

Xhosa Oral Poetry

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN
ORAL AND LITERATE CULTURE

Xhosa oral poetry

Aspects of a black
South African tradition

JEFF OPLAND

bum bi
pam bi
dun ga
tēn da
gom so
kam be
kan ti
vim ba
fun da
zem ka
sēn ga
ham ba
lin da
nam pa
nan ga
wam bi
yim bi

IN KO MO zon ke ze zi ka-Ti-
xo: un gum ni ni zo yè na. Kun-
ga bi ko nūm tu o zi ci ta yo. I pi-
we gu ye i mi fi si, ne mi ti yon-
ke zi ya pila ga yo; a pi we na-
man zi e zi wa sē la yo. Yim vu-
me yom ni ni zo u ku ba zi kon-
ze ti na 'ban tu in ko mo; zi ya-
si kon za go ko. Za pi wa in ko-
mo ku-No wa, na ku ti gu-Ti xo
um ni ni zo, u ku ze si zi xē le, si-
pi le ga zo; zi xē li we go ko. Zi-
xē li we in ko mo, go ku ba e vu-
me le ne na zo um ni ni zo; go ko
si na so i si xa so e si ku lu e si pi-
la ga so. Zi ya ni ka i ma zi za-
ko we tu lo ma si e si wa sē la yo

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The Xhosa-speaking peoples of south-eastern South Africa have a long tradition of oral poetry, extending back at least two hundred years. This book, first published in 1983, was the first detailed study of that tradition. Jeff Opland has assembled a large corpus of Xhosa oral poetry making his the first analysis of an active South African oral poetic tradition to be based on actual fieldwork. The book focuses in particular on the poetry produced by the imbongi, or court poet, and Professor Opland examines the poetry and careers of four such individuals. He describes the imbongi's informal training, the diction of his poetry and its improvisational character and the relationship of the poet to the chief and the community, revealing that the role of the poetry is essentially political. He also considers the nature of the poetry in relation to ritual. His discussion of Xhosa poetry in relation to theoretical constructs of oral poetry and of oral mental processes is an important contribution to the debate about the nature and distinctiveness of 'oral literature'. With its interdisciplinary approach, it will appeal to readers from many disciplines as well as to general readers interested in African culture.

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