Listening to Literature

Towards a South African Canon

SOL PLAATJE
SAMUEL EDWARD KRUNE MQHAYI
NONTSIZI MGQWETHO
KEORAPETSE KGOSITSILE
MAZISI KUNENE

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Foreword

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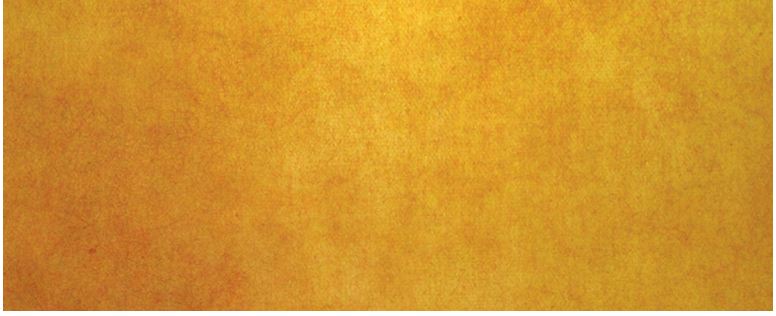

Foreword

Retracing the Bloody Footprints

What must never ever elude us, as African creatives and cultural workers, is that Africa must be free. A free people free themselves by defining what freedom means for them. Because freedom means being able to be everything a nation wants to be, Africa knows, and knew, from time immemorial, that freedom must be attained by all means necessary, if the end is to establish security, peace and justice for all who live in it. In spite of all the serious problems and challenges which Africa has had to face and experience, Africa still stands and dies by these words: *Motho ke motho ka batho ba Bang* (a person is a person by and because of other people).

This freedom of expression and culture, which Africa so cherishes through the masses of her people, must be defended and protected, even against other Africans, who, through greed and avarice, have sold the continent for a pittance. These are the lessons of African history which must be the present creative and cultural reference.

Until such time that we, as African creatives, reference everything we create by acknowledging that the tragedy of human tragedies is African; is the slave trade, we will always blunder hither and thither, and end up nowhere. The African voice which must be emancipated, which is relentless, which echoes the beating of her heart, insists, no matter how many times she is betrayed by whatever means, that Africa must and will be free in spirit, thought and limb. Africa must be freed!

Let me retrace some steps before I walk on. There has been all kinds of talk about the "tower of babel" in Africa: it has been said that there are so many tribes, so many languages, some dying, some borrowed from the colonialists, that it may be difficult to define the African nation. Also, that Africans are not homogenous and that they cannot understand each other and are always fighting tribal wars among themselves.

Be that as it may and whatever has been said against Africa, I agree with the late Chinua Achebe who propagated the idea that one should write in English, teach English and African history and culture and make it African. I also agree with Ngugi wa Thiongo when he said, (I paraphrase), that Africans should speak or write in the African language in which they were most proficient, to save and free Africa. I agree with both these outstanding African writers, because the assertions of both writers have been formalised in the pioneering and ongoing work of the African Union institute on African languages, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), whose objectives in part are:

- To promote and develop the use of African languages in general and vernacular cross-border languages in particular, in partnership with the former colonial languages;
- To promote functional multilingualism, especially in the education sector;
- To ensure the development of African languages as a factor of African integration and development;

I agree, because embedded in all of the African languages, are all the historical, cultural and wisdom references and experiences of Africa which stretch across different generations and define her indigenous knowledge systems, her history, her culture, her heritage and therefore also all her art form expressions. There is no nation in the world which does not have its own dialects and languages; Africa is no exception. Africa cannot be and must never be an exception!

As creatives, therefore, our reference point is the breadth of African languages. This reference point must evolve because we use it and as we use it. We must do so consciously so that we can contribute to the empowerment and emancipation of the voices of the masses and therefore liberate the African word and voice into the universe and cosmos. In other words, the question is: What, oh nations, would you lose if you were to consciously and deliberately promote mother tongue and multilingualism in nations?

I have gone to this length on the issue of African languages, so as to contribute to and prime the removal of all the obstacles which have resulted in us only marking time on this very important matter of language in Africa, and also, hopefully, to prime a forward movement on this bloody subject. As I do so, I must also state that it was a master stroke of genius for the democratic Parliament of our country to legislate for the existence of the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB).

One of the main objectives of the PANSALB is to promote, protect and develop African languages which have been disadvantaged and marginalised by the colonial and apartheid system. At that time of oppression and

exploitation of human beings by other human beings, the languages of the majority in South Africa were being used to institute and promote tribal enclaves, called Bantustans, to create the basis for utter control as well as to nurture continuous conflicts between the different language speakers.

I have also gone to this length on this matter of languages so that on the one hand, I may pay tribute to the many Africans who lost their lives in tribal wars, which were engineered and instigated from outside of Africa by the imperialists and colonialists; on the other hand, I have done so also as a contribution towards entrenching in the African spirit, wherever Africans find themselves in the world, that spiritual feeling that we are fine; we are well; we are okay, because now we have made our own choices. We can put our hand on our chests and declare: "I am an African" as President, Thabo Mbeki did in an inspiring poem delivered in the South African Parliament on the 8th May 1996.

This is also to say that we have put our shoulder to the wheel; we are making progress to resolve African problems by resolving the people-made problem of the tower of babel in Africa. It is also important to note that all of the writers, including the contributors to this very important South African contribution to African literature, "Listening to Literature", have without fail, not only borrowed but also recognised, innovated, utilised, become creative with and paid tribute to the stoic presence of African languages. That tribute is also paid to the wisdom of African cultures as preserved and expressed by those who interacted at various levels with the institutions of higher learning on the continent and throughout the world to give direction to this important matter and subject. That that experience was used to contribute to the emancipation of the African voice, not only on the African continent, but throughout the length and breadth of the world, must be registered as a commitment to honour mother tongue and multilingualism in all human cultures.

As stated above, the African Union (AU) has established the ACALAN. The AU has also designated Swahili, among other languages, as the African Union language. We also speak of the African Union, following the Organization of African Unity (OAU), because the basis for the unity of the African people, and the recognition of the presence of Africans throughout the world, is also part and parcel of the African discourse and is acknowledged especially now, as the commonality of cross-border languages are known, recognised and officialised within the five economic regions in Africa; the sixth being the African diaspora.

Have we not quickly, very quickly, arrived at a point where African languages must be taught within the length and breadth of the African diaspora, and for that matter, in the world, generally?

Besides the foundations of the African economic system, *New Economic Plan for African Development* (NEPAD), as being the basis and building block for African liberation and unity, the AU has also instituted the *African Peer Review Mechanism* (APRM) sector on Arts, Culture, Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge systems. The point I am making through all this detail, is that it is incumbent upon African intellectuals and creatives to not only be conscious, but also, as the Black Consciousness Movement stated, to be part of the solution of the most challenging historical, cultural, political, economic and social issues facing Africa and Africans wherever they are.

"*Listening to Literature: Towards a South African Canon*" produced as part of the *South African Arts, Past and Present Project* by the Art and Ubuntu Trust, challenges us to ponder and engage from diverse points of view with the objective of defending, protecting and promoting innovation and unity in diversity of Africans, wherever they are. What a beautiful challenge!

Mongane Wally Serote, *South African Poet Laureate*
March, 2021.

Poetry is symbolic. It needs to be said by poets and understood by the general population. We have absolutely to hold on to this heritage of poetic language. Everybody must be ready to carry this thing hand in hand together.
– Ernest Mancoba, 1994

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Introduction

Bridget Thompson

Towards a South African canon

One might expect, in our orally literate society, that South Africa's most recent former poet laureate, Keorapetse Kgositsile (1938-2018) would be a household name. Regrettably not. Nor is Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006), poet laureate before him and designated African poet laureate by UNESCO in 1993, nor is Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875-1945) affectionately known as Imbongi yesizwe jikelele (The poet of the nation as a whole). Nontsizi Mqwetho, a remarkable writer, about whose life very little is known but whose poetry written in the 20s and 30s amazes and delights to this day, is familiar to an even smaller circle.

More people, perhaps, have heard of Sol Plaatje (1876-1932) who was not a poet, although apparently a great orator. However, he could be described as the father of modern South African literature. His novel, *Mhudi* was the first written by an African man in English, preceding the accolade given to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by decades. As a diarist, journalist and editor of his own papers he was prolific. He also produced a foundational book on South African history and politics, *Native Life in South Africa*, a heartfelt and profound analysis of the impact of the Native Land Act of 1913, still considered one of the most significant texts in South Africa more than a hundred years after its publication.

Plaatje held political office, being a founder of and the first elected general secretary of the African National Congress (ANC) at its inception in 1912. He was chosen as general secretary because his ability to organise and communicate across all language groups in South Africa had been ably demonstrated in the previous decade of his singled minded entrepreneurship. He owned, edited, printed and distributed newspapers including *Koranta ea Becoana* (Newspaper of the Tswana) established in 1901 and *Tsala ea Becoana*, and *Tsala ea Batho* (The Friend of the People). Their distribution saw him travelling all over South Africa engaging readers.

There is a rich wealth of biographical materials, which documents his prolific activities and there is a substantial record of his own writing, so our purpose here is not to draw attention to his achievements, but to highlight one aspect of his work and personality, that of the African influences that shaped him.

We know from Plaatje's own work that he cherished Setswana proverbs and the Setswana language – his 1916 publication[1] lists hundreds of Setswana

1 Plaatje ST. 1916. *Diane tsa Secoana le maele a Sekgooa a a dumalanang naco. Sechuana proverbs with literal translations and their European equivalents.* London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.

proverbs with literal English translations and then European language equivalents drawn from English, Dutch, Latin and Greek.

In the preface he quotes Archbishop Colenso's observation that the average English peasant has a vocabulary of 300-400 words, but the average Setswana herder had a vocabulary of 3000-4000 words, indicating the source of Plaatje's dexterity with language and languages. He spoke five or six languages. His Shakespeare translations (Julius Caesar and Comedy of Errors/Diposho Posho) are regarded as going far beyond a mere translation adding something distinctive (see further in Prof Matjila's article).

All the strengths of Sol Plaatje's literary engagements are true of all the other writers here. Sol Plaatje initiates this canon because he, like the poets included, has drawn extensively on indigenous literary knowledge to inform his aesthetic.

Although these poets use different languages, they have cross-influenced each other. Kunene studied Mqhayi, Kgositsile was influenced by Kunene.

Plaatje, Mqhayi and Mqwetho were part of the same cultural milieu, publishing in newspapers which were read across South Africa by the black intelligentsia during the 1920s and 1930s. This was a time when black newspapers published in many languages as well as English. Although we don't know of instances when Plaatje and Mqhayi met we do know that Sol Plaatje once edited the Eastern Cape paper, *Izwe le Bantu* (Voice of the People), a newspaper in which Mqhayi published his poems and no doubt they both read the paper that Nontsizi Mqwetho published her poems in, *Umteteli wa Bantu* (Mouthpiece of the People).

All these writers took up the responsibility of the imbongi to remember those who are worthy of being remembered and importantly to speak the unspeakable and say the unsayable in poetic language:[2] Kgositsile was a praise poet of artistic lineages, musicians and writers as well as freedom fighters, his mother and other mothers. Mqhayi had, and still has, a significant cultural and historical impact. Apart from his poetry, his novella *Ityala lamawele* embedding Xhosa (African) jurisprudence served as a dispute resolution guide amongst prisoners on Robben Island.[3]

Prof Kgositsile *passed on while we were preparing this book. We dedicate this volume to him and thank him for his clarity of vision, warmth, wisdom and kindness.*

2 The duty of an artist as described by Ernest Mancoba in conversation with the writer in 1994

3 As described by Govan Mbeki in conversation with the author in 1993

Mazizi Kunene's huge body of work, much as yet unpublished, contains an extraordinary body of knowledge which is critical for the development of the soul of an African nation[4], and Nontsizi Mqqwetho left poems that are today still relevant and inspiring to all but the knowledge that she, as a woman in the 1920s, took the mantle and responsibility of an imbongi is especially enlivening.

This publication is an attempt to provide an introduction to these seminal writers.

Prof Sekepe Daniel Matjila brings an insightful reading of how Sol Plaatje's work as Shakespeare translator, collector of stories, novelist and storyteller, reflects his Setswana language and African cultural influences. He allows the reader to see how the values, determination and creative dexterity of the multi-lingual Plaatje were shaped by his first exposure to language, through Tswana proverbs and tales.

Vusi Mchunu in discussing Mazisi Kunene's work, provides a framework on orality and orature which powerfully highlights a rich heritage with relevance in our lives today and into the future.

Zukiswa Pakama, a storyteller herself, writing from the perspective of a first language Xhosa speaker reflects on how Mqhayi's poetry, familiar from childhood and school and Nontsizi Mqwetho, recently discovered through Jeff Opland's book, capture and express the language she loves so well.

Dr Uhuru Phalafala provides an assured reading of Keorapetse Kgositsile's work, alerting us to how he deploys the Tswana language in his quest to 'tame the English language' and highlighting the Kunenian influence in his poetry. She also provides insights into his significant impact on the black arts movement in the US.

Prof Kgositsile passed on while we were preparing this book. We dedicate this volume to him and thank him for his clarity of vision, warmth, wisdom and kindness.

We thank his successor as poet laureate, **Dr Mongane Wally Serote**, for the foreword which places all these endeavors in historical perspective, highlighting what has been achieved and what still needs to be done.

4 Conversation with Ntongela Masilela 2010

How Plaatje expressed his oral influences in his written work

Daniel Sekepe Matjila

Though Plaatje lived in extreme times; though his words were necessarily trenchant and incisive, he was moderate and measured. Though outspoken and outraged, he possessed a remarkable inner discipline.

Introduction

Sol Plaatje is well known as a writer of books and newspaper articles in English. He was a newspaper editor and politician. However, his fluency in the Setswana language and his use of indigenous literary sources in his writing and as evidenced in his life could be described as the fountain of his values.

The significance of Setswana stories and Proverbs/Animal Tricksters in Sol Plaatje's life

In Africa selected animal stories are taught to children, these can be their first lessons in the cultural value of restraint or moderation. The purpose is first to draw attention to this quality of character that was so marked, so evident, in Plaatje. Though he lived in extreme times; though his words were necessarily trenchant and incisive, he was moderate and measured. Though outspoken and outraged, he possessed a remarkable inner discipline. As a child, Plaatje would have heard animal trickster stories about *phokojwe* (the jackal) and *mmutla* (the hare); stories which illustrate the worst human appetites – greed, gluttony, selfishness, self-preservation and ingratitude – and inculcate the importance of restraint.

As an adult Sol T. Plaatje collected and recorded hundreds of Setswana proverbs and published seven hundred and thirty-two in Sechuana Proverbs (1916). In this remarkable little book these proverbs, are translated into English and their 'European equivalents' are provided as well. Clearly, he was trying to preserve the values expressed in the Setswana proverbs and at the same time seeking points of commonality with other cultures. This careful consideration of the strengths of his own culture and commonality with other cultures is clear in his translations as well.

Translations of Shakespeare plays

Despite having only a Standard III formal education, Plaatje was the foremost Setswana language scholar and translator of his day. One of his undertakings, to translate a number of Shakespeare plays into Setswana, illustrates his sensitivity to language as reflective of culture as well as resonating with poetry and music. Julius Caesar, a great and powerful leader, ruled Rome in the days of the

PLAATJE'S SHAKESPEARE
translations … are infused with his Batswana poetic sensibilities and idiom. One can taste and smell Setswana.

Republic when the Romans had given up on their kings. A dictator, he became drunk with power and ambition and was finally assassinated by his closest associates. All powerful leaders can fall prey to the temptations of power and ambition. A Setswana proverb *Bogosi bo a taga* (Kingship is intoxicating) which warns kings, can also serve as a warning to all in authority, in public and political leadership positions. Though not a king, Julius Caesar found power intoxicating.

Plaatje's Shakespeare translations, as we seek to demonstrate in this section, are infused with his Batswana poetic sensibilities and idiom. One can taste and smell Setswana. Mark Anthony's famous speech praising Brutus, for example, uses words that might describe a Motswana hero:

> *E rile go twe ngwana-a-kgoro Moroma, ga bo go tewa Borutuse*
> *Ba bangwe botlhe e ne e le dilalogi,*
> *Dibitiela Kesara yo mogolo ka poulelo.*
> *O ikopantse nabo fela ka pelo e namagadi,*
> *A leka go lemofalela morafe.*
> *Botshelo jwa gagwe bo ne bo le maatlametlo,*
> *Le diele tsa tlholego di logaganye ka methapo ya tshika tsa gagwe,*
> *Gore popo yotlhe e eme ka dinao, e reye lefatshe e re, "Moroma yo, e ne e le monna!*
>
> This was the noblest Roman of them all:
> All the conspirators, save only he,
> Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;
> He only, in a general honest thought,
> And common good to all, made one of them.
> His life was gentle; and the elements
> So mix'd in him, that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world 'This was a man!'

Rive appropriately suggests that these last three lines perfectly describe Plaatje but that Plaatje's humility and meekness would have prevented him from realizing it.

Plaatje's is less a literal translation and more of a transposition across languages and cultures. He employs symbolic signs loaded with meaning to match those of Shakespeare, without sacrificing the Setswana culture. The name Brutus, rendered Borutuse, is a transliteration, as are loanwords from other languages in Setswana. The character of Borutuse is described in *ngwana-a-kgoro* (child of the lineage), *pelo e namagadi* (tender-hearted, an idiom derived from the word for a female animal), *lemofalela* (safeguard), *maatlametlo* (dexterity), *diele tsa tlholego* (natures' elements, the word *diele* derived from the distinguishing marks on livestock) and *popo* ('nature,' in the

English of Shakespeare, but 'creation' in the Setswana). A strong sense of place in history, as well as echoes of pastoral life and the hunt, reflecting the Batswana worldview, is present in the choice of language. The language, the symbolic signs, are thus pathways to the poetic centre of this historically important character, who, from Plaatje's description, might well have been a Motswana hero.

Plaatje's rendering of music and melody in the translation mirrors Setswana verse in the ways in which sound is employed. Sound repetition, both consonance and assonance, create music; rhyme adds melody.

*E rile **g**o twe ngwana-a-**kg**oro Moroma, **g**a bo **g**o tewa Borutuse [g/kg]*

The /g/kg/ sound is used for dramatic effect to create fusion of form and meaning. The sound is onomatopoeic – the reader feels as if there is scratching, tearing, ripping, shredding, pulling and creeping. The same sound also creates a mind picture of boldness and bravery. Indeed, Borutuse is an audacious and courageous soldier. Daring in his actions, confident to express his views, he is not afraid to sacrifice his life for the benefit of his people. The /g/ sound has not only been used to express boldness but to highlight wisdom and foresight. In the same line the vowel [o] is repeated seven times:

*… G**o** twe ngwana a kg**or**o M**or**oma, ga b**o** go tewa B**o**rutuse [o]*

Plaatje uses assonance here to create tone. By tone, we mean the writer's or speaker's attitude toward the subject, the audience, or toward herself/himself. Almost all the elements of poetry or verse go into indicating tone: connotation, imagery, metaphor, rhythm, sentence construction and formal pattern. The poet chooses words for sound as well as meaning. Verbal music enables the poet to do something more than communicate ideas. Verbal music creates tone; that is, it conveys affect, feeling.

*Di**la**logi dibitie**l**a Kesara yo mogo**l**o ka poule**l**o [l]*

In this line of Mark Anthony's speech praising Brutus, repetition of /l/ serves to foreground the line as a whole. The effect is strengthened by the repetition of the same sound two lines later: *A **l**eka go **l**emofa**l**e**l**a morafe.* Apart from the general emphasizing effect, this sound repetition creates melody. Although grammatically necessary (the *le* is determined by the requirement of correspondence between the prefixes of the noun and the adjective), it is perceived as semantically functional because it relates two content words which are important components of the central metaphor: in Shakespeare's English, "In common good to all, made one of them" and in Setswana, if we give a literal translation of Plaatje back into English, "He endeavoured to safeguard the nation's/tribe's well-being." Borutuse embodied servanthood, was a true servant of the people.

By glancing at the printed page, you cannot miss the rhyming words, before even beginning to pronounce the sounds. The same line exhibits reverse rhyme:

*A leka go lemofal**ela** mor**afe***

and internal rhyme:

*A l**eka** go lemofal**ela** morafe.*

Skilled in words and poetic idiom, Plaatje the translator borrows reverse rhyme from English, showing an ability to transcend linguistic difference, even in verse. Together, his sensitivity to Setswana's melody and music, including onomatopoeia, as well as culturally resonant symbols embedded in the language he chooses, foreground his ethnic and linguistic sensibility. Again, Plaatje uses assonance, repetition of the sound /i/ to good effect:

*E le d**i**lalog**i** d**i**b**i**t**i**ela Kesara [i]*

The high unrounded frontal vowel /i/ can be used to portray piercing, pricking, scorching feelings. The line expresses deeds of cowardice, referring to Caesar's murderers as wanderers and merciless wrestlers.

Octavius' speech closes the play:

A re mo direleng tlotlo e e lebanyeng maatlametlo a gagwe.
Re ye go mmoloka ka ditshwanelo tsotlhe le tirelo tsa phitlho.
Marapo a gagwe gompieno a tla lala mo tenteng ya me
Jaaka marapo a motlhabani yo o tlotlegang.
Atlholang mephato e itapolose, gonne e le rure la gompieno
e tlhotse e se tsatsi la tlala, tlhaola malata, e ne e le la marumo
maja-magosana.
A ba ikhutse re tsoge re ye go abalana makgabane a tsatsi
leno la tlhapedi

According to his virtue, let us use him,
With all respect, and rites of burial.
Within my tent his bones to-night shall lie,
Most like a soldier, order'd honorably.
So call the field to rest; and let's away,
To part the glories of this happy day.

Again Plaatje selects words with rich, cultural meaning. He repeats the word *maatlametlo* (dexterity, skill, orderliness), used earlier to praise Borutuse. He could have used *ditiro*, meaning deeds, instead of *maatlametlo*, which encapsulates ingenuity, ability and adroitness. In the line *marapo a gagwe gompieno a tla lala mo tenteng ya me,* the use of *marapo* (bones) symbolises continuity – Borutuse's spirit will live forever. *Marapo* symbolises strength as in the idiom *go tsenya marapo nameng* meaning to show resilience and buoyancy. The use of *marapo* illustrates respect and elevates Borutuse to the status of venerated ancestor. Plaatje continues his cultural allusions, using two words, *mmoloka* and *phitlho*, meaning one and the same thing with nuances of difference. *Mmoloka* from *go boloka* means to spare

or to save and *phitlho* means burial. Together they convey the fact that in Batswana custom the corpse is buried, but the spirit of the person lives on. *Go boloka* suggests that the spirit of the dead is spared.

Plaatje, the translator, adds a line not in Shakespeare's original that sums up the action of the play:

> *e tlhotse e se tsatsi la tlala, tlhaola malata, e ne e le la marumo maja-magosana.*

The implication is that many people lost their lives, including gifted, worthy and selfless people like Marcus Brutus. The line echoes the Setswana proverb, *Ga se tlala tlhaola malata ke lerumo maja magosana* which means "It is not hunger, the chooser of servants, but spears, the slayers of princes" which might be rendered in modern English, "Unlike hunger, death does not visit the poor only; it takes people indiscriminately."

Plaatje's proverb both sums up the action of the play and again praises Brutus.

Plaatje's transposition of Shakespeare into Setswana poetic and musical idiom, the addition of a Setswana proverb eulogizing Brutus and the choice of language reflecting Batswana cultural norms and beliefs surrounding death, betray the sensibilities of a man deeply rooted in his Setswana language and Batswana culture.

THIS LOSS of lefatshe (earth or land), still plagues the South African nation and we still live in extreme times as Plaatje did. Now, more than ever, we need to learn and teach the timeless lessons embedded in Setswana trickster stories and proverbs and delve into the rich wisdoms stored in our languages.

Mhudi

Mhudi, Plaatje's 1930 novel, the first by an African to be published in English, also manifests the influence of oral cultural forms. The story is highly didactic and moralistic. Plaatje, as a Motswana herd-boy, had life lessons inculcated early, through proverbs heard daily, that teach the importance of promptness, diligence, consistency and discipline. Typical examples of such proverbs include *Tlogatloga o tloga gale, modisa wa kgomo o tswa natso sakeng* (Get up, get up early/immediately; the herdboy leaves the *kraal* [enclosure for livestock, often made with thorny branches to repel predators] with the cattle) or *tlogatloga e tloga natso, thupa ya dikgomo e kgetlwa di eme* (get up, get up early/immediately; the herdboy leaves the *kraal* with the cattle; the rod is plucked while the cattle are standing.) Young boys were entrusted with the

young of livestock and the care of calves. As they grew up, their responsibilities increased. Cattle herders were given strict instructions that a bull should never sleep out of its *kraal*. As head of the *kraal*, a bull was regarded as a fountain of wealth. Traditionally, it was believed that witches wanted to get hold of the dung of a bull. It was believed that if witches gained entrance to the *kraal*, they could kill all members of the family. If killing was not the motive, they might bewitch the cattle not to multiply.

Loss of cattle in *Mhudi* symbolizes the loss of Batswana identity, land or farm.

In sum

This loss of *lefatshe* (earth or land), still plagues the South African nation and we still live in extreme times as Plaatje did. Now, more than ever, we need to learn and teach the timeless lessons embedded in Setswana trickster stories and proverbs and delve into the rich wisdoms stored in our languages.

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Influences & significances of orality & orature on Mazisi Kunene

Vusi Mchunu

"Knowledge is of the Ancestors. The secret of ancient wisdom lies in the names of things and their forgotten meanings." – Ms Maqandeyana Ntuli *(as told to her great grandson, Mazisi Kunene)*

Introduction

> "Oral history *allows the voice of ordinary people to be heard".* – J. Tosh 1991

To embrace or not to embrace orality and orature in African and Black literature is the question.

Post-African independence, following the pioneering Ghana of Kwame Nkrumah, free in 1956, commentators, writers, culture activists and educationists have been embroiled in intensified debates and disagreements on the centrality of working in African languages or through the adopted colonial languages, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, in the African context. We could, in the South African case, include Afrikaans here, as it is a well-established fact that Afrikaans emerged as an African language-based creole of the Khoisan, Malay, Xhosa, Nama and West African Krio, and other African dialects, with borrowings from Dutch, the dominant colonial language of the time.[1]

The African quest for freedom from the colony and the post-colony has spawned a number of ideologies, world views and philosophies. Nationalism, Black Nationalism, Black Power, the Civil Rights Movement, Pan-Africanism, Negritude, Black Consciousness, Black Marxism, African Humanism, Ubuntu, and the re-evaluation of Indigenous Knowledge systems. These are the religious strands and sects of this broad church called African and Black Liberation formations. In his brilliant recent offering, pioneering South African Black psychologist and psychiatrist, Chabani Manganyi[2], had the above in mind when he refers to his ground-breaking research into Black psychology and writings of the 1970s, " . . .the Black Consciousness Movement, developed in the spirit of, and side by side with international cultural and

1 The creole evolved in spoken form in the maritime centres (such as Simon's Town and Cape Town) on the eastern seaboard of the Indian Ocean, which were also traversed by Arab and Muslim traders Significantly Cape Town was the place of exile for those Muslim princes who led the resistance against the Dutch East India Company in Batavia, the Dutch eastern headquarters in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was also the destination for tens of thousands of captives in the slave trade over two centuries, many of whom were also Muslim or converted to resist their Christian masters. Thus, Afrikaans was first written in Arabic script and many Afrikaans words can be identified as originating in Arabic – for example "dien" meaning prayer and "papegaai" meaning parrot .

2 Manganyi C:2016; *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist*

nationalist movements such as Negritude in West Africa, the Black Power and Civil Rights movements in the USA."

The militant strands of the liberation movement have been in evidence since the slavery-colonial encounter between Africans and European powers. Rev. Tiyo Soga, a Scottish-trained priest at the end of the 19th century, has been called "the father of Black Consciousness". He was followed by Pixley ka Isaka Seme, co-founder of the African National Congress in 1912, Clements Kadalie of the Industrial Commercial Workers Union (ICU) in the 1930s, Anton Lembede, first President of the ANC Youth League and I.B. Tabata, leader of the Cape-based Unity Movement. Let us not forget AC Jordan's call for according pride of place to African language writing. There has been such a strong strand of intellectual and artistic commitment to the independent black voice in our country.

What is unique and important about the Black Consciousness (BC) movement is its attention to "liberation psychology" for the oppressed, as spelled out by the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire, and the Martinican/Algerian clinical psychologist, Frantz Fanon. The special focus of the BC movement is on healing, self-help and community orientation, and it still resonates throughout our society as unfinished business in contemporary times. Central to the BC notion of healing is self-awareness and cultural awareness. One of the things BC encouraged was for poets to reach back into oral poetic expressions. At the same time as the BC poets in South Africa were trying to look beyond the apartheid knowledge facade to find poetic antecedents, a great South African writer in exile, Mazisi Kunene, prepared a voluminous body of work in isiZulu (*Emperor Shaka*, *Anthem of the Decades*) which drew on the depths of South Africa's indigenous knowledge.

This short essay seeks to throw some light onto the polarity/convergence of Africans advocating assimilation to European world views and language and Africans calling for a purist stand of alienation from European influences and a "Return to the Source", as Amilcar Cabral, the Guinea Bissau revolutionary, theorist, writer, and liberation struggle hero would articulate it. Guided by the writings, analyses and positions of six African writers, the essay will indicate the commonalities, convergence and complementarity of standpoints that from the outset seem irreconcilable. Our sources shall be Mazisi Kunene (South Africa), Chabani Manganyi (South Africa), Ngugi wa Thiongo (Kenya), Tshepo Moloi (South Africa), Ezekiel Mphahlele (South Africa) and Ntongela Masilela (South Africa).

Orality and Orature in contemporary South Africa

In the post-1994 democratic dispensation, as heritage practitioners, we focused on introducing the free African Voice, redressing the heritage narrative in South African museums, rehabilitating indigenous knowledge sources and planting them into the mainstream. We had to revert to oral informants and viewpoints. The neglected and marginalised voices of the mass of apartheid victims assisted in this ongoing enterprise. By implication, this enterprise is driven by the mass of the people, usually the working, farming and marginalised sections of the populace.

> "Oral history *allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated. A much more rounded, realistic and fair reconstruction of the past can be arrived at by calling the subjugated voices to talk back and rectify the dominant accounts of the past contained in archival sources."*
> – P. Thompson 1988

Tshepo Moloi of the Wits University History Workshop and the Historical papers, reminds us that, "One of the most obvious strengths of oral history, especially oral tradition, is that it allows us to gain insight into the history of peoples and societies who have not recorded their past in writing. This includes pre-literate societies, who have a rich oral history; poor and more marginalised communities who do not really have a voice in official records; and people who deliberately destroyed any written information to avoid arrest under repressive regimes or had such documentation seized by the police. Under the Apartheid government, for instance, strict censorship, banning, detention and other forms of repression prevented many political activists and trade unionists from keeping written records containing sensitive or incriminating information."[3]

This brings a freshness and an independence to the historical record that was not imagined to be there in the first place. Oral evidence gives us access to new types of history. This type of evidence contains information that is unique, making oral sources valuable in and of themselves. Practitioners of orality have frames of references guided by criteria like age, gender and culture. Tshepo Moloi again reminds us, "Written sources, for instance, tend to reflect the views and interests of the rich, powerful and influential people within society (including government officials and politicians, businessmen, and journalists). On the other hand, oral sources tell us much more about the lives of ordinary

3 Moloi T Wits historical papers

people. History becomes more democratised as barriers are broken down between the researcher and the informant and the educator and learner."[4]

How reliable are orally transmitted sources?

Orality is a central technique for orature but is not the whole picture. Orature is a systematic recording and transmission of systems of knowledge (as opposed to lived experiences recorded in oral histories) via oral means. It is the primary means of managing Indigenous Knowledge and has many branches: literature, art, medicine, philosophy, childrearing practices and methodologies of social cohesion.

Ezekiel Mphahlele, noted South African author, educationist and advocate for African Humanism tells us, "Now to the oral tradition. The praise poem and the epic (the narrative poem that relates events and deeds of a heroic nature) are ancient forms of oral poetry. Oral poetry was meant to be recited at festivals or in the king's court or at public gatherings by a travelling poet, (imbongi for the Nguni and a griot for West Africa). African oral sources are undergoing a lot of misappropriation, abuse and trivialisation today, as they are not protected by intellectual property rights"[5]

The last point remains pertinent and disturbing, as false artists and commercially-driven Africans and their Western counterparts apply many devious ways to distort and banalise the true gift that orality has endowed to the African and Black world. Who should intervene to stem the commercial abuse of Ndebele mural artworks? Ndebele geometric art, painting and mural works are a form of symbolic, orally-driven, visual language. Pregnant with cultural codes, Ndebele art may be viewed as a written language with alphabets and forms of speech. Not even the current Ndebele royalty are raising alarm at this dismal state of affairs!

ORATURE IS *a systematic recording and transmission of systems of knowledge (as opposed to lived experiences recorded in oral histories) via oral means. It is the primary means of managing Indigenous Knowledge and has many branches: literature, art, medicine, philosophy, childrearing practices and methodologies of social cohesion.* – VUSI MCHUNU

It is important to recognise that memories are extremely variable; some people remember events in great detail and with a high degree of reliability.

4 Moloi T ibid

5 Mphahlele: 1986; *Let's Talk Writing Poetry*

Others do not. Flaws of recollection come in two different forms: the one is distortion or misrepresentation. The second is forgetting and silencing. Of these, simple forgetting, or alternatively suppressing the memory of something unpleasant is by far the most common. Confirmation does not mean that we should simply dismiss points of disagreements with the accepted historical record as inaccuracies. On the contrary, such disagreements may open up a whole new area of inquiry and provide new data.

Tshepo Moloi says, "Our own experience as heritage practitioners, was that during focus group sessions, the versions of occurrences, participants differed from informant to informant. To us this was the enrichment and enhancement for sharing, understanding the content of that particular topic under investigation. We should, therefore, ask why our informant's versions of events differ. It is also important to remember that there is data that we get from interviews that we cannot really 'test' or confirm. These include feelings, perceptions and conflicts."

One of the first moments in a process of healing is to speak one's truth. The many oral testimonies shared in the post-1994 South African experience have begun a process of unlocking the 350 years of abuse that need to be spoken about in order for healing to happen.

The case of Mazisi Kunene, a great practitioner of orality and orature

In 2011, Statistics South Africa counted the demographics of South Africa which encompass about 53 million people of diverse origins, cultures, languages and religions. The rural population in South Africa last measured 35.70% in 2014, according to the World Bank. Rural population refers to people living in rural areas as defined by national statistical offices. It is calculated as the difference between total population and urban population.

According to the 2001 national census, Christians accounted for 79.7% of the population. This includes Protestant (36.6%), Zionist Christian (11.1%), Pentecostal/Charismatic) (8.2%), Roman Catholic (7.1%), Methodist (6.8%), Dutch Reformed (6.7%) and Anglican (3.8%). Members of other Christian churches accounted for another 36% of the population. Muslims accounted for 1.5% of the population, Other 2.3%, Unspecified 1.48% and None 15.1%. African Indigenous Churches made up the largest of the Christian groups. Some believe that many people claiming no affiliation with any organised religion adhere to traditional indigenous religions. Many people have syncretic religious practices combining Christian and indigenous influences.

Black South Africans indicate a high level of home language resilience. They bore the brunt of several colonial systems' (Portuguese, Dutch, English, Apartheid), onslaughts by uncompromising Christian missionary programmes which sought converts to Christianity and reading and writing, besides the enforced Bantustan education schemes that sowed unnecessary divisions within intelligible language clusters such as Nguni (Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele, Xhosa) and Sotho-Tswana (Pedi, Tswana, Sotho). Black South Africans lived cheek by jowl with a large settler community that subjugated them for centuries. The arsenal of the white rulers to bastardise languages and culture and obliterate oral traditions was formidable. In the mines, the real site for African modernisation and industrialisation, a fake communication and language tool, "fanagalo", was thrust down the throats of the indigenous. It was not sustainable. The apartheid regime made an irreparable mistake in shoving Afrikaans into the Black schooling system. The backlash was the Soweto Students Uprising of 1976. And it is the generation of those Soweto students that pressed on towards the realisation of democratic elections in 1994.

African traditions, language, culture and customs bent almost to breaking point, but the African spine remained intact. Mphahlele states, "When African pre-industrial communities recited praise poetry and folk tales, sang ballads, dramatised healing processes, ancestral worship, when society had not yet disintegrated, there was no talk about a "unified sensibility, it was a natural thing".[6]

African rites of passage ceremonies had to be adjusted under colonial and apartheid restrictions, but never faded away. British colonialism tried but failed to reduce Zulu royalty to the status of chieftaincy. The new dispensation saw to introducing a House of Traditional leaders to the new parliament. Every year the numbers of participating youth in the initiation schools rise: Koma amongst the Pedi and BaPulana, ukuthombisa/ukuya entabeni for amaNdebele, ukusoka for the Swazi, ukoluka for the Xhosa, ukubuthwa for the Zulus. The Zulu monarch has reinstated a series of celebrations to mark the Zulu calendar: Mkhosi woMhlanga, the Reed ceremony for the maidens and Umkhosi wokweShwama, the First Fruit Ceremony. This is the context that is enabling orality and orature to flourish as a source for South African and Southern African authors, poets and cultural practitioners.

It is in this fashion that Mazisi Kunene introduces us to his journey with orality and orature: "The conception and creation of *Anthem of the Decades*, was deeply influenced by my great grandmother, Maqandeyana of the Ntuli family. She was one of the greatest oral historians and narrator of legends I

6 Mphahlele;1986

have ever met. 'Knowledge is of the Ancestors,' she once said. The meaning of her words did not sink in at first as she commenced her teaching, covering not only the ideas of the origin of life, the authority of man on earth and medicine, but also the nature of the words and their secret meanings. She often said in discussions, 'The secret of ancient wisdom lies in the names of things and their forgotten meanings.'

African oral literature is not just the antithesis of a written literature, but a development of a more complex literary genre which has utilised social and linguistic potential to the maximum. It is a form that has evolved a special set of principles necessary for the socialisation of thought and the preservation and interpretation of history aimed at reinforcing the all-powerful umthetho wobuntu (fundamental law of humanity). Its symbols are organised to appeal to a complex and varied set of community emotions. It carries inner meanings that become complex, as one probes deeper into their hidden systems."

Mphahlele emphasises the dynamism, the need for innovation, and the emergence of hybrid forms of orality to counter modernity and the colonial/apartheid project. He reminds us, "Everywhere in Africa, we shall for a long time continue to commute between tradition and the present. We shall be the vehicle of communication between two streams of consciousness, as they exchange confidences, knowledge, wisdom and dreams".[7]

However, here is an interesting paradox. The early Mazisi Kunene took a swipe at the Sophiatown Renaissance (1949-1961) writers, that include Mphahlele, for writing in and mimicking American English and mannerisms. But Eskia Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and Arthur Maimane worked in the English language to pursue the African liberation agenda. In the context of the international anti-Apartheid struggle, English was a portal for access to the wide world. Obviously, this was quite a stretch for this debate.

A page from Mazisi Kunene's influences

In an interview with Zoe Wicomb in 1993, on the occasion of his return to South Africa after a 34-year exile period, Mazisi Kunene said, "I think it's logical, normal to write in your mother tongue because there's a psychology, a philosophy connected with the selection or even the shape of the words you use that is linked up with your experience as a person in the language, in the milieu in which you speak, in which you communicate, in which you challenge others. A language has certain nuances that are complex and secretive, and these nuances are crucial because in making a creative work you cannot merely

7 Mphahlele; Voices in the Whirlwind; 1967; pp 146,149,151

make a statement… So the effort of creating requires that writers should not separate themselves, should not make a choice even as to what language to use. I did not choose to write in Zulu; I did not have to make a decision. As you say in my tradition, you are actually inhabited by the spirits on your shoulders and they tell you what to do, what to say."

Kunene collected, analysed and synthesised particularly the praise poems for the Zulu kings. Comparing styles and innovations, Kunene pondered the golden period of Zulu praise poetry as experienced in the times of Kings Shaka, the artist King Dingane and the victorious King Cetshwayo.

Reflecting on unique attributes in the poetic innovation of Shakan-era Praise Poet Magolwane, Kunene says, "The greatness of Magolwane clearly emerges against the background of these compositions. He revolutionised the whole poetic idiom… The conflicts between individuals were depicted as conflicts of character and national interests so that the individuals in his greatest epic poem became symbolic of greater issues involving the destiny of nations and peoples."

"It is for that very reason that Magolwane is not content with giving description in the first few lines of his stanzas, but always, draws a philosophical conclusion. This conclusion must have a direct relationship with the first introductory description and must at the same time be a lead on to the next stanza. In this sense Magolwane's poetry impresses itself in waves of meaning. The meaning which is not only assumed in words but also in the structure and form of the poetry."[8]

Ntongela Masilela[9] highlights Kunene's links with, and the influence of earlier praise poets, "The passing away of Mazisi Kunene on Thursday evening, August 10th 2006, is truly extraordinary given that this is the centennial year of seminal occurrences and events in South African intellectual, political and cultural history… In his search for his own particular classicism demanded by S.E.K. Mqhayi of all those who wrote in the African languages, Mazisi Kunene was very much aware that he had to go through his master Benedict Wallet Vilakazi in order to learn from the classicism of two great Zulu poets of the nineteenth century: Magolwane and Mshongweni. Being a comparative study of Xhosa literature and Zulu literature, Vilakazi's dissertation 'The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni (1945)', in whose preface an indebtedness to Mqhayi is expressed, did not consider these two poets in any great depth as Kunene's master's thesis on 'Zulu Literary Lineages: An Analytical Survey

8 Portrait of Magolwane-The Great Zulu Poet", Cultural Events in Africa [Cambridge University], July 1967

9 New African Movement; Essays;2006

of Zulu Poetry' (1958) subsequently did." Ntongela reminds us that Kunene premised the tradition, styles, poetic form, manner of rendition and the coinage of new expressions, from the early Zulu praise poets. Just as C.L.S. Nyembezi recounted in the explanatory texts to his "Praise Poems of Zulu Kings", Kunene turned his back on Zulu poets imitating the English Romantic poetry of Keats & Shelley.

Let us consider the following poem to illustrate assertions of Kunene above and below.

The Song of Egypt
All our children and our high priests have returned
We no longer have cause to speak to the earth
Our languages have long been forgotten.
Our former selves bark commands at our children's children
Only the one voice of the mountain poet
Breaks through the yellow river into the desert
Our vast continent opens up
And the secrets of our altars are revealed
They are whispered from our ancient homes
And we are freed of the past by a New Dawn!

(unpublished manuscript and presumption that the original is in isiZulu)

Mazisi Kunene's journey to rediscover, better understand and see the linkages in the evolution of Zulu orature, was an uphill struggle. He notes, "Modern poets like Vilakazi, Mthembu, Made, S. Dlamini, A. Kunene, when first attempting to put in writing what had been an oral tradition, faced immeasurable problems. As the Zulu literary tradition had been devalued, I started writing without models, until I discovered Vilakazi's poetry. When I became dissatisfied with Vilakazi and others, I started my own metrical experiments based on the recurrence of stress in the penultimate syllable. Finding this unsatisfactory, I then experimented with syllabic metre, but eventually discarded all these experiments in preference for an internal rhythm which I found in studying traditional poetry. This is the method I have found most appropriate to Zulu poetry."[10]

10 African Publishing Corporation, New York, 1970

Mazisi Kunene and the complementary aesthetic in African languages, orality, orature and all art forms

Celebrated Kenyan author, advocate for writing in African languages and literary theorist, Ngugi wa Thiongo, reminds us that the arrival and eventual acknowledgement of orality, orature and oral sources as veritable sources for research in Western scholarship, was a result of advocacy by African scholars. "It took the fighting pioneering spirit of those African historians, led principally by Bethwell Allan Ogot of Kenya and Kenneth Onwuka Dike of Nigeria, to have oral sources accepted as valid by universities and institutions of higher learning in Africa and the world."[11]

The unique, innovative and ground-breaking contribution of wa Thiongo's 'Globalectics,' is to provide ample examples from the leading authors and essayists on orality and orature that attest to his bottom up approach, affirming the mass of rural, working and emergent voices. That is keeping the seed for the freedoms that vernacular speakers are seeking and confirming that the oral aesthetic also has a social function. There is a spontaneity and liberty of communication inherent in oral transmission, an openness to sounds, sights, rhythms and tones in life and the environment. Body language and gesture are central to oral transmission, which is characterised by the willingness to experiment with new forms and a willingness to connect.

There is also an emphasis on the quest for networking and solidarity amongst indigenous language speakers. Nature in orature manifests itself as a web of connections of mutual dependence. Nurture comes out of nature and gives rise to cyberture. These realms and technologies do not always act in harmony or lead to immediate positive outcomes. At times they are like unregulated emissions of gases that contribute to global warming and lead to rupture of the rhythms of nature, nurture and cyberture. Here wa Thiongo is alluding to, on the one hand, the dynamism and versatility of orature, but also to its contradictory poles, that are accommodated in the African system,

THERE IS *a spontaneity and liberty of communication inherent in oral transmission, an openness to sounds, sights, rhythms and tones in life and the environment. Body language and gesture are central to oral transmission, which is characterised by the willingness to experiment with new forms and a willingness to connect*
– VUSI MCHUNU summarising Ngugi wa Thiongo

11 Ngugi wa Thiongo: Globalectics; 2016

as they should lead to new combinations and new platforms: nature, nurture, cyberture, orality, orature and cyborature.

To return to Mazisi Kunene, this analysis draws our attention as to why he chooses the epic format. The epic incorporates networks, realms and time and space elements within a large body of work. Generic elements of orature – riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama, dance, myth – nourish the imagination, explain the universe and help humans to come to terms with it. The story is all-pervasive in orature; it has its basis in the human confrontation with time. Nobody knows what will happen in the next second, hour, day, week, month or year. That is in the future.

Central to all these elements of orature is performance. Story, riddle, proverb and dance constitute a performance genre. Anywhere from the fireside, village square or market place to the shrine. Whatever the combination of location, time and audience, orature realises its full potential in performance. The carnival takes place in the streets. Mazisi Kunene believes that through performance and celebration we rediscover the grandeur in ourselves. Our splendour, our greatness, is expressed through celebration. He talks about encounters at the central dance arena. Dance is a celebration of form over fixity, a momentary triumph over gravitational pull, a symbolic conquest of gravity. Motion is inherent in change, growth and development in nature and nurture. Orature has a dynamic living presence in all cultures, religious functions, births, deaths, funerals, marriages, nightlife and politics. Orature is a living tradition precisely because orality, its base, is always at the cutting edge of the new and experimental experience.

What of the future?

Ngugi wa Thiongo states, "In the age of the internet and cyberspace, the language of texting and emailing, access to pictures and music in real time, produces a phenomenon that is nether pure speech nor pure writing. The language of cyberspace borrows the language of orality. It is neither one nor the other. It is cyberorality. The problem has been their placement in a hierarchy. Network, not hierarchy will free the richness of the aesthetic, oral or literary. We can talk about classical and contemporary orature. Since ancient times the history of orature has been one of migrations of the main genres across languages, cultures and territories. This is globalectics and the globalectic reading of texts and the world."[12]

12 Ngugi wa Thiongo; Globalectics; 2016.

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Images of Sound: Nontsizi Mgqwetho's Poetry

Zukiswa Pakama

When I first laid eyes on Jeff Opland's book, "The *Nation's Bounty"*, a collection of inspiring Xhosa poems, I was overwhelmed with such joy that I could scarcely contain myself. My eyes were glued to the pages, one after another. It was incredible to me that such a collection existed – that I'd never heard of before! These poems by a relatively unknown woman called Nontsizi Mgqwetho, of the Cizama clan from the Eastern Cape, made me feel as though I had seen what is ordinarily hidden from sight. One word that would describe my feeling at that moment is a Xhosa word: *Ndelamile*! Which simply means to come face to face, unexpectedly, with the mythical goddess of the great rivers, *uMamlambo*, whose splendour and inexplicable beauty would cause your death if you saw her, according to my grandmother's folktales.

How on earth could such vast wealth and knowledge be hidden from our eyes for so long? Her Xhosa is so rich and exquisite that I could not truly fathom its meaning even though I pride myself on being an aspiring isiXhosa custodian. In a time when our precious indigenous languages seem to be dying a rather sad, slow and painful death at the very hands of their custodians – those who are supposed to nurture and maintain them as our forefathers did before us – this treasure came before me.

These poems from this zealous daughter of Mgqwetho, reminded me of the rich, creamy, sour curds of milk that we would gulp on hot summer days, after sweating in the maize fields hoeing long stretches of planted rows with the aim of producing an admirable harvest. I felt lifted up to a higher level of worthiness, for poems like these remind you of who you are and where you come from.

Nontsizi Mgqwetho, as the author of "The *Nation's Bounty"* has stated, was the 'first and only female poet to publish a substantial body of works in Xhosa', at a time when political and cultural conditions were against the recognition of any woman's voice. She wrote these incredible poems, pregnant with meaning, not only about her time but pointing rather to our times and beyond. What a prophetess she was! If only she could see her words unfold in the lives of our people today! How sad that she can't be part of us and witness her prophecies coming to life. She was a proud woman of the African soil, as she states in one of her poems:

…poems like these remind you of who you are and where you come from…

"Amanzi e Afrika makahlokome
Ilizwi le sizwe lilizwi lika Tixo
Indlela mazihlwayele uManyano
Olusuka apa lume n go Tukela

Let the waters of Africa roar!
The nation speaks with the tongue of God
Let every path sow Union
From here to far-off Tugela (Poem 31)

She wanted to see her land, Africa, united and prospering.

"Nkosi- sikelela i-Afrika
Beti ziyikili ngezihlisa zodaka
Kuvelamabala zixel'ulovane
Ufake nophawu ukuze sivane
Camagu!

God Bless Africa!
Patch the network of cracks in the wall up with clay
So the surface appears chameleon coloured,
A sign to inspire our respect for each other
Peace! (Poem 35)

She wrote as if she foresaw the plight of our country, the plight of Africa as it rapidly moves away from its origins. She wrote as one pleading for mercy and hope for her beloved country.

"Hlaziya Yehova 'imihla' yethu
Njengokwamandulo ko bawo betu
Ungaba usicekise mpela na
Ndlovu Edla ezindle zaseKanana

Lo mhlaba i-Afrika ngumhlaba wetu
Seyle kwisiziba ngobudenge betu
I-Afrika ihleli ayiyanga ndawo…

"Jehovah replenish our days on earth
As you did in the time of our fathers
Did you forsake us forever?
Elephant grazing the plains of Canaan?

This land Africa is ours
But we sank in pools through our folly
Africa stayed: she is nowhere else… (Poem 98)

It is imperative to note that oral traditions influenced her writing immensely; they made her what she was. Her poems, so rich and inspiring, were published during the early 1920s. This was a powerful woman who spoke her mind regardless of who was in charge. It is also noted that she wrote for *Umteteli Wabantu* during the time when the great Xhosa poet and author, SEK Mqhayi, *imbongi yesizwe jikelele,* (The poet of the nation as a whole) was a prominent writer for the publication. He could have influenced her writing

in more ways than one, including her love for her culture and traditions, and the quotes she uses now and again from the Bible when she wants to bring a certain matter to the fore.

To me she is not even Mama Nontsizi, but rather *gogo* Nontsizi, for my own grandmother MamZangwa, was born, as we estimate today, between 1916 and 1918. (Since no one was literate in her family, this date is just speculation.) My grandmother was told by her parents and neighbours that she was only a baby when the so called 'Great Flu' disease attacked their communities and people died in their numbers. Unfortunately for my grandmother, she never set foot on school premises; she never held a slate and pencil in her hand. The only school she attended was the one by the fireplace at home, where the whole clan would be seated, perhaps having supper, or just passing time by telling stories which were packed with information about the world around them. This is when the elderly people would share their lessons about life and the values of African people, and more significantly, the learning and maintenance of the language. These lessons were given in the form of stories, songs and even folktales, *iintsomi.*

I am confident that Nontsizi lived by these *iintsomi* as a youngster, for this was home school before official school. Even in her writings while in Johannesburg, the influence of those oral traditions can still be felt in her voice and the similitude she used to describe and bring out certain meanings. She went back to the examples and similes from animal behaviour in Xhosa stories and fables and even nature itself. She talks about '*intsomi yoNomeva'*, about *'hyenas and jackals'*, about '*something that stinks like a river snake, fouling the air'.* She warns leaders, or rather nations, '*to peer about before it moves to avoid encountering hyenas on their way home'.*.. That kind of language is learnt from the home school by the fires and nowhere else!

She prides herself on being an African woman, writing:

Tarhu Nontsizi Bulembu be -Afrika,
Obuyephuzela emazantsi namaza
…
Tarhu Dadakazi le ndada ze Afrika
Ub'hib'hinxa lwentombi esinqe sibi
Awu! Nontsizi bulembu be –Afrika
Akusoze wende nezinto zigoso
…
Awu! Tarhu Sanusekazi se zibongo
Nalo neramncwa liwabhul'amaphiko…
Mercy, Nontsizi African moss

Sipping moisture from under the ripples
…
Mercy, duck of the African thickets
Ungainly girl with ill-shaped frame
Awu! Nontsizi, African moss,
With bow-legs like yours you'll never marry!
…
Awu! Mercy, poetic diviner,
Watch out, the wild bird's flapping its wings. (Poem 13)

Stories of great historical events such as wars and famine, pestilence and calamities that had befallen the nation were narrated by the fire. Stories of joy and grief were repeated by the fireplace night after night but the audience never tired of listening, for this was the only form of schooling, and knowledge was passed by this method from generation to generation. Even when official schooling was introduced to Africans, they never abandoned the culture of grooming the young by the fireplace that pertained during Nontsizi's childhood years. A time before television and social networks stole and demolished the sacred times of family gatherings in our homes.

Thus in her poetry she does not leave out the calamities that befall the country, the nation; she makes sure to write them down so generation after generation would know and relate events. She writes about the earthquake in Johannesburg, which I imagine would have been quite shocking for her. She wrote about the splitting of the Congress, making sure that it was known by future generations: she added her own voice to the unfolding of historical events.

'…Lumkela ke wena ose Rhawutini!
Uza kugutyungelwa! Ngumavutula ukuhamba axelis'umlilo
Yinyikima! Leyo enqonqozayo emnyangweni wako,
Ifuna ukukugweba ngetyala ikuzinzise
Taru!
Niyayivana? Le nyikima, apa e Rautini? '(Poem 9…)

'…Take care Joburg, you will be consumed
By the rager like fire on the move
Earthquake, a knock on your door
Condemning your sins to correct you
Mercy!
Do you heed this earthquake here in Johannesburg?'

Reading her work I am taken back home to rural Hamburg in the district of Peddie. It brings back the nostalgic feeling of being seated by the fireplace with my grandmother, a storyteller of note. My siblings and I would watch her

every move as she imitated the mannerisms of the ever-smart and cunning jackal who could always fool any animal he came across.

Nontsizi's style of writing, the similes and the idioms with which she decorates her writing, that are so hard to translate into English without losing their core meaning, reveal without doubt that she was groomed by the fireplace. The oral influences from her upbringing were a blanket that she wrapped around herself. Even in her time in Johannesburg, far away from the settled daily life of the rural, she never took it off, for without it, she was no longer her true self. When she speaks of her beloved Africa, she likens it to a beautiful she-dove.

"Taru! Afrika Hobekazi Hobekazi
Ndlov'enemixhaka yiyo Imirozo
Esuka Emhlabeni yati ngqu ngamazulu
Ube noko ungumceya ongangenizembe

Tarhu? Afrika Hobekazi Afrika
Sigcaw'esinoboya sakwa Mtirara

Mercy, she-dove of Africa!
Distinguished elephant commanding an army
Stretching from earth to the skies,
Tall as an ironwood safe from the axe

Mercy, she-dove of Africa!
Furry spider of Mthikrakra's place… (Poem 22)

Allow me to clarify this: storytelling in the African cultural setting was not merely a lullaby, a tool to urge the child to fall asleep quickly as it is today when we read stories to our children. Telling stories was the African way of preserving culture and maintaining a rhythm, imparting ancient values to the young and grooming them to be better citizens, imbued by African values and aesthetics. Though ancient African people could not read or write, their customs, values and ethics were maintained and preserved successfully. It is so unfortunate that the arrival of missionaries, missionary schools and the introduction of the Bible and other forms of literature affected the African way of life to such a degree that even Africans looked down on their own Africanism. Everything African started to be tainted and diminished as it was seen as primitive, barbaric or uncivilised. How sad!

Contrary to her name Nontsizi, which means one born wrapped or beguiled by sorrows, (or Mother of Sorrows as translated), her writings possess a wealth of knowledge, an understanding of the richness of Xhosa culture and a vast love of her people! If I were to give her a name, I would simply call her

Nondyebo: the one who inspires wealth or the wealth provider. Her writings, I believe, are a gift of knowledge and goodwill to our generation today and beyond.

This was a woman of great zeal and stature, a lioness in terms of literature who stood her ground for what she believed in. As she is one of South Africa's foundational writers, I do not understand and can hardly accept that 'nothing much is known about her'. We need to know more; we want to cherish, honour and even embalm this woman's ideas in our hearts, as she is indeed the voice we have been yearning to hear! Her voice of reason was loud and clear then; it still reverberates loudly today. Her writings are as much to the point as if they had been written yesterday!

I take my hat off; I bow in respect to this African Moss, this ungainly woman of such tremendous beauty and intellect, Nontsizi Mgqwetho.

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Mqhayi's poetic gift and well of knowledge

Zukiswa Pakama

I have no doubt that, more than any Western education he (Mqhayi) could have had during his school years, the first ever education that would have sharpened his mind was learnt from home, by the fireside. His swift and smooth tongue in praise singing, his ability to capture the mind with skilfully chosen words was learnt far away in the fields, because as a young boy he was the herder of his father's livestock, just like any other boy his age in the village.
– Zukiswa Pakama

The name of SEK Mqhayi is a prestigious one in the Xhosa literature fraternity and in South African literary history. It has gained praise, honour and reverence because of the rich legacy that Mqhayi left for generations to come. The acclaimed writer, advocate of literature in African languages and Professor of Literature, Dr Ngugi wa Thiong'o, when referring to the role that Mqhayi played in the rebirth of the Xhosa language in his time, expressed himself thus: "*…Mqhayi emerges as a renaissance figure combining in himself many talents and interests, an imbongi, performer, writer, poet, dramatist, essayist, translator, humourist, critic, culture advocate, political analyst and a public intellectual who preaches and practises his doctrine.*"[1]

Mqhayi left a vast wealth of knowledge and wisdom that is still golden for all those who are proud of the isiXhosa language and determined to preserve it. He made the language his pride, and the culture of speaking to it unashamedly, his armour. He managed successfully, though not without challenges, to elevate its status, even in the time of harsh rule in the southern Africa region, where African languages were given little or no respect. For Mqhayi to maintain such a high standard in the upholding and preserving of the Xhosa language could not have been an easy task; it needed a man with an unrelenting vision, great zeal, and above all, an unconditional, unshakeable love and awe for his culture. Because people communicate through a particular language, it is through that language that a nation is formed.

"*SEK Mqhayi, belonging to the next generation of Xhosa intellectuals, specifically to the Izwi Labantu group, initiated a revolution in the historical consciousness and artistic sensibility of the African people in South Africa in the opening years of the twentieth century,* regarding modernity*… While he agreed that the European languages may have been necessary cultural facilitators of entrance into modernity, he disagreed with them about whether the African languages were not as capable as the Europeans languages in representing and articulating the complex experience of modernity.*"[2]

Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi was born in 1875, in Kwa-Gqumashe in the Eastern Cape and died 70 years later in Ntab'ozuko. *"Mqhayi achieved widespread celebrity as a Xhosa author. In 1917, he was accorded the honorific soubriquet "Imbongi yesizwe jikelele" (the poet of the whole country), for rising*

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1 wa Thiong'o Ngugi. "The Fourth Steve Biko Annual Lecture." 12 September 2003. University of Cape Town.

2 Masilela, Ntongela. "Ernest Mancoba – A new African Artist." in Thompson B ed 2006 *In the Name of all Humanity: The African Spiritual Expression of Ernest Mancoba*

above parochial considerations and addressing himself to the black people of South Africa as a whole."[3]

My interest is not in him as a poet, a bard, a novelist, or a storyteller only, but also in how he became one. How he learnt the art of being such a great storyteller and so appreciated as a widely praised imbongi, that he earned the title, *Imbongi yesizwe jikelele* (The poet of the nation as a whole), appreciated not only by Xhosa-speaking people but by Zulu and Tswana speakers and others.

He grew up surrounded by giants, great learned men of literature who were determined to bring the culture of learning and writing to the people.

According to Ncedile Saule, Mqhayi was also a preacher and an ordained man of the cloth. "He became a full member of the church, in the United Congregational Church (one of the oldest churches amongst the Xhosa people) and he became one of its powerful preachers under the tutorial of great men like Rev W.B Rubusana."[4] I am fascinated by the knowledge that Mqhayi was also included in the process of translating the Bible into isiXhosa. qhayi loved language and wanted to instil that in his people. One of his reasons for joining the church and contributing to the translation of the Bible could have been so that his people were not left behind. What stands out though, is that even though Mqhayi followed the teachings of the Bible and even helped with the composition of some old hymns, using his gift of poetry, he never released himself from his culture and upbringing. It is said that he was "considered to be a difficult person because of his criticism of some methods of the missionaries, Mqhayi's extensive use of the Bible in his literary works, however, is unqualified".[5] This might be one of the reasons he could not stay long at Lovedale College where he worked with the missionaries but was critical of their interpretation of Xhosa history; he preferred to be a full-time writer and praise poet where he could exercise his voice freely. "*Lovedale still rejected some of his works for publication: on 18 April 1940, R. H. W. Shepherd returned Mqhayi's biography of Rubusana, explaining that it showed bias in recording relations between Rubusana and Jabavu: 'As a missionary press, we*

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3 Opland, Jeff. "The First Novel in Xhosa". *Research in African Literatures* 38 no. 4. (Winter 2007): 87-110.

4 Saule, Ncedile. "SEK Mqhayi and the Bible: Traditional Poetry and Essay in context" 2011

5 Saule, Ncedile. "Southern African Journal Folklore Studies. Vol 21(2) December 2011

cannot allow ourselves to become involved in political controversy making for division among the Bantu people'".[6]

Mqhayi was brought up in the oral tradition of telling and passing stories, information, and wisdom from one generation to the next, but he thought it would be wise to have our history written as well. He wanted to take the baton of writing Xhosa stories from the men before him and carry it through for generations to come. Today we are benefiting from his intellect.

If I may just touch on the catastrophe of the sinking of the Mendi, about which Mqhayi wrote an astounding poem entitled *Ukutshona kukaMendi* (The sinking of the Mendi). In 1917, the Mendi, the ship carrying the South African National Contingent to France to assist in the war suffered a calamity in the English Channel that still makes me shudder when I think about it. Through Mqhayi's pen and insight, through his wisdom in painting a picture and telling a story, we as readers are taken into the heart of the tragedy.

> REMEMBER THIS, *an imbongi or an oral poet's role was not merely to sing praises to the chief or the nation; he was also regarded as a seer, a prophet, a guide and an advisor to the chief and his subjects.*
> – ZUKISWA PAKAMA

"…On the day you left home, we talked,
on the day you left, we promised to look after your families,
on this day we shook hands, and our eyes were wet.
On this day mothers cried, you fathers sobbed,
on this day you left the mountains of your birth…

Could we have sacrificed anything more precious?
What did it mean to sacrifice a village?
Was it not giving the bull calves of your homestead?
Sending those very ones who loved you as a nation?"[7]

He had a way of choosing words to paint a picture that would stay etched in your mind forever. He wrote for his people in a language they could understand about events that they were familiar with. It was his aim to join the men before him in helping to bring light, education and the art of reading and writing to his people. I appreciate the burden he assumed for his language and his people by contributing to the Xhosa newspaper and taking part in translating

6 *Cory Library for Historical Research*. MS 16, 321c.

7 Mqhayi, S.E.K. "Ukutshona KukaMendi." From *"Inzuzo."* (1943). Translation: Krog, A., Saliwa, N. and Oosthuyzen, K. (2008).

the books of other authors into isiXhosa. Being a journalist was an excellent vehicle to bring his rich poetry into the homes of the people.

"Contributions to newspapers such as Izwi Labantu, Imvo and Umteteli wabantu earned him the title of 'Imbongi yakwaGompo' (The Poet of Gompo) and later, 'Imbongi Yesizwe' (The Poet of the nation). His poetry also focused on events and individuals outside of the immediate Xhosa tribe and landscape, transcending South Africa's borders – hence the designation – Imbongi yesizwe jikelele (The Poet of the whole nation)."[8]

While he was able to write stories, he did not discard his culture of the oral tradition, because that is what he drew from home, by the fire, under the blue starry skies. In those days it was a norm that families would be seated around the fire after a long hard day's work and stories would be told. These were folklore stories about the wisdom and foolishness of certain animals and were narrated to teach the young as they grow up. Some of the stories told were true and covered wars, brave men of the nation and great disasters and famine in the country. It was therefore essential for the stories to be told repeatedly, so that, if possible, a similar situation could be prevented from occurring. What comes to mind is the story of Nongqawuse. My grandmother narrated this story with sadness and anguish in her voice. Oh! What a catastrophe for the Xhosa nation!

Though my grandmother never knew the dates precisely, historians like Jeff Peires came to our rescue: "*What we know of her is mainly related to the Cattle-Killing/Millenarian Movement of 1856-7 and her role and relations therein. She enters history either through colonial records or the oral traditions passed down from generations amongst the Xhosa people.*"[9]

Mqhayi was a poet of note and a born poet, what we call in the Xhosa fraternity an *imbongi yomthonyama*! He could write poetry and recite it and make certain that it sat well with the ears that received it. Mqhayi was a poet who surpassed the norm. One recalls that poets then were the eyes of the nation; they were the voice of the people to the chief, and again, they were a stern voice from the chief to the people. When an important gathering was to be held at the great place of the chief, everyone would be eager to hear what the *imbongi* would say before

… poets then were the eyes of the nation; they were the voice of the people to the chief …

8 Jadezweni, Mhlobo. "Beyond Dudlu Ntombazana! – The Voice of S.E.K. Mqhayi." *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies* 25, no 3 (April 2016).

9 Peires, Jeff. "The Dead will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-killing Movement of 1856-7." (September 1989).

anything else was said. Poets were the divulgers of secrets, especially if such secrets were to alert and build the nation.

More than anything else *iimbongi* were recorders of history, and with their memory and extolling of past events, of wars and famines that had befallen the nation, they became wells of knowledge for the nation. They were even allowed to rebuke the chief through their recitations, not explicitly, but in metaphor. They were revered in the same way as the diviners of the nation, *amagqirha namaxhwele* (witchdoctors and herbalists). An *imbongi* had to be up to date with the affairs of the nation, the chain of events that had taken place. He had to know and understand the lineage of the chiefs of the nation and even of the nations around them, to keep the records straight. Mqhayi as usual did not disappoint. In his classical novella, the first of its kind, *Ityala Lamawele* (The Trial of the Twins, 1914), his voice as an *imbongi* is felt through the dialogue of this magnificent piece of work.

> *"The value of this short novel lies not so much in character depiction. Its real value lies in the magnificent exploitation of the intricacies of the Xhosa language. The writer reveals and reflects the cognitive orientation of the Xhosa, and this is done in grand style. In the course of this story, he also validates the cultural values of the Xhosa."*[10]

Mqhayi, because of his great skill, was one of the chief's councillors and the *imbongi* of the Rharhabe chiefdom/ chieftainship. "As an adult, Mqhayi travelled with the Rharhabe chiefs as their councillor but also as their *imbongi*. He produced praises on a wide variety of ceremonial occasions."[11]

MORE THAN *anything else iimbongi (praise poets) were recorders of history, and with their digging up of past events, of wars and famines that had befallen the nation, they were wells of knowledge for the nation. They were even allowed to rebuke the chief through their recitations.*

In one of his poems performed in front of Edward, Prince of Wales, when he visited South Africa in 1925, Mqhayi does show respect to the English King. We see that in the poem entitled: *Itshawe laseBhilithani.* I am in awe of the way he addresses the issue of the arrival of this "great man" from a Great Britain, "*the land where the sun never sets.*" It is as if he is handling

10 Nyamende, Abner. "The conception and application of justice in S. E. K. Mqhayi's Ityala Lamawele." *Tydskr. Letterkd.,* 47 no.2. (2010).

11 Opland, Jeff. "Abantu Besizwe, historical and biographical writings, 1902 – 1944: S. E. K. Mqhayi. Edited and translated by Jeff Opland." (2009). Johannesburg.

the matter with kid gloves but the truth has to be told that even though the *"arrival of the settlers in the African continent was a thing of significance in terms of political associations, yet cruelty, pettiness and malice prevailed."*[12] The nation was gradually moving away from or even looking down on its heritage, its values and principles, and Mqhayi points out that not all is good. He directs his message boldly but always in poetic language, never directly, never overtly rudely. But the core of his message is that colonialism is a deadly wound for Africans. Before the poem ends, he states the confusion that colonialism has brought amongst Africans, as if he could see beyond to the generations to come and witness the disastrous results of colonialism. I now believe that poets are seers!

Hail, Great Britain –
You come with a bottle in the one hand and a Bible in the other;
You come with a preacher assisted by a soldier;
You come with gunpowder and bullets;
You come with cannons and guns-which-bend-like-knees.
Please forgive me Oh God, but whom should we obey[13]

Lastly, I cannot leave out one of my favourite poems by this legend of literature. At school we did a poem called *uQongqothwane, igqirha le ndlela* (Qongqothwane, the diviner of the road). In later years, the poem was adapted into a traditional song. People still love it because of its many clicks that resemble the distinctive knocking sound that is made by the dusky beetle tapping its abdomen on the ground. The tapping of the beetles was believed to bring rain and good luck; hence the song was popular during wedding celebrations. There is no message here as such, but Mqhayi seems to be playing with the "clicks" of the language. As we know, the Xhosa language's uniqueness is in the use of the three clicks, namely, C, X and Q. The same poem later became one of the most well-known songs sung by the late Miriam Makeba and others, always referred to as the "click song".

"Igqirha lendlela nguQongqothwane.
Sel'eqabel'egqith'apha nguQongqothwane"

(A diviner of the road is the knock-knock beetle,
Already it climbs up and passes by here, it is the knock-knock beetle[14]

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12 Mqhayi, S.E.K. "Ukutshona KukaMendi." From *"Inzuzo."* (1943). Translation: Krog, A., Saliwa, N. and Oosthuyzen, K. (2008).

13 Translation: 2008, Antjie Krog, Ncebakazi Saliwa & Koos Oosthuyzen

14 *The Click Song – Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Click_Song (June 2009*

Mqhayi played with the subtlety and the sweetness of the language and managed to rhyme well with the Xhosa clicks creating a sound beautiful to the ear. Through his use of language and his great historical and political insight, he has left poems and writing which is still meaningful for us today.

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"To wander is to see"[1] – Go tsamaya ke go bona

Uhuru Portia Phalafala

1 A Tswana proverb used by Kgositsile in his poem 'For Olinka' (1990: 30) which highlights the necessity of not limiting your worldview to one knowledge system.

This essay focuses on the role of Setswana language and literatures, as well as other Southern African oratory and literary practices, in Keorapetse Kgositsile's poetry.

Growing up with his grandmother and mother, Kgositsile was not allowed to speak any English at home, and was furthermore encouraged to read in Setswana.[2] His grandmother saw English as a tool to bludgeon and kill the cultures and languages of the natives, assimilating them into a particular type of thinking. She immediately identified it as "very dangerous". Kgositsile narrates to Charles Rowell, in an interview conducted in 1973, that the early experiences that had an impact on his writing point to "two very strong women – my grandmother and my mother – in that order. Practically everything I write is tied up with some kind of wisdom I got from them in that hostile environment."[3] Kgositsile is keenly aware of the collective wisdom that can be possessed by the older generations. He emerges from a tradition of writers whose pressing task was to record the oral traditions shared with them by their grandmothers. This is true of Tswana writers Solomon Plaatje and Leepile Raditladi, as well as Zulu writer Mazisi Kunene – Kgositsile's predecessors who advertently sought and rejuvenated oral traditions in their work.

Kgositsile's artistic agenda is shaped by that Tswana-centred upbringing. He left South Africa in 1962 as an exiled member of the African National Congress (ANC) at the age of twenty-three, carrying with him Setswana literary classics. He arrived in the United States of America (USA) and immediately immersed himself in the revolutionary movement for civil rights, seeing it as a different site of the South African anti-apartheid struggle in its internationalist perspective. He arrived in the USA a journalist, to study at Lincoln University, where he established himself as a poet.

KGOSITSILE IS *keenly aware of the collective wisdom that can be possessed by the older generations. He emerges from a tradition of writers whose pressing task was to record the oral traditions shared with them by their grandmothers.* – UHURU PHALAFALA

Upon arrival he associated himself with a movement of writers that are understood in scholarship to be a second wave of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement (BAM). He became a prominent poet of that era,

2 Author Interview 1: 2013

3 Rowell, 1978: 23

winning coveted writing prizes, and publishing six collections of poetry in the duration of his stay from 1962-1975. He also published widely in black international periodicals such as *Negro Digest/Black World, Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968), and *Black Art: An Anthology of Black Creations* (1969), amongst many others. In this essay I will focus on his writings in exile.

Proverbs and Slogans

In the opening lines of his essay, 'Malcolm X and the Black Revolution: The Tragedy of a Dream Deferred', mourning the death of Malcolm X, Kgositsile opens the lament by quoting a Setswana proverb: "a Motswana doctor throws his bones and when they tell him of an irretrievable loss he will say:

> 'Se ileng se ile
> Se ile mosimeng, motlhaela-thupa
> Lesilo ke moselatedi'"

He translates the proverb thus, "what is gone is gone / it has gone down the hole, the-unreachable-by-rod / the irrational (i.e. the unwise and ill tempered) is he-who-follows-it."[4]

The Motswana doctor in this context represents collective wisdom and echoes his line in another praise poem, 'Son of Mokae', where he states, "bring the bones rootmen / the rootmen say they have fallen like this and like this" (1975: 20). A Motswana doctor is being summoned from South Africa to come and divine over black pain. Kgositsile employs the services of traditional healers, whom he refers to as "rootmen", a term that resists the associations of tradition as conventionally polarised with modernity. The Tswana proverb becomes the portal through which the Tswana doctor traverses transatlantic spaces. He helps Kgositsile seek and make sense of his devastating sense of loss – indigenous knowledge is cultivated to make sense of the present. In that knowledge system he finds a vocabulary to soothe his own pain, reverting to traditional wisdom through that proverb. It is customary to comfort others or offer advice by postulating, "The wisdom of the elders says [insert proverb]", or "Our ancestors said [insert proverb]", *et cetera*, in order to ground the comforting words of advice in a lineage, affirming that they have stood true through the test of time. Kgositsile leans on this communal truth and universalises it throughout his poetry.

The following translated memory from the Tswana/Sotho/Pedi knowledge system helps Kgositsile see the struggle of blacks in the diaspora as a different

4 Kgositsile, in *Negro Digest* November 1968: 42.

site of the same struggle of (South) African blacks within an internationalist perspective:

> These are the words
> Of an ancient dancer of steel
> — the children of a person
> share the head of a locust — (1971: 23)

The original proverb states that 'bana ba motho ba kgaogelana tlhogo ya tsie', and is from what is known as 'Dikgafela'—the first fruit harvest and thanksgiving celebrations. Here the proverb emphasizes the virtue of sharing what you have with the community, informed by a relational identity where 'motho ke motho ka batho', relating to communality in the collective consciousness. This concept is the one that premises the lack of single authorship over these stories, songs, and wisdoms. These proverbs signify shared communal experiences, as well as a communal regime of truth.

> In Setswana, *as in other African languages, there is no word for citizen. We speak of moagi, resident. 'Go agisana/ agisanya,' from aga, from which moagi is derived, means, 'in the same breath', 'building together' and/or 'living together in harmony or peace'*
> – Keorapetse Kgositsile

Kgositsile is also able to re-enchant colonial cartography through the revolutionary slogan, 'Mayibuye iAfrika', which is the title of his 1971 poem. He uses isiZulu phrasing to call back the land, and spells Africa with a 'k' to signal restoration and liberation. The title derives from a revolutionary call for action that translates to 'bring back Afrika', or 'let Afrika come back', which was an ANC and PAC slogan that roused anti-apartheid and anti-colonial aspirations to drive white settler communities from the continent. It is used as a call-and-response during rallies or any type of gathering and can even be used as a greeting from comrade to comrade. The call "mayibuye" could simply be used to elicit the response "iAfrika", and vice versa, between two people as a greeting of solidarity. It is very much oral and aural. The saying therefore has its own values that articulate a united vision for de-colonisation, collective aspirations, spiritual wellbeing, and collective identity. This slogan respects no linguistic or cartographic boundaries and may be heard in the anti-colonial struggles of most Southern African countries. He elucidates this re-enchantment of colonial space:

'In Setswana, as in other African languages, there is no word for *citizen*. We speak of *moagi*, resident. '*Go agisana/agisanya*,' from *aga*, from which moagi is derived, means, 'in the same breath,' 'building together' and/or 'living together in harmony or peace.'[5]

There is no word for citizen because there is no word for country, in the sense of the nation-state. There are those who build together and live together, in the same breath, which connotes place, belonging, and communality. National boundaries created linguistic boundaries, including the intra-national ones that the apartheid regime engendered, and in the title 'Mayibuye iAfrika', Kgositsile trumps the notion of ethnicity and tribalism by traversing all imposed boundaries.

Praise Poetry and Totems

In his first collection of poetry, *Spirits Unchained* (1969), Kgositsile 'sings' the praises of leaders of liberation struggles and cultural workers in Africa and its diaspora in poems that are shaped and governed by the enunciation of oral praise poetry. Through cultivating the rhythms, styles, forms, and oral practices of Southern Africa, he is able, firstly, to use the past to make sense of the present in the molding of a de-colonised future, and secondly, to embrace international black struggles in affiliation and solidarity. He recorded these praise poems on a cassette as a supplement to the collection, revealing that they beg to be aural inasmuch as they are oral. The poems are dedicated to Amiri Baraka, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, David Diop, Rap Brown, Nina Simone, Patrice Lumumba, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, A.B. Spellman, Max Stanford, Nqabeni Mthimkhulu, and Lindsay Barrett. Kgositsile thereby expertly uses the praise poem form as a vehicle for diaspora consciousness. The poem, 'Elegy for David Diop', is an example of this practice,

> He who thinks immortality
> Flaming with furious fidelity
> Could be dead has no head
> You are the indignant air
> Carrying fruit to nourish the continent
> Unrelenting throbbing of the continent's heart
> You are the dance and the dancer
> The concrete foundation and the builder
> Moving at lightning speed
> Mating with fertile future
> Refusing the touch of the stench

5 Kgositsile, 2004, 149

Of the carcass of rancid europe
I saw you explode
In Sharpeville burning
In Watts and the paddies
Of Vietnam and all dawn
Long I the desert palm
Drinking from your spring
Danced to the elegant
Replenishing of your majestic fire
Roaming the rhythms of your eternity
Because you are not man
You are what Man should be
Eternal like the Word

This poem bears all the features of a praise poem and is oral in nature, finding better expression when read out loud, as Kgositsile did on that cassette tape. The first three lines set the tone and style of the poem, setting the spirit of praise in motion by arresting the reader's attention with a heroic voice, and luring them into the enchanting characteristics of the subject of praise. The first three lines at once subvert the form, style, and nature of a British traditional elegy by energising the audience out of mourning into celebrating: "he who thinks immortality flaming with furious fidelity could be dead has no head". To address Diop as "you are the" twice, (as opposed to "you were the") is a feature that emphasizes the immortality of his subject of praise.

From the oral archive he appropriates epithets as salient features of praise poetry – you are the indignant air, the dance and the dancer, the spring, and the majestic fire that roams eternally. The sustained energy of praise and language that borrows from nature – air, fruit, heart, lightning, mating, fertility, desert, palm, spring, fire, man – embodies much of African oral poetry, carrying "resonances of an intensive sense of absolute organic unity in the universe: man, not alone in the universe but unique in the rhythm of being and in harmony with other men, with animal, natural phenomena and so on" [6]These are qualities deserving of praise; that the subject has harnessed a rhythm in his life that is in harmony with that of his fellow men, ecology, cosmology and natural phenomena. The epitome of the praise poem form is embodied by the last three lines: "you are not man / you are what Man should be / eternal like the Word" charged with Evangelism, not of the colonial type, but of a superior spirit whose beginning has no end, like the word.

6 Mphahlele, 1979: 34

The decisive act of naming in Kgositsile's poetry signifies an archaeology of black memory. Almost all his poetry is dedicated to family members, or a cultural/political figure/movement. He deploys totems as synecdoche of place, memory, and linguistic bearings. The reference to his mother as "woman dancer of steel", is a translation from her Tswana totem "*mosadi-mmina-tshipi*"[7] and calling South African communist party giant Moses Kotane "*Seaparankoe*"[8] are a case in point: totems truncate a poem into a phrase that praises an individual's qualities, mostly acquired after their rites of passage (into wo/manhood or marriage). Also applied to whole families, totems usually compare the qualities of an individual or family with objects or phenomena from the natural world. Kotane's totem is "one who adorns leopard skin"; it bequeaths him royal and brave qualities. Only members of royal families wear leopard skins in Southern African societies. The issue here is not whether Kotane is from a royal family; Kgositsile elevates him and his deeds to royal position and his courage and agility (mental and physical) is celebrated by being compared to a leopard. A "dancer of steel" implies that his mother's strength is a weapon that is valuable, solid, and unbreakable, while also being flexible, dexterous, and beautiful. In this instance Kgositsile calls on their totems to summon their presence and to embody their strength and wisdom.

Kgositsile expertly demonstrates that indigenous knowledge is not to be left behind to ossify, but rather to be reinvigorated through translation, and carried over the Atlantic as a cultural reservoir. He is aware of the danger of colonialism erasing the traditional knowledge which informs his identity and relationship with community. Language as repository of heritage and history is a key site of self-affirmation for him while in exile, and he uses it to shape his pan-African persuasions. The praise poem as a form has been shown to be pivotal as a vehicle for diaspora consciousness, leading to his work being read as a bridge between black Africa and black America. He retains the essence of Setswana in his work while functioning in the wider black international context of the diaspora.

THE PRAISE *poem as a form has been shown to be pivotal as a vehicle for diaspora consciousness*

Kgositsile's name and politics were widely known in the United States of America (USA) through his work published in black journals, books and magazines such as *Soul Book* (1964), *Transition* (1965), *Contrast* (1966),

7 1971: 28; 1975: 9

8 1982: 96

Poems Now (Ed. Hettie Jones, 1966), *Journal of Black Poetry* (1967), *Negro Digest* (1967), *Pan-African Journal* (1968), *Black Fire: An Anthology of African American Writing* (1968), *Black Arts: An Anthology of Black Creation* (1969), and *For Malcolm: Poems on the life and the death of Malcolm X* (1969). Through these publications, in 1969 he won the Conrad Kent Rivers Memorial Award given by *Negro Digest*.

Some of Kgositsile's poems published individually in the various black presses came together to form his first collection of poetry, *Spirits Unchained: Paeans*, published in 1969 by Broadside Press.[9] *Spirits Unchained* brings together important components in Kgositsile's development as a writer and political figure: the tango between poetry, jazz, and politics is salient in the collection; and the pan-African advocacy is evinced in the index page. Kgositsile's second collection, *For Melba* (1970), is homage to his love for his wife, Melba, and their daughter, Ipeleng Aneb Kgositsile. His third collection, *My Name is Afrika* (1971), was initially submitted to Columbia University in part fulfilment of a Master's degree in Arts. Kgositsile put out a call to African writers to submit poems to be published in an anthology of poetry, *The Word is Here* (1973), that he edited. The poems are prefaced by an introduction highlighting Mazisi Kunene's trajectories and philosophies as a writer, and positioning the anthology to "reflect the pulse of Africa today" (Kgositsile, 1973: xvii). Kgositsile's fourth offering, *The Present is a Dangerous Place to Live* (1974), is most expressive of the anguish of exile, and is epitomised in the poem 'Exile', prefaced by an epilogue from Aimé Césaire – "my memory is surrounded by blood / my memory has its belt of corpses" (1974: 15). His fifth collection, *Places and Bloodstains*, with an introduction by Chinua Achebe, is "dedicated to the brothers and sisters who picked up arms to create a place for us in *southern Africa*" (1975: Dedication; my emphasis), and the poems are mostly written for South Africans such as [writer] Can Themba, [Black Consciousness Movement member] Ilva Mckay, [Pan Africanist Congress activist and poet] Dennis Brutus, [writer] Es'kia Mphahlele, [*mbaqanga* musician] Gwigwi Mrwebi, [poet] Cecil Abrahams, [MDALI – an umbrella organisation of Music, Drama, Arts & Literature – member] Montshiwa Moroke, and [American-based South African actor] Zakes Mokae.

His sixth collection, *Heartprints* (1980) is "dedicated to all our women – our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, daughters and cousins in our struggle for national liberation and especially to the Women's Section of the

9 Dudley Randall founded the publishing company Broadside Press in 1965 to receive the creative outpouring from voices such as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight, Audrey Lorde and Keorapetse Kgositsile.

African National Congress …".[10] It was published in the German Democratic Republic, with illustrations by Dumile Feni. Kgositsile's seventh collection, *When the Clouds Clear* (1990), and the first to be published within South Africa (by the Congress of South African Writers or COSAW), confesses, through its title poem, to the failure of struggle. The eighth collection's title, *To the Bitter End* (1995), comes from the declaration, "COME THUNDER! CONFLAGRATION! … I will tell you right here and now that, like Castro, no force on this planet can move me from conviction about the principles of socialism. To the bitter end. Socialism or death. *Daar's kak in die land*".[11] He republished the second edition of *The Present is a Dangerous Place to Live* in 1995 through Third World Press. Since most of his work was published in the USA, he published a selection of poems from previous publications in *If I could Sing* (2002), and a collection of all the poems he dedicated to music/ians in *This Way I Salute You* (2004), with Kwela Press. He continued to write, publishing in anthologies in South Africa and abroad and to teach.

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Keorapetse Kgositsile

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