" and a decentring of the self.

In a 2001 essay, "The ties that bind: a search for common values", Njabulo Ndebele records his anxiety that, in exile in Lesotho and in becoming fluent in Sesotho, his first language, isiZulu, would deteriorate. He notes: "For a long time, as a young student I could not conceptualise an African-language-to-African-language dictionary. An African language existed in relation to a European language, into which it was being translated. It was a relationship of dependence" (Ndebele 158). So a considerable amount of the conference's time was spent on the question of choices made when translating, with three participants coming down heavily on the English translation of Mofolo's first novel, *Moeti oa Bochabela* (claiming that the French translation is better). One participant even offered a new English translation of passages from the Sesotho original.

Let us focus on a specific case where translation is potentially problematic owing to cultural specifics. Chapter Four of *Chaka* is titled "Chaka o eteloa ke morena oa maliba", translated by Kunene as "Chaka is visited by the Lord of the Deep Water" (Dutton translated it as "King of the Deep Pool").² How commensurate is Mofolo's Sesotho version with the name for the creature in Zulu myth (which has a rough Sesotho equivalent), "Inkosi yeziziba"?

How do you translate *morena oa mailiba* (king/lord of the deep) into Hausa, the language of a people who do not see much deep, because they live in the Sahel? To compound the problem, given the theocratic nature of Hausa leadership, is it possible to translate *morena* by the most obvious term, *sarki*, without appearing to be irreligious?

How does your translation of *morena oa maliba* into a West African coastal language such as Twi, Yoruba or Douala, avoid suggesting that you are talking about *Mami Wata*, which is a different kettle of fish altogether? (How do you translate "kettle of fish" into anything?)

In order to reconsider the translation of Mofolo texts in the languages present (English, French, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Shona, German, Hausa, etc.) we formed groups to translate chosen extracts. Franci Vosloo, especially invited for her knowledge

of the various accents within translation studies, gave an introduction in which it was emphasized that translation means multiple texts, multiple choices.

The leader of each group was a Sesotho first-language speaker who then became not only the most valuable, but the most dominating, resource during the workshop itself and the subsequent writing of essays. The groups mixed young and older first-language Sesotho speakers, students and lecturers in African and South African literature, translators, historians and writers among whom one has translated a Mofolo text into Afrikaans, with interests ranging from Simultaneous Interpretation (SI), literal as well as literary translations and translation studies, to transcribing indigenous Pitiki songs and advertising slogans within Lesotho.

Specific paragraphs were also translated from the Sesotho into isiXhosa and isiZulu and then re-translated into English. This created lively debate, allowing new viewpoints to emerge, and quickly engulfed us in the dilemma of "equivalence". As Anthony Pym suggests: "Equivalence is crucial to translation because it is the unique intertextual relation that only translations, among all conceivable text types, are expected to show" (qtd. in Baker 80). At the same time we sensed very clearly, again in the words of Pym, that we should move "away from the strictly linguistic to view translation as a transaction, and equivalence as equality of exchange value. Equivalence becomes a negotiable entity, with translators doing the negotiation" (qtd. in Baker 78).

The recuperation of Mofolo's original texts expanded the groups' knowledge of the unfinished nature of translation, and the extent to which translations of literary works already indicate interpretation and how, in contrast to the works themselves, some of the translations were often still trapped in a kind of missionary encampment. Theo Hermans (13) suggests that researchers have to bear in mind that they, working with the translated text, have no indication of any "preconceived notions of what actually constitutes 'translation' or where exactly the dividing line between translation and non-translation is to be drawn".

The effort to keep the original text vivid through all the discussions had the effect that negotiations were kept open between a kind of ranging bland universalist view of translation and traditionalist conservatism; between "faithful" literal translation and free translation. We became very aware of Gideon Toury's observation that:

[t]ranslated texts and their constitutive elements are observational facts, *directly* accessible to the eye. In contrast, translating processes, i.e. those series of operations whereby actual translations are derived from actual source texts [...] are only *indirectly* available for study, as they are the kind of 'black box' whose internal structure can only be guessed, or tentatively reconstructed. (18, italics in original)

We were also pleased that the translation workshop, which took up a third of the span of the conference, resulted in several references to the original texts in many of the papers gathered for this collection.

The essays collected here form an informative thread. The interview with Njabulo Ndebele provides a direct link from the work of one of South Africa's foremost writers to that of Mofolo, Lesotho, Sesotho and the important influence of *Chaka* within a canon broader than African literature. Apart from the biography of an early Mofolo (to our delight Stephen Gill is now working on a full biography), we have an essay by Piniel Shava and Lesole Kolobe in which they investigate what is termed "Lesotho literature in English". Because it was so immediately translated into English, *Chaka* is regarded by many as the foundation of English literature in Lesotho as well. The wide spectrum of writing in the Mountain Kingdom by subsequent generations is assessed against the dwindling influence of Mofolo and the novel as literary genre. It is interesting to note, however, that in South Africa, Sindiwe Magona published a novel in November 2015, *Chasing the tails of my father's cattle* in which a toddler girl is being visited and her whole body 'blessed' by a snake—a clear and direct influence of Mofolo's *Chaka*. Shava and Kolobe's paper makes an interesting reference to the Africanisation of the English curriculum at the University of Lesotho.

Tying in with the history of *Chaka*, in his essay French scholar Alain Ricard (1945–2016) sweeps energetically across all the French translations, tracing the neglect and racism of the various publication routes through French missionaries, French publishing and French literature. In a moving account, he turns to Mofolo's contemporary, Sol T. Plaatje, imagining how they possibly influenced one another.

To our delight, Inie Kock and Moroosi Nakin captured the translation processes of the conference itself in their essay. They are quite clear in showing that every decision, no matter how small, in some or other way projects a particular interpretation of the text. Their concerns are shared by Mosisili Sebotsa, who focuses on the difficulty of translating culture-specific terms from Sesotho into English and French.

The process of translation itself, Toury's "indirect" process, is tackled by Chris Swanepoel, the only translator of Mofolo who did *two* translations of *Chaka* and is therefore in a unique position to compare, not the final texts, but the thinking that went in before and during the two processes of translation into Afrikaans. He raises questions that cannot be answered, but that impress on the reader the sophistication and mastery skill in Mofolo's style, especially the paragraph-length sentences. During our translation sessions this was also an important problem—the sentences were so long, and had so many links, that a translator had to work very hard to keep the thread of the idea while respecting and rendering the beautiful poetic and idiomatic language of Mofolo.

Chris Dunton and Lerato Masiea compare the French and English versions of *Moeti oa Bochabela*. Using the original Sesotho as guideline, they introduce new translations exposing the marvel of Mofolo's style.

For the first time since Kunene's authoritative analyses of Mofolo's works, we have a native speaker in Limakatso Chaka surveying all three novels, referencing

the original Sesotho texts which deepens, enriches and sensitises her arguments. Focusing on land, humanity and colonial resistance, she not only foregrounds new themes, but traces them through Mofolo's works as he progresses in skill, confidence and stature. The fact that Limakatso Chaka mostly worked and wrote her work in French makes this contribution especially valuable as it brings together three crucial linguistic crossover points for us: Sesotho, French and English.

Krog offers a different reading of *Chaka*. Since Kunene's authoritative work on Mofolo, most scholars accepted that the novel represents a view of a historical figure coloured by Christianity. Krog makes an argument that the novel could be read as a philosophical interrogation of a pre-Christian African ethics.

Certain participants show how Mofolo's *Chaka* influenced other artists. Vassilatos describes several Francophone transcultural manifestations of the novel: what in Mofolo's text was kept, what was changed, how and why? By tracing the use of the text through the work of Senghor and his *négritude* movement, as well as various other later French African writers, she draws a full circle back to the writings of Biko. The essay convincingly shows that Mofolo's text put in place the possibility for a conversation from within Africa, between Africans and about Africa.

After being made aware of how other, mostly black, poets have made use of Mofolo's novel on Chaka, it is extremely interesting to read how a young poet from the Netherlands Antilles, Alfred Schaffer, found resonance with *Chaka*. Schaffer provides an insider-turned-outsider account of the exciting layering process he used, and especially how he dealt with the aesthetic-ethical dilemma: on the one hand "using" and "appropriating" a figure; on the other the absolute imperative of artists to revisit older literary works and figures. This of course resonates strongly with the views of Njabulo Ndebele in the interview as he describes his own struggles in balancing the real life of Winnie Mandela and the life he uses in his novel, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*. Schaffer suggests that the term "metamodernism" encapsulates his efforts: using a historical text, but not allowing its philosophical layer to wither within postmodernism, and, rather, cresting an ethical content through irony and anachronism. In a charming essay, Katt Lissard uses literary echo in exploring potential connections between Mofolo, Gertrude Stein and W. E. B. Du Bois. One of the earliest papers presented at the conference threw the issues into relief in ways that were unexpected and which bear on the "closedness" of the Sesotho corpus and the isiZulu corpus that we discussed above. This paper was entitled "Redefining King Shaka: the Zulu perspective" by Njabulo Mabusu, a young final year student from the QwaQwa campus of the University of the Free State. Regrettably, no final version of this paper was produced for inclusion in the present volume, but we felt that he presented an argument around race, academia, sources and—above all—the dilemma when indigenous languages are not translated into one another, that we wanted to include in some way in this collection. Mabusu is a first-language Zulu

speaker, but cannot read Sesotho, so his paper was based on the English version of *Chaka*.

In his paper, apparently with support from his lecturer, he focused initially on the controversial melding of facts and fiction in Mofolo's novel (a subject also addressed by Limakatso Chaka and Njabulo Ndebele in various contributions to the present volume). What is at stake for Mabuso here is both the need to understand the nature of the fictive and the need to acknowledge adequately the ideological orientation of the text: certainly *Chaka* is designed to portray its central character in a complex, even damning, light; but an attempt to denigrate Mofolo for this, through defending the historical Chaka, is a move no less ideologically freighted. Mabuso further focused on what he perceives as an overreliance by Mofolo on colonialist accounts of Chaka that are highly pejorative, and on Mofolo's overlooking accounts of Chaka by Zulu and missionary historians that are less pejorative. He suggested: "Mofolo wrote during Eurocentrism when African writers had no voice but were expected to produce what whites needed."

In the view of Mabuso, Mofolo allowed himself to be used as a tool of the colonialists and of the Christian mission at Morija, an interpretation that was calmly contested by other conference participants but prompted outrage from Basotho delegates during the tea break.

This event underlined an important point: Mofolo's novel *Chaka*, written in Sesotho, had been translated into Afrikaans (and numerous European languages), but the absence of translations into isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sepedi means that large numbers of people are hampered from entering into informed dialogue on Mofolo's characterisation of Chaka. This is a pity all the more as the legacy of Chaka is a matter of more immediate concern for many of them than it is for Sesotho, English and Afrikaans readers. For the sake of interest we present a short extract from Mabuso's paper here:

This perspective of defining king Shaka in a distorting manner was invented by the whites (capitalists) because they wanted to cover their deeds of human trafficking and slavery so they derived a plan of cracking the black nation apart and losing its collective strength, so that they would benefit from this resourceful soil of Africa. [...] This paper does not dispute the fact that he killed people like every king of that time, but it seeks to advocate on his behalf that he had a vision and elimination of every obstacle was the ultimate punishment (death), not that he was a ruthless killer who killed innocent souls to feed his bloodthirst. [...] When people say Shaka was ruthless and cruel, how come he was a fond friend of Charles Rawden McLean famously known as "John Ross" who was an opponent of slavery in Africa? He kept Fynn [who presented a positive rendering ignored by Mofolo] who knew medicine close to him to heal his people when there is an unknown illness.

[We still celebrate him, because] the people of Zululand have used orality to trans-

fer information, knowledge and cultural practices to other generations and what our forefathers told us about Shaka differs from what is written about him and his praise poem affirms this truth. A narrative like the one of Mofolo brings huge sorrow to the black nation because of its degrading and humiliating of the black nation while helping those who wanted to take our soil to succeed without any obstructions.

Though Mabusó's argument cannot be defended academically, because unsupported by documentation, it is not idiosyncratic, but presents a defensiveness and sense of hurt and misrepresentation that is widely held by South Africa's black communities. This is all the more reason why we wished for a continuation of this argument after a proper translation in isiZulu. We also regret that no paper came forth from the part translated into isiXhosa.

In conclusion, the essays collected here comprise an unusual and valuable kaleidoscope on Mofolo's work—a kaleidoscope in a variety of ways. First, moving from the original Sesotho text to the many translations, from the original to the translation processes, the histories, the interpretations, the influences of these translations in various literatures, this collection attempts to highlight the profound value for several disciplines in returning to older African texts written in other time junctures. Second, as these texts were created by a writer wrestling with a decentring brought about by colonialism (and not yet the total marginalisation of apartheid), it means that Mofolo confronts us with a different sense of self, speaking within a context which enabled him (still?) to produce a confident and enriching voice. This kind of voice opens up new ideas and could incubate an informed debate within recent challenges of knowledge making. Third, all the research presented here is dominated by a text written in an indigenous language by an African who regarded himself as being in conversation not only with his fellow Basotho, but with other Africans. Key to this endeavour is therefore that the scholars of this collection had to take the original Sesotho text seriously in their engagement with Mofolo's work. Fourth, through the focus on the original, several contemporary issues could be addressed ranging from the value of and key concepts around translation to the role of art in igniting groundbreaking thinking beginning with the formation of *négritude* to an ethical evaluation of Chaka and Winnie Mandela, as well as, in the current state of affairs in South Africa, the invaluable role of texts like these in rethinking what it means to "Africanise" academic discourse.

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Note

1. Since our conference on translating Mofolo's work, two key figures, and contributors to the event had died: Daniel P. Kunene on 27 May 2016 and Alain Ricard on 27 August 2016. Besides his own large creative output, Kunene had translated two novels by Mofolo and wrote extensively on his work, and Sesotho prose and poetry. Ricard, a Research Professor at the African Studies Centre at the University of Bordeaux, France, was regarded by many as one of the foremost Africanist literary scholars. The essay in this volume is probably one of the last he had written.
2. The historical figure Chaka, "king of the Zulu", is also known as Shaka kaSenzangakhona or Shaka Zulu. He lived from ca. 1787 and died on 24 September 1828.

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