

Useful bilingual source publications

Part T. Mgadla and Stephen C. Volz (translators and editors), *Words of Batswana. Letters to Mahoko a Becwana, 1833-1896*
Van Riebeeck Society II-37, Cape Town, 2006
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Jeff Opland and Abner Nyamende (translators and editors), *Isaac Williams Wauchope. Selected writings, 1874-1916*
Van Riebeeck Society II-39, Cape Town, 2008
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With their Volumes 37 and 39 (Second Series), the Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of Southern African Historical Documents (VRS Hereafter) are not only continuing their tradition of producing high quality source publications, they are also breaking new ground – and hopefully setting a new trend. For a long time now this society's publications have proven the value of approaching the collection, selection and presentation of source material as a collaborative effort between two or more scholars who could either supplement one another's different skills, or focus their similar capabilities on one and the same subject, thus multiplying the veracity of the outcome. The VRS' patronage has long since also included the translation of documents into English, the unofficial *lingua franca* in Southern African historical writing. What is new about these latest two books, *Words of Batswana* and *Isaac Williams Wauchope*, is that they are the result of collaborative work in multi-language publishing: in these books documentation of historical and literary value written a century ago in two African languages (Setswana and isiXhosa respectively) were rescued, in the words of VRS Chairperson Howard Phillips, "from the crumbling pages of long-forgotten newspapers" (Wauchope, p xiv). Each transcription from the newspapers is accompanied with a complete translation into English. True to VRS style, the collections are contextualised with comprehensive and insightful introductions and annotations.

As far as the presentation of the publications is concerned, Mgadla and Volz went further than Opland and Nyamende and even wrote the introduction in both languages. In the book, *Words of Batswana*, all the equal numbered pages are written in Setswana, while the unequal numbered pages offer the equivalent in English. Even for an ignoramus like myself, who can recognise only certain Setswana words on paper, this proved to be a worthwhile strategy, constantly alerting one to the fact that translation in itself is an act of interpretation – as the irregularity of the blank spaces at the bottom of each page suggests: sometimes more words were required to say in English what substantially less had accomplished in Setswana, and sometimes the English translation could convey in a few lines what the Motswana writing a century earlier had needed several more words for.

In its scope, *Words of Batswana, letters to Mahoko a Becwana, 1833-1896* is a contribution to southern African cultural history and a reminder that the South African-Botswana border is a fairly recent and arbitrary thing. It is indeed also the product of transcontinental collaboration. Part Themba Mgadla is from the Department of History at the University of Botswana and Stephen Volz, who holds a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is Professor of History at

Kenyon College in Ohio. His involvement in this project tacitly comments on our South African callousness towards the formal study of African languages (note the dismally low student numbers), compared to the assumption amongst Africanists in the United States that one should learn the language of the people whose history one intends to write.

The letters in Setswana selected for this volume are all from the *Mahoko a Becwana*, a montly paper edited by the missionaries of the London Missionary Society and printed on their press at Kuruman. Mgadla and Volz go to great lengths to consider the varying strengths of the successive editors' censoring hand. They grant the possibility that there may have been occasions where that which this volume aims to represent, may have been the very type of writings the missionaries would not consider fit for publication: "those addressed to fellow Africans, dealing with issues that may have been of little interest to Europeans then, but which were of great importance within African communities" (p xiii). Besides content, there was also the obstacle of style, which prompted one of the early editors to reprimand writers for sending in letters failing to "say something". Then again, a disclaimer included by a later editor that the letters "have been printed simply as they were written", provides for the possibility that a wider range of styles and issues could have been reflected in the newspapers under this missionary's editorship. As with all source publications, this collection, and the individual contributions, should also be read for what they are *not* saying. The readers of this collection are nevertheless more fortunate than most, thanks to Mgadla and Volz's openness about their selection process and their alertness to difference:

The main indication that the letters were indeed "words of Batswana" is the frequent disagreement that appeared between writers and editors. It is true that the majority of the published writings expressed views largely in accord with those of missionaries, indicating a possible bias on the part of the editors, but the editors also published a significant number of letters whose views clearly differed from those of the missionaries and from one another. Rather than ignore such contrary viewpoints, the editors took it as an opportunity to express their own opinions ... in addition to publishing the responses of Batswana whose views approximated to their own (Mgadla & Volz, p xxxv)

The selection of letters, which comprise 40 per cent of the total number published in the newspaper during its existence from 1883 to 1896, were divided into four chapters, dealing with the standardisation of written Setswana; mission work; cultural change; and government respectively. The chapter on writing in Setswana is divided into two sections, one on language issues raised at the start of the newspaper in 1883-1884 and one on the issues raised at the restart of the paper in 1889. Batswana's own comments on the orthography give remarkable insight into issues around the ownership of the language, recognition of the complexity of capturing the spoken word in letters, and a need for pragmatism. The following letter was written by Bannani Diphafe on 17 October 1889 and appeared in the paper of January 1890:

... in the future we might find ourselves speaking the one language only used in books, which would not be our original language but the language of those who find it difficult to speak Setswana. Please understand me well, my teacher. I am saying that this Setswana is comprehensible, but we seem to be returning to a state of confusion. Those people who pronounce "Modimo" as "Morimo" are not speaking well; they are confused. These are my words. I will keep on trying to explain myself even though I don't know how to write

I am,

Bannani

(Mgadla & Volz, p 35)

The chapter on mission work is divided into the following sections: “Schools and literacy”; “Reports from Tswana evangelists”; “Behaviour of church members and Biblical interpretation: Bible versus European science”. Under Chapter 3, “Cultural Change”, the letters have been arranged under the following sub-headings: “General challenges of European culture”; “Bridewealth, Beer and other alcoholic beverages”; and “Other beliefs and traditions”. This last section opens with a discussion on witchcraft, but also includes contributions on stories, music and proverbs, as well as debates on funeral practices and initiation. Lastly, under “Government”, the letters in Chapter 4 are divided into categories for “Church-State relations”; “Tswana politics and history”; and “African-European relations”.

Who were the letter writers? A list of the missionary editors and the Tswana correspondents appears at the back of the book, with a brief biographical sketch on many of them. However, just as many remain unidentified. The fact that they are representative of the whole range of opinions held by the Batswana mission educated elite who participated in newspaper correspondence at the time, seems to outweigh the need to link a particular opinion with a particular correspondent. Herein, of course, lies the major difference between the approach in this publication and that of Opland and Nyamende. The binding factor in their compilation of newspaper-published material, is the fact that it all originates from one particular individual.

Jeff Opland and Abner Nyamende’s work constitutes a biographical source publication of congregational minister, political activist, historian and poet: Isaac Williams Wauchope – a single member of a different African elite, that of the Eastern Cape. Opland (SOAS & University of South Africa) and Nyamende (University of Cape Town) reconstructed the oeuvre of Wauchope from the following newspapers: *Isigidimi samaXosa*; *Imvo zabantsundu*; and *The Christian Express*. Unlike the Tswana men whose writings were compiled by Mgadla and Volz, Wauchope also wrote in English, and when he did, his intention was also to speak out, to address and educate English-speaking audiences. This is clear from his 1908 Lovedale publication, *The natives and their missionaries*, included in its entirety in the book. By the way, the decision of the editors of the Wauchope edition not to translate his English writings into Xhosa, is a clear clue as to their anticipation of who the readers of their book might be: a reader like myself, who is grateful that something I would neither have been able to access nor to understand, has been passed on to me in Times New Roman English. However, is there in this assumption that those who can read Xhosa, will be able to deal with the English texts as well, an underlying concession that Xhosa will eventually no longer be read in future? I cannot help but think that Mgadla and Volz’s commitment to producing the publication bilingually as completely as possible was a forceful confirmation of the existence of a community of Setswana readers out there – and an affirmation of their entitlement to reading material in this language. The difference between the Setswana/English and the English/Xhosa publications might have had a lot to do with the fact that the Setswana language (with the independent state of Botswana as its guardian) had a different history in the twentieth century than South Africa’s “Bantu languages” (in “Bantu education”).

It is not up to historical source publications to reverse the current trend of aversion to a study of the mother tongues of South Africa, but if, with books like these, we are reminded what a rich tool of self-expression they had offered previous generations of Africans, then at least their past role had not been obliterated. To those

who do take up the study of the languages of Southern Africa here and now, and acquire the skill to translate them into English, the wisdom of the decision is apparent in the richness of the material and the possibilities it offers for altogether fresh understandings of a cultural historical landscape far more dense than former monolingual research could have anticipated. In Wauchope's letters, reports, poetry, travelogues, lectures, obituaries, histories and folklores unfolds not only one man's extraordinary life. His writings offer "launch pads" from where a wide range of topics and other individuals can be encountered. Opland and Nyamende used similar organising principles as Mgadla and Volz. The six chapters of Wauchope's writings cover "Religion and mission work"; "History and biography"; "Politics and social affairs"; "Lore and language"; "Poetry"; and lastly, "Biographical articles on Wauchope and his family".

It is useful that the editors of both volumes account for the scattered whereabouts of the original papers from which the selections for the two publications had been made. However, with the dense offering in the two publications so carefully and richly contextualised, these are indeed two examples of primary material in printed form that deserve excavation in their own right. What we need most are more readers who can read the Setswana and Xhosa texts in their new easily accessible form, and engage with the translators' interpretations – comment on whether they concur with the particular choice of words in the translations, and perhaps even offer alternative or complementary possibilities. Honours and MA students can be encouraged to delve amongst the pages: they will acquire vast quantities of new knowledge in unexpected nuances, their interpretative tools will be sharpened in the process, and they will definitely come up with unanticipated insights. After all, who can be left uninspired by the "urgent voices" of men like Wauchope? Standing on the deck of the sinking *Mende* in 1917 he had proven that with words one can exact dignity, and *will* a world that endures beyond the self.

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