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## “The Gwarrie Call that they Recognise”: An Analysis of the Translated Sesotho Poem “*Ntwa ea Jeremane 1914*” (War against Germany 1914) by BM Khaketla (1913–2001)

Antjie Krog

This essay looks at a recently translated poem, “*Ntwa ea Jeremane 1914*”, written by BM Khaketla, as a lens through which to approach the feelings and attitudes of people from Lesotho towards the world wars. A poem is sometimes described as a gathering of spoken or written words, arranged in such a way that it evokes an intense imaginative alertness around an issue, an emotion or an experience. Investigations into the participation of black South Africans in the world wars mainly rest on official archival documentation, with attention focused on the racial, socio-economic context and the post-war treatment of soldiers. Distinction is seldom made between black South Africans and those from Lesotho (or Swaziland or Botswana) as they were all drafted under the South African contingents. There has been little discussion in South African art about why black people joined the Allied forces during the world wars, with the prominence of the sinking of the SS *Mendi* a wonderful exception as it reverberates in SEK Mqhayi’s famous poem, “*Ukutshona kuka Mendi*”, as well as Fred Khumalo’s recent novel, *Dancing the Death Drill* (2017). The visual artist William Kentridge has also commemorated the death of very large numbers of black Africans in the First World War in his powerful exhibition, *The Head and the Load*. This article explores the expression of emotions and conclusions about the world wars in a poem by Khaketla, as well as the techniques he uses to carry these across larger vistas.

**Keywords:** Lesotho; “*Ntwa ea Jeremane 1914*”; BM Khaketla; poetry; translation; world wars

Two historical landscapes are important in the context in which this poem should be read: the first is the engagement, prior to the world wars, between England and Lesotho (the country of Bennett Makalo Khaketla); and the second is the treatment of black soldiers after these wars.

Around 1820 Moshoeshoe I forged the Basotho into a nation of about 40 000 people with a stronghold at Thaba Bosiu near Maseru.<sup>1</sup> The threat of the emigrant Boers in 1834, and their subsequent desire to annex Lesotho to the Republic of the Orange Free State, saw Moshoeshoe urgently and persistently seeking the protection of the British Crown until it was granted in 1868. British protection saved the Basotho kingdom – although by that stage it was already much reduced in size.<sup>2</sup> The country was briefly annexed by the Cape Colony in 1884, but again removed from Cape control and placed under direct British rule. This protected status enabled Lesotho to resist incorporation into the proposed Union of South Africa in 1910, in which division along racial lines was increasing.<sup>3</sup>

Lesotho leaders feared the Union. As Simon Phamote of the Sotho National Council said: “We know that ... the Boers will one day get their independence from the British”,<sup>4</sup> and then that Lesotho would simply dissolve into a broader South Africa with its racist laws and socio-economic oppression. Their ability jealously to guard their independence from South Africa via their direct link to England provided Basotho people with a different perspective on the

Empire's actions during the time of Lesotho king Nathaniel Griffith Lerotholi, who ruled from April 1913 to July 1939. A great many young Basotho men joined the South African Native Labour Contingent of black soldiers to fight for the British during the First World War.

In his essay, "Black Men in a White Man's War: The Impact of the First World War on South African Blacks", Albert Grundlingh suggests that one of the major shortcomings of research on the First World War is the "inclination to divorce the fighting side of war from its socio-economic and political context" (1982: 1). He describes how the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) was formed by the South African Government in September 1916 in response to urgent requests from the Imperial authorities for manpower to expand their military infrastructure. The idea was that black soldiers would only serve in a non-combatant capacity, doing various kinds of work in the docks of the French channel ports, building roads, working on railways, quarrying, and other similar activities; so 21 000 men left for France, constituting almost 25% of the total military labour force for the huge Somme offensive (1982: 3). On the insistence of the South African government, black South Africans were however isolated in closed compounds – the only unit in France to be accommodated in this way – in order to prevent "Africans acquiring ideas which the authorities considered detrimental to white South African interests" (1982: 3).

In his essay on the South African Native Labour Contingent's recruitment of black soldiers for the war, Brian Willan offers an extensive analysis of how South African authorities tried to control the use of black soldiers so that they did not operate on equal footing with whites, as that would have led to a breakdown of the social colour bar with "unacceptable implications" (1978: 65). The value of their non-combatative work was however much appreciated by the British military authorities: the official War Office commented on the "splendid reputation for good work under the hardest conditions conceivable".

Willan notes that a disproportionate number of the African elite (to the size of their class in the total black population) joined the forces (1978: 65). Among various reasons suggested for this was the idea of proving their loyalty to the "civilising Imperial power in an hour of need, as well as the notion that service abroad was an educative experience" (1978: 66). Even Sol T Plaatje suggested that "six months in France would teach them more than ten years in Kimberley: it was just like a great educational institution without having to pay the fees" (1978: 66). There also existed the fervent hope that through fighting the war, people could negotiate a fairer dispensation afterwards: "The Great War has ... opened a chance to us, ... let us not lose the chance", argued LT Mvabaza on the eve of the contingent's departure to Britain (Grundlingh 1982: 12). In the poem to be discussed, I also want to point to another motive emerging in the text for the participation of Lesotho soldiers in the war effort.

The second contextualising landscape to the poem is the treatment of black soldiers in the aftermath of the war. Disillusionment set in quickly. There was much unhappiness about the absence of any reward or recognition locally or internationally for their sacrifices. The greatest anger was directed at the fact that black and white soldiers faced the same dangers, were killed in the same way, and yet, back in southern Africa, none of that equality existed or was recognised. Willan quotes a report from the Transvaal Native National Congress in this regard:

King George himself had said that natives should have their freedom just the same as any other nations. Look, we have been assisting the Kingdom in these great wars and many of our children, fathers, and brothers have died in the war or have sunk in the sea. So why can't we have our freedom just the same as any other nation? (1978: 84–85)

Veterans received no war medals or gratuities, and all the promises made during recruitment were swept from the table, including that they would be relieved from paying poll tax, be exempted from pass laws and be given free grants of land as well as cattle.

Having served their purpose, these men were repatriated without any further ado. This means that although the men from Lesotho went to war on the strength of their ‘special relations’ to the British, they were treated the same as black South Africans. Many of them were in dire distress; without food and with little money they streamed back to poverty-stricken areas. This was particularly the case with the Sotho because during 1914 Basutoland experienced a severe shortage of food.<sup>5</sup> A disillusioned AK Xabanisa described his situation as follows: “I am just like a stone which after killing a bird nobody bothers about, no one cares to see where it falls.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Second World War Lesotho played a more effective and specific role, expending great effort to distinguish its members from those of the South African contingents. The 35th Basutoland National Council fulfilled the request of Paramount Chief Seeiso that 100 000 pounds “be made available from Basutoland funds to buy aeroplanes for the British war effort. By early 1941, there was a spitfire squadron of 20 aircraft bearing names such as Maseru, Thaba-Bosiu and Lijabatho” (Ambrose 1993: 141). Despite the fact that during the Second World War the non-combative conditions for black soldiers remained the same, the racial division failed to work out as stringently as before. Although the recruits’ role was again envisioned to be that of mere labourers and guards, guarding military installations, some vital infrastructure and prisoners of war, by 1941, due to shortages of manpower, black soldiers’ roles were extended to their being deployed as transport drivers, dispatch riders, medics and office workers at home and abroad.<sup>7</sup>

But black recruits also quickly became armed soldiers. Petrus Dlamini testified about the replacement of their “old” guns with better ones: “Then we went to El Alamein and they took these [Italian] guns that we had and that were not right and they gave us short magazine Lee-Enfield .303. We got them at El Alamein.”<sup>8</sup> Dlamini continued:

It [the 8th Army] pushed. Ai! Man! It was terrible, soldiers were lying dead, black and white, but the Germans were retreating and we kept following them. The Germans ran away. Now we were having short magazine guns. We pushed them. They said we went 300 miles [...].<sup>9</sup>

Again the Lesotho soldiers were treated abominably after the war ended, so although the poet BM Khaketla was born in 1913, shortly before World War 1, he probably often heard discussion of the post-war treatment of black soldiers.

### Some Notes on the Poet

The poem “*Ntwa ea Jeremane 1914*” was published in 1954 in the volume titled *Lipshamanthe* (Astonishments).



Bennett Makalo Khaketla was born in Lesotho in 1913, started school in Souru, continued in Mohlapiso and gained a teaching certificate from Mariazell College. He struggled to find employment during the economic depression, but while teaching at St Patrick’s School in Bloemfontein, he studied for a BA degree at UNISA, and returned to Lesotho in 1953 as a teacher who later also became a school principal (Phafoli 1996: 23).

Khaketla is regarded as arguably the second major figure in Southern Sotho literature after Thomas Mofolo, producing remarkable works in all three major literary genres: two novels, *Meokho ea thabo* (1945, Tears of Joy) and *Mosali a nkholo* (1960, A Woman Betrayed Me); three plays, *Moshoeshoe le baruti* (1947, Moshoeshoe and the Missionaries), *Tholoana tsa sethepu* (1954, Results of Polygamy) and *Bulane* (1958); as well as a poetry volume, *Lipshamanthe* (1954, Astonishments).

Although these creative works are a considerable literary achievement and legacy in Sesotho, Khaketla is probably more renowned in Lesotho as a formidable political analyst and journalist. He and a number of colleagues formed their own newspaper *Mohlabani* (Warrior), which became very popular in the 1950s in Lesotho. Its main objective was to criticise the British administration for its unequal and unfair treatment of the Basotho people (Phafoli 1996: 27). His texts were regarded as so fiercely critical that he and a colleague were dismissed from their teaching posts. Although OR Tambo successfully defended them in the subsequent court case, Khaketla decided to devote himself full time to the newspaper (1996: 27). His editorials of the 1950s evidence Khaketla's remarkable grasp of international politics as well as of the complex interrelation between culture and politics as part of the New African movement.<sup>10</sup>

### “The War with Germany” (1914)

Here is Khaketla's Sesotho poem, followed by Tšepiso Mothibi's English translation:

*“Ntoa ea Jeremane 1914”*

*Hloaea tsebe u mamele oa nkholo,  
U mamele masisimosa-mele:  
Taba tsa banna li mosenekeng,  
Li batla ho reetsoa ka tsebe-lethoethoe.*

*E n'e le ka khoeli ea Phato, selemo,  
Meea, Lesotho, e foka, e puputla,  
Ho thunya marōle a mafubelu tšere!  
Kahohle ho utloahala lepukupuku.*

*Ra utloa ho hlajoa mokhosi ka mose,  
Ka mose ho maoatle ho la Jiropo,  
Ho beheloa chaba tsa lohle lefatše  
Bosōtō ba chaba tsa nah'a Jiropo.*

*Ke ofe ea sa ka a utloa molumo?  
Molumo oa lithunya le oa likanono?  
Lerata la tsona la thiba litsèbè,  
La tšela maoatle la fihla Lesotho.*

*Mosotho a botsa: “Molato ke ofe,  
Ha ho ruthuthanoa, ho lla likanono?”  
Ba mo ooeletsa, ba bua moeka:  
“Lipoho lia koeba, li fata makoatsi!”*

*“Ke ea Jeremane le ea Engelane,  
Li khonya haholo, li bohla senare;  
Ho khonya ha tsona ho khoesa maseea,  
Lebese le hlanye le le matsoeleng!”*

*Oa Botšelela, moroala-korone,*

*E n'e le koloane le benya sekama;  
A hana ho utloa, a tela borena,  
Mophato oa hae a o khobokanya.*

*A loana senna le thaka tsa hae,  
Likulo tsa hae leholiotsoana,  
Tsa tsosa lifefo, tsa chesa linaha,  
Tsa ba tsa tlabola K'heisare litelu.*

*Na o n'a ka khutsa mor'a Lerotholi,  
Setlōlō sa Kholu le sa Fitoria?  
A hana hehehe, a latola bosehla,  
A bolela: eabo ha e che a le teng.*

*A tea mololi likhoari tsa utloa,  
Ha tlōla maqhae le liqhoqhobela,  
Ha tlōla mehohla e telu li thata,  
Ha tlōl'a sebele malala-a-laotsoe.*

*Maseea a e-khoa a siea matsoele,  
A khoesoa ke oa e moholo, mololi,  
Morena Kerefese oa Lerotholi,  
A mathela mose ho thiba semeche.*

*"Bathusi ba lōna ke Majeremane,"  
Ho bua lithoto le litseketeke;  
"Le a rapelle a pshatle mahata  
A Manyesemane, balotsanahali!"*

*Ba bang ba bua, ba pepesa feela;  
"Satane oa khale hase le molemo,  
E mocha, kamehla, hase ho chesaka!  
Rōna re rata oa rōna oa khale."*

*Ho joang kajeno? E timile hlaha.  
Ea tingoa ka eng? Ka mali a Basotho.  
Tšepiso li kae tsa bolokolohi?  
U tsebe, ngoan'eso, setsoeng ho hōle!*

*"The War against Germany 1914"*

Sharpen your ears, child of Grandma,  
and listen to a story that makes the body tremble with concern:  
matters of men are at a bottleneck,  
and need to be listened to with a keen ear.

It was in the month of August, already spring,  
the time in Lesotho when the winds blow strongly,  
shooting up dusts of crimson!  
From every direction, the wind was flapping up a plethora of dust.

That was the time we heard a piercing alarm from overseas,  
from far away, in the land of Europe,  
reporting to all the nations of the world  
the misery of the nations of Europe.

Was there anyone there who did not hear that thunder,  
the thunder of guns and cannons?

Their din deafened the ears,  
it crossed oceans and reached Lesotho.

Then a Mosotho asked, "What is the reason  
for this barrage, and the wall-breaking sound of cannons?"  
The truth was shouted at him,  
"The bulls are goring, they throw up the dust that they tear from the ground!"

"It is the bulls of Germany and of England,  
they roar terribly, they bellow like buffaloes;  
their bellowing makes infants pull away from the nipple,  
and curdles the milk that is still in mothers' breasts."

The Sixth George that bore the crown,  
still smeared with the glittering antimony of the initiate,  
refused to listen and instead put his kingship on the line.  
He gathered his regiment.

He and his peers fought like men,  
their bullets a tornado,  
they raised storms, they scorched lands,  
they even singed the Kaiser's beard.

Could the son of Lerotholi then keep quiet,  
last black grandson of Kholu and Victoria?  
No, no, no, he refused the colour of yellow neutrality,  
and declared, "The king's home will not burn down while I am here."

He whistled because partridges call one another with the *gwarrie* call that they recognise.  
Up jumped the gallant heroes and the valiant,  
up jumped the strong with hard beards,  
up jumped those who were ready to begin battle today  
although they heard about it only yesterday.

Infants weaned and abandoned the breast,  
they were weaned by the Old One's whistle,  
King Griffiths of Lerotholi,  
he hastened overseas to halt the colliding smash.

"Your saviours are the Germans",  
said the fools and the idiots.  
"Pray that they crunch the skulls  
of the great conniving English!"

Some said, opening up the real issue:  
"The Satan of old may be better  
than the new one, always burning, without rest!  
We prefer the old one."

How are things today? The blaze has been stamped out.  
What was it extinguished with? Basotho blood.  
Where are those promises of freedom now?  
You know, my brothers and sisters, it is too difficult to bite your own elbow!

The translation itself warrants a study on its own, but in this essay I am concerned with exploring the expression of emotions and conclusions about the world wars in the poem by Khaketla, as well as some of the techniques he uses to carry these across larger vistas than merely war.

### Analysis

Although it is published as a written poem and not as a recording of an oral praise poem performance, the poem opens with typical oral opening lines: a call to the attention of listeners because an important and crucial moment has arrived (Guma 1967: 154). The listener is being requested to listen carefully with sharp (pricked up) ears, because the material to follow is complex, and only careful listening will make understanding possible.

In her essay, “The Blanket of Darkness: Problems in Translating from a Bantu Language into English”, Mary C Bill discusses the challenge of translating this specific requirement about listening from isiTsonga into English: “*rhiya ndleve*”, she says, literally means “set the ear”. *Ku rhiya* is to set something, e.g. a trap, or to cock the hammer of a gun: “In English, you can cock your hat, a dog can stand with its ears cocked, you can cock your nose in contempt, you can be cock-eyed, but you can’t ‘cock your ears’. So here again I have resorted to paraphrase, ‘listen attentively’” (Bill 1982: 36).

In his praise poem delivered at a UNISA event, poet MK Mothoagae begs: “*Ahelele! Ahelele!* Give me your ears! It is the son of Diutlwileng who is praising here – the leopard of the big lakes” (Krog 2002: 203). Other poems in indigenous languages point to the same kind of opening strategy, albeit with different metaphors. In the Sesotho poem “*Ntwa ea Lithunya*” ZD Mangoaela asks for his audience to put their sharp ears “next to the Precipice” (2002: 212). In her long oral poem, TshiVenda *imbongi* Tshinanga Makhadzi asks her audience to put down their sticks, to take the bundles from their heads, because she, the black rhinoceros, wants to speak (Krog 2002: 148). In a *sefela* recorded by David B Coplan, the request is for the audience to “bend” a “dry grass stalk” double to “dig out the earwax and listen to the wonders and evils of the world” (Coplan 1994: 10).

By further addressing the listener as the “child of Grandma”, homage is paid and appeal is made in Khaketla’s poem both to the intimacy of oral stories as told by grandma and the ancestry speaking to the attentive ears for bodies to be stirred or “tremble” with concern. The speaker-poet signals that he is not inventing text as an unrestricted artist, but is the mouthpiece also of the ancestors. Via them he is on such familiar footing with his audience that he can call them the grandchildren of grandma – the whole audience is therefore family. Matters “are at a bottle neck”, a great many complex issues are coming together and are therefore hard to formulate. One should listen carefully.

In a wonderful display of words and sounds the poet, echoed by the translator, suggests an intense occurrence of fierce wind and skies filled with red dust-storms. Note the explosive spitting sounds of *puputla* – a fire stoked so much it makes smoke; *lepukupuku* – blowing so hard that it makes a moaning sound; *thunya* – the explosion of gunfire but with the visual image of a branch bursting into blossoms. The redness is intensified by using *mafubelu* (red) with *there* – very very red; both words used together evoke an intense form of blushing, of blood gathering. The translator uses the s-sound, as well as explosive p-, t- and d-sounds, to indicate fierce winds: “shooting up dusts of crimson!/  
From every direction, the wind was flapping up a plethora of dust”.

In the third and fourth stanzas one finds the two kinds of rhyming that JM Lenake explains in his analysis of the poetry of KE Ntsane (Lenake 1994: 145–149): internal rhymes; as well as rhyming of thought. In the first two lines synonyms for the concept of “overseas” are utilised as a form of rhyming, while the next two lines have internal rhyme:

That was the time we heard a piercing alarm from *overseas*,  
from *far away*, in the land of *Europe*,  
reporting to all the nations of the world  
the misery of the nations of Europe.



The poet skilfully uses direct speech right through the poem, bringing an immediacy and reality to the event. An ordinary person, “a Mosotho man”, does not understand what is happening. Why is nature like this? What are these terrifying sounds? This allows the poet to describe the war in visual and metaphoric terms instead of through historical facts: the bulls and the buffaloes are fighting.

Bulls preparing for a vicious fight are often described in indigenous poetry, and almost always linked to death. In the poem “Black Wednesday” describing the events of 16th June 1976 the poet HML Lentsoane says: “The big bulls, the armoured tanks, turned hastily and kicked up dust” (Hall and Krog 2018: 196). In his “*Sefela*”, Teboho Raboko greets a pandemic killing hundreds of people as: “Hail, Thin Death, Bull of Raboko”: “There where you go, Bull-of-Raboko,/ you fight wars./ You fight in the middle of a blaze of burning spears,/ the fierce are in the middle of that war” (Hall and Krog 2018: 148). In his famous poem about death, LMS Ngcwabe addresses death: “You bull whom people fear even before you gore,/ battering with your horn like a rhinoceros,/ / Creator of orphans,/ fountain of tears! / Hippo-pool of desperation!” (Hall and Krog 2018: 189). In the poem “Aa! Hail, Unsettling Country, You Hero of Britain!”, SEK Mqhayi calls Queen Victoria a she-buffalo. Her son is “the son of the she-buffalo, Victoria,/ a woman like a god in the country of men,/ a mystical, supernatural warrior-priestess” (Hall and Krog 2018: 141). In her song about the handsomeness of a lover, Princess Magogo sings: “Ah, my father! Ah, my father!/ I love him for his handsomeness, my people!/ A human child:// [with] the forehead of a buffalo!” (Hall and Krog 2018: 43). Clearly, the war between bulls and buffaloes is a dangerous space where any and all kinds of deaths await one.

But apart from spilling blood, making frightening noises, inspiring heroes to volunteer participation, war also disturbs the natural flow of life: babies pull away from their mother’s milk, they wean prematurely, and breast milk curdles – all indicators of unfortunate disruption.

The importance of equilibrium and harmony in African ontologies and cosmologies in southern Africa is emphasised by Harriet Ngubane in her book, *Body and Mind in Zulu Medicine: An Ethnography of Health and Disease in Nyuswa-Zulu Thought and Practice* (1977). Health, balance and equilibrium mean the “harmonious working and coordination of this universe” (1977: 27–28). The concept of “balance” in isiZulu is implied in the word *lungisa* (vb *lunga*) – “to put in order, arrange, adjust, set as it should be, tidy, or *hlela*, or *uhlelo*; *ukuzilungisa*, meaning moral order, a symmetrical sense of relation” (1977: 27–28). In order to survive, everyone must establish and maintain a form of balance with his surroundings. The balance is established not only between a man and his impersonal surroundings (nature), but also between man and man (1977: 26).

It is therefore possible that at least one of the reasons the Basotho volunteered for the fight against Germany was to restore balance, to bring back equilibrium, not only in the world at large, but also in their personal racialised and socio-economically oppressed worlds.

What did the Basotho and their king do when this alarm reached Lesotho? The poet refers to the longstanding links between the Basotho and England. England’s protection of Lesotho, through the requests of Basotho kings, makes the Basotho king part of the extended British royal family, a relative of the Queen. Being the last “black grandson of Queen Victoria”, the Basotho king could not but react positively to this call for help.

Using the wonderful idiomatic notion that partridges know, recognise and acknowledge one another through the sounds and calls that they make, the poet suggests that the Basotho recognised their fellow folk in England and could not do otherwise than respond to their cry for help with compassion. The partridge is known for its sudden loud call which is often heard before the bird is seen. Partridges are also lured by hunters through imitation calls.

This stanza, so rich in metaphor, is also piercing with sound: *likhoari* (pronounced with a hard “g” as “*dikgwari*”, suggesting the sound of the partridge) is followed by a hail of hard tongue-

clicking q's as well as t's and a d: “*Ha tlōla maqhaoe le liqhoqhobela; telu di thata*”, strengthened by the repetition at the opening of each line of “*Ha tlōla*”. The translator makes excellent use of the ideophone<sup>11</sup> embedded in the Sesotho word *likhoari*: “He whistled because partridges call one another with the *gwarrie* call that they recognise.” The metaphor of the partridge is not merely a case of “birds of a feather that (should) flock together”, but in fact a recognition of a broader humanity. The British should be supported because they are family, understanding the principle of support during times of crisis.

This philosophical reasoning had already been formulated by various African intellectuals. When the ship Mendi was sinking, the black soldiers on deck were addressed by Reverend Isaac Wauchope Dyobha,<sup>12</sup> formulating the reason for fighting as something much more profound than merely financial reward, educative advantage or unthinking acts of desperation by impoverished people:

Be quiet and calm, my countrymen, for what is taking place now is exactly what you came to do. *You are going to die, but that is what you came to do.* Brothers, we are drilling the drill of death. I, a Xhosa, say you are all my brothers, Zulus, Swazis, Pondos, Basutos, *we die like brothers.* We are the sons of Africa. Raise your cries, brothers, for though they made us leave our weapons at our home, our voices are left with our bodies. (My emphasis)

The poet SEK Mqhayi, also reacting to the sinking of the Mendi, says in a poem that black people wanted to assist in the war because the war was fought for justice: “Therefore, Sotase! It [the war] was the beginning of righteousness!” (Hall and Krog 2018: 85). Mqhayi deliberately puts the willing participation of black people in a white man's war in a broader perspective:

We did not have to beg you;  
we did not buy you with pieces of meat;  
we did not have to give you precious things;  
we did not have to promise you a plenteous harvest –  
we are saying this even to you who died in Africa,  
or in the sunrise side of Germany –  
or in the sunset side of Germany –  
you went because of your respect for your own king,  
you went because *you accepted your shared humanity with Britain.*  
(Hall and Krog 2018: 85 – My emphasis)

Mmapule Emma Ramaila celebrates the indivisibility of humanity in her praise poem for Modjadji: “Agee ... Agaa ... ! Let us head for Bolobedu, / place where respect is given to cattle and humans./Place-of-No-Distinction-Among-Humans, where only witches discriminate./The place of Madumane at the Modjadji palms” (Hall and Krog 2018: 158).

War, killing, terrible fighting are taking place. In his essay about black soldiers in the First World War, Grundlingh describes an event that left a significant impression on black South Africans, and one can imagine even more so on Basotho soldiers. On 10 July 1917 the British king, George V, inspected and addressed the contingent. For many of the educated Africans it was an unforgettable experience to see the king in person – the supreme symbol of imperial supremacy and British justice which loomed so large in their imagination: “‘We saw him, George V, our king, with our own eyes [...] To us it is a dream, something to wonder at’, mused ML Posholi” (Grundlingh 1982: 20). The king not only praised them for their labour, but assured them: “You are also part of my great armies fighting for the liberty and freedom of my subjects of all races and creeds throughout the empire” (Grundlingh 1982: 6).



But at this point the reader encounters a problem in the text. The poem speaks of George VI, but he was king during the Second World War, not the First, which occurred during the time of George V. Is the date 1914 in brackets in the title a mistake by the poet? Entered by the publisher? Clearly George VI is not a typographical mistake, because the description that follows fits the young king who had to step in after his brother's abdication. Still smeared with the ochre of the initiate, he decided to call on his own regiments – those who were initiated with him – to fight the war.

The poet introduces George VI as a brave fighter raising storms, scorching lands, even singeing the Kaiser's beard. Again a seeming anachronism: the Kaiser (who was also a grandson of Queen Victoria and a cousin of George V) was a major figure in the First World War, but had already abdicated and gone into exile as anti-Hitler before the Second World War. So now the poet is back to the First World War. There is a deliberate movement between the wars, and so a coining of them as one and the same thing.

In real life it was also uncannily true of the seasons – most of the action in terms of recruitment in the First and Second World Wars, as well as the important battles, took place before the South African planting season, during spring. The establishment of the South African Native Labour Contingent took place in September, the offensive at Somme from late August to early spring, and the fighting at El Alamein in October.

The poet, Khaketla, being also a political journalist and newspaper editor, was of course aware of the feelings of a special, but heavily thwarted, Lesotho relationship with the British government through their kings; and rapidly the reader (with sharpened ears) realises that the poem deliberately shifts between the two world wars. There was not much difference for the Basotho between these wars: in fact the war that started in 1914 against injustice was still continuing in the aftermath in the 1950s. Among the 21 463 Basotho men who took part in both wars, 1 105 of them were killed away from their homes and families. The returnees from the Second World War received a cash allowance of £ 2, a khaki suit worth the same, and a gratuity according to their length of service.<sup>13</sup> The reader realises that the poem is treating these two wars as one continuous war among white people in which black people were involved. Initially it was much more than an involvement, it was a wholehearted belief to fight with other righteous people for justice for all. But this turned out to be a falsehood.

The poet deliberately combines the wars against Germany in order to emphasise their similarity for Lesotho soldiers: whoever reigns in England, they are family, and one has to assist them in the wars against Germany. But, and this is important, there is always a "Germany" – those who threaten the larger family-of-righteous-people – and one will always support those

on the side of justice against those exercising injustice. In the end, however, not even those who claimed they were fighting for righteousness remained true to their word.

Bearing in mind that these wars have been referred to in South Africa as “the white men’s wars”, the poet now diverts bitterly from Mqhayi’s forceful statement that black people were fighting on the side of “righteousness”, wanting their names to be written among those who stood up for justice. He quotes those who are in effect saying: have you not learnt (from the First World War) that the British are dishonest, that they promise freedom but after the war ignore you?

Kakhetla is obviously aware of voices saying, “God be with Germany and clear out all Englishmen on earth” (Grundlingh 1982: 6), and reprimands them, saying that both groups are evil. In a newspaper article Kakhetla famously wrote:

We do not, in the least, belittle what the English have done to uplift the people of Ghana. What happens to be our object of hatred is their practice, for which they have become notorious among the colonial peoples, of always digging in their roots where ever they set foot. They are never satisfied with doing what they set out to do, and having accomplished it leave the people of the particular country to their own devices. So it happened in Ghana as it has happened in many another country. The English leech stuck its hooks into the black bowels of a black country inhabited by a black folk . . . . (Quoted in Grundlingh 1982: 13)

Another piece of direct speech in the poem holds no punches: both these groups are “Satan” – confirming that the old Satan was at least useful, while the new Satan was just burning whatever he sees.

The poem concludes with the very sad and disillusioned thought:

How are things today? The blaze has been stamped out.  
 What was it extinguished with? Basotho blood.  
 Where are the promises of freedom now?  
 You know, my brothers and sisters, it is too difficult to bite your own elbow!

## Conclusion

In their essay, “Translating: A Political Act” (1996), Alvarez and Vidal quote Susan Bassnett’s refusal to accept that translation is always a betrayal. She says that translation “becomes the act that ensures the life of the text and guarantees its survival. Far from traducing the pure original, the translation injects new life blood into a text bringing it to the attention of a new world of readers in a different language” (1996: 6). Touching briefly on a few markers in the translated poem offers glimpses of the potential of various kinds of ‘new knowledge’ embedded in poems like this written in indigenous languages.

So what does the poem say to us today? Coplan suggests that the “art of praising is an exercise in moral imagination as well as political communication” (1994: 52). Indeed. In this praise poem Kakhetla wants to contrast the sacrifice of the Basotho, and the reasons behind this sacrifice, not only against the treatment they received, but against the impossibility of expecting humanity from either of these groups (English or German). The Basotho gave their blood to be able to add their names to those righteous ones who fought for freedom, but were forced to live with the offensive, deprecating treatment of the British, and later with the Apartheid government. In fact, in terms of the poem’s covering the aftermath of both wars in South Africa, it points to the inability of white people in general ever to reach this sense of fairness and equality. Just as they can never reach/ bite their own elbows, so they can never reach a concept of fair equality. The Sesotho dictionary adds to the meaning of *setsoe* (elbow), the following: *I could bite my elbow, i.e. it is impossible.*

The elbow is part of the body; it is close to the heart, the brain; the elbow is a crucial component of the spear-throwing arm, the harvesting arm, the embracing arm. The elbow represents the capacity for radical change in direction. Besides, the elbow can be reached by the other hand, so when someone's elbow is out of reach, that person is deliberately debilitating the body of humanity.

There is also something deeply fatalistic in that idiom in the last line. The poet is re-grouping his listeners by directly addressing them as in the opening phrase: you should know, my brother and sister, all these promises of freedom, to be saved, are rubbish; we are as far away, our blood as unnoticed, our existence as marginal, as the elbow is a hardly acknowledged part of the body of humanity.

### Notes on Contributor

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### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes

1. <https://www.gov.ls/about-lesotho/>; <https://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/lesotho/history>; <https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/lesotho#:~:text=In%201959%20Basutoland%20became%20a,and%20became%20known%20as%20Lesotho.&text=Lesotho%20was%20also%20rocked%20by,King%20Moshoeshe%20II%20into%20exile>.
2. Ibid.
3. <https://en.unesco.org/courier/news-views-online/first-world-war-and-its-consequences-africa>
4. Ibid.
5. Grundlingh quoting: C.A.D., J.208/5/314/14, Lt. E. Hardiman to Staff Officer Bloemfontein, 13 August 1914 (copy) p 8.
6. Grundlingh, quoting C.T.A., C.M.T. 3/925/778/2, A.K. Xabanisa to Chief Magistrate Transkei, 28 December 1919. p 8.
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native\\_Military\\_Corps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Military_Corps)
8. <https://samilhistory.com/2017/05/28/armed-sa-native-military-corps-in-ww2-this-corps-screams-out-for-a-definitive-work/>
9. Ibid.
10. <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/newafre/writers/khaketla/khaketlaS.htm>
11. Oosthuysen describes an ideophone as a stereotyped audible representation or image of an idea, e.g. *isithuthuthu* for a motorbike. It evokes an idea in sound, describing a predicate, qualificative and /or an adverb. "This part of speech is relatively uncommon in Western languages and that makes it difficult to translate hence there is usually inconsistency in translating these kinds of words" (Oosthuysen 2016: 353).
12. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/ss-mendi>
13. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/soldiers-without-reward-africans-south-africas-wars>

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