Written in English in the early 70s, *Hill of Fools* was projected into the market for world literature among distinguished company in the Heinemann African Writers Series (HAWS), at a time when expectations for African writing in English reflected a certain orthodoxy; when the book’s origins in apartheid South Africa pressed certain ‘buttons’ in world readerships, and when the country’s increasing cultural isolation meant that even relatively well-versed literary Africanists were less than familiar with the milieu from which the story springs. The result has been that the novel acquired a rather odd penumbra of interpretation, ranging from the naïve to the dismissive or reductive. (Some of this material is represented in the article on the novel’s early reception in the present volume.) The trend has continued to the present day, where discussion tends to focus on the book as exemplifying certain preoccupations (‘violence’ or ‘proto-feminism,’ for instance), or as an historical contribution to the Xhosa novel (the work was translated into Xhosa and published as *Kwazidenge* in 1980). *Hill of Fools* is more than this. While in no way wishing to exaggerate the book’s claims – it is competent and interesting, rather than a great novel – there does seem to be merit in tracing the publication trail, and the cross-currents of literary-political opinion, which the story had to negotiate in order to emerge with its own integrity. To the credit of author and publisher, the specific regional emphasis informing what the Russian formalists would term the *sujet* of the work have survived in the published novel to support a story much of whose human poignancy, political relevance and sociological interest were missed by the published text’s original readers.

**The quest for publication**

In his initial search for a publisher, Peteni was fortunate in the people he chose to rely on for advice on getting his book into print, principally Lionel Abrahams and Guy Butler. Both staunch liberals in politics, with demanding standards in literary art, their humane outlook was not unlike Peteni’s own. They too yearned to be free of the apartheid
insanity, were suspicious of the hysteria of the right and left in South African politics, and embarrassed by the failures of their (voting) countrymen to choose any more equitable, progressive path. Like him, though for very different reasons, they suffered the impotence of a liberal minority. Butler saw to it that his literary judgment was supported and confirmed by people better able to assess the book in its local historical and anthropological context – though he, too, had a good idea of the book’s authenticity and importance – as discussed below, so that in all, from the South African end, Hill of Fools received skilled and informed assessment.

The effort of writing Hill of Fools must have paled into insignificance compared to the task of getting the work published. Peteni was well-known and highly-regarded in African educational circles, but he had written nothing major and was nearing sixty when he took up the challenge. Apartheid was in full cry, the very region in which Peteni had grown up, where his father had made his name, and in which Hill of Fools was to be set – the Keiskamma district of the Ciskei – was embroiled in power-struggles surrounding the creation of the Transkei and Ciskei ‘Bantustans’ under the separate development policy of apartheid. A critical issue, outlined elsewhere in this volume, is whether Hill of Fools blandly ignores the ongoing micro-politics of the Ciskei, or whether it is in fact a covert commentary on Bantustan and apartheid politics.

As early as 1970 Peteni was searching for a South African reader/literary agent for the novel, and approached Lionel Abrahams (see Peteni to Abrahams, 30 October 1970), who responded with at least two letters offering advice and encouragement, from which Peteni evidently felt he had profited (Peteni to Abrahams, 17 April 1971).¹ Abrahams’ side of this correspondence has not come to light.² A year or so later, he seems to have settled on Guy Butler at nearby Rhodes University as an additional mentor. Butler was a literary figure well-known in the Eastern Cape and familiar to academics at the University of Fort Hare where Peteni was lecturing in the English Department. Rhodes (founded 1904) and Fort Hare (founded 1915) had enjoyed a close and mutually beneficial relation until the infamous ‘Extension of Universities’ Act of 1959 annexed Fort Hare to serve as a Xhosa university for the planned Ciskei Bantustan, under an
ambitious if bizarre plan to provide separate tertiary education facilities for ethnic groups. Butler read the ms. himself, and passed it to two unknown readers for comment, one of whom responded as follows, in Butler’s account relayed to Peteni (1 February, 1972):

My second reader of *The Hill of Fools* [the title in ms initially carried the definite article – L.W.] is worried by what he calls the “correct but rather old-fashioned English.” He does not find sufficient evidence “of the impact of cultures, of African society in transition, of people clutching to old traditional things in order to endure or survive in the new dispensation.” He feels that you should be encouraged to write another novel, on a less isolated theme, in which the contemporary predicament of Africans is the main concern.

Here is the first indication that *Hill of Fools* did not conform satisfactorily to the paradigm of African writing in English as established in the 60s by (primarily) the new writers of West and East Africa. Peteni replied serenely that while he might one day consider writing a book “on the theme suggested by your second reader”, the political predicament at present militated against any such decision (Petení to Butler, 9 February 1972):

The theme of “impact of cultures” is a popular one with African writers, especially those in West Africa. I have thought about it, but I decided against it for an obvious reason. In the last few years it has not been a wise thing for any African to speak or write freely on the political or social scene in South Africa. those who have done so have invariably got into trouble afterwards.

This was no exaggeration. Among writers banned in recent years had been Dennis Brutus (1970), Mazisi Kunene (1966), Alex La Guma (1962), Todd Matshikiza (1966), Bloke Modisane (1966), Es’kia Mphahlele (1966), Lewis Nkosi (1966), Cosmo Pieterse (1970), Modikwe Dikobe (Marks Ramitloa) (1962), Albie Sachs (1967), Ruth First (1962), Can Themba (1966), Ben Turok (1967), and several others (see Böhmer, Addendum 2). The apartheid machine was intent on smothering any sign of intellectual resistance. If you had an intention of writing and staying in South Africa, some more devious, less confrontational strategy had to be adopted. (Petení’s solution is discussed in the article “Politics, latent and overt, in *Hill of Fools*” in this issue.)
Seeking further confirmation of his opinion, Butler sent the ms to David Hammond-Tooke and Tim Couzens at the University of the Witwatersrand. Hammond-Tooke had been Professor of Anthropology at Rhodes and Couzens was an ex-student of Butler’s in the English department at Rhodes. Only Couzens’s opinions of the novel survive, in the form of Butler’s notes taken at a meeting in Johannesburg:

1. Explain title
2. Fill out Tembu – Hlubi rivalry
3. Certain characters could be filled out
4. Writing occasionally stilted – look at heroine’s speeches again – & first chapters
5. Good shifting bias e.g. towards lover and girl. Interesting.
6. Liked relationship between Christian and tribal – nice balance between the way a tribe makes a decision, & the way a European court makes a decision; or, one family goes to church, the other goes to a witchdoctor. Relation between Christian and tribal religion v. interesting.
7. Finds processes of conciliation operating in both religions. But ideal love usually sought for in Christianity.
8. Tragic decision she has to make between the man the Tribe has chosen for her, & her own choice, who is an enemy: yet her love is potentially conciliatory between enemies; but the choice she makes is conciliatory within the tribe.

Butler duly conveyed points 1-3 (i.e. the issues calling for his attention) to Peteni (25 August 1972), but this rough record of the conversation with Couzens already indicates a deeper level of engagement with the novel’s preoccupations than in the event seemed possible for most South African and international reviewers when the book was finally published. Why was this? The issue probably boils down to a paucity of authentic writing by Africans in English on traditional South Africa, and to white reviewers being soused in European and American writing, and largely ignorant of the relevance of anthropological work such as that of Philip Mayer and Monica Wilson for the
understanding of rural South Africa. There was also the unavoidable void preceding the range of challenging historical writing on the Eastern Cape which was about to surge onto the historiographical scene just as Peteni’s novel was published.\(^3\) Peteni’s enterprise was unusual, even idiosyncratic, in the climate in which he wrote.

Butler and Couzens had the advantage of local knowledge, the latter through his early passion for African South African writing (caught, in part, from Butler) and the former through having grown up in the Eastern Cape and being familiar with its ethos.

Butler himself was impressed by the manuscript, suggested improvements some of which at least Peteni seems to have implemented (Peteni to Butler, 1 February 1972),\(^4\) and then sent it on to James Currey at Heinemann in London (16 February 1973) with a warm recommendation: “It is interesting for several reasons, I think: no whites in it at all; no obvious political or colour issue; a good sense of character, family, clear region; informed by a gentle stoicism; no hysteria whatever.” The other reviewing possibility was a “friend at Oxford”, possibly a contact made through the publication of Butler’s very successful *Oxford Book of South African Verse* (OUP, 1959). However, there proved no need to pursue the Oxford link, because Currey saw possibilities in the manuscript.

**The Readers’ verdicts**

On starting to peruse the novel Currey seems to have concurred with Butler, at least provisionally: “The first chapter gets off at a good pace. The women fighting at the ford is handled quite realistically and, although the style is quite straightforward, it promises well” (Currey to Butler, 14 March 1973). The ms went out to an array of readers for the African Writers Series (HAWS): two South Africans and several readers in the East and West African offices of Heinemann (see list of ms sources below). The first report to arrive (from ‘R de L’ [Ros de Lanerolle], a South African working freelance in London) was devastatingly negative, and is worth quoting at some length because it signals in forthright terms a strain of politically-motivated impatience with Peteni’s novel:

> I feel not just disappointed with this one – but angered. How can a competent writer (he is) in S.A. in 1973 expend his energy on a tale of simple tribal life – a
moral tale, what’s worse? Zuziwe’s love for a boy of another tribe leads to a ‘faction fight’ in which a boy of her own tribe is killed. Her own guilt and her boy’s weakness lead to her death and that of her unborn baby – but the hope is born that faction fighting will cease and people be valued as individuals. And if all this is some sort of allegory on apartheid it is so generalised as to serve only the enemy. I can see no reason why this bloke shouldn’t have his book published by the Government Publishing house as a text for secondary schools.

Then, following a short paragraph of faint praise, she concludes:

All the more saddening when you remember that even 10 years ago, black culture in S.A. was decades ahead of the consciousness of the rest of the continent, now writers elsewhere are at the growing points, and from S.A. comes this pathetic piece of ‘separate development’.

I guess I’m overreacting. But this is not for AWS.

De Lanerolle is, in many superficial respects, spot on: Peteni’s novel side-steps the internal and international struggle against apartheid, partly for reasons of self-preservation, as mentioned in the letter to Butler, cited above, and partly because the total anti-apartheid struggle was not, in fact, always on the front burner for rural African people in the way that it was for western-orientated activists. This was a feature of their life-situation. Peteni was trying to capture the ‘felt life’ of a specific region, and this involved setting the struggle in the place it occupied for many ordinary people in this locale. Difficult as it may be for a post-apartheid readership to accept, there could be a degree of dispirited acquiescence, of resigned toleration and bland dismissal in the rural mindset, preoccupied with its own concerns and its own agenda. The marginalized could also marginalize. From this perspective, there is little in Hill of Fools that international political activism at the time could yoke to the struggle against apartheid without ambiguity. Equally, there is a great deal in the book that was beyond the purview of usual anti-apartheid viewpoints because ignorance of local history, politics and the disposition of the people Peteni was writing about made the political struggles he was commenting on inaccessible to an international readership – and white South African readers were little better off at the time.

Other readers could hardly have been more at odds with de Lanerolle’s verdict. The South African writer, Richard Rive, then busy at Oxford researching Olive Schreiner,
enthused: “This is a fine piece of writing. It is so well done that I became engrossed, read it at one sitting, and then read most of it again”, before carefully listing points for emendation. From OUP East Africa, John Nagenda’s report, equally positive, starts: “How pleasant to come across an MS that you actually enjoy!”

This pastoral tale is most fetching. And generally it is written in a pleasant easy style to match - - - it is an MS which would pay close attention, because its base is completely sound, because a great deal of it is already fine and accurate, above all because once the necessary revisions have been done the result would be good.

Henry Chakava in the Nairobi office of Heinemann listed detailed suggestions for improvement, the general intent of which seems to have been to shift the emphasis to include more direct reference to the apartheid struggle:

The point that although Zusiwe and Bhuqa manage to transcend their tribal shells, they are ultimately destroyed by the social laws which govern migration in S. Africa should be given greater emphasis. Look at this discussion between Zuziwe and her aunt:

Zuziwe: ‘Is there any hope, do you think, that Bhuqa will one day marry me and take me away to some far away place where there are no enemies, no hatred, no influx control, where he could live happily with me and my child?’

Aunt: ‘There is no place like that’ - - -. Coming after Bhuqa has failed to secure a permit to settle in Port Elizabeth, one wishes this discussion could have been developed in the right direction.

A disturbing element of quiescence, almost fatalism, resonates in the Aunt’s response and offends Chakava’s sense of the politically appropriate. The failure to engage with the realia of apartheid is seen as spoiling the aesthetic shape of the novel:

Bhuqa should be developed more as a character who expounds a social vision. The weight of the tragedy must rest not only on Zuziwe but on Zuziwe and Bhuqa. It seems as if after chapter 14, the author is in a hurry to end the novel, rather than tidying it up and giving it an artistic balance.

We can be reasonably sure that the balance advocated here would be one where the “social vision” putatively allocated to Bhuqa would locate Peteni’s story fully within a South African apartheid inflection of the paradigm early identified by Albert Gérard (1971) as carrying “the chief original theme” of African literature:
the theme of acculturation, with its many subordinate motifs: industrialization and technical development, impact of city life and the new money economy on ethical behavior, transformation of marriage customs and sexual mores, contrast between modern education and ancient wisdom and superstition - - -.

In other words, if Peteni is writing African pastoral, as Nagenda suggests, or at least a ‘version’ of pastoral (to borrow Empson’s term), his effort must be flawed because it fails to supply the critique of the city or of civility expected of the genre, or even to explore in any depth the manner in which the rural and the urban are imbricated. It is certainly no overtly didactic anti-apartheid novel. Chakava moves on to advocate a significant piece of critical revisionism:

I personally feel that, to remove the impression that this is the story of barbarians, noble savages full of passions and ready to cut off each others [ ] at the slightest provocation, it must be restated that this is a struggle between two families, or two villages, or what Ngugi in his novels calls two ridges; and not two tribes. All references to tribe and tribesmen must be removed and the result will be a *Romeo and Juliet* type story much more superior to *Weep Not Child*.

After all these revisions have been made this will clearly be a first class novel.

Chakava’s final point goes to the heart of the manner in which Africanists were reading “the African story” of that time. Mention of “tribe” or “tribalism” was more than just politically incorrect; it ran counter to the conventional wisdom among Africanists of the 50s and 60s, according to which the triumvirate forces of independence, African nationalism, and development, were destined to overwhelm ethnicity. The new nations would be caught up in a wave of political liberation, economic growth and nation building so absorbing as to overwhelm reactionary forces of traditionalism, which would subside into a benign cultural legacy. This was the beckoning modernization paradigm, distorted in South Africa by the oppressions of apartheid, and the core of what Peteni – so the critique goes – ought to have been have been writing about. This would be the “right direction” towards which Chakava gestures.

It may be significant that, immediately following his identification of “the chief theme of African literature,” Gérard goes on to say: “Indeed, the chief interest of African literature for the non-African reader is, perhaps, that it provides a key to the African’s own
awareness of the problems raised by his emergence into the modern world” (380). The publisher’s readers were hardly non-African, but they were singularly ill-equipped to respond to Peteni on his own terms. Disregarding the embarrassingly anthropologised “African” in Gérard’s text, there is clearly a possibility that at least some of Peteni’s early assessors were approaching his novel from the orthodoxy of the day; presupposing a neat congruence between assumptions about emergent African literature and the master narrative supplied by the proponents of modernization theory. Was this, though, where Peteni himself was ‘coming from’?

‘A Novel of the Ciskei’
It is significant that the hard-back edition put out in South Africa by David Philip Publishers, through arrangement with Heinemann, carries on its cover and title page the subtitle, “A Novel of the Ciskei.” David Philip was given a fifteen-month opening in the southern African sales region, as explained to Peteni by James Currey, to “help get your novel off to a good start by ensuring that it is well-reviewed, stocked by the bookshops and given due attention!” after which the international HAWS edition would be allowed to compete (19 February, 1976). The sub-title was added at the instigation of David Philip himself simply to indicate to the local market that this was a South African story, *Hill of Fools* (like *Ship of Fools* and other similar titles) not being particularly resonant of locale; but the addition unintentionally impels the work into thickets of political complexity unsignalled in the international edition. *Hill of Fools* is indeed at one level about the Ciskei, but in a perspective probably inaccessible to an international readership at the time of publication. Peteni never mentions the word ‘Ciskei’ in the novel, and his comments on the issue in the Winter School lecture (1977) are forthright:

I did not want anybody to sit back, complacent, feeling that the spotlight was on Lennox Sebe’s Ciskei alone, or Kaiser Matanzima’s Transkei, or John Vorster’s apartheid South Africa. The spotlight is on the Ciskei, yes, on Transkei, on South Africa, on any other country where public life and personal relationships are bedevilled by tribalism or racialism or any form of sectionalism. I did not wish to analyse the present Ciskei as politically constituted, as one of the ‘homelands’ of South Africa, because I feared that I might be carried away by criticism of the policy of ‘separate development’ and weaken the impact of the theme of clan or tribal prejudice which was my main concern.
This is as far as we can go using the pre-publication materials on *Hill of Fools* that have so far come to light. A more detailed study of the manuscripts of the novel must wait until some surety that all extant manuscripts have been located has been achieved. A tantalising prospect exists that early drafts and notes, possibly among Peteni’s private papers in the keeping of his daughter Vuyelwa Maqubela, may still surface (see note 2). For now, attention must shift to the politics implicit in the novel, and the early reception accorded the work, both of these being issues that shed light on the questions signalled in the publication history.

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**NOTES**

1. Something of what Abrahams said can be gleaned from Peteni’s account of it to Butler (Letter of 6 January 1972):

   The criticism you made about clichés was made by Mr Lionel Abrahams on an earlier text. I tried to weed out the clichés carefully, and substitute them with Xhosa expressions, but it appears I missed some of them. It’s so easy for one who is not a native speaker of English to read a cliché over and over again --- without realizing it ---.

2. In an interview at her home in Alice (14 January 2003), Mrs R. Peteni mentioned that her late husband’s literary effects are in the keeping of his daughter, Vuyelwa M. Maqubela, at Philips Academy, Andover, in the United States. She has to date not responded to enquiries.

3. Colin Bundy’s seminal *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry*, a work which seems to have connected with literary historians much more than the earlier
anthropologically orientated writing of Monica Wilson, Philip Mayer or W.D. Hammond-Tooke, only appeared in 1979. William Beinart’s graduate work (‘Peasant Production, Underdevelopment, and the Traditionalist Response in Pondoland’, London MA thesis 1973) was hardly known. J.B. Peires’ The House of Phalo (1981) had not yet appeared. That these approaches later made some impact on literary studies was one result of the challenge to liberal South African historiography which took place in the early 1980s.

4. “I fully agree with your comments on the opening scene. I shall try to make the dialogue between Zuziwe and Diliza more natural. I agree also that the Dakada family should not be made to fade out so early in the story. It should be possible to introduce a scene involving them towards the end of the story” etc. (Peteni to Butler 6 January 1972).

5. Indications in the SOAS ms (deposited by the publisher) are that editorial intervention was relatively slight. For instance, in the following passage the sentence “She was not yet certain, but she felt that Bhuqa’s baby was in her body” originally followed the next sentence in the paragraph:

She stiffened and waited, ready to fight for her lover and her baby. ['She was not yet certain etc. – published edition.] That was the way she saw it, a fight for her lover and her baby, the baby in her womb, the baby who had come from Bhuqa’s body to her womb, as if by a miracle, in defiance of the hostility in the hearts of the Thembus and the Hlubis. She was not yet certain, but she felt that Bhuqa’s baby was in her body.

(ms 3c: 79)

Apart from minor stylistic improvements (e.g. “- - - said Dakada sharply” for “said Dakada in a sharp angry voice”; or “Mvangeli was a sympathetic man and was touched by the appeal of Diliza’s father” instead of “Mvangeli was a sympathetic man and the appeal of Diliza’s father touched him” – both ms 3c: 25), the significant editorial interventions comprise a tightening of the ordering of the narrative. We see that exposition of the rivalry between the Hlubis and the Tembus (“No one could remember when the rivalry began - - - rush madly into battle without knowing why they fought”), which now stands as the second paragraph of the chapter “Ntabeni Hits Back”, originally came much later as the
boys gather for the fight, i.e. between “They must not trespass on Hlubi territory - - -” and “All the villagers were waiting expectantly for Diliza to join the warriors - - -.” Exposition now firmly precedes and supports the action which is to follow, rather than deflating the immediate build-up to the fight. I have not looked sufficiently closely at the NELM mss. to comment on the degree of authorial revision they capture.

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1. Annotated carbon copy of the typescript ms The Hill of Fools (1a) before submission to Heinemann: National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown (Peteni mss collection, NELM ms PL0104).

2. Revised typescript of The Hill of Fools (2a) as submitted to Heinemann: National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown (Peteni mss collection, NELM ms PL0111).

3. Author’s revised typescript of The Hill of Fools (3a), together with an author’s proof (3b) and a publisher’s marked proof (3c): HAWS mss collection, London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS ms 380507).

B. Heinemann readers’ reports (a) and publisher’s correspondence (b) referred to: HAWS mss collection in the Archives of Reading University.

(a) Heinemann readers’ reports (order of receipt):
1. [Ros de Lanerolle] June 1973 (Unsigned, date noted in pencil by a recipient)
2. Richard Rive, Magdalen College, Oxford. (Undated – order of receipt established by reference to Currey’s letter to Guy Butler, 7 August 1973.)

(b) Publisher’s correspondence:

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James Currey to Peteni, 4 October 1973. (Letter provisionally accepting the novel for the HAWS, and enclosing readers’ reports as suggestions for revision.) HAWS mss collection, Reading University.

Peteni to James Currey, 11 March, 1974. (Letter advising Currey that the revised ms 3a has been posted.) HAWS mss collection, Reading University.


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D. Published material
