

# Re-membering Local African History – Translating the Biography of Muhlaba I of the VaNkuna into English

**Idette Noomé**

## Summary

This article explores translations and potential functions of a biography of King Muhlaba I (ca 1864-1944) in reshaping memory in local and wider South African history, acknowledging the contributions of the Nkuna people as members of the South African community. Muhlaba I led the Nkuna people (a Tsonga group) from the 1880s into modernity, through the South African War and two World Wars. In their 1957 Xitsonga biography, Nkuna authors P.M. Shilubana and H.E. Ntsanwisi describe this leader as a wise ruler, proponent of education and judge who administered indigenous restorative justice, and negotiated the space between his people's traditional lifestyle and modernity. The article suggests possibilities for transparent and accountable, and thus ethical, translations of the text within the limitations imposed by the local translation context. It considers the question of why more translations of this text, especially in English, need to become available in a post-colonial context, given that it covers the life of a man in the colonial era, and was compiled during the apartheid era. It also contends that it is important to preserve both the 1957 biography and a 1963 Afrikaans translation as historical artefacts. The article argues that availability of this text in English would widen knowledge of Nkuna involvement in national and international historical events, and would complement academic and popular sources on African perspectives on South African history.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek vertalings en moontlike funksies van 'n biografie van Koning Muhlaba I (ong. 1864-1944) in die herskepping van geheue in die plaaslike en wyer Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis, om erkenning te gee aan die bydrae van die Nkuna as lede van die Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap. Muhlaba I het die Nkuna ('n Tsonga groep) gelei van die 1880's tot in die moderne tydperk, deur die Anglo-Boereoorlog en twee Wêreldoorloë. In hulle 1957 Xitsonga biografie beskryf die Nkuna outeurs P.M. Shilubana en H.E. Ntsanwisi hierdie leier as 'n wyse heerser, voorstander van opvoeding en regter wat inheemse restoratiewe reg toegepas het, en 'n balans tussen sy mense se tradisionale lewenstyl en moderniteit probeer bewerkstellig het. Die artikel maak voorstelle rakende deursigtige en verantwoordbare, en dus etiese, vertalings van die teks binne die beperkings van die plaaslike vertaalkonteks. Dit ondersoek hoekom meer vertalings van hierdie teks, veral in Engels, beskikbaar moet wees in 'n postkoloniale konteks, gegewe dat dit die lewe van 'n man in die koloniale era dek, en dat die biografie tydens die apartheidsera geskryf is. Daar word aangevoer

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dat dit belangrik is om beide die 1957 biografie en 'n 1963 Afrikaanse vertaling daarvan as historiese artefakte te bewaar. Die artikel bepleit die beskikbaarheid van hierdie teks in Engels omdat dit kennis van die betrokkenheid van die Nkuna in nasionale en internasionale historiese gebeurtenisse sal verbreed, en akademiese en populêre bronne oor Afrika-perspektiewe van Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis sal komplementeer.

## Introduction

*Hosi* (King) Muhlaba I (ca 1864-1944) led the Nkuna people, a Xitsonga-speaking group that now lives near modern-day Tzaneen, from the mid-1880s, until his death in 1944, through the South African War, and two World Wars. During his long reign, as a leader by example, legislator, judge, warrior and negotiator on behalf of the VaNkuna,<sup>1</sup> he introduced radical changes which shaped the fate of his people into the 20th century. The biography of *Hosi* Muhlaba I,<sup>2</sup> hereditary king of the Nkuna people, was written in the mid-1950s by two people who knew him intimately, Regent P.M. Shilubana (a member of his family) and H.E. Ntsanwisi, who worked closely with the *hosi*, his family and his council in various capacities. This biography is an account of an exceptional man, who is still honoured by his people today. The account is unique because it was written and published only 13 years after his death by his own people, and, equally unusually, was translated into Afrikaans in the 1960s by a Xitsonga speaker, R.W.S. Phakula. In this article, I want to argue the need for one or more new translations of this text (into English, and possibly into other African languages). The article also raises some questions about possible ethical ways to engage in this process in the complex and imperfect post-colonial South African translation context, and about strategies to create rich translations that will honour the past and open up the text and its translation(s) as artefacts to future scrutiny, allowing new ways to remember and reconstruct history.

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1 The prefix “Va-” added to the noun implies “people”. In other words, “VaNkuna” means the same as “Nkuna people”, or “VaTsonga” means “Tsonga people”. Similarly, the prefix “Xi-” in “Xitsonga” refers to the language spoken by the VaTsonga.

2 The name can be spelled Muhlaba or Muhlava; similarly his people are referred to as the BaNkuna or VaNkuna. These variants result from the pronunciation of the B in Xitsonga – it is not a full plosive, but tends towards a softer fricative, which may be rendered as a V in some orthographies.

## The Biography and its Afrikaans Translation

The original 1957 biography, *Muhlaba. Hosi ya va ka Nkuna. Nkanyi wa le Ndzilakaneni*, was written in Xitsonga. The publisher and copyright holder are listed as the Nkuna Tribe. The small hardcover book, containing a genealogy and several black-and-white photographs, was printed by the Morija Printing Works in Lesotho. It was reprinted in 1958, and in 1979. It was translated into Afrikaans very soon after its first publication by a Tsonga-speaker, R.W.S. Phakula, possibly as early as 1957, although the date of the translation itself is not indicated in the translation. The Afrikaans version is called *Muhlaba. Kaptein van die VaNkuna. "Die maroelaboom op die grenslyn"*, and there was a cloth-bound 1963 "edition", typed on wax sheets and roneoed. I argue that this biography needs to be translated into English. The ideal would be a translation directly from Xitsonga into English, but I also explore ways in which the existing Afrikaans translation can be harnessed in creating a *working* translation and to ensure the preservation of both the Xitsonga original and Phakula's Afrikaans translation, itself an extraordinary achievement. (The rationale for this option is explored fully toward the end of this article.)

There are relatively few copies of the text and its Afrikaans translation in existence, or at least in the public domain, making these texts very vulnerable. I was able to trace only one Xitsonga copy in private possession, and it is in a fairly poor condition. The University of Limpopo's catalogue lists a copy, but it is apparently no longer in the library – exhaustive searches on Worldcat located six possible copies in academic libraries only, one in Germany. No examples of the purported 1979 Xitsonga reprints could be traced. The University of Pretoria has two Afrikaans copies – one in the open collection, and one in the Africana collection.<sup>3</sup> Unless there are still some in private ownership, these may be the only two remaining copies, and due to the paper quality, these copies are beginning to deteriorate.

Shilubana and Ntsanwisi's biography has two main parts, which are retained in Phakula's translation. The first part presents a version of Nkuna history, and the second part focuses on the life of *Hosi* Muhlaba himself. The main points in the page of contents give a sense of the structure of the book:<sup>4</sup>

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3. The vulnerability of rare texts such as these is clear from comments by some #Fees Must Fall protesters in 2016 that they wished to burn this collection in the University of Pretoria's Merensky Library.
  4. Except where otherwise indicated, references are to the 1963 Afrikaans edition, and the translation is my own. See the explanation for this later in the article.

<b>Shilubana and Ntsanwisi's Xitsonga text</b>	<b>Phakula's Afrikaans translation</b>	<b>My English Translation</b>
<i>Rito ro rhanga</i>	<i>Voorwoord</i>	Foreword [by Henri Junod]
<i>Marito ya Vuhosi</i>	<i>Die Kaptein se boodskap</i>	The <i>Hosi's</i> (King's) message
<i>I. Ndzima yo rhanga – Ntumbuluko wa va ka Nkuna</i>	<i>I. Eerste Deel: Oorsprong van die va ka Nkuna</i>	I. Part One: Origins of the va ka Nkuna
<i>II. Ndzima ya Vuvirhi. – Vutomi bya Hosi Muhlaba</i>	<i>II. Tweede Deel: Die lewe van Kaptein Muhlaba</i>	II. Part Two: The life of <i>Hosi Muhlaba</i>
<i>A. Xikhuna-Masungi-Muhlaba – Shilubana</i>	<i>A. Shikhuna<sup>5</sup>-Masungi-Muhlaba[-]Shilubana</i>	A. Xikhuna-Masungi-Muhlaba – Shilubana
<i>B. Hosi Muhlaba a fuma Ezekhaya</i>	<i>B. Die regering van Kaptein Muhlaba by Ezekhaya</i>	B. <i>Hosi Muhlaba's</i> reign at Ezekhaya
<i>C. Hosi Muhlaba a fuma eMuhlaba Location</i>	<i>C. Kaptein Muhlaba. Sy Regering in Muhlaba Lokasie</i>	C. <i>Hosi Muhlaba's</i> reign at Muhlaba Location
<i>D. Mafumela ya Hosi Muhlaba</i>	<i>D. Regering van Kaptein Muhlaba</i>	D. The reign of <i>Hosi Muhlaba</i>
<i>E. Ku fa ka Nkosikazi Gavaza, makumo ya ku fuma ka Hosi Muhlaba. Ku fa ni ku lahliwa ka yena</i>	<i>E. Die heengaan van hoofvrou Gavaza. Die laaste jare van Kaptein Muhlaba: sy dood en sy begrafnis</i>	E. The death of Queen Gavaza, the last years of the reign of <i>Hosi Muhlaba</i> . His death and funeral.
<i>III. Marito ya makumo</i>	<i>III. Slot</i>	III. Conclusion

The text consists of an intriguing mixture of recorded oral history (briefly discussed below, drawing on additional sources), detailed anecdotes about genealogy, individual players and memorable events such as the return of the Nkuna regiments from World War I and the British government's thanks for that, the death of the queen, *Nkosikazi* Gavaza, and of *Hosi Muhlaba* I himself.

Some of the text is reminiscent of praise song, for example, descriptions of the young king's prowess as an athlete and superb marksman:

... and he was a hunter, an elephant hunter. And after the coming of the white people, he was a holder of a firearm. He was an expert marksman and shot a hippo in a pool in the Mukandzi-Nweveti river. Many people had not

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5. Phakula's spelling using the "sh" instead of "x" reflects a variant spelling. In Xitsonga, the pronunciation of the sound represented by the "x" is indeed /s/, and thus the x/sh spelling should be considered a variant spelling in terms of the different orthographies followed. In the 1950s and 1960s, the orthography was in flux, and spelling depended on which orthography an author favoured.

succeeded in hitting it, because the hippo hid in the water. When Muhlaba got there, the hippo's forehead appeared on the surface. He fired one shot and hit the hippo's forehead. That was the end of the hippo. It was loaded onto a wagon and brought home.

(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 36; my translation)<sup>6</sup>

Even more impressive is a shot which brings down a running ostrich; Muhlaba's own ability to run fast is also praised: "Hunters are always runners. They have to be, because they often have to run to hunt. *Hosi* Muhlaba was a fast runner" (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 36; my translation). In a competition, he quickly took the lead:

It was a long way. Shilubana's child, the calf of the bull, began to run in front. He could be seen by everyone because of his tall physique. It was *Muhlaba Dabuka ka Pondo, xitsutsuma ni timperhe*,<sup>7</sup> the one who runs like horses.

(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 37; my translation)

Shilubana and Ntsanwisi ([1957]1958, 1963: 37) describe the young *hosi* as a person of wide ability, praising his skill as a cattle herder, the beauty of his woodcarving, and his ability to play musical instruments and dance. Later in the text, the Solomonic wisdom of the mature *hosi* as a judge and leader is also discussed, with positive assessments of his worth as a leader.

### ***Hosi* Muhlaba I, His Historical Context and the Biographers' Depiction of Details of His Life**

The importance of this biography and translations of it as artefacts is their contribution to various understandings of *Hosi* Muhlaba I as a person, and of Nkuna history, which I discuss below, drawing on a variety of sources to provide additional context corroborating the biography.

As far as ethnographers and missionaries such as Junod ([1905]1927) could piece together from the oral records, it seems that the Nkuna, originally part of the Ndwandwe group, left Zululand at some point in the 18th century. They migrated into the interior, and into Mozambique, settling near the confluence of the Olifants and the Limpopo rivers until the early 1800s. There they negotiated extensive political and marriage alliances with the surrounding Tsonga tribes (Boonzaaier 1990: 2-3) and amalgamated with them. However, soon after 1820, Sochangana invaded Mozambique. He would have subjugated the Nkuna, but at that time, Sochangana was more focused on a punitive expedition against

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6. At this point, the authors add an interesting aside: "The reader will remember that this was in the old days, when wild animals had no owners or protectors."

7. In this passage, Phakula retains the Xitsonga as emphasis, and paraphrases the epithet.

another tribe, which he pursued to Zambia (Junod [1905]1927: 229, 230; Boonzaaier 1980: 25). The Nkuna refused to join Sochangana on this expedition, and stayed in Mozambique. Around 1838, the Nkuna heard that he was returning south, and they fled to the north-eastern Transvaal Lowveld, because they feared reprisals for their failure to cooperate with him. There, in 1839, they found asylum with a Northern Sotho tribe, the Kgaga of Maake. From 1842 onwards, the Nkuna moved several times, avoiding open conflict with Sochangana, but clashing with Albasini in 1864, the Swazi in 1868, and with other groups at various stages. The biography mentions the war between the VaNkuna and the Rikhotso clan, as well as with the Nhlava clan – it tells, for example, of how the Nhlava warriors fled so quickly that they knocked over and trampled a young hippo as they ran through a river (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 16).

According to his biographers, Muhlaba was born around 1864. When his father, *Hosi* Shilubana, died in 1875, Muhlaba was still only about ten, so regents were appointed:

Mankhelu Shilubane [the regent] came with the [body of the late] king, who was covered by a red blanket. On his head, the new king wore a multi-coloured cloth. Mankhelu lifted the new king so that the crowd could see him, and said: “The one king dies, the other remains. The old man is dead, and here you all see his little branch. From today, he is the King of the Nkuna.”

(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 35; my translation)

In 1886, Regent Mankhelu welcomed the Swiss missionaries (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 42), who were to influence Muhlaba’s thinking very strongly in the years to come. Among these missionaries was Henri Junod, who developed the first Xitsonga dictionary, and the first collection of Xitsonga proverbs, starting a Xitsonga written tradition. Junod’s ethnographic study *The Life of a South African Tribe* (1905, republished in two volumes in 1927) is still considered the standard work on Tsonga customs. Shilubana and Ntsanwisi (1963: 42) compare Muhlaba’s reception of missionary influence to that by Moshoeshe in Basutoland (Lesotho) and Khama in Bechuanaland (Botswana). This exposure made English the second language in the area, rather than Afrikaans.

Muhlaba was officially inaugurated as *hosi* in 1888. He had a deep respect for learning and drew on the education offered by the missionaries. From the outset, he was eager to innovate and learn. He started the first school among the VaNkuna, first as an evening school for himself and his children, and later as a registered day school open to his people. He later built four more schools, initially up to Standard 6 (Grade 8).<sup>8</sup> In 1898-99, at the age of about 34, already

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8. By the 1990s, there were numerous primary schools (about one in each of the 22 wards) and several high schools in the area (Boonzaaier 1990: 568). There was also the Timbuveni teacher training college in Nkowankowa, a local industrial growth point – this college has since been closed, in line with government policy (Boonzaaier 2014: pers.comm.).

able to read and write, Muhlaba decided to go to study at Thaba’Nchu in the Free State to learn Dutch so that he could communicate better with the white authorities. His plans were disrupted by the outbreak of the second Anglo-Boer War (now called the South African War), and he had to return home.

He adopted Christianity, and for about 20 years resisted calls for him to follow the clan tradition, according to which he as *hosi* had to marry more than one wife. *Nkosikazi* Gavaza was the wife of his youth and, it seems, of his heart. Only after 1911 did he bow to continued pressure to take additional wives (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 76). The biographers comment explicitly on the spiritual crisis that this elicited in him, and the fact that he felt unable to continue to participate in Holy Communion and to lead the congregation in church under the circumstances.

The iconic image of the Marula tree, which shelters and feeds the people, is a central metaphor in the biography of Muhlaba I. His biographers use this epithet in the title of the book, and report the *hosi*’s own words as follows:

[And] He said: “I am a marula tree, a marula tree that stands on the boundary line. The people who live on both sides of the boundary pick up its fruit.”  
(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 63, my translation)

They explain:

With these words he wanted to indicate how difficult it was to look after the Christians and also after those who adhered to the old ways. It was his duty to serve them all, and to see to it that they all lived together, in peace and happiness.

(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 63; my translation)

The authors continue to use this image to refer to his careful balancing of relations between his people and the government of the day.

The choice of the photographic material included in the Xitsonga version of the text (but not reproduced in the Afrikaans version) reinforces and endorses the overall impression of his decision to straddle the boundary. He was a physically imposing figure, as the photographs reveal. The cover features a line sketch of an impressive and dignified photograph taken of him by Alfred Duggan-Cronin,<sup>9</sup> in traditional garb, which is also included as a frontispiece (see below).

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9. Duggan-Cronin’s photographs have met with a mixed reception, as Godby (2010) discusses in detail in his article “Alfred Martin Duggan-Cronin’s photographs for *The Bantu tribes of South Africa* (1928-1954): The Construction of an Ambiguous Idyll”.

RE-MEMBERING LOCAL AFRICAN HISTORY: ...



Photo: Alfred Duggan-Cronin, © Duggan-Cronin Collection  
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Museum, Kimberley, South Africa



The decision to feature him in the insignia of chieftainship – the head-ring of wax set on a special *hari*, or chaplet of fur and the *xidlodlo* (leopard skin mantle) – in three photographs (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi [1957]1958 – the frontispiece, and on pages 119 and 129) is juxtaposed by nine other photographs showing him in Western clothing (with his wife, *Nkosikazi* Gavaza, on page 51, with the Earl of Athlone on page 118, at the Union Buildings on page 166, and on pages 95, 100, 111, 136, 139 and 162).

*Hosi* Muhlaba I is presented as negotiating the space between the traditional and the new. He himself attended initiation school, but made an effort to abolish such schools after some initiates died. He was one of the first to recognise the risk to young boys. He was unable to convince his tribal council or fellow members on the then Native Representative Council to prohibit initiation schools for boys, which he considered a Sotho influence, but he did manage to restrict Nkuna circumcision schools to the winter school holiday under strictly controlled conditions (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 125-126). Among the VaNkuna, it is therefore no longer a prerequisite for young men to undergo the initiation ceremony to get married, but many do still attend the Sotho-led initiation schools (Boonzaaier 2014: pers.comm.). *Hosi* Muhlaba I did however change Nkuna law to prohibit initiation for girls (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 126-127).

*Hosi* Muhlaba I clearly recognised some of the risks of a monetary economy for traditional practices, such as *xuma*, or *ntsengo* (better known in South Africa by the isiZulu term, *lobolo*).<sup>10</sup> At the start of his reign, the customary amount of *xuma* was 16 head of cattle (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 131-132). He reduced this to a fixed number of 11 head of cattle. When a monetary economy became more common, money gradually replaced cattle as the most common form of *xuma*. To prevent irresponsible demands, a fixed price of £5 was set on cattle. He initiated the regulation of registration of marriages to simplify judgements in divorce cases where the amount of *xuma* was in dispute. He noted: “[E]ven if the witnesses pass away, the register cannot lie, it cannot forget, it cannot love one man and hate the other man, it will only speak the truth” (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 127).

He was also forward-thinking about the protection of women in cases of divorce and property for women. He made it possible for a woman married under customary law to claim all the assets she brought into the joint estate. This entitled her to her personal earnings, the agricultural produce from the land allocated to her, and any furniture she purchased from her personal income and savings. An example of the outcome of this change is recorded in another source, namely Boonzaaier (1990: 407), in a court case reported from the area: a man left his wife in the tribal area when he went to work in Johannesburg. There

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10. Shilubana and Ntsanwisi use the term *xuma* (for example, on p. 128 of the Xitsonga version), which was still in use by the 1980s and 1990s, although the more common term then was *ntsengo* (Boonzaaier 1990: 642).

he married a second woman. His first wife planted, tended and harvested the crops. When the husband eventually returned home with his second wife, his first wife told him that she could not prohibit his second wife from entering and staying in the kraal, but said that his second wife could not “crush her mielies” (could not eat the maize the first wife had grown). The husband chased his first wife away and she took the matter to the tribal court. The court granted her a divorce and decided that because the husband no longer loved his first wife, he would forfeit the *xuma*, and that his first wife would get all the maize she had harvested. The husband also had to pay the cost of transporting the maize to her father’s kraal and the court costs.

His biographers show that *Hosi* Muhlaba I negotiated successfully with successive white governments for benefits for his people, and avoided conflict in the interests of the clan. He purchased private land for the VaNkuna with the Nkuna people’s own money, in addition to the land allocated to the tribe by the government. These actions elicit praise to this day: they meant that “even during the worst days of apartheid, the Nkuna people were never forcefully removed from their land. The tribe has title deeds for the land it occupies ...” (Benneth Buku Ready Shilubana, quoted by Maakana 2015), and the clan has continued to build schools and clinics, and create jobs.

An illuminating and valuable aspect of the text is its inclusion of official correspondence with the authorities which would not otherwise be readily available to anyone without access to government archives or the Nkuna records, especially regarding the Nkuna contribution to the international arena, in the form of regiments sent to join the war efforts in World War I and II. Such contributions by African communities are not yet sufficiently widely known. The biographers describe the involvement in World War I in detail (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 76-81), noting that four regiments were sent, who led them, when they went, and when they returned. The first was led by *Hosi* Muhlaba I’s brother Dududu, the fourth by his son Solomon. The end of the war is marked by a detailed account of the way in which the then Department of Native Affairs honoured this contribution, sending a high-ranking official, Colonel Godley, to thank the Nkuna in person (the speech is recorded in full). He was accompanied by a pilot (whose name is recorded as Lieutenant Gearing), who demonstrated a plane:

Then, later, he flew the machine over the crowd and demonstrated how things were done in the war. The plane flew up and down, like an eagle looking on the ground for chicks to catch. It flew further away, to where there were no people, and dropped bombs that dug into and tore the earth. It delighted the onlookers.

(Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 80; my translation)<sup>11</sup>

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11. A photograph of this event is included (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi [1957]1958: 115), showing a regiment in full traditional garb seated and standing under the wings and in front of the biplane.

## Considering Translation(s) of the Text

Shilubana and Ntsanwisi's biography does not supplant Nkuna oral history, but it does provide a series of snapshots of the way in which that history, *Hosi Muhlaba I*, and some of the events of his reign were perceived a decade after his death. The text is now more than 60 years old, and its Afrikaans translation is 55 years or older. The question remains whether it is valuable – worth (re)translating into English – worth making public again, and why these two texts should be preserved and examined. Is this mere nostalgia? What purpose can this serve? I will return to these questions.

Pragmatically: Who should be translating the text and which text should be translated? I am currently working on a translation into English, and am drawing to a large extent on the Afrikaans text (more on this problematic decision later), but I am deeply aware of how anomalous it is for a white, middle-class woman to engage in this task. It seems obvious that a Xitsonga speaker should be the translator, and that the Xitsonga version should be the source text. At the very least, a Xitsonga translator should be consulted in the translation process. Realistically, however, these “obvious” ideals are unlikely to be met in the South African context, and may not be quite as obvious as they seem, since in translation, the international ideal is in fact translation *into* the translator's *home* language, which would require an English home-language speaker who is completely fluent in Xitsonga and who is a trained translator.

Xitsonga/English is a scarce combination among professional translators. By July 2015, the South African Translators' Institute (SATI), the country's principal association for professional language practitioners, listed only 18 accredited Xitsonga-English translators and interpreters for the whole of the country, and the bulk of their work is likely to be official documentation (a search in March 2018 showed a decrease – SATI no longer listed any accredited translators with this combination).<sup>12</sup> Translation is time-consuming and expensive. At roughly 43000 words, a conservative cost estimate for this text in the unregulated South African translation industry (SATI n.d. (a)) would currently be anything between R21500 and R38000, *excluding* the cost of the editors to check the translation, which would add between another third and half of the translation cost per editor.<sup>13</sup> The likelihood of the very few already pressured academics with suitable language training being willing or having the time to undertake the task is fairly slim. Wikitranslation might be

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12. This is not to say there are no Xitsonga/English translators, but there are none accredited with SATI who have an active listing.

13. These estimates are based on the lowest average cost suggested by the tariffs posted by SATI (n.d. (b)) and the current standard cost for translation for Afrikaans/English and for African languages/English used at the University of Pretoria.

an option that would need to be tested, but verification of the accuracy of the translation is then a problem. Wireless translation technology – dubbed “Everyware” (Cronin 2012: 475) – is being developed, but is still virtually inaccessible to the vast majority of South African users. Old-style machine translation is notoriously inaccurate, and samples of such translation demonstrate that even approximate linguistic equivalence is still impossible by this means (Noomé 2015a: 232). Thus, if this translation is to happen, it has to be either a labour of love, or a sponsor will have to be found.

Regarding the accuracy of the translation, as Steiner (1992: 319) suggests, “translation is, more than figuratively, an act of double-entry; both formally and morally the books must balance”. Steiner meant that the criteria of a high level of idiomatic fluency (the formal requirement) and a high level of accuracy (the moral requirement) should be present in a translation. In this context, the “moral” element should also imply a strong awareness of the implications of power inequities and problems of translation, especially in a post-colonial context (see below for further discussion). If the Xitsonga is used as the source text, how would the translation be verified? The usual practice is for an editor in the *target* language to check the text, but in this case, checking the faithfulness of the translation would require an editor who is equally at home in Xitsonga, or indeed a Xitsonga home-language speaker, which might then conversely compromise the ideal that a first-language speaker of the target language should translate and edit the English translation.

If the Afrikaans text is used as the source text, more translators may be available who could verify the English translation, but this is clearly also unsatisfactory, as the Afrikaans translation itself needs to be verified, and is unusual in that Phakula was not translating into his home language. The use of the Afrikaans text as an intermediate text opens up all the problems associated with relay translation, which is often criticised as a necessary evil where scarce language combinations require an intermediate translation,<sup>14</sup> because of the increased likelihood of translation errors and the compounding effects of multiple cultural overlays in the successive translations. Dollerup (2014: 23) describes a relayed translation as one

... based on a translation that has a genuine audience in the first target language. Like indirect translation, it spans realisations in three or more languages (viz. the source text (L1), the first translation (L2), and the relayed translation (L3)). When the first translation is chosen as the source text for the ‘next’ translation, the first translation becomes a relay.

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14 This technique is used to speed up translation or interpretation where a translation is commissioned and there is some urgency. Alternatively, Dollerup (2014: 24) lists translations where there may be a delay of decades, if not centuries, in the transmission of texts in one language via another, for example, in the case of Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tales.

Verification of the translation(s) of this biography may in fact be crucial, if it is to be used as a source for Nkuna history and genealogy. The importance of accuracy is increased by the fact that texts such as these may be used as sources in legal disputes in South Africa's Common Law system, for example, in the Constitutional Court, in cases where the validity of customary marriages are addressed, or in cases regarding land claims and succession disputes, where, for example, a too loosely translated term relating to kinship may have serious implications, affecting the outcomes of court cases (Boonzaaier 2017: pers.comm.).

To address this problem of verification, and to preserve the Xitsonga and the Afrikaans text as artefacts – products of a certain time and context – I propose that what is needed is a three-way parallel working text, with translator's annotations at least on the English translation, enabling Xitsonga-speakers to cross-verify the translation, making explicit the actions of the translator, and drawing attention to difficulties in the translation itself, especially where equivalents are difficult to express.<sup>15</sup> An example of this is the term *hosi*, which Phakula rendered as *Kaptein*, and which in colonial and apartheid days might have been rendered as “chief” or “king”, which serve as common nouns, but also as titles and forms of address. The current politically correct term would be “traditional leader”, which does not double as a form of address. The option I preferred throughout this article to overcome the difficulty was to gloss *hosi* briefly as “king”, to convey his general status, but to revert to *hosi* in the rest of the article, slightly foreignising the text (in other words, making the unEnglishness of the term explicit), but inviting readers (and especially readers who can speak Xitsonga) to engage with the Xitsonga term and suggesting, rather than repeatedly hammering home, the denotation and connotations of the term.

In considering the complexity of conveying meaning across cultures, Appiah (1993: 389-401) calls for “thick translation”. He notes elements which may be elided in translation due to cultural difference and assumptions, and requiring “thick” translation, such as proverbs and nuances that create difficulties in interpreting inferences (Appiah 1993: 395-397), or implicatures, to use Grice's (1981: 183-198) term. Appiah adopts his term from anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) (Appiah explicitly refers to the title of his own article, “Thick translation”, as invoking a “Geertzian vocabulary”.) Geertz (1973: 3-30), in his essay “Thick description: Toward

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15. In this regard, Jakobson ([1959]2004: 139) acknowledges the “intricacies” pointed out by theorists such as Whorf, in analogy with Schleiermacher ([1813]2004: 47), that languages, which shape thought systems and are shaped by cultures, are too different for perfect translation to be possible. However, he claims: “All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language” (Jakobson [1959]2004: 140; my emphasis). He does not suggest that there is an exact equivalent “code-unit”, but that there is always some analogue which allows communication.

an interpretive theory of culture” in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected essays* contrasts a “thick description” to a “thin description”, which is a factual account without any interpretation. A “thick description” contains not only facts, but also commentary, interpretation and interpretations of those comments and interpretations of the context of facts. The biography itself (and thus Phakula’s translation) offers such commentary and interpretation, which may be expanded in an English translation by translators’ notes. The availability of a three-way parallel text (such as that offered in the table of contents included above) with translator’s notes would enable such “thick description” and may make it easier to find editors who can indeed verify the translation(s), and for future scholars to examine the biography and its translations as time-bound artefacts.

In the case of this biography, an ethical translation has to be both cognizant of and respectful of Nkuna culture, and aware of the questions about textual power relations inherent in translation raised by post-colonial translation theory (Noomé 2015a, 2015b). Post-colonial translation studies draw particular attention to the fact that translations, “whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology [...] and function in a given society in a given way” (Bassnett & Lefevere 1995: vii). Post-colonial theorist Lori Chamberlain (1988: 311) illustrates the potential for systemic violence inherent in the act of translation by using strong terms such as “rape and pillage”, “conquest” and “taking captive” to describe the “appropriation” of texts by another language. Similarly, Venuti (1995: 20) refers to “the ethnocentric violence of translation”:

The violence wreaked by translation is partly inevitable, inherent in the translation process, partly potential, emerging at any point in the production and reception of the translated text, varying with specific cultural and social formations at different historical moments.

(Venuti 1995: 19)

Bassnett and Trivedi (1999: 17) rightly warn that translation “has been at the heart of the colonial encounter, and has been used in all kinds of ways to establish and perpetuate the superiority of some cultures over others”. In this regard, Robinson (1997: 31) explains that post-colonial studies criticise translation for playing three roles (past, present and future). In the past, translation has acted “as a channel of colonization” (and it may well continue to do so long after colonisation has officially ended). In the present, an exploration of translation practice can act “as a lightning-rod for cultural inequalities continuing after the collapse of colonialism” (Robinson 1997: 31). But, more hopefully, in future, translation (and translation studies) may act “as a channel of decolonization” (Robinson 1997: 31). Thus post-colonial translation studies focus on the asymmetry between those who colonise and those who are colonised, and such studies decry the dominance of hegemonic cultures and languages, such as English.

The insights of such post-colonial theory may seem paralysing to translators in the sensitive South African translation context, but Bassnett and Trivedi (1999: 2) also point out that “translation does not happen in a vacuum; it is not an isolated act, it is part of an *ongoing process of intercultural transfer*” (my emphases). The word “intercultural” implies two-way traffic – in this regard, Brazilian theorist Else Vieira (1999: 95-113) points out that as long as translation, especially in a post-colonial context, is not a one-way process which reinforces power inequities, there is hope. She calls for “bilateral appropriation”, where translation is done to empower and give a voice to the colonised or formerly colonised too, not merely to benefit the coloniser.

Another aspect of creating an accountable translation is considering the visibility of the translator. Both Venuti (1995) in his book *The Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation* and Luise von Flotow (1997) in *Translation and Gender: Translating in the “Era of Feminism”* raise the issue of invisibility:

Gender awareness coupled with translation has brought about a revision of the normally “invisible” role a translator plays. Taking their cue from the feminist writers they translate, translators have begun asserting their identity and justifying the subjective aspects of their work.

(Von Flotow 1997: 3)

I would suggest that in view of the sensitivity of South African translation, explicit visibility of the translator and his/her identity, as well as annotation and transparency around the *activity* of translation of this text is a way of addressing some of the concerns around making visible the power relations around this translation. In this context then, a translation by a white woman drawing on the Afrikaans text may be better than no translation at all, but only if that translator makes explicit his/her identity and the procedures used, and opens the translation for scrutiny and revision, for example, in the annotated parallel text proposed here.

Spivak (1992: 372), herself a renowned translator, calls on the translator to surrender to the text, claiming that “translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has *earned the right* to become the intimate reader, she cannot *surrender* to the text, cannot respond to the *special call of the text*” (my emphases). By reading extensively on the Nkuna, as a translator, I might indeed earn such a right, and I might, as indeed I did, fall under the spell of the subject of this biography. However, such surrender may itself hold some risk. It may help to produce the “balancing” of the books that Steiner (1992: 319) calls for, but in this case, that “accuracy” and empathy with the text may itself elicit criticism, because writing a biography is not a neutral act, any more than translating it would be. At best, an empathetic translation (one in which the translator does surrender to the text) would enable future *readers* to identify and negotiate the stance of the biographers 60 years ago and the translator(s) then and now, to enter into a dialogue with that stance.

I return to the question of why we should translate the text at all, today, in the postcolonial context, since it covers a life in the colonial era, and it was written during apartheid. One answer is that there still seems to be an interest in this ruler – Muhlaba Day was instituted in 1972, and continues to be annually celebrated. Moreover, his legacy remains alive in the Tzaneen area. For example, by 2008, literacy among Xitsonga speakers was estimated at 93% (Kha Ri Gude 2008). This high literacy rate has been directly ascribed to *Hosi* Muhlaba's welcoming of the Swiss missionaries (Shilubana & Ntsanwisi 1963: 42). The schools in the area today are a testimony of the tradition he started.

Is undertaking this translation merely an exercise in nostalgia? In *Native Nostalgia*, Jacob Dlamini (2009) warned against a failure to recognise the complexity of life in South Africa – both during the apartheid period, and in the present. He cautions against “a master narrative of homogenous black suffering” (Dlamini 2009: 145-146) which “blinds us to a richness, a complexity of life among black South Africans, that not even colonialism and apartheid at their worst could destroy” (Dlamini 2009: 19). Dlamini argues for a recognition of the multivalent and variegated nature of both memory and history. I would then argue with him for what Boym (2001) calls a “reflective” or “critical” nostalgia (if it is nostalgia), recognising what Medalie (2010: 41) calls the “constructedness of memory”, using the past to trouble generalisations, to bring ironies to the surface, and raise questions about the Nkuna legacy, especially if the biography and the Afrikaans and English translations are not read as monolithic narratives on the Nkuna, but are considered as artefacts and documentary sources alongside other documentary evidence, for example, official correspondence, court records, and ethnographic records, such as those of Junod ([1905] 1927) and Boonzaaier (1980, 1990). I would argue that if translations make this text accessible to more scholars, in future, the text can also be studied as a counter-narrative to apartheid narratives, offering a narrative of stability and successful negotiation of hybridity at the turn of the 19th century, and can elicit greater exploration of the history of the VaNkuna. An especially interesting avenue might be pursuing oral narratives on the women's stories hinted at in the text.

The place of the Afrikaans translation as an artefact and object of further study in itself is worth considering. It has a number of unique features in terms of some of the points discussed above. If an ethical translation of Shilubana and Ntsanwisi's Xitsonga biography has to be both cognisant of and respectful of Nkuna culture, the Afrikaans text meets that criterion. Moreover, the translator is named, and thus not invisible to scrutiny. Indeed, Phakula's achievement is remarkable, especially in the context of apartheid South Africa – as a Xitsonga speaker, he undertook a translation into Afrikaans, which was not his home language. It is somewhat unclear at this point why he did this Afrikaans translation, especially as the translation does not appear to have been commissioned by a publisher, but was only roneoed, clearly in limited



numbers. Future research on the creation and publication history of the Xitsonga text, and on Phakula's translation and its dissemination may be illuminating. Close examination of the text, in comparison to the Xitsonga and using the lens of recent translation theory, may reveal how he negotiated implicit questions about colonial and textual power relations inherent in the translation.

The potential loss of texts such as these, along with oral versions, is serious. In an ideal world, the young would want to hear the stories the elders tell, and in an ideal world, nothing would be lost in the retelling or the translation – but this is not an ideal world. Every day that we delay, texts such as these are destroyed – pulped, burnt, shredded, thrown away. And the information, whether it is flawed or not, is lost forever. A case in point is the loss of the records on the concentration camps for Black Africans in South Africa during the South African War – for example, the last records on the Black African camp at Greylingstad were lost when the municipal offices in that town burnt down (Louw 1991: 5). Digitisation is an obvious answer, but someone still has to take the responsibility and physically has to do it. (In the case of this text, permission also has to be sought from the Nkuna authorities, who hold the copyright.) Theorising on who has power and who has not, who may translate and who may not, can be paralysing, preventing action until it is too late.

Why translate the text into English, since it is theoretically available to Nkuna readers in their mother tongue, Xitsonga, and an Afrikaans translation is available? The answer is connected to the question of whether this content should remain exclusive to speakers of Xitsonga (and/or Afrikaans). Clearly, if the text is to be used as a starting point for reflection and reappraisals of Nkuna life and history, the wider the exposure, the better. This makes access in a *lingua franca* essential, and as authors such as Wright (1996, 2015), Titlestad (1996) and others have argued, for the foreseeable future, in South Africa, that *lingua franca* is English. Such access can open new avenues of research to illuminate related histories and herstories, inside and beyond this text.

In my title, I speak of “re-membering” local African history, and in particular, the history of the VaNkuna. We come to know “our many selves” in ways “dictated by fields of power and discourse that command what is allowed to be said, who gets to say it, and with what authority”, according to Madigan (1997: 341). He cites feminist Jill Johnson (1973: 18, quoted in Madigan 1997: 341), who maintains that “identity is what you can say you are, according to what they say you can be”. Neither identity nor memory is a freely created product of introspection – both are profoundly political. Narrative psychologist Michael White (2005: 13) suggests that if memory and identity are constructed, they can also be reconstructed – re-membered, to “contribute to a multi-voiced sense of identity, rather than the single-voiced sense of identity which is a feature of the encapsulated self that is the vogue

of contemporary western culture”. Re-membering is a process that involves others, calling on them to *witness* that identity. Thus, making available this biography in more languages – in ways that honour the text, its subject, and the people who produce(d) and own this text – can help people remember it, and can re-member its community of witnesses to include other South Africans in ways that can enrich, rather than impoverish and restrict.

## Conclusion

It is hard to predict how future generations will see *Hosi Muhlaba I*. They may agree that he was a visionary ruler who led his people peacefully into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as someone who innovatively negotiated the space between a traditional lifestyle and modernity. On the other hand, a decolonial revision may reject that interpretation of his legacy. For better or worse, this biography and translations of it may play a role in that future view of him.

I believe that allowing as many people as possible to re-member, to share in the memory through the kinds of rich, “thick” and sensitive translations that Appiah (1993: 389-401) and Spivak (1992) call for, will allow constructions of memory and identity of all South Africans to shift in the dynamic flow of the intricate negotiations (Madigan 1997: 342) of revising our local, and indeed, our national history.

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**Idette Noomé**  
University of Pretoria  
[idette.noome@up.ac.za](mailto:idette.noome@up.ac.za)