

John Knox Bokwe (1855–1922): A model of creative tension in the late 19th and early 20th-century South Africa

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The year 2022 marks a century since the death of Reverend John Knox Bokwe, a minister of the United Free Church of Scotland Mission in South Africa. Although little known, Bokwe was an important member of the emerging African intellectual elite towards the end of the 19th century. He demonstrated the creative tension that arises when two cultures encounter each other as he confronted and made sense of the historical meaning of modernity. He emphasised the value of his traditional culture in a context where western culture was making a significant transforming impact on African life, which produced a creative tension throughout his working life in various contexts. This paper analyses his particular contribution as an active committed Christian through a number of overlapping lenses – his life in clerical work, journalism, literature, theology, education, music and his involvement in social and political issues and ministry. In all this he operated with a holistic vision. The paper offers an assessment of his life's work using a combination of primary and secondary sources.

Contribution: This article adds to the growing body of work that is derived from studies on the emergence of indigenous leadership in South Africa by looking at the life, work and Christian witness of Rev John Knox Bokwe from the perspective of the creative tension that he experienced and navigated in the varied professional and vocational perspectives he engaged in during his life.

Keywords: Bokwe; John Knox; Lovedale Missionary Institution; Ntselamanzi; Ntsikana; Ugie; *UloThixo Omkhulu* (Great Hymn).

Introduction¹

If Rev Tiyo Soga (1829–1871) was a prime example of universes in collision (Ashley 1980; Duncan 2018) during the middle of the 19th century, then Rev John Knox Bokwe was an example of universes in creative tension in the next generation. Yet, despite the significant contribution he, and others of the late 19th-century intellectual elite in South Africa, made to the recognition of black leadership, he has been largely forgotten until now, the centenary of his death:

The untended gravesite of Rev Bokwe, just a stone's throw from the current campus of Lovedale College on the way from Alice to Ntselamanzi, the village of his birth and death, illustrates how unrecognised and unappreciated are the legacies of legends and legendary institutions by the current government. We should not be fooled by government officials' repetition of the slogan that the Eastern Cape is the 'Home of Legends' because it is not coupled with actions. (Mba 2022:1)

I can identify with this image, for Bokwe's grave has stood untended for many years. When I first arrived at Lovedale in 1978, I had to look for the grave, which was virtually lost in the undergrowth on the bank of the River Tyumie. What a poor historical tribute to a great servant of the Church!

Life history

John Knox Bokwe was born on 15 March 1855 into the Ngqika Mbamba clan to Cholwephi Jacob and Lena (daughter of Nxe), one of the first converts of Ntsikana, the Xhosa prophet. He was their lastborn child, born at Ntselamanzi, close to Lovedale (Mqhayi [1925] 1972:17). His parents left him when he was 1 day old at Lovedale Mission run by the Free Church of Scotland (Ntantal 1995:1). This was the first instance of creative tension within a traditional Xhosa family (his grandfather

¹This article is an expanded version of a lecture given in a Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) webinar on 15 March 2022 (Bokwe's birthday) to commemorate the centenary of the death of Rev John Knox Bokwe. It was organised in conjunction with the Eastern Cape government and the John Knox Bokwe Foundation. The actual celebrations took place on 19 March 2022 at Alice in the Eastern Cape.

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was a councillor to Chief Ngqika [Roberts (1925) 1972:3]) that they should offer their son to a western educational institution so soon after his birth. This exposed him to creative tension, which he would experience throughout his life. His father was one of Lovedale's first pupils when it opened in 1841 (Nyoni 2022:1), so beginning a generational connection with Lovedale (Matthews 1981:38). John was named after the 16th-century Scottish reformer, John Knox. He grew up within the Reformed Free Church of Scotland tradition at Ntselamanzi, and was taught by William David Msindwana and William Kobe Ntsikana, who was the grandson of Ntsikana, the Xhosa prophet and hymn writer (Millard 1999:7). Within his western education he was introduced to his traditional culture. He earned the nickname *Mdengentonga* (small in stature but great in achievement, a man with a big mind, Matthews 1981:39).

A story is told how one day:

In 1867, when he was twelve, he encountered a family with which he was to become closely associated. He later related that, when he and two friends went to watch the Thyumie River in full flood, and passed by the mission station, he was attracted by some beautiful music, which he had never heard before. Drawing nearer, he saw a white lady sitting in front of a box from which the music seemed to come. When she saw him, she beckoned to him and asked him: 'Where can we get clean water?' He went and brought her the water. The woman was Mrs. Stewart, wife of the newly-arrived missionary [Rev Dr James Stewart]. (Ntantal 1995:1)

This initiated his lengthy relationship with the Stewart family.

Bokwe began his education in the preparatory class at Lovedale in 1866 and entered the college in 1869. He completed his education in 1873 (Stewart 1888:22) having made excellent progress in English language (Roberts [1925] 1972:5). From an early stage, Bokwe worked at the institution in order to pay his fees. In 1867, he helped in the missionary's house earning half a crown per month. He progressively earned more as he took on work with greater responsibility. Bokwe was absolutely committed to the Lovedale system. During a time of conflict between students, Bokwe informed on them (Dr Jane Waterston in eds. Bean & Van Heyningen 1983:316–317):

[H]e is always cheerful and willing at any hour of the day or night – and the quality of his work is excellent. His energy, reflection, and sound judgment, have rendered him a very valuable agent in connection with the complicated work of this place. (Note by Dr Stewart, undated, Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019)

This was confirmed by visitors to Lovedale:

The Doctor's Secretary, who is also cashier and book-keeper [*sic*], is a specimen and fruit of the work of Lovedale. A Kaffir by birth, trained at the Institution, to build which his father brought the first load of stones, he has himself, by natural aptitude and well-employed opportunity, fallen into a position of service and usefulness near the centre of the whole. He is what would be

described in home circles as a well-trained, business-man. He is respected by everyone, and is as ready to offer help outside his own sphere, as he is able to afford it within. ('Lovedale: How it Strikes a Stranger' FROM 'KENNEDY AT THE CAPE' Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019)

Bokwe was offered a substantial salary by leading merchants, but decided to remain at Lovedale, with which he had a life-long connection (Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019). He was also offered employment in government service by the colonial administrator, Sir Bartle Frere in 1878 (Roberts [1925] 1972:6).

While at Lovedale, Bokwe met Lettie Ncheni who also worked in Stewart's house and was also studying at Lovedale. Dr Jane Waterston (Bean & Van Heyningen 1983:31) noted that they were married in 1879. No further information is available regarding Lettie. He later married a second time to Maria Sopotela. In all he had five children. He was an office-bearer in the 'Lovedale Native Church' from 1875 (Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019). He was a tenor, and led 'the Kaffir choir of the Kaffir Church'. Visitors to the Lovedale church commented:

On Sunday we attended the little Native Church of Lovedale and heard a sermon in English by one of the teachers, which was translated in Kaffir with much feeling by John Knox. We were much struck with the singing of the hymns. One of them was a strange composition – the first Kaffir hymn ever written [Ntsikana's *Olu Thixo omkhulu?*] ... Next day we had the further satisfaction of hearing the Lovedale pupils, under the baton of John Knox Bokwe, sing secular music in the lecture-room. We enjoyed, above all, the characteristic 'Kaffir Wedding Song'. (From Kennedy at the Cape, Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019)

When Bokwe left Lovedale in 1897, his colleagues at Lovedale expressed their deep regret at his departure and presented him with £25 and a Bible as a token of the high regard in which he was held. He worked for a short period in journalism and was soon afterwards that he realised that his true calling was to the ministry. This was a time when Bokwe suffered from ill health. In 1899 he left for his wife's home at Tsomo, in the Transkei, to recuperate. This gave him the opportunity to fulfil his boyhood dream and to become a minister of the church. He left Tsomo for Ugie (eDyoki) in 1900, where he served first as an evangelist, and then as a probationer under the supervision of Rev Dundas L Erskine, minister at Somerville in Tsolo. Erskine was in charge of the Maclear district of the UFCoS (Dana [1925] 1972:13). Perhaps Bokwe's illness was part of his discernment process as he struggled to respond to his call. At Ugie, he interpreted his role in a creative manner as he extended his activities to include, among other things, education.

He went to Scotland twice; once in 1892 and, after returning to Scotland for a second time, to be trained for the ministry. He was ordained a minister of the Free Church of Scotland at the age of 51 years in 1906 (Thompson 2000:179) and was stationed at Ugie mission in the Transkei where he participated in evangelistic missions and ministered to both black and white alike (Roberts [1925] 1972:8). He became

Town Clerk of Ugie and one of the town's most respected citizens (Smit 1964:83–84). Here his evangelistic work was successful in a context where, like most Victorian evangelists, he used music as a means to convert, to 'sing the gospel'. Bokwe Street in Ugie was named after him and is where John Knox Bokwe Memorial Congregation is situated (Jita & Mzaca 2022:2).

Bokwe was also a committed member of the Independent Order of True Templars, a temperance organisation. In this he was linked to politics because there was a widespread concern among the educated elite in the Cape that the introduction of European alcohol had the deliberate intention to undermine the African population. As early as 1883, the first conference of the *Imbumba yama Nyama* (Union of Black People) demanded a total ban on alcohol for Africans. This was linked to the growth of social and political aspirations according to Thompson (2000:170). Bokwe was a pacifist who believed that everyone is equal despite ethnic tensions between the Mfengu and Xhosa people in the Eastern Cape.

He retired in 1920 because of ill health (a trait he shared with his forebear, Rev Tiyo Soga), and returned to Ntselamanzi, which had been established to house the first African converts close to the Lovedale campus who had moved from Ncera village (Frieda Matthews diary entry in Matthews 1981:68). In 1921, Bokwe became involved in a conflict to resettle Ntselamanzi village because the Lovedale authorities believed it to be a distraction to the older male students. In failing health, Bokwe, the leading villager, became the principal spokesman of the residents in the drawn-out negotiations between the Lovedale authorities, the government and the villagers in representations to the Native Affairs Commission (Matthews 1981:68–69). The negotiations failed and Ntselamanzi was moved to a distance of two miles from its original location. This township hosts a congregation of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, named after John Knox Bokwe. Bokwe died soon afterwards on 22 February 1922. He was buried in the Gaga Cemetery, alongside other missionaries associated with Lovedale. Bokwe had pursued a variety of work activities during his life and gave his best to all of them; yet his true vocation was fulfilled in his call to the ministry where he continued to exercise a comprehensive ministry that was not restricted to purely religious activities. He exercised his call by God in all of the activities he engaged in.

Administration

From 1870 Bokwe worked as a stable hand, a bookkeeper and a clerk until he became James Stewart's personal secretary (Shepherd 1971:43). He was also placed in charge of the telegraph station. In time he also became postmaster, choirmaster, cashier, occasional teacher (Millard 1999:83) and principal interpreter (Roberts [1925] 1972:6). He had the gift of administration demonstrated in both the volume of work he was commissioned to undertake and the added responsibility that came with it. This was a source of creative tension as he strove to meet the expectations of his time-bound superiors, many of whom may have had a rather

negative view of the capacity of Africans. Rev John Buchanan made a rather cynical remark praising Bokwe, which also highlights his perception of the difference between him and the 'other' amaXhosa he had encountered:

He is an exception to the general rule of natives in this important feature – that he accepts responsibility, and imposes it on himself to a degree I have rarely known in the case of any native. And this is just the point where the great majority of natives fail, especially in work in which the brain is chiefly concerned. (Ancestors South Africa:1)

Stewart (1906) took a more positive approach, however:

Taking the average native African as he is found over wide areas, a fair and unprejudiced judgment would admit that he possesses a larger amount of good sense, a firmer texture of mind, and more intellectual ability than he generally gets credit for. (p. 362)

This could be applied to the character of Bokwe, for the results of his administrative capacity were noted by the Stewart who had placed great trust in him:

He is always cheerful and willing at any hour of the day or night – and the quality of his work is excellent.' His energy, reflection, and sound judgment, have rendered him a very valuable agent in connection with the complicated work of this place. (Note by Dr Stewart, undated, Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019)

In 1876, Dr James Stewart, Principal of Lovedale, organised a mission to go to Livingstonia in Malawi. Bokwe volunteered but was considered to be essential to Lovedale and was rejected. He accepted this with equanimity.

While at Ugie mission, in the Maclear district, Bokwe also undertook the responsibilities of Town Clerk, which demonstrated the creative tension that existed between his ministerial and municipal responsibilities. He was able to navigate the difficult path between the sacred and the secular by integrating the secular as a dimension of the sacred. He had good relationship skills, which he demonstrated in his handling of the farming community at Xalanga, Cala in the Eastern Cape. Merriman ([1925] 1972:12) commented on this as 'one of the most orderly and best conducted' meetings, which demonstrated 'his ability and good sense'.

Journalism

James Stewart was the editor of the missionary paper, *The Kaffir Express*, which was known in Xhosa as *Isigidimi samaXhosa* (The Xhosa Messenger). Bokwe helped with this publication and also helped with *Indaba* (*The News*) (Ntantala 1995:1). The paper was founded in October 1870 when Bokwe was 15 years old. The journal had Xhosa columns, which were handled by the African students who helped with translations. *The Kaffir Express* was designed to form a generation of African readers by exposing them to global issues, such as the war between the French and the Germans, as well as the discovery of diamonds in Kimberly in 1867. The paper also focused on promoting the missions in a non-sectarian fashion.

When Bokwe left Lovedale in 1897 he joined John Tengo Jabavu and was appointed co-editor of the journal *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion), which had been established in opposition to Lovedale's *Isigidimi samaXhosa*. Bokwe's two years' stay in *Imvo* did not work out as he had expected. His interest in journalism waned as the result of growing tensions between himself and Jabavu. Many Africans were critical of the views expressed by Jabavu, in part because Jabavu was Mfengu, a dispossessed group who were regarded as subordinate to the Xhosa people. They were also known to be willing collaborators with the British colonial authorities. Opposition to Jabavu's opinions found expression in another newspaper, *iZwi la Bantu* (*The Voice of the People*) published in East London, under the editorship of N. C. Mhala. It was to discourage these accusations that Bokwe, a Xhosa, had gone to join Jabavu. This was a less creative form of tension, which Bokwe experienced, and it led him to move away from a career in journalism.

At the beginning of the South African War (1899–1902) he left the newspaper to follow his childhood dream of becoming a minister of the church. At age 51, he was ordained a minister of United Free Church of Scotland.

Literature

Bokwe was part of the emerging Christian elite and also part of a *cadre* of Black Christian writers, lay and clerical, referred to as the New Africans (De Kock 1996:20), who chose to write on Christian themes, which were within the orbit of the then current missionary ideology (Hodgson 1997:84). Roberts ([1925] 1972) commented aptly:

Mr Bokwe's age produced such a group of men – Makiwane, Mzimba, Jabavu, Sihlali, and, earlier, Soga. The influence of these men in their times cannot be over-estimated. Without ostentation or recompense they to no small degree, guided the destinies of their people through days that were marked by a rapidly changing order of things. (p. 10)

Beinart (1994) concluded that:

This African elite was partly forged in the colonial world and claimed a place in the colonial order. But their position was anomalous. Though segregation was not yet rigid many of their activities were restricted to their own community. Everywhere the barriers seemed to be moving up against them. (p. 85)

They experienced the possibility of creative tension in their lives and work, between their 'roots and remedies' (Reese 2010), between their African primal origins and the liberation, which they found elusive. Bokwe dealt with moral issues such as the evils of alcohol consumption and the secularism and dangers of urban life (Opland 1997:308). He also wrote a biography, *Ntsikana: The Story of an African Convert* (1914), which aimed to restore Africanism and note the historical arrival of modernity through the introduction of European culture. Another literary composition was the drama *Vuka Deborah*, which was considered to be a 'minor classic' (Switzer 1993:144).

While at Lovedale (1923–1925), it was intended that SEK Mqhayi, who was to become a leading author in the Xhosa language, assist Bokwe in the development of Xhosa Literature, but this was prevented by Bokwe's death (Kallaway 2021:268, 270). Mqhayi ([1925] 1972) later published a biography of Bokwe, *Ubomi bomfundisi u John Knox Bokwe: Ibali ngobomi bakhe*, which was published by Lovedale Press in 1972. Bokwe wrote other religious works including *Imbali keNehemiya indoda yamadoda* (The story of Nehemiah: A man among men, 1989), *Ibandla lezizwe ezifunda izibhalo* (The Church of Nations: The study of Scriptures, 1892) and *Iindumiso zika Davide* (The Psalms of David 1921; Mqhayi [1925] 1972:64–65).

This was possibly the field in which Bokwe's creative tension was most evident as he, and others, struggled to make sense of the development of a creative relationship between their traditional culture and the imposing arrival of western Enlightenment ideas based in rational thought. Because most of their work was published by mission presses, serious tension arose between writers and publishers because of their differing ideological perspectives and prejudices (see Duncan 2000:288–296).

Yet, despite:

[A]ll his European ways and habits Mr Bokwe was at heart a Native.

This was seen whenever any matter touched his people. His European ties and interests, even his European friendships then went to the winds: he was one with his brethren when, even indirectly, their rights or privileges were assailed.

The idea, also, of moulding the Native people through the newspapers impressed him (Roberts [1925] 1972:7–8).

Through this means Rev Smit ([1925] 1972) stated:

He felt that if the white man in South Africa wanted to solve the appalling Native Problems, he could not do it unless he knew the native mind, and that could only be done by loving and respecting such educated Natives as the late Mr Bokwe. (p. 15)

This offers a good explanation of the creative tension he experienced and how he dealt with it. It explains his temporary *sortie* into journalism as what has been commonly called an 'improver' of his people's prospects (again like Tiyo Soga).

Music

At an early stage, while he was still working in the Stewart household, Mrs Stewart taught him to play the piano and organ and he became a talented pianist (Matthews 1981:39); He also joined the Lovedale Brass band (Huskisson 1969:8). Early on, at the invitation of a friend, he had an opportunity to pay his first visit to Scotland and preached in different locations while enlightening the Britons about the work he did at the Lovedale mission. He also sang at social occasions enthralling his listeners with his tenor voice.

Bokwe's career as a hymn writer began in 1875, and in the following years he made a significant contribution to Xhosa Christian music despite the fact that as:

A self-confessed autodidact, Bokwe's lack of formal compositional training seemed to concern him especially in the matter of harmony. Of the first edition of *Amaculo ase Lovedale* (Lovedale Music; 1885), a compilation of about a dozen tunes which included *Msindisi*, he wrote that 'the harmonizing [is] from ear', so 'not likely to be a scientifically ... got-up affair'. When asked for assistance in harmonizing another convert's tunes, he conceded that he was 'not much of a judge of correct harmony'. (Olwage 2006:4)

This was an area where creative tension arose because of Bokwe's self-confessed lack of a strong background in the technicalities of musical composition. Bokwe was involved in the preparation of the first Xhosa hymnbook in 1841. He also helped Dr James Henderson, Stewart's successor at Lovedale, to translate the metrical psalms into Xhosa (Millard 1999:8). In 1885 he published a book containing his own compositions *Amaculo ase Lovedale* (Lovedale Music) (Mqhayi [1925] 1972:64; Smith 1997:323), a collection of African folk songs including the popular hymn *Msindisi wa boni* (Saviour of sinners) (*Incwadi yamaculo amaXhosa* 1929; no 166:194–195), which is still sung today. He was a prolific hymn writer using a variety of styles (Stewart 1888; Dictionary of South African Biography, vol. 1:88–89). Bokwe wrote *A plea for Africa* as a personal anthem written for his Scottish trip in 1895. Its purpose was:

[T]o appeal to those in the metropolis to support the foreign mission, and to encourage those in the colonies, including the black elite, involved in the thick of evangelizing and civilizing. (Stewart 1888:23)

Bokwe, for one, had prefaced *Lovedale Music* (1894) with the following:

Departing from the usage his own people had grown accustomed to in their religious hymn singing, [the author] composed his tunes so as to preserve in singing the correct accentuation followed in speaking the Xosa language. The practise in church praise had hitherto been to adapt English tunes to Kafir words, but the different usage of the two languages in placing the accent made the accentuation fall quite out of place on the Kafir words in most of the hymns. *The Kaffir Express* (Bokwe 1875:8)

Creative tension was evident in his attempt to remain faithful to his traditional context and to adopt a style fitting to the recent western Victorian evangelical musical tradition. Bokwe incorporated traditional African musical forms into his compositions as can be seen from his work on Ntsikana's music.

Ntsikana

Bokwe is best known as a transcriber-arranger of the hymns of the early 19th-century Xhosa convert and prophet Ntsikana Gaba (d. c. 1821). The best known of the transcription-arrangements is the 'great hymn', *UloThixo Omkhulu*, into musical form. He also wrote his biography, *Ntsikana: The story of an African convert*, which was published in 1914. He was

also a composer and his other works include *Intsimbi ka Ntsikana* (Ntsikana's bell), *Heavenly guide* and *Wedding song*.

The Xhosa prophet, Ntsikana was a figure of great significance in the development of Christianity in the eastern Cape as he 'came to symbolise evolutionary change which went hand in hand with the development of a non-violent Xhosa nationalism' (Hodgson 1985:334). Unlike his contemporary Nxele who favoured revolutionary change, Ntsikana, like Bokwe, was an accommodationist who favoured the development of his people by integrating Xhosa traditional religion and Christianity. With him we see the beginnings of indigenous theology (Hodgson 1980:4–7), which is expressed in the form of preaching, prophecies, prayers and praise (Hodgson 1980:10), which functioned as a unifying 'powerful group-integrating force' (Hodgson 1980:10) and which demonstrates the African nature of Ntsikana's Christianity and remains in continuity with his tradition. Bokwe (1914:1) gives Ntsikana the credit for the 'progress made by the gospel of Jesus Christ in Africa' in which missionary teaching was combined with the unmediated visionary experience of his conversion'. Ntsikana was a 'carrier' of change who offered new content to faith 'rooted in the historical figure of Christ' (Hodgson 1980:5) by taking 'a step of faith into the unknown where the supreme being rather than the ancestors held sway' (Hodgson 1980:5). De Kock (1996:186) suggests that this indicates that Christianity has a universal impact and can permeate any context. This is now known as inculturation and is consistent with Bokwe's interpretation as the original tradition is combined with a rejection of paganism. Yet, it is more than this, as it marked the assimilation of western colonialism and civilisation and the depreciation of the past. De Kock (1996:187) summarises the effect of work such as Bokwe's:

The missionary text of a universal God was ambivalently superimposed upon the preceding culture in a textual gesture of natural continuity which obscured a past of difference in the name of the one text of Christianity.

Bokwe was the first person to publish the *Great Hymn*, 'which is given in the original Kafir, with a literal translation into English, with the tune, or rather the chant, to which it is sung' (Bokwe 1914:31) in *Isigidimi Sama-Xosa (Xhosa Messenger)* in 1876 and in *Amaculo ase Lovedale* in 1885. Bokwe (1914) commented on the hymn:

It is a weird air chanted to lines expressive of what the man took God and the Gospel to be. It is the first Christian hymn composed and sung in Kaffirland to real native music, and it is to Kaffirs a precious legacy left by Ntsikana to his native fellow Christians, and is highly valued and loved by them. (p. 28)

The hymn was theologically orthodox and simply expressed in its hope of promoting the unity of God's people (Hodgson 1980:54), hence its integrative community-forming function (Hodgson 1980:76). Bokwe (1914) commented on the power of the hymn to evoke deep emotions:

Later on, Ntsikana would start *Ulo Tixo Mkulu* to the following tune, regarded as his Great Hymn. Its weird music, gravely and deliberately led by him is said to have been very impressive. He

would chant the first two bars in a loud voice and then the people would join in repeating the words line by line. To the old Christians it never fails to move them to tears even to this day. Read in the light of present-day knowledge of Bible truths, the Hymn 11 is wonderfully complete as a theological creed. For the benefit of non-Kafir readers a literal English translation is given of each line. This Hymn in Kafir has been included in almost all the various denominational hymn books used for church praise. (p. 25)

By arranging the *Great Hymn* Bokwe attempted to integrate it within the concordant world of Victorian hymnody, which was promoted at Lovedale (Olwage 2006:10). It is strange that rather than construct this awkward melodic arrangement, Bokwe could have notated the lead/call part as the main melody throughout. The composite mode, adopted by Bokwe, rearranged the original Xhosa in terms of Victorian hymnody, which had become the normative framework of Bokwe's compositional style (Olwage 2006:11). Ntsikana's music was thus cast to another, if not quite 'primitive', historical time, and the hymn was deliberately integrated within the Victorian ideology of progress (Olwage 2006:12). This was the music common to revivalism (Olwage 2006:13). It was necessary that a novel form of faith expression had to enable its hearers to identify with the traditional musical forms with which they were already familiar. This was true of Bokwe's work on Ntsikana's hymn. However, this was not considered to be typical of his output (Olwage 2006:14). Bokwe (1914) offers more detail regarding Ntsikana's hymnology:

The hymns and music were composed by Ntsikana, but at what date no one can exactly say. They are grand and original productions, a precious legacy to his native fellow Christians, and should be highly valued and loved by them. Ntsikana's great influence still secures for his memory, his words, and his actions, that reverence which this first Christian convert among the South African Xosa worthily deserves. Oh! that his influence would constrain every South African Native who may read, or hear tell of this story, to accept of this Gospel that won Ntsikana; leading them to imitate the exemplary life he adopted after conversion. To emulate his earnest zeal for extending the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, whom Ntsikana described in the following words:

He, is the great God – the one who is in heaven.
 Thou art Thou, Shield of Truth,
 Thou art Thou, Stronghold of Truth,
 Thou art Thou, Thicket of Truth,
 Thou art Thou, Who dwellest in the highest.
 He, who created life (below), created (life) above.
 The Creator Who created, created heaven.
 This maker of stars, and the Pleiades.
 A star flashed forth, it was telling us.
 This maker of the blind, does He not make them of purpose?
 The trumpet sounded, it has called us.
 As for his chase He hunteth, for souls
 He, Who amalgamates flocks rejecting each other.
 He, the Leader who has led us.
 He, Whose great mantle, we do put it on.
 Those hands of Thine, they are wounded.
 Those feet of Thine, they are wounded.
 Thy blood, why is it streaming?

Thy blood it was shed for us.
 This great price, have we called for it?
 This home of Thine, have we called for it? (p. 26)

Here, we note faith in a supreme being, a creator, the truth, a reconciling sacrificial missionary God who 'hunteth for souls': *ulondoloze*, the saviour and protector of the people. Bokwe's compositional practise established a political response that became anticolonial and justifies how early black choral music became 'black' in its receptions. Olwage (2006) claims that:

[E]thno/musicological claims that colonial black choral music contains 'African' musical content conflate race and culture under a double imperative: in the names of a decolonizing politics and a postcolonial epistemology in which hybridity as resistance is racialized. (p. 37)

The *Great Hymn* has continued to be a uniting force in the Xhosa church and facilitated the growth of nationalistic aspirations, which later developed into Black Consciousness (Williams 1978:126–128). The hymn is often sung at special occasions as a form of national anthem (Hodgson 1980:81). Perhaps Bokwe's affinity with Ntsikana's music was derived from their similar outlooks on the relationship between African traditional cultures in its attempt to accommodate itself to western modernity.

Hodgson (1980) summarises the achievement of Ntsikana's *Great Hymn*, which gained national significance as the result of Bokwe's transliteration and his provision of musical form as a form of creative tension between his historical and contemporary contexts:

We conclude that the content and form of Ntsikana's hymns, in both words and music, show how by interpreting Christianity within the traditional framework he was able to fulfil the spiritual needs of those of his countrymen who were moving between two cultures and who otherwise would have been left in a spiritual vacuum. The transitional nature of his own spiritual development meant that the move to Christianity was not such a radical shift and that in the process Christianity became rooted in the indigenous culture. (p. 81)

In this exercise, Bokwe provided a bridge from the past into the emerging present as a form of transitional spiritual direction. This is consistent with the views of Robertson Smith (1889):

No positive religion that has moved man has been able to start with a *tabula rasa* to express itself as if religion was beginning for the first time; in form if not in substance, the new system must be in contact all along the line with the old ideas and practices which it finds in possession. A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in its audience, and it cannot reach these without taking account of the traditional forms in which religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language which men accustomed to these forces can understand. (pp. 365–366)

In contemporary terms, Robertson Smith, along with Bokwe, is indicating a paradigm shift, a gradual transition from one

traditional paradigm to a more inculturated paradigm. In sum we might say that there was a creative tension between Bokwe's literary skills and his musical competence in considering Ntsikana's hymn.

Theology

When it comes to a discussion of Bokwe's theology, the issue of inculturation arises in a significant way. Bokwe was a follower of Ntsikana's thinking as we have seen above. This was tempered with the influence of primal and African traditional religion which was dominant until the arrival of the missionaries at the end of the 18th century. It is believed, according to one discourse, that Ntsikana was influenced by Dr Johannes van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society (Hodgson 1980:1).

On the other hand, having been raised and educated at Lovedale, Bokwe would have absorbed substantially from the missionary theological narrative, which was grounded in a strong belief in the superiority of western values (Villa-Vicencio 1988:18). The foundation of the missionary impulse was the conviction that personal salvation was rooted in using one's personal gifts for the relief of suffering. This led to the concentration on conversion as redemption from eternal damnation rather than in the improvement of their material circumstances. This annihilated 'the entire edifice of customary practise. Once the divine light of the truth had fallen on it, savage innocence became original sin' (Broadbent 1865:193 in Comaroff & Comaroff 1991:238). It was:

Simplistically assumed that black people had no knowledge of spiritual matters and no concept of God! What they failed to realise was that the entire lifestyle of blacks was infused with a deep spirituality and a firm belief in a supreme being. (Duncan 1997:40)

On the other hand, the missionaries subscribed to a conservative theology, which was espoused by the first meeting of the General Missionary Conference of South Africa in 1904, including the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the physical resurrection of Christ and the fundamental doctrines of the Incarnation and Trinity (Duncan 1997:41). Such views persisted into the 20th century with the belief that the function of the church was to keep to religious matters. This was contradictory in a context where missionaries had often become colonial agents implementing policies that undermined the traditional role of chiefs and, consequently, African social and political structures (Villa-Vicencio 1988:60).

This was the context in which Bokwe had to negotiate the conflictual religious dimension in South African society. We call this process inculturation as:

A dynamic ongoing process of conscious, critical and mutual interaction between the Christian faith and the religious and secular aspects of cultures such that the Christian reality becomes appropriated from within the perspective of and within the resources of these cultures to challenge and

transform society and bring about a re-interpretation of faith. It seeks to open up new understandings of faith and lead to recreating culture and society. (Ukpong 2013:531, emphasis in original)

Such a process was formerly known as syncretism, although it was different in its essential elements, for syncretism involved the imposition of some practices inherent to tribal cultures were inserted into the imported form of Christianity. Inculturation or contextualisation involves the integration of Christianity into a culture in a manner appropriate to that culture, which results in the creative re-interpretation of both culture and Christianity (Encyclopedia.com 2019:1).

In the case of Ntsikana's hymn, we can see the process of inculturation at work as:

His statement of Christian belief was in an African idiom and his teaching gained its impact by being related to the existential situation of his people ... so matching new concepts with much of the old as were common to their everyday experience ... he was inspired to add new content to the tradition and, as shown in his 'Great Hymn', this new content was rooted in the historical figure of Christ. (Hodgson 1980:4-5)

This was the theology that Ntsikana promoted and Bokwe developed in his own time – a Christian theology grounded on their traditional culture in continuity with the noble history of their people 'where the supreme being rather than the ancestors held sway' (Hodgson 1980:5).

Education

Education lay at the heart of much of Bokwe's endeavours and permeated his missionary work, teaching, political stance, journalism, literature and musical contribution. While he was studying at Lovedale, Bokwe was an active member of the Lovedale Literary Society and became its Chair (Thompson 2000:25). His 1894 paper presented on 'The Native Land System as Operating Today' remained relevant well into the 20th century (Roberts [1925] 1972:9-10).

When the famous Xhosa author SEK Mqhayi was a student at Lovedale, he struggled with the matter of circumcision in a Christian context. He was challenged by Bokwe, a senior minister, who helped him to reconcile his Xhosa culture with Christianity (Kallaway 2021:268). Bokwe did not despise his traditional background. He supported the traditional role of the chief. Referring to the relationship of the chief to the *amapakati* (counsellors) as head of the council he stated: 'The chief can do nothing without consulting the *amapakati*' (Bokwe in *Native Laws and Customs* 1883:36; Mostert 1992:200). Again, we note the creative tension between Bokwe's allegiance to culture while also accepting the growing allegiance to the western system of government.

Within his active ministry, he discovered that the Ugie community had many illiterate Europeans and Bokwe made strenuous efforts to persuade the educational authorities to provide schools in the area for both Europeans and Africans.

He established a mixed race school for children in a community that had hitherto been unable to support one (Bennie 1925:11–12). He did this initially without government assistance. This led to the establishment of a European school in Ugie and schools in Mt Challenger, Mapassas Hoek, Cornlands, Maclear, Remia and Ncembu (Dana [1925] 1972:13). Bokwe's work was largely undone by the implementation of the Native Private Location Act (1897), which led to the removal of Africans from the farms, and all but two of Bokwe's schools and churches were obliged to close. He also recommended that parents send their children to Lovedale where they would receive a quality education. Yet, after years of hard work, his schools had flourished until external government forces destroyed his results. Despite this, he made a significant contribution to the development of education in rural areas through his diligent and conscientious commitment to social upliftment. Bokwe clearly saw these as complementary, although many would see these as mutually exclusive activities and unrelated to his ministry. This testifies to his holistic approach to human development.

Through his commitment to Education, Bokwe became the first treasurer of the Native Education Association (NEA) formed in 1880. The NEA was dedicated to 'the improvement and elevation of the native races', their 'social morality' and their 'general and domestic welfare' (Davis 1979:28). In 1916 Bokwe was elected general secretary of the Native Teachers Association in the Transkei.

Bokwe was also involved in the establishment of the South African Native College (later renamed the University of Fort Hare) in 1916, which still bears the nickname *kwaNokholeji* (Mqhayi [1925] 1972:18) because of its origins as an African college. The idea had its origin in a recommendation of the South African Native Affairs Commission (1903–1905), although the concept originated with James Stewart of Lovedale sometime earlier. Bokwe served on the Executive Board of the Inter-State College from 1907 to 1914.

Education and politics

Although he was not directly involved in political affairs, Bokwe was one of 11 000 African registered voters who exercised their right to vote in parliamentary elections (ed. Hellmann 1949:29).

As part of Bokwe's protest politics he challenged people to: 'Take full advantage of schools wherever and whenever you can. But you don't need to depend only upon them – you can also learn for yourselves' (in Olwage 2006:26). Here he may have been alluding to the traditional forms of education based on observation, imitation and explanation (Saayman 1991:32). He challenged the 'native intellectual' to a similar self-responsibility: to 'write and translate, [to] be the pioneers of a Native Literature' (Olwage 2003:158–161). Together, the black elite, including Bokwe, engaged in anticolonial nationalist action towards the close of the 19th century.

In addition, this was a time of constant change politically, economically, socially and in the religious domain. Bokwe and his colleagues lived through the secessionary Ethiopian type church movement, the South African War, the formation of the Union of South Africa (1910) and the consequent betrayal of black aspirations, accelerating industrialisation leading to hardening racial divisions, the South African Native Affairs Commission (1904–1905), the growth of Social Darwinist ideas, Milner's 'anglicanisation' policy, the formation of the SANNC (1912), the Rand strike, women's protests against urban rights and passes in Bloemfontein mainly, the notorious Land Act (1913), the First World War (1914–1918) and rural protests and white poverty (Beinart 1994:59ff).

The musical programme accompanying that protest was composed, like Bokwe's music, in the 'language of Victorian Britain, a language that speaks contrary to the master narrative of cultural nationalism, in which the decolonization of culture is typically scripted as its black Africanization' (Olwage 2006:118). Here again we can note the creative tension that was evident in his life and work.

Assessment

John Knox Bokwe's entire life was a response of creative tension as he negotiated 'being' a Xhosa who was raised in a western context and susceptible to all its influences.

A product of mission education he was educated at Lovedale (Matthews 1981:33) and became an early leader in the Presbyterian Church. He developed and adhered to a holistic approach to life. He did not separate faith and politics because he saw both as areas of God's activity in the one world he created. A testimony to Bokwe sums up his character:

I have great pleasure in bearing testimony to the exemplary and thoroughly satisfactory character of John Knox Bokwe, of Lovedale. While acting for Rev. Dr. Stewart, during his absence at Lake Nyassa, for more than eighteen months, I was necessarily brought closely into connection with him as Book-keeper, and general Secretary in the Office of the Institution; and from first to last I found him to be most willing and trustworthy. I have never seen him in an angry or sulky mood nor received one disrespectful word from his lips. I was repeatedly unfitted for effort by continued illness, but his thoughtful and painstaking care kept everything in perfect order, and often left me nothing to do, but adhibit my name to well-written documents prepared by himself, even without my direction. He is as steady in temper and habit, as he is true in heart. I could trust him with anything – his honesty, integrity and truthfulness being simply unimpeachable. I do not hesitate to say that, while he is a good book-keeper, a fair general scholar, and a musician, he is, in his whole spirit and character, an honour to Lovedale Institution and an ornament to the Christian Church. (FROM 'SOUTH AFRICAN PAPERS'. – NO. II. 'Lovedale: How it Strikes a Stranger' Ancestors South Africa Family Tree & Genealogy Research 2019)

His friend, Dr AW Roberts, spoke of his 'admiration and regard for a life so fine and so worthy' as Mr Bokwe's was

(Roberts [1925] 1972:3). All of these comments bear testimony to Bokwe's character, which, like Ntiskana's, was accommodating. He was forthright and humble, remaining with the people, whatever their circumstances in his village of Ntselamanzi and in his rural congregation at Ugie. Throughout his life in whatever role he found himself, he remained faithful to his various callings and used them to advance his mission of the reconciliation of his traditional African culture and the culture of modernity introduced by colonists, settlers and missionaries.

Nyoni (2022:2) has suggested that 'The reinvigoration of the culture of spirituality, non-racialism, tolerance and the value of intellectual discourse could provide an appropriate tribute to Bokwe's life, work and witness'. His approach to spirituality was applied to all the varied tasks he undertook throughout his life and set a standard for the emerging black intellectual elite, which was and remains worthy of emulation.

In his journalistic endeavours, Bokwe was a catalyst for the worldview of the people. He raised issues that remain of current interest regarding ethnicity and morality, which provide us with encouragement to become more responsible members of our communities in relation to contemporary ethical issues related to gender-based violence and corruption. In a number of ways he was an agent of social networking and he galvanised social cohesion; he played a pivotal role in mediation. His educational work at Ugie might encourage a rethink of the vexed matter of the reopening of mission schools as an instrument of elevation through the provision of greater access to education with the concurrent hope of raising throughput levels. We can say then that he was an agent of creative tension who advanced the cause of his people in a rapidly transforming environment. In sum, Rev John Knox Bokwe was truly a public servant who worked for the restoration of the dignity of all people and in this he epitomised the principles of *ubuntu*.

Conclusion

John Knox Bokwe was 'one of the most outstanding products of the Lovedale system in the second half of the nineteenth century' (Thompson 2000:8; cf. Matthews 1981:32) and early years of the 20th century. He certainly earned his nickname *Mdengentonga*. He found himself among an emerging *cadre* of Xhosa intellectuals who tried to discern the meaning of modernity in the period 1880–1920, all of whom stood in the tradition inaugurated by Rev Tiyo Soga who had encouraged his people to adapt to modernity. They went beyond Soga by constructing African modernities as a response to European modernities that were based on authentic historical memory. Many of Bokwe's varied activities reflect this attempt.

Bokwe was a man of culture. He integrated what he considered to be the best elements of Western civilisation, including Christianity, and was also aware of the value of his own traditional African civilisation. He rejected the proposition

that in order to be faithful to one's own culture it was necessary to reject all others. Like other African intellectuals, he was an excellent example of 'African personality' (Bokwe 1961:1). He displayed this creative tension in a number of ways during his lifetime. Perhaps one tribute we may offer to Bokwe's memory is to make greater use of the hymns he composed and in particular, the great hymn he translated, *Ntsikana's Great Hymn*, and to republish some of his works.

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