

AWARDS, HONOURS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Heinemann-ALASA Literary Prize for published research in African Literatures (1999)
- Shuter & Shooter Literature Prizes (x6)
- Hiddingh-Curry Award 2018 (Unisa Senate Publications Committee)

DEFINING MOMENTS

Becoming a Professor, Vice-Dean and Vice-Principal were three defining moments in his career. Each came with its own measure of recognition as well as new taxing challenges, underpinning a life of progress and fulfilment.

WHAT PEOPLE MIGHT NOT KNOW

"I cherish a special interest in the recital and performance of Sesotho *dithoko* (praise poetry) which I have often performed. I have sung in semi-professional choruses such as the PACT Opera and SABC Choirs, as well as the *Kleinkantatesangers*. Trained as a baritone, I have given many recitals at lunch-hour concerts, Christmas concerts and weddings."

IMMERSION IN THE MULTILINGUAL REALITY

African languages have interested Chris Swanepoel since the age of four, when he would regularly 'elope' to the grazing fields of the eastern Free State to play with his Sesotho-speaking cattle-herd friends. "Taking Sesotho as a school subject from then Standard 7 was the beginning of a life-long pursuit of a better understanding and love of both the people and the languages of our continent. Africa reverberates in the languages, the folklore and modern literature, history, philosophy and religion of the people – in my case mainly of the Basotho people, but then also of the languages which had a major influence on Sesotho such as IsiZulu and IsiXhosa. I shall forever be grateful for the privilege."

While studying Sesotho at the then University of the Orange Free State, now University of Free State in the early 1960s, Swanepoel was introduced to the literary works of Thomas Mofolo and developed an ever-growing admiration for Mofolo's book *Chaka*, a complex novel written in beautiful Sesotho. "I soon wished that fellow speakers and readers of Afrikaans literature could share my admiration for Mofolo, the depth of his creative mind and the nobility of

his prose, albeit through translation," adds Swanepoel. A little more than a decade later this wish was fulfilled with the publication of his first translation of the classic in 1974. *Chaka* was among the top five on the list of the 100 most influential texts published within Africa during the 20th century. It weaves a creative tale which is not strictly bound by historical facts and where the Sesotho and IsiZulu cultures are interwoven. More than 40 years after the first translation into Afrikaans, Unisa Press issued the second translation of the classic work to bring it in line with the sea of changes that South African society has experienced since the early 1990s in all walks of life.

Swanepoel, now an Emeritus Professor at the University of South Africa (Unisa), contends that while there is considerable pressure on Afrikaans as a language of tuition in the higher education sector, there is no constitutional, linguistic or cultural impediment to its existence or curtailment of its further growth. "An entirely new and diverse generation of users is emerging, totally committed to contributing to national reconciliation and the promotion of intercultural exchange and subsequent mutual enrichment."

Literary translation is a key driver of that much-needed intercultural exchange and literary enrichment, he continues. "Here we have an opportunity to follow a fascinating dialogue between official language Afrikaans receiving from official language Sesotho a classic gem that is internationally regarded as among the best of the latter's cultural exports. As a language that developed on African soil, Afrikaans is proudly receiving a contribution from a neighbour in the rainbow of South African languages, Sesotho. In this sense I am confident that the new translation stands a good chance of contributing to what comes to us as a constitutional challenge: building a new multilingual nation. And mutual transfer of this nature between the languages of the land is perhaps an enterprise worth embracing."

A CAREER IN ACADEMIA

Coming from a teaching family and marrying into another one, his first degree naturally led to a second, and then to a third, the so-called research degree



that opened his eyes to further possibilities, especially in a relatively uncharted field at the time such as African language literature. "Research is the bedrock of knowledge and insight and its subsequent application in all walks of life. Perhaps not as financially lucrative as the business professions, academia and research are intellectually just as challenging and spiritually rewarding for a humanities person like me."

Swanepoel has produced numerous articles, conference papers and research articles, the most recent of which was published in an international *Festschrift* in 2018 and focuses on reconstructing aspects of the second Afrikaans translation of *Chaka*, analysing the challenges involved, while at the same time celebrating the depth of Mofolo's creative competence.

Swanepoel has occupied management and executive positions in higher education, including serving as the Unisa Vice-Principal (Academic and Research) from 2001 to 2006 during the time of the mergers. He describes his leadership style as "the pursuit of an understanding of people" and says this supported his becoming a leader as he tried to understand the problems of students, the predicaments of the teaching staff as well as the sensitivities and sensibilities surrounding the new executive leadership dispensation at South African universities in transformation.

"As a WAM*, to be part of such a tectonic metamorphosis was a privilege. A leader is both a supporter and initiator. These attributes were particularly useful

during the turbulent times of university and technikon mergers that marked the first years of the new millennium. Unisa's merging with TechnikonSA and incorporation of the distance education branch of the former Vista University, committed one to drive the merger of more than ten faculties into only five. To match and merge the learning programmes of unequal institutions with dissimilar cultures and values required one to balance urgent targets and dynamic initiatives with the greatest possible understanding of the human factor behind every proposal made and every initiative taken."

Highly regarded in his field and always willing to go the extra mile, Swanepoel serves as a rating report writer for the National Research Foundation's language, literature and linguistics evaluation panel. He has been the keynote speaker at many conferences and holds honorary membership of the African Languages Association of Southern Africa.

Looking ahead, he is working on a forthcoming translation of an early Sesotho play by BM Khaketla about King Moshoeshe and his relationship with the missionaries, as well as a multi-year research project, including fieldwork, looking into the culture and poetry of traditional divination in Sesotho.

* WAM – White Afrikaans male

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