

minority religions; and in some countries, like Benin or Burkina Faso, local religions still provide a primary identity for many and have wide-ranging influence on daily life for many others. As Ali Mazrui described in his 1979 Reith Lectures, *The African Condition* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), Christianity and Islam exerted influence over somewhat different times, spaces, and problems (i.e., Sunday mornings, theodicy) than those covered by already established traditions, which tended to be applied to practical questions of illness, drought, and fertility. Integrating this insight into the analysis would have strengthened it, especially for an audience concerned with issues specific to the region.

Yet the book still stands as an essential contribution and one that, I think, very few scholars working today in any discipline could have written. By neither vilifying nor idolizing religious devotion, but writing with balance and sensitivity, it demonstrates what good research on religion can provide to a concerned global public. It will work both in the classroom and as a reference for future researchers, and as such comes highly recommended.

Nicolette D. Manglos-Weber  
*The University of Notre Dame*  
 Notre Dame, Indiana

Nicolette.D.Manglos.1@nd.edu

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## LANGUAGES, LITERATURE, AND THE ARTS

**Innocentia Jabulisile Mhlambi. *African Language-Literatures: New Perspectives on IsiZulu Fiction and Popular Black Television Series*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012. 230 pp. Bibliography. Index. R270.00. \$34.95. Paper.**

In an often cited article from 1995 (“African Language-Literature and Postcolonial Criticism,” *Research in African Literatures* 26 [4]), Karin Barber, a leading scholar on African popular culture and African language literatures, complained about the “effacement” of literatures in indigenous languages in postcolonial theory. In many respects, Barber’s complaint represents the starting point for Mhlambi’s *African-Language Literatures: Perspectives on IsiZulu Fiction and Popular Black Television Series*. Focusing on isiZulu, Mhlambi seeks to dissolve two artificial binaries: the first one separating African language literary culture from an investment in modernity, and the second one separating the discursive practices of orality from contemporary writing. In other words, for Mhlambi, following in the footsteps of Barber (and also Ruth Finnegan, particularly *Oral Literature in Africa*, Open Book Publishers, 2012 [1970]), the oral is not necessarily in the past, nor is it always even oral.

Mhlambi’s book offers insight into the place of African language literary expression in South African popular culture, an insufficiently

acknowledged dimension of black popular culture in general. Three chapters examine isiZulu novels from the 1990s, analyzing the deployment of discursive elements associated with orality, while three examine television series in isiZulu from the same period. Mhlambi does not so much set out to confirm the persistence of tradition as to highlight adaptation and the reshaping of older discursive practices in the isiZulu expressive forms that have their place in the wide spectrum of South African popular culture.

The last three chapters of the book track the cross-fertilization of themes and concerns between isiZulu television dramas and literature, and between imaginative narrative in isiZulu and other forms of black popular culture. Mhlambi frames this discussion with references to critical discourses on creolization and intertextuality. For example, chapter 5, titled “Thematic Re-engagements,” examines how the television series *Gaz Lam* treats commonplace themes in isiZulu literature such as rural–urban migration and arranged marriage while also drawing on other popular black culture forms such as the musical genre Kwaito and the urban vernacular of Tsotsitaal. In short, this is one of the few books to track African-language verbal arts and narrative production across different formats. The influences and developments are conceived not so much as a forward-moving teleology, with one type gradually giving way to another, but as a constantly shifting state of osmosis in which discursive types migrate from one format to another without losing their ability to exert influence on, and absorb inspiration from, other discursive fields.

Unfortunately, while much of the discussion is shrewd and interesting, a certain amount of indeterminacy with respect to terminology has the effect of clouding rather than elucidating some of the major theoretical points, perhaps limiting the value of the book for African literary studies writ large. Several of the isiZulu movies analyzed are occasionally described as films, and at other times as television series. Which exactly are they? And all of the works (both written and filmed) are considered under the rubric of “literature,” an indeterminacy that starts with the title, which refers to “literature” rather than to the more generic “text” or “narrative.” But in using the word “literature” to identify all these textual types, Mhlambi appears to foreclose debate about the nature of the relationship between texts disseminated in different formats. If both print and television narratives borrow themes and perspectives from each other, are these themes and perspectives then represented and read in identical ways? What difference, if any, does the move from televisual media to print and back to performance make to the construction and presentation of selected themes in these texts?

Perhaps most importantly, one might ask, what purpose does the embedding of discursive practices associated with “traditional orality” serve in narratives focused on imagining and redefining modernity? This question is implied rather than explicitly expressed and addressed. In seeking to formulate a response, I return to Karin Barber, who in a more recent work writes that “discourse is the unremarked and unrepeated flow of utterances

in which most human activities are bathed. Text is created when instances of discourse, by being rendered detachable from their context of emission, are made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts" (*The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 22). If the distinction that Barber makes is correct, then what we have here are not just changing contexts for entextualization or the production of text, but changing functions for the process of detachment and reinsertion of discursive types. Thus for me, the underlying question prompted by Mhlambi's book is the following: What are the contexts, and more so, the functions of changing modes of entextualization in postcolonial literature in indigenous languages? This is a question not only for isiZulu literature, but also for Wolof, Gikuyu, Punjabi, and Maori literature.

This would seem to be the fundamental question that underlies the individual studies presented in the book, though the book does not explicitly acknowledge this. At one point, for example (p. 103), Mhlambi describes some forms of isiZulu narratives as "elitist." This is an interesting observation: Doesn't the mere fact of being composed in an African language automatically make them popular? That at least was the assumption behind Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's support for writing in African languages: that in order to be popular and to ensure popular access, African literature needed to be composed in African languages. Thus the value of Mhlambi's work for those of us who are not experts in the field of isiZulu literature lies not in the definitive answering of such questions, but in the extent to which it complicates our assumptions and prompts us to ask additional questions.

Moradewun Adejunmobi  
University of California  
Davis, California

[madejunmobi@ucdavis.edu](mailto:madejunmobi@ucdavis.edu)

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**Aissatou G. Sidikou and Thomas A. Hale, eds. *Women's Voices from West Africa: An Anthology of Songs from the Sahel*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. xv + 144 pp. Maps. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper.

What happens when women of the Sahel sing? "If the singer can be a fierce critic of her society," write Aissata Sidikou and Thomas Hale in *Women's Voices from West Africa: An Anthology of Songs from the Sahel*, "she can also keep the social fabric together by contextualizing and historicizing events: announcing, answering, or accentuating concerns; and exploring the conditions of her people in her songs" (7). Indeed, as the book illustrates, women's songs have for centuries depicted the Sahelian landscape and recounted the stories of empires and nations from a female point of view. Improvised by individual soloists as well as choruses representing collective communities of women, they are the constituents of a genre that