The poet and poetic language in the Celtic and Southern Bantu praising traditions*

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This paper[1] draws attention to similiarities in the above-mentioned traditions. It is not the first such comparison. Carter (1974) addresses similar matters, as does Opland (1971). Both studies point out that similar social structures tend to produce similar poetic devices and traditions. The main purpose of the current paper is to juxtapose the poetry and social context of two cultural areas to see whether any parallels emerge – some of the points raised are discussed in detail for parts of each area in Haycock (1981) and Gunner (1981).

Every (1978, p6) has said, in an entirely different context, that "resemblances imply differences". This certainly applies here – there are many similarities between both traditions, but also many differences.[2] Nevertheless, it is one of the axioms of comparative literature that the comparison itself may serve to illuminate aspects of what is being compared, and it is hoped that this will be the case here.

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[2]For example, Celtic poetry is composed in very strict and complex metres (some of the rhymes and alliterations have been marked in items 1 and 12 in the appendix), was in olden times composed and recited by two different people (*fili* and bard, compare Provençal *troubadour/jonglar* and Swahili *mtungaji/mwimbaji*), was usually composed before recital, could sometimes be satirical or vaunt untrue claims of the patron, and was composed by a professional. Southern Bantu poetry, on the other hand, was usually composed and recited by the same person, was usually more spontaneous in its recital (in that the poet might not have a very clear idea of what exactly he was going to say before he started reciting), would never be more than critical and was always true-to-life, and was composed by a semi-professional.

The social situation: tribal kingdoms

Praise-poetry is intimately connected with a certain social environment, in which there is the "ever present challenge" (Kunene, 1971, p3) of, among other things, "frequent wars, battles and skirmishes", and "frequent cattle raids". It is necessary also that those who live in these conditions be "only minimally equipped to cope with their hostile environment … for as long as [a man] can barely keep his environment under control, rather than take it and permanently establish himself as master over it, for so long does his physical prowess remain indispensable for his survival, and thus a subject for laudatory compositions" (Kunene, 1971, p4).

Both the Celtic and Southern Bantu cultural areas show the same pattern of a great many minor kings struggling incessantly with one another. One *chanson de geste* says of Ireland in the 12th century (Johnson, 1980, p13):

> *En yrland event reis plusur*
> *Cum alures erent les cunturs.*
>
> In Ireland there were as many kings
> As counts elsewhere.

There were, of course, some major kings as well, such as the kings of the five Irish provinces, of Gwynedd and Powys in Wales, Dingiswayo and Zwide in the Zulu area, and so on, but their authority consisted mainly of overlordship, and lasted only until they were defeated in battle.

A monarchical system was, in fact, never established, though it may be that it was developing when the areas in question were overtaken by events and conquered.[3] The Irish had their *ard-rí* (high king), who often belonged to the O'Neill family, but his power was limited and he did not exercise governmental authority – as Johnson (1980, p13) says, the "high king reigned but did not rule". In Wales too there was instability – the princes of the House of Gwynedd asserted their authority over the whole of Wales, with varying degrees of success: Gruffudd ap Llywelyn was king of the whole of Wales between 1055 and his assassination in 1063, and Llywelyn ab Iorwerth "the Great" (1173-1240) managed to create a feudal Welsh state that covered most of the country. However, this did not survive the assassination of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, "the Last Prince of Wales" in 1282.[4] In Southern Africa the Napoleon-like figure of Shaka emerged, who succeeded in welding together other tribes with his own to form the Zulu Empire. Likewise, the Sotho king Moshoeshoe managed to strengthen his people and lay the foundations of Lesotho. But all these developing institutions were racked by internal and dynastic strife, and were seldom able to present a united front to an external invader.

[3] There was a king in the Scottish Lowlands, but they are not a primarily Celtic area.

[4] Meilir Pennant Lewis, p.c.

With the imposition of outside rule (though this took longer in some places than others), the old order began to decay, sometimes helped along by specific ordinances, such as the prohibition of all Gaelic dress, music, speech and names in the Highlands after the Battle of Culloden, and the systematic dismantling of the Zulu kingship and military system after the Zulu War (Cope, 1968, p22). "By the time we have contemporary sources reporting on [the praise-poets] and their work, the world they belonged to was already disintegrating" (Thomson, 1974, p19). Praise-poetry, though divorced from its social context, was still composed, however. An interesting question today is whether Southern Bantu praise poetry will die out, or will continue to fill a function in society, even though the society has changed and hence the function has also changed. As Gunner (1981) shows, praise-poetry is now often composed for ordinary people, rather than just for kings and dignitaries as in the olden days. In the Celtic countries the praising idiom did survive the destruction of the old order for about 200 years, but became progressively less vigorous.

The attitude of outsiders to praise-poetry

This type of poetry was often misunderstood and ridiculed by outsiders. The monk Gildas, writing around the middle of the 6th century, tried to accuse the rulers of his day of being responsible for the downfall of Celtic Britain, and said to one of them, Maelgwn, king of Anglesey and Gwynedd:

> "When the attention of thy ears has been caught, it is not the praise of God … and the song of church melody that are heard, but thine own praises (which are nothing); the voice of the rascally crew yelling forth, like Bacchanalian revellers, full of lies and foaming phlegm, so as to besmear everyone near them."

"For Gildas, the panegyric verses of these bards … were nothing but vain flattery" (Lewis, 1976b, pp28-9).

Dieterlen and Kohler, quoted in Kunene (1971, ppxi-xii), say:

> "In these elegies there is … nothing that constitutes proper verse as we see it – unless one wishes, in spite of good sense and taste, to honour with the name of poetry that which modern writers call *le vers désarticulé et invertébré*."

In describing the recitation they say:

> "In a large gathering … a man seems suddenly seized by an irresistible devil. He leaps forward, parades in front of his friends, his head held high, his eyes large and staring, his face contorted, his voice raised

> in pitch, making violent gestures; he declaims his praises but without varying the intonation of his voice, and with such a stream of words that it is difficult to understand all the words. He goes on and on as if deluded, possessed and mad, and when he reaches the end of his long poem, he engages in several wild capers … Then he goes calmly back to his place, to listen to and admire the grimaces of him who has replaced him in this strange exercise. The white man laughs, finding this infantile, ridiculous and grotesque."

Chapman, quoted in Schapera (1965, p5), said of one poet:

> "He spoke rapidly for several hours, and I expected he would drop with exhaustion … Native chiefs are everywhere so fond of flattery that they pay for it."

Not everyone took this patronising view, though (see, for example, Casalis' comments quoted in Schapera, 1965, p4), and sometimes even its detractors had to admit that native composition had certain praiseworthy aspects. For instance, Dieterlen and Kohler concede in another essay, quoted in Kunene (1971, p6), that the war-song has "an inconceivable grandeur", and Chapman, quoted in Schapera (1965, p5) admits that the poets "generally display great eloquence, and metaphorical poetry comes naturally to them".

Gunner (1976, p86) says of Bryant's comments on Zulu praise-poets:

> "his account is interesting as an example of recording accompanied by a cultural shift of perspective; the recording may be fundamentally truthful, but the values behind what is described are distorted or ignored."

The function of praise-poetry

This point is certainly true, because there is much more to praise-poetry than simple flattery. It may sometimes degenerate to this, but to refer to it as flattery is to misunderstand its purpose, which was in reality to provide an aid to social cohesion.

This stems from the fact that the king was considered a semi-divine figure (Lewis, 1976a, p129):

> "In their stately encomiums … these poets portrayed an ideal which helped to sustain and unite the society to which they belonged. They practised their art, based as this was, in part, on the primitive belief in the bard's supernatural and divinatory powers, in order to instil powerfully into their patrons those virtues and qualities which were

> esteemed above all others and which would eventually result in stirring deeds and actions."

Behind the poet was "the shadow of a high-ranking pagan priest or druid" (Carney, quoted in Caerwyn Williams 1971, p86), and the poem was meant to give "a feeling that all this glorifies the man who maintains life and society, guiding his subjects, the leader in the fullest sense of the word" (Parry, 1955, pp48-9).

The semi-divine king had a mystical connection with the fertility and well-being of the land. "The concept that a land's prosperity … is indissolubly linked with the qualities of its ruler is a constant underlying theme" (Lewis, 1976a, p130). Caerwyn Williams (1971, p129) notes the widespread belief that "the righteous rule of the rightful sovereign increase[d] the prosperity of the land, and that his death diminish[ed] it", and quotes the Irish *Aurraicept Moraind,* a set of instructions to a prince:

> "By the prince's truth … fair weather comes in each filling season …
> For it is the prince's falsehood … that brings perverse weather upon wicked people, and dries up the fruit of the earth."

Even later, around 1475, the Gaelic bard MacEwen sees nature as being "in sympathy with the fortunes of the chief, … shrivelling and withdrawing on his death, burgeoning in the kindly warmth of a good chief's rule" (Thomson, 1974, p45), and says of the death of MacDougall of Dunollie:

> Since he died …
> no nut has parted from the trees. …
> A savage storm breaks the woods,
> the yawning ocean laments him.

We can also compare the anguish of Gruffudd ab yr Ynad Coch after the assassination of Llewelyn ap Gruffudd (Williams, 1965, p81).

Among the Southern Bantu, the king also had a religious significance; there were, for example, the Zulu first-fruits ceremony (Berglund, 1976, pp42ff) and the Tswana rain-making ceremony (Schapera, 1965, p21), in each of which the king played an important role.

The function of the poet: eulogy and restraint

In both these cultural areas, therefore, there was "the steadfast conviction that honour, immortal fame and glory, renown for the great aristocratic virtues of valour and unstinting liberality, and noble descent in the king, … were indispensable

prerequisites if the society was to return to its basic stability and flourish"[5] (Lewis, 1976b, p14). So one of the poet's functions was that of propagandist, identifying and presenting the king to his people, sustaining and spreading his fame, and building up loyalty, for the king was the personification of his people[6] (cf Cope 1968, p32).

> "The assumption which underlies all this poetry is that fame and honour are the supreme values. By singing of the steadfast courage and honour of his patron the court poet confirmed those virtues and ensured everlasting fame for his benefactor." (Cope, 1968, p129)

Both poet and patron were well aware of what this meant. As Phylip Brydydd the Welsh poet said to Rhys Ieuanc, "*y gwneuthum it glod*" (I made fame for you). The poets celebrated a hero before an audience of heroes (Caerwyn Williams, 1971, p93-4): "*trengid golud, ni threinc molud*" (wealth vanishes, fame/praise does not), said another, and a line in the Old Welsh poem Y Gododdin says "*beirt byt barnant wyr o gallon*" (the bards of the world adjudge men of valour). An Irish poet asserted "*neach nach ordhruic gan ollamh*" (no man can be famous without a bard). In Cynddelw Brydydd Mawr's ode of reconciliation to Lord Rhys of Deheubarth in Wales, with whom he had quarrelled, he says (Bell, 1936, pp52-3):

> *Ti hebaf nid hebu oedd teu.*
> *Mi hebot ni hebaf finneu.*
>
> You without me have no voice.
> I without you have nothing to say.

Compare also the words of the poet MacEwen to the chief of the Campbells (Thomson, 1974, p40):

> In the ancient books of men of learning,
> and in the gleanings of our ever-fresh poems,
> there will remain [on record] each good deed … done to me,
> O fair-judged, bright and lofty earl.

Magolwana, the greatest Zulu bard, once said to King Mpande:

[5] The same idea of the religious significance of the king, i.e. that he is God's representative among the people, recurs in the Bible; c.f. for example Psalm 45 (Meilir Pennant Lewis, p.c.)

[6] In Tswana poetry the king was "often ceremonially addressed by the personification of the tribal name" (Schapera, 1965, p32), such as *Mokgatla* referring to the name of the Bakgatla people. This is directly comparable to the Irish/Gaelic way of addressing the king or chief of the clan, e.g. The O'Neill, The MacDonald. The king is also father of his people (Cope, 1968, p20), again similar to the Irish/Gaelic idea – "clan" comes from a word meaning "children".

Uze uwel' imifula yonke nje na,
uwezwa yini?
Kawuwezwa yimi na? …
Ubani owakuth' izibongo ezingaka lezi na,
wawungenazo nje?

As you cross all these rivers (i.e. obstacles) thus,
what causes you to cross?
Do not **I** cause you to cross?
Who has composed for you such great praises as these,
and did you just possess them?

And Mpande acknowledged this when he reluctantly had to sentence Magolwana to death for treason: "And now who will recite the praises for me? … Now I too shall die, seeing that Magolwana is about to die" (Stuart, quoted in Gunner 1976, pp79-81).

But the other function of the poet, besides ensuring his patron's fame, was to impress on him the necessity for correct conduct, and criticise him for any habit or deed unbecoming to his status.[7] Gunner (1976, p79) says that in the Zulu poems there may be "praise and celebration of success, but it does not gloss over unpalatable facts and is far from being blind adulation." Knott and Murphy (1966, p75) notes that Irish court poetry could contain pleas for caution or peace, and also complaints. If the Irish poet was offended by the king, he could of course satirise him (the same option existed for Hausa praise-poets), which was literally deadly for the unfortunate recipient; the satire was classed in various types, ranging from insulting speech right through to ritualised character assassination (Knott & Murphy, 1966, p79-80). Southern Bantu poetry tended to criticise by leaving glaring omissions in the praises, though often more direct locutions were employed – see Cope (1968, pp28,31) and Schapera (1965, p10), The poet's special position enabled him to do this with impunity. Speaking of Magolwana, Gunner (1976, p81) says:

> "This indulgence on the part of the King came perhaps from his recognition of the bard's talent, and of his need for him as celebrator of his achievements and the achievements of his lineage, his role as creator of Mpande's very identity."

The figure of the poet

The poets had special emblems of their office – the Irish poets in olden times wore a garment "partly or wholly made of feathers" (Caerwyn Williams, 1971,

[7] Schapera (1965, pp31-2) gives a good summary of the duties of a Southern Bantu king, which also applies in most part to those of a Celtic king.

p121), while the Zulu poets donned "a fantastic costume made of furs and feathers and animal tails" (Cope, 1968, p28) when they were reciting their praises. Magolwana's regalia, for instance, was a monkey-skin girdle, a special brass armlet, and a necklace of metal beads (Gunner, 1976, p82).

The poets were in addition often courageous warriors and well-born men of high standing in society; for example, Bleddyn Fardd, Gwalchmai ap Meilyr, and Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd were Welsh noblemen (Lewis, 1976a, p136); Klwana, Mnyamana, and Shingana kaMpande were Zulu politicians (Gunner, 1976, p84-5).

There is one case of two Zulu poets (Dingane's poet Magolwana, and Mzilikazi's poet) actually fighting to the death after a poetic contest – the former won. There were numerous "contentions of the bards" in Ireland, though there are no records of any going this far – in fact, they were sometimes quite humorous.[8] Nevertheless, Irish court poets were often the subject of punitive raids by enemy reivers, and "were too often closely connected with their chieftains to escape sharing their fate" if the latter was murdered (Caerwyn Williams, 1971, p132). Mxamama, Shaka's praise-poet, freely chose death after the latter's assassination (Gunner, 1976, p84). Many Welsh court poets died fighting for their king (Lewis, 1976a, p136).

The intelligibility of the poems

There has been some question as to how intelligible the compositions of the praise-poets were to their audiences; it would seem that although they may sometimes have been difficult to interpret because of speed of delivery (Southern Bantu) or archaic and poetic locutions (Celtic), they were for the greatest part accessible to the listeners. Parry (1955, pp48,51) speculates that it was not every prince who could follow the meaning of every line. Knott and Murphy (1966, p65) concedes that "doubtless like any other literary writing it was somewhat over the head of the uncultured listener", but notes that it cannot have been too recondite, because many examples have been preserved, some of them orally. Caerwyn Williams (1971, p95) agrees: "It is certainly inconceivable that they were intended to be unintelligible, however recondite their language may have been". But he does admit that their appeal was perhaps to the ear first – the sometimes complicated Celtic metres did tend to put sound on an equal par with sense (Parry, 1955, p48).

With southern Bantu praise-poems the reasons are slightly different; there are no demands of metre in the European sense, and in its heyday probably the only barrier to complete understanding was the high speed at which the poem was delivered. With the passage of time, however, some phrases and references may become opaque, though the poet still "commits them to memory as he hears them,

[8] They were comparable rather to the Swahili *diriji*, or the poetic contest between the national poets of the Mombasa and Lamu city-states in the 1860s.

even if they are meaningless to him" (Cope, 1968, p28). In Cope's opinion, "The obscurities in the praise-poems are due to the references to forgotten events, unknown people, and unknown places, rather than to linguistic difficulties, for the lexical and grammatical archaisms are slight" (Cope, 1968, p35). Schapera (1965, pp22-3), however, quoting Lestrade, agrees with him that Tswana praise-poetry has many archaic terms and expressions that are difficult for the modern speaker to understand, and concludes that "to many Tswana the beauty of the poems lies more in their vocabulary than in their rhythm or sentiment". This may not be completely justified – no matter what modern listeners may think, we have no way of assessing how contemporaries considered the poems.

The conclusion would seem to be that praise-poems used an elevated form of language, but certainly not with the intent to mystify listeners – that would have defeated their purpose.

The tradition behind the poet: conventionality

The form of the poems themselves is traditional – certain modes of composition were expected. Knott and Murphy (1966, pp75,73) refers to Irish praise-poems as "literature based on conventions" – "the compliments and methods of reference in the panegyrics or odes are usually (not invariably) stereotyped". Bell (1936, p40) emaphasises that the reader accustomed to European poetry must make a shift of perspective if he wishes to appreciate this type of poetry; he must accept

> "the idea that poetry is a social rather than an individual function, that it is a craft to be taught by master to pupil, not a gift of God, and that its mysteries can be preserved and handed down from one generation to another".

Parry (1955, p46) concurs: "The great merit in a poet in that age was to be like his predecessors, not cherish an individual originality or to shake off 'the fetters of the past"'. This could sometimes lead to lifeless verses; Thomson (1974, p47) says:

> "Bardic verse … was essentially a product which had to be made available on demand … and hence it had to rely heavily on technical competence and the application of well-understood and readily-marshalled formulae. A poem could well be constructed from these materials alone, and many were."

Cope (1968, p27) suggests that a good memory was one essential qualification for the praise-poet, and Gunner (1976, p86) notes that:

> "although [the poet] had some freedom to introduce fresh praises into his composition as a means of impressing his audience, his inspiration

would be guided by conventions and usage that would be known to his fellow bards and approved by the audience."

The obvious question is: why is this poetry so valued and appreciated if it is so conventional? This merits some discussion, particularly as it seems to be comparable to the problem of when and why a metaphor should be pronounced "dead". In European poetry there would seem to be two main parameters for evaluating poetic compositions; (i) form, or lack of it, and (ii) subject matter, which can be taken fairly loosely as referring also to sentiments about the subject in question, treatment of the theme, and so on. If either the form or the subject has been well-worked by previous poets, so that it has become stereotyped, the poem will tend to be judged rather harshly – of course, if both form and subject have become stereotyped, the poem is doomed to oblivion.[9]

However, to account for the praise-poetry under discussion here, we might need a third parameter, that of "topicality" or "contemporariness". This element occurs also in proverbs; a proverb, though used and repeated a great deal, tends to stay fresh because it neatly sums up a whole state of affairs – it expresses the essence of a situation. Even when the proverb is so well-known that only its first half need be quoted (e.g. "a stitch in time", "too many cooks"), the general effect is still one of appositeness. Likewise, a praise-poem may be stereotyped, but it is its quality of aptness, what needs to be said at the right time, that ensures it a warm reception by the audience. This ties in with the factor of social cohesion discussed above – the poem acts as a lens focussing the people's opinion of their king and the king's duties to his people. Moreover, as the lists of names in the praise-poems show, there is a strong sense of the past – a metaphor may be used over and over again because it seems fitting to say once again what has been said before, to reinforce the notion (in much the same way that repetition can be used in syntax to produce emphasis). Parry (1955, p47) concludes:

"The one thing [the poets] did not do was tell a story, and it was not at making the story clear and intelligible that they aimed, … but rather

[9] It is, of course, possible for a poet, either unwittingly or intentionally, to offend the requisites of form or subject or both, so that incongruity results and the poem is remembered as a bad joke or a good parody. As examples of the former, we have the poems of William McGonagall (`http://www.mcgonagall-online.org.uk`), or of Julia Moore, "the Sweet Singer of Michigan" (`http://homepages.wmich.edu/~cooneys/txt/Moore`), whose verse was "mainly concerned with violent death. A critic of the day said she was 'worse than a Gatling gun', and in one slim volume counted 21 killed and 9 wounded" (Pile, 1980, p125). James Grainger composed the immortal line,"Come, muse, let us sing of rats", which he had to delete after noticing that his listeners burst into laughter whenever they heard it, and John Armstrong apostrophised Cheshire cheese as "that which Cestria sends, tenacious paste of solid milk" (Pile, 1980, p116). It is also possible for the poet to use stereotypes constructively by cashing in on the very fact that they are clichés – a good example might be the songwriter Bryan Ferry.

> at striking chords of memory and the varied strands of consciousness in the heart. This must be accepted before we can understand their very existence."

Historical accuracy

The reference to "telling a story" prompts the question of how historically accurate these poems are. Cope (1968, pp35,32) says that:

> "historical record is simply a by-product of praise, and neither completeness nor chronological completeness is to be expected. … The object of the praise-poem is to light up different facets of the chief's personality, and this is sometimes most effectively achieved by reference to historical events."

Kunene (1971, pp35-6) agrees. This applies to Celtic praise-poetry as well; the poets picked out of the panorama of events such happenings as would serve their purpose, and passed over those which were unpleasant. Thomson (1974, p41) suggests that even where this was not sufficient, the honest poet could draw parallels or analogues to avoid becoming "emotionally involved with his subject", while using "direct, lyrical praise when it was honest to do so".

General features of the poems

Both traditions show the same general features and structure in the poems. Knott and Murphy (1966, pp73-4) notes that "the person addressed must be fully identified", hence the proliferation of names of ancestors and relatives. Topographical names are liberally used in order to place the addressee in context – Irish poets, who had a special interest in *dinnseanchas* (topographical lore), were capable of composing entire "poems" consisting only of place-names. A metaphor referring to the person being praised is often followed by a personal or place name to make the metaphor more specific (Knott & Murphy, 1966, p71). Kunene (1971, p38) notes the same for Sotho.

There is a general mythico-historical background on which the figurative language, keenings and metaphors depend, so that they reflect "some item of ancient historic or mythological lore known and cherished by contemporary listeners" (Knott & Murphy, 1966, p68). There are references to the person and household of the king, and lines extolling his prowess in battle. In the Southern Bantu cultural area these usually occur as parts of the whole poem, but in the Celtic cultural area such descriptions could serve as part or all of the poem: "On Cathal Redhand" (Bergin, 1970, no23) and Iolo Goch praising Owain Glyndŵr's court at Sy-

charth (Clancy, 1965, p135) are examples of the former, and "On a warlike prince" (Bergin, 1970, no40) an example of the latter.

Thomson (1974, p48) notes that "the stanza is often the unit of artistic care and deliberation rather than the complete poem", and this also applies to the "stanzas" (Cope) or "paragraphs" (Kunene) of Southern Bantu poems, where there may be a juxtaposition of events that belong together thematically, but have little chronological connection with one another, resulting in some "chronological confusion" Cope (1968, pp35).

Metaphors

The last section of this paper focusses on specific similarities in the way that praise-poems from both cultural areas use metaphor. Relevant extracts from key works are quoted below, and the appendix provides a wide-ranging selection of actual metaphors from Irish Gaelic, Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Zulu, Tswana and Sotho praise-poetry.

Irish Gaelic (Knott & Murphy, 1966, pp69-70)

> "The complimentary epithets of persons are of various kinds, referring to nobility of birth, beauty of form, strength, prowess, hospitality, success in war or in love. Often they are metonymical [e.g. *strong arm*, *bright cheek*]. The metaphorical epithets show a widely extended range: animals known or unknown [e.g. *whelp*, *ox*, *lion*, *bear*, *griffin*]; birds and fishes [e.g. *hawk*, denoting keenness in battle; *swan*, for grace and beauty; *salmon*, *trout*, probably implying wisdom]; plant names [e.g. *branch*, *nut*, *vine-stalk*, *juice of the vine*, *ancient tree*]. Natural phenomena are used freely [e.g. *sun*, *moon*, *star*, *ocean-bed*]. It seems very likely that the use of some of these words in this way came in with the Christian Latin poetry and derive ultimately from the Bible. Compare the Old-Irish litanies."[10]

Zulu (Cope, 1968, p39)

> "Senzangakhona is described as the gate-post … of the kraal, and his son, Shaka, as the aze … of Senzangakhona, as the firs of the long dry grass … as the wind of the south … as a pile of rocks … as a hawk … descending from the hills, and as a young viper … in a great rage. Dingiswayo is the log … that does not burn when the fire is

[10]Compare also such metaphors in the modern Litany of Our Lady as *mirror of justice, seat of wisdom, mystical rose, tower of ivory, house of gold, morning star*.

> stoked, Macingwane is an antheap … that is light-coloured amongst those that are dark-coloured, Phakathwayo is the little stone … that trips up unwary walkers on the pathway. Cetshwayo, whose skin was dark and hairy, is described as a black forest … thus indicating his awesomeness also. The image of the ford with slippery stones … where people slipped as they thought they were crossing over safely, is used to describe the sly diplomacy of Zwide, Khondlo, and Gcwabe. Some images tend to be overworked, such as the sun and the sky, sticks and shields, and especially lions and elephants, for [these] are common titles of address for chiefs."

Tswana (Schapera, 1965, p21)

> "[T]he chief is identified with some such animal as the lion, elephant, rhinoceros, or buffalo, and is spoken of as pouncing upon his enemies, trampling upon them, or goring them; he may be likened to a snake or bird of prey, to a thorn tree impeding invaders, to the lightning striking people or huts, to a rock crushing those on whom it falls, to a shield protecting the tribe, or to a cow yielding nourishment for his subjects; he is *as tall as a hill, as shapely as the full moon, as straight as a sandalwood tree*, or *like a cloud overshadowing the people*."

See also the discussion of different types of name for the chief on p23.

Sotho (Kunene, 1971, pp37-9)

> "[Metaphors] identify the hero with phenomena of nature which are noted for possessing to the highest degree the qualities observed and praised in the hero. There are the usual associations here – lightning associated with speed and deadly accuracy; the lion with strength, ferocity, majesty; the overarching sky with strength, elevated status, benevolence and gatherly protection to those below, etc. However, the metaphorical names uses of Basotho heroes are mainly names of animals, mostly wild and ferocious, but also domestic animals, especially the bovine. Quite often inanimate objects are also used as phenomena of comparison. Of twenty-nine metaphorical namings of Maama in his praise-poem … twenty-one are based on names of animals."

See also Chapter 4, which is a good general description of the names used for the addressee of the poem (c.f. also pp19-20), and Chapter 7, which is an excellent examination of the symbolism of names and expressions in the poems. Kunene's book is perhaps the best attempt yet to give a theoretical background for discussion of the poems.

Conclusions

To sum up: there seem to be certain broad similarities in the figure and function of the praise-poet, and narrower similarities in poetic language and references, between the praise-poetry traditions of both the Celtic and Southern Bantu cultural areas. Although it is possible to account for these by a theory of "spontaneous generation", it is more reasonable to assume that they are due to literary "universals", i.e. that people in similar situations or social environments will tend to produce literary works with similar features or qualities.

The social context described above is of course not the only one in which praise-poetry may occur. Modern Zulu praise-poetry occurs in a very different environment, and Polynesian praise-poetry (Ruth Finnegan, p.c.) occurs in a less hierarchically-ordered society. Likewise, praise-poetry may even be composed for the head of a totalitarian state, where the social relationships are very different from those described here. But these situations do not detract from the wider proposition that similar societies will tend to produce similar genres of literary works.

Appendix: Examples of metaphor in praise-poetry

Irish

(Knott & Murphy, 1966)

(1) *Maighre séanta a sruth Fhinne,*
lá gréine i ndiaidh dílinne,
gnúis mhordha is céimleasg i gcath,
éinfhleasg órdha na nUltach.[11]
Precious salmon from the stream of Finn,
a sunny day after a downpour,
stately figure, cool in conflict,
the Ulsterman's gilded stem. [of Eoghan Óg Mhac Suibhne]

(2) Our healing herb, our sleep charm,
our fruitful branch, our house of treasure;
a piece of steel, yet one who never denied any man,
most precious offering of the Grecian Gaels.
[of Maol Mórdha Mac Suibhne]

(Bergin, 1970)

(3) Highborn hawks of Innisfail,
four desolations of Cruachan's hill,
four mighty ruins of Tara,
are the glittering dark spearshafts.
[No. 8, elegy for the O'Donnells]

(4) a. the pole-star of Mac Con's Munster …
a piece of bright steel

b. hand that searches Clanna Carrthaigh
stern elbow against the Conallaigh
[No. 11, of Pádraigín Mac Muiris]

(5) a. hawk of the Boyne

b. O James, beloved of guests,
salmon of Dublin, stately eye,
steel blade to which Islay has yielded,

[11] Underlines mark rhyme; note the stressed/unstressed final rhymes. Double underlines and dashed underlines mark the internal cross-rhyme in lines 3-4.

thunderbolt of victory of the land beyond the sea.

c. Thou forward step, thou spearpoint of danger,
lover of bounty, hater of wealth,
spiller of blood, dreaded visitor,
fruitful nut of the Grecian Gaels.

d. Fragrant blossom of Clann Domhnaill,
comely stag of Inis Fáil,
fawn of the doe from the land of Mull,
sun of the school of Magh Máil. [No. 43, of Sémas Mac Aonghuis]

Scottish Gaelic

(Thomson, 1974)

(6) a. a lion in the fierceness of his exploits

b. a hand that was not feeble in the dark fight

c. stalk that was most powerful in every battle-field

d. salmon of Shiel, powerful salmon
[pp25-7, of Donald son of John of Moidart]

(7) O raging whelps
O sturdy bears
O most sprightly lions …
O brave heroic firebrands [p31, an incitement to battle]

(8) O countenance like the ripe fruit of the apple-tree
[p37, of Tomaltach Mac Diarmada]

(9) a. slim handsome hawk of Sliabh Gaoil

b. salmon of Sanas of quiet streams
dragon of Lewis of sun-drenched slopes[12]
[p54, elegy for Mac Neill]

(10) O branch laden with fruit [p40, of the Marquess of Argyle]

[12]Note the parallelism in these lines.

(11) a. a slender branch in a lovely garden,
a tree that will not bend

b. my jewel that I love,
my full moon,
my vigorous apple-tree

c. my battle-belt

d. my sword,
my slim tapering spear

e. our well-water that does not run dry …
our precious liquor being drunk from golden goblets
[p50-1, of Donald son of John of Moidart]

Welsh

(Williams, 1965)

(12) a. *Ysgythrwr cad, aets goethrudd,*
esgud i'r aer, ysgwydd rudd,
ysgithredd baedd ysgethrin,
asgwrn hen yn angen in.[13]
Carver of battle, fine red "H",
speedy to war, the bloody shield,
tusks of a fearful boar,
an old backbone to us in our need.

b. the boar of battle

c. the great spear-shatterer …
lightning's gun [p113, of Sir Hywel Y Fwyall]

(13) a. the oaken door of Aberffraw …
protection's sharp piercer

b. a lord who was a roofstone where the Welsh gather …
candle of kingship, strong lion of Gwynedd,
chair of honour …
Nancoel's lion, … Nancaw's shield

c. a proud hawk breaching a gap …

[13]Dashes mark rhymes; note the unstressed/stressed final rhymes. Underlines mark alliteration; the sequence is *sg–thr–sg–thr* in lines 1 and 3, *sg–r–sg–r* in line 2, and *g–n–n–g–n–n* in line 4. Double underlines mark line-internal assonance.

a thrusting wolf [pp81-85, elegy for Llywelyn ap Gruffudd]

(14) the gold-patterned shield of battle [p25, of Urien]

(15) I am a lion [p53, Gwalchmai, of himself]

(Williams, 1976)

(16) Shepherd to Yrechwydd,
heart of a king, breaker of spears,
… a charger in battle,
prop of war, snare to the enemy. [p9, elegy for Urien's head]

(Lewis, 1976a)

(17) Gruffudd, red lance against the foe [of Owain Cyfeiliog]

(Bell, 1936)

(18) Caradawg son of Cedifor,
hawk of the army, bulwark of the host,
falcon of the war-band, beloved, …
hard it is to lack thee. [p47, elegy for Hywel ap Owain]

Zulu

(Cope, 1968)

(19) *UTeku lwabafazi bakwaNomgabhi,*
betekula behlez' emlovini.
The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,
joking as they sat in a sheltered spot. [p90, of Shaka]

(20) *Ikhab' elimile lodwa eNhlungwana,*
amany' emil' isixexelegu.
Maize-plant that grew alone at the Nhlungwana river,
while others grew in a conspiratorial cluster.
[p222, of Cetshwayo]

(21) a. spear that is red, even on the handle

b. fierce animal in the homes of people

c. butterfly of Phunga

d. rushing wind in the assembly

e. brass walking-stick …

f. deep pool which is in the Manevane river

g. feather that bobbed down …

h. the sun that eclipsed another with its rays

i. buffalo that stood glaring with a spear …

j. the sky that rumbled

k. high star of Mjokwane

l. grass that pricks while still growing …

m. burning furnace

n. calf that climbed on top of a hut …

o. you are a wild animal! a leopard! a lion!
you are a horned viper! an elephant!

p. porcupine that stabbed the disorderly young people

q. the corn-seed of Mjokwane which prefers low-lying land

r. the finch which was beaten by the Zimpohlo regiment

[pp88-112, of Shaka]

(22) splinter which the Zulus splintered and left lying,
flesh of the otter of Zimangele [p132, of Mzilikazi]

(23) field of which the cattle ate the southern part and left the northern
[p134, of Langalibalele]

(24) tortoise that devours people [p166, of Ngwane]

(25) bushbuck with long jaws [p156, of Zihlandlo]

(26) a. speckled calabash of the daughter of Donda

b. the duiker that got up with a spear in its back,
black millet that is eaten raw …
red-naped lark of Hamuyana

c. thorn-tree which shuts up children in stomachs

[pp122-4, of Dingiswayo]

(27) a. claw that came after Nggengelele …

b. large headland of rocks at Nkandla

c. stick that knows how to beat his father-in-law

[p130, of Macingwane]

(28) a. red-winged loury of Menzi …
plum tree that matured on the Ndulinde Hills

b. great reptile of the Vuna river [pp216,200, of Cetshwayo]

(29) whirlwind like a mamba, …
tree that is on top of the Lugede mountain [p144, of Phakathwayo]

Tswana

(Schapera, 1965)

(30) a pestle that rattles and jars [p45, of Masellane]

(31) hookthorn that obstructs [p46, of Molefe]

(32) circular shield [p52, of Senwelo]

(33) people were once attacked by a tree snake
by a green snake, dogger of people
by a fly, brother of Tshire[14] [p63, of Molefi Molefe]

(34) a. lightning, brother of Nthwalwe …

b. I'm a two-pointed awl of the Masonya [pp67,71, of Kgamanyane]

(35) a. an elephant once screamed in a pass …
I am an ape, and I conquer elephants

b. at Phala pan there lies a rhinoceros
Ramono's [black rhino] is sleeping there
at Monwane a rhinoceros bull is lurking

c. *Bafithlhetse noga yaphika eletse,*
mokopa osare kebolaya ope

[14]Note the cross-parallelism and parallelism in these lines.

They found a python lying down,
a mamba meaning harm to none [pp84,90, of Lentswe]

(36) *Kephalwe keope, tladi yatlerere,*
tladi yaboMorekwe leMapidiwe
No-one surpasses me, the forked lightning,
the lightning of Morekwe and Mapidiwe [p99, of Ramono]

(37) a. the lion roared lately at Mochudi

b. the buffalo roared out against the Mafatshwa [pp108-9, of Isang]

(38) noxious herb that inflames the bowels,
medicine that's bitter when eaten,
the buffalo-thorn is bitter [p139, of Sebele]

(39) a shoot sprouted forth in the ruin …
Motsokwane said, "It is a bush-willow";
I, his father, argued it was a wild plum [p158, of Gaseitsiwe]

(40) Makaba, you are the salient of Makapana [p147, of Makaba II]

(41) the light-coloured cow [p162, of Bathoen I]

(42) red ox of the Matsemotlhaba river … bustard [p123-4, of Motswasele]

(43) howling wind of Tshosa [p128, of Moruakgomo]

(44) the river of Nkane Masilo [p134, of Sechele]

Sotho

(Kunene, 1971)

(45) a. *Tladi e ntsho ya habo Seeiso,*
ya tjhesa Maseru tsatsi le rapame.
Black thunderbolt of the house of Seeiso,
he scorched Maseru when the sun was slanting west.

b. *Letlake, lenonyane, ramahotetsa,*

ramahotetsa hlaha ya ka Twaing.
Vulture, eagle, setter-alight,
setter-alight of the jungle-grass of Tswaing. [p36, of Maama]

(46) a. bright, bright star of Ramatheola

b. foreign bullet of the children of Letlama

c. sky to the people of the place of Mojela,
… the lightning

d. the water-drop

e. gushing spring of the great lake …
crocodile, seal of the great lake

f. rhinoceros …
… ferocious beast, eye of the earth
… leaf of tremendous size
[pp167,169,171,175,178,192, of Lerotholi Majela]

(47) black crocodile who is a collider with boats [p41, of Masopha]

(48) a. the male antelope gores an antheap

b. hurricane, python of the house of Seeiso

c. fire-tongs of Kings …

d. monster of the deep …

e. over-arching sky, Lekena

f. rainbow of the land of Moshoeshoe [pp60-5, 11, 123, of Lerotholi]

(49) lion of the buffaloes [p39, of Jonathane Molapo]

(50) a. gorge of unfathomable depth

b. I am the sharp shearer, the shaver

c. the blade that shaved off Ramonaheng's beard
[p103,1,34, of Moshoeshoe]

(51) … cow in calf … [p113, of Lethole]

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