

ORAL TRADITION, RECENT AND CONTEMPORARY BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN  
POETRY IN ENGLISH: TOWARDS A RELEVANT AESTHETIC.

BY

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## PREFACE

I hereby state that this thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is my own original work.

Nevertheless, this work would have been impossible without the expert advice and assistance I receive from my supervisor, Professor Colin Gardner and co-supervisor, Dr Adriaan Koopman. I also wish to thank my fiancée for the assistance and support I have received from her.

### ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to examine the influence of South African oral traditions on recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English in terms of its thematic concerns and composition techniques.

The introductory chapter mainly deals with some dominant assumptions about oral tradition and izibongo. Chapter two gives a brief outline of the debate about the nature of oral and literate societies, and it suggests why this debate is relevant to this study. It also pays special attention to the dominant poetic devices used in izibongo. This chapter finally analyses Izobongo ZikaShaka in the light of the assumptions made about the philosophy of life of Zulu society, the poetic devices used in izibongo, the role of izibongo and that of the imbongi in society.

Chapter three examines recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English to assess the influence of oral tradition on this poetry. This chapter argues that aspects of oral tradition literature reveal themselves in recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English.

The conclusion is that oral tradition is an important influence on recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English and I argue strongly that a relevant aesthetic should take this into account.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In Africa, we have both written and oral traditions. Oral traditions are far less widely known and appreciated. Oral literature has somewhat different potentials from written literature, and it offers additional resources which the oral artist can develop for his own purposes and which the modern artist can draw on for inspiration. This is of primary significance in the process of forging an alternative critical framework in which oral tradition has a central role to play. S.M. Guma emphasises the literary value of oral literature:

The oral and written literature is a survival of an indefinite past from which it was handed down from generation by word of mouth. (1964:3)

Oral forms of poetry in pre-colonial Africa served as a complex means of recording African history. These were oral performances, dramas and various forms of oral poetry consisting of hunting lyrics, dance songs and notably, the praise poem (izibongo). Izibongo recorded the lives of chiefs and their ancestors. They also had animals as their subject of praise although this was not as common as izibongo zamakhosi or the King's praises.

Men also kept a repertoire of poems about themselves and their peers. These are called izihasho and can still be found among men who belong to the same peer group.

In oral traditional society, izibongo were recited by the imbongi (traditional praise poet or praise singer or bard) who was responsible for the reception of the king and his entourage on behalf of the assembled gathering. It was the imbongi who was responsible for the composition of new poems that were often improvised.

Colonialism brought Christianity and the written word to Africa. The people of Africa did not simply replace their own traditions with Christian traditions. African oral traditions were often integrated into Christianity. Also when the modern struggles against white domination emerged, many African poets drew on oral tradition to express their rejection of white rule.

Today oral forms of poetry present a glaring challenge to literary researchers because it is very difficult to record an oral performance in writing.

Oral performances include spontaneous interaction between imbongi and his/her audience. They also include improvisation and song which are very hard to write down. Workers have made the ground fertile for the development of oral poetry. In the trade union movement oral poetry has been used as a means of expressing the experiences and aspirations of workers.

## 1.2. AIMS AND SCOPE OF STUDY

This thesis is not a comprehensive and in-depth study of oral tradition. Rather, its primary focus is to assess the influence of South African oral traditions on recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English in terms of its thematic concerns and composition techniques.

I will write very briefly about the social context of oral tradition. I will then proceed to write about izibongo - their role in society and their stylistic features. I will also discuss the role of the, imbongi in society.

In order to demonstrate, in practice the assumptions that I shall make about imbongi and izibongo, I will analyse izibongo ZikaShaka as an example of izibongo.

The central focus of this thesis, however, will be on analyzing recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English using oral tradition, and more specifically izibongo, as a touchstone.

This study will concentrate on mainly two aspects of this poetry: stylistic features and thematic concerns. These two aspects are perhaps the most important in understanding oral poetry in general and izibongo in particular: A.C. Nkabinde suggests that

...besides the superficial structure of the sentence in disorder or praises, social concepts are fundamental in the understanding of communication. (1967:7)

In the course of this study an analysis of poetry by the so-called "Soweto Poets", Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Mafika Gwala, Sipho Sepamla, Mongane Wally Serote and Ingoapele Madingoane will be made. It will include an analysis of selected poems by Mazisi Kunene. Mi Hlatshwayo's poetry will be analysed as representative of the labour movement. The poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli will also be analysed as a perfect example of contemporary oral poetry. These poets, I believe, are fairly representative of the spectrum of black South Africa poetry in English that I wish to deal with.



At the end, conclusions will be drawn from this analysis of recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English and I believe that these conclusions will vindicate recourse to oral tradition in the criticism of this poetry.

### 1.3 SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ORAL TRADITION AND IZIBONGO.

#### 1.3.1 ORAL TRADITION.

Ruth Finnegan notes that various questionable assumptions have been made about oral tradition. One maintains that oral tradition has been passed down, word for word, from generation to generation and is reproduced verbatim from memory throughout the centuries. Another is that oral literature arises communally, from the people as a whole, so that there can be no question of individual authorship or originality (1970:14).

Suffice it to say that all these assumptions have been disputed, and it is not the object of the present study to deal at any length with them.

Ruth Finnegan suggests that oral tradition embodies the history of the nation, is a source of inspiration for artists and has a political and didactic purpose.

This is suggested in the following passage:

...Historians discuss its reliability as a historical source, creative writers turn to it for inspiration, governments recognise its relevance for propaganda or as a source in education. (1970:46)

This implies that oral literature is a reservoir of national history, an art form and a vehicle through which society perpetuates its beliefs, norms and values. This assumption is supported by Mazisi Kunene.

Literature ... serves more than as a form of entertainment, but it is at once a serious system of ethics which it enforces, a preserve of historical events, a body of philosophical speculation, a nexus that produces a logic, not only between past and present generations, but also in the whole cosmic phenomenon. (1976:28)

So, Kunene goes even further, He contends that oral tradition creates a link between past and present generations. It also leads to man's organic unity with the universe. It is, therefore, a vehicle for social progress, continuity and unity of existence. It unites man and man, and man and the universe.

Oral tradition presents a unified vision of life in which everything has its proper place- a statement of truth as the imbongi sees it. Mphahlele expresses a similar view:

Oral poetry captures life in flux, is itself  
a way men, women and children function. (1982:14)

Z.P. Jordan beautifully summarises these enshrined about oral tradition:

The ethos of traditional poetry was enshrined in oral, legal, religious and literary traditions through which the community transmitted, from generation to generation its customs, values and norms. (1973:IV)

Oral tradition is, therefore, the sum total of a complex mixture of norms, values and the philosophy of life of the society which has been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth through myth, poetry, song, tales and chants. Because of the interplay with other cultural traditions, oral tradition has undergone a complex process of modification through selection and exclusion. This means in practice, changing the old, filling in with the new: this results in a symbiosis of the old and the new in an emergent tradition.

### 1.3.2 IZIBONGO

Izibongo - praise poetry, literally "praise" - are the most widely used poetic form in Africa. Izibongo are poems about concrete historical events in the life of an individual or nation. Izibongo validate the social status of an individual. They also enhance intellectual and aesthetic interest. Furthermore, they stress accepted values and criticise deviant behaviour. Although satire is widely used in izibongo, the celebratory mode is the most dominant.

The dominant stylistic features are parallelism and linking. Izibongo are, to a very large extent topical in the sense that they deal with pertinent social and political issues. These features of izibongo have been discussed by various critics. V.V Mkhize regards izibongo as a reservoir of the history of the nation.

Izibongo are based on a system of names of various sorts which are expanded to form praise verses. Izibongo are a history and record of man's deeds.  
(1989:19)

Mzamane agrees with Mkhize.

Izibongo catalogues the genealogy of the king.  
(1984:148)

The best definition of izibongo in my view, is that given by A.C. Nkabinde:

Izibongo ... are often historical to a large extent... they are not mere flattery for its own sake. On the contrary, they reflect a person's estimation in the value system of a particular community. They are a record of a person's achievements, exploits, shortcomings and his fellowmen's evaluation of him. (1976:7) +

Some definitions of izibongo are, however, not very satisfactory. One of them traces the etymology of the term isibongo. According to this definition by Grant, izibongo is a plural form of izibongo and is derived from the Zulu word "ukubonga". (1927-9:20) While there is a morphological relationship between these words, it is not correct to claim a semantic relationship between isibongo and izibongo because they mean different things. Isibongo is a clan name or surname and does not in any way refer to "one praise name" as Grant seems to imply.

Yes, there is a semantic relationship between izibongo and ukubonga. Ukubonga may mean to thank, praise, to declaim izibongo or to criticize - depending on the context.

So, what I'm trying to demonstrate here is the fact that it would be confusing to arrive at a definition of izibongo by tracing the etymology of the term.

Another attempt at defining izibongo is by Opland who claims that

...all spontaneous burst into poetry during any social function with many people present, events such as weddings, beer drinking, parties or dances is defined as ukubonga. (1983:33)

At the social functions that Opland mentions it is very rare to hear izibongo sung. They are sung at such occasions only if the king is present. It is rather ukugiya, izihasho and izithakazelo that are prevalent on these occasions.

Ukugiya can be defined as a spontaneous act of gaiety accompanied by the stamping of feet, pointing of a stick or spear to the sky and chanting of the performer's izihasho.

Izihasho, on the other hand, are personal or peer group praises that are normally used by an individual's peers or the individual himself as some form of greeting or at a specific social function. The act of reciting a person's izihasho is called ukuhasha.

Izithakazelo can be defined as clan praise names which are essentially an extension of a person's surname. These are often sung in praise and thanks to the person who is hosting a social function.

It is of vital importance that we distinguish between ukugiya, ukuthopha (to chant a person's clan praise names) and ukubonga. This will help us understand izibongo more clearly.

Koopman defines ukubonga as:

Any form of address or reference (whether to one word or extend at length) which seeks to further the status of the individual (whether in relation to society or to the speaker) in a positive way.  
(1968:148)

While this is generally correct, it however loses sight of a very significant aspect of ukubonga, the satirical aspect which permeates even izihasho. Ukubonga, in respect of izibongo, can be used almost interchangeably to mean either praise or criticise.

There is no better conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing discussion of izibongo than that arrived at by Opland:

The oral poetic traditions are often complex and not reducible to simple definitions. (1975:186)

Kunene, however, feels that it is wrong to refer to izibongo as "praise poetry" because they do more than just praise an individual, they also project the value system of the society. For this reason, he prefers to call them "poems of excellence":

Poems of excellence are so designated because of their social strategy - namely that of elevating highest desirable qualities in society. They have wrongly been described as praise poems. However, they do more than praise and are more complex. Rather, they project an ethical system beyond the circumstances of the individual. (1979:XXIX)



## CHAPTER 2

This chapter will first give a brief outline of the debate about nature of oral and literate societies and it will suggest why this debate is relevant to the present study.

It will also pay special attention to dominant poetic devices used in izibongo. In Chapter three these poetic devices will be shown to be fundamentally the same as those used by our recent and contemporary poets, in a new context and with new content.

Finally, this chapter will analyse Izibongo Zikashaka in the light of the assumptions made about the philosophy of life of Zulu society, the poetic devices used in izibongo, the role of izibongo and that of the imbongi in society.

So, it will attempt to demonstrate, in a practical way, how each of the above were projected in izibongo. The same general approach will be used in Chapter 3 when an analysis of recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English is made.

### 2.1 The Orality - Literacy Debate.

Since this thesis has as its central focus the influence of oral forms on written poetry, a brief discussion of the dominant assumptions within what is often called the orality - literacy debate is pertinent.

There are two extremes within the orality - literacy debate. At one end of the spectrum are the so called "great divide theorists" (Livine, 1986) like Havelock, Goody and Ong. They argue that there is a great difference between modes of thought in an oral culture and those in a culture. They believe that the new state of culture brought about by literacy accords people certain cognitive skills. They conclude that literate people can think more abstractly, logically, analytically, rationally and critically. This, therefore, places a great divide between modes of thought in oral and literate cultures. The fundamental conclusion that can be drawn from the views of these theorists is that certain intellectual functions are only fully possible with the presence of literacy.

At the other end of the orality - literacy debate are theorists like Graff, Street, and Scribner and Cole. They agree that literacy has cognitive effects but they stress the importance of the context in which such literacy occurs and the functions it serves. They caution against combining the effects of schooling with those of literacy.

The basic conclusion that can be drawn from their argument is that literacy does have fairly complex cognitive consequences but this does not necessarily discount the presence of cognitive processes in an oral culture.

For Street, the whole debate is centered around the conventions of the dominant class in a dominant culture. He argues that ideological arguments are hidden under the guise of literacy as a superior and advanced skill:

The suggestion is no longer that a culture has acquired such technological skills as literacy because it is intellectually superior, as earlier racist theories had argued, Rather, it is claimed that a culture is intellectually superior because it has acquired that technology. (1984:29)

The fact that oral and literate cultures have influenced each other cannot be denied. The mutual impact of one on the other was of course, inevitable.

The literate culture has influenced orality to a very large extent. However, this does not imply that oral forms are now extinct. Ong makes a distinction between primary oral and secondary oral societies. His distinction serves to clarify the interaction between oral and literate cultures.

The primary oral culture is one where writing has never played any part. The secondary oral culture is one where writing and the oral mode of thought and reproduction co-exist side by side, having previously relied solely on the oral mode of thought. (1982:40)

So, in secondary oral society, oral traditions and the literate culture exist side by side.

This co-existence is very aptly expressed by Mphahlele when he argues that "tradition lives alongside the present." (1972:21) This has very significant implications for the critic of recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English. It implies that the critic should consider both the oral and literate cultures in the criticism of this poetry.

Mzamane advances a similar argument:

In dealing with creativity among blacks most scholars tend to deal with either oral or written forms, but very seldom with both, as if these entities are not mixed within the creative process of black writers in South Africa. (1984:25-6)

However, this does not imply that the oral and written modes are largely similar:

There are some marked differences, as Ruth Finnegan points out:

- The text of oral literature is variable and dependent on the occasion of performance, unlike the fixed text of written literature.
- Oral literature is composition in performance, not prior composition divorced from performance.
- Composition of oral literature is not through word memorisation. (1988:51)

Performance is a very important aspect of the oral culture which further distinguishes it from the literate one. It is indeed in performance that oral literature takes on its fullest meaning. Canonici stresses the importance in traditional literature:

Audience participation is vital since each performance is a communal experience. It is closer to a dance since it has to be performed. (1987:2)

The ritualistic nature of performance is revealed in Mphahlele's argument that "performance is ritualised." (198:14)

## 2.2 Dominant poetic devices used in Izibongo.

The dominant poetic devices used in izibongo include the gestural (emphases, stress and dramatisation), formulaic language (parallelism and linking), alliteration, assonance, improvisation and songs as well as what Cronin calls "agonistically toned features" (1989:43)

Parallelism is the most dominant poetic device used in izibongo. Kunene identifies three types of parallelism:

- Parallelism of thought the repetition of words and phrases.
- Parallelism of thought through the restatement of ideas by synonyms and indirect references.
- Parallelism of grammatical structure through the repetition of syntactic slot? (1971:68)

Fortune has made a study of the structure of Shona traditional poetry and has come to the conclusion that the dominant poetic devices are similar to the ones listed above, with a few additional ones:

The poetic devices of Shona traditional poetry are linking, which may be initial, cross or final, parallelism, alliteration and assonance and others such as antithesis or refrain. (1971:42)

In addition to repetition as the dominant poetic device in praise poetry, Kofi Anyidoho mentions three extralinguistic features characteristic of oral poetry:

- dramatic pauses
  - Audience participation
  - Ritualistic incantation and expletives.
- (1983:22)

Although this applies more to West African praise poetry it is relevant in the present discussion because Southern African Izibongo share the same features when they are performed.

It is clear, therefore, that izibongo rely on the devices identified above. These devices are very important because they give izibongo their form and also identify izibongo as uniquely oral poetry. These devices produce a very close relationship between form and meaning in izibongo.

### 2.3 The users of oral traditional forms in Izibongo ZikaShaka.

I shall now consider Izibongo ZikaShaka, as recorded by S'busiso Nyembezi (1960:19-27) as an example of izibongo form.

Translations are mine.

One of the very first assumptions made about the role of the imbongi in society is that he is the historian of the nation. This is clearly evidenced in Izibongo ZikaShaka when the imbongi catalogues the life history of the king. One example of this is when the imbongi praises the king in the following terms:

uSishaka Kashayeki (line 7)

This potbelly cannot be deciphered.

This is an allusion to the history of Shaka's story of his conception. It is said that Nandi (Shaka's mother) had always nursed a longing to meet Senzangakhona (Shaka's father). Nandi's dream came true. Nandi fell pregnant by Senzangakhona. In order to keep the pregnancy a secret, it was said that she was suffering from an illness called ishaka, an illness that cause a woman to have a potbelly, as if pregnant. Thus, when the child was born, he was named Shaka.



It is also possible that the imbongi is commenting on Shaka's character which was very difficult to understand, or on his invincibility in war. The obvious assonance consolidates these interpretations. There is another allusion to Shaka's childhood when the imbongi praises him as:

Unodumehlezi Ka Menzi (luie 8)

The cradle hero, son of Menzi.

When Shaka was born, he had to be hidden for fear that some people from within the royal family might try to kill him. Mthaniya, Shaka's grandmother was very eager to see her grandson. Mudli, Shaka's paternal uncle and Senzangakhona's brother, smuggled Shaka to Mthaniya. Mthaniya kept Shaka behind closed doors and as a result, she was accused of witchcraft. Shaka and his mother were always on the run and wherever they came, people were always talking about them. As a result Shaka became very famous although he had not yet achieved anything. Menzi was another Name for Senzangakhona. One must, therefore, know this history in order to understand and correctly interpret Izibongo ZikaShaka.

The assumption that the imbongi will uphold the social ethos and ridicule any behaviour that militates against it is evident in Izibongo ZikaShaka. Shaka's cruelty is revealed sarcastically under the guise of praise in the following lines:

Odabule Ku Ndimu NoMgovu,  
Abafaz' abandoni baphuluza,  
Imikhubulo bayishiy'iziqindi,  
Imbewu bayishiy'isemanxiweni. (lines 34-37)

Who passed through Ndimu and Mgovu,  
And the pregnant women miscarried,  
They left their fields unfinished,  
They left their seeds in deserted homesteads.

This is a veiled criticism of anti-social behaviour. Shaka is seen by the imbongi as an enemy of life which is symbolised by pregnant women, the fields and the seeds. He is militating against the norms and values of society and, therefore, deserving of criticism. The role of "conscience of the nation" is another important function of the imbongi in society. Assuming this role in izibongo, the imbongi sensitises the nation to what is going on and shapes its response.

Izibongo ZikaShaka abound with examples of this, like the following:

Mgengi phez' izitha kusehlobo,  
utshani bude buzokugibanisa. (lines 34-37)

Smoohtaker, stop making enemies in Summer  
The grass is tall and will trip you.

The king is busy attacking neighbouring tribes, hardly aware that he is making too many enemies, even within his own people who are now tired of war. The imbongi warns him that this will lead to his downfall. He warns again:

Buya Mgeng' indab' uyenzile,  
Uzwid' umphendul' isigcwelegcwele,  
Namuhla futh' usuphendul' indodana,  
Izinkomo zabant' inkelenkele,  
Zikhungel' ingob' ematshobeni. (lines 166-170)

Smoohtaker, it's enough now,  
You've made a wanderer of Zwide,  
And now his son.  
People's cattle cause enmity,  
Because owners follow them with spears.

The imbongi can also assume the role of sage or seer. Assuming this role, he interprets certain events in the nation and makes predictions.

This can be seen in the following lines:

Igawu bazawuliluma,  
Bazawuliphimisa,  
Bakhumbul' amagaw' abebesi. (lines 9-10)

The pumpkin they will bite,  
And spit,  
Remembering the unripe ones.

Here, the imbongi predicts that at first the people will welcome Shaka with great acclaim, but later on, they will reject him because they will find his actions hard to live with.

Things indeed did turn out this way. As a democratic agent, the imbongi must ensure that the democratic operative maxim inkosi yinkosi ngabantu (a king is a king on account of the people) is adhered to by the king. If it is not adhered to, it is imbongi's duty to criticise the king's autocratic behaviour on behalf of the people.

Shaka was sometimes incredibly stubborn. That is why the imbongi says of him:

Usiphuphuma simadel' imiyalo. (line 177)  
The stubborn one, who never takes advice.

Izibongo depend on oral poetic techniques for their effectiveness. The most widely used poetic device in izibongo is parallelism. There are many instances where parallelism and linking are blended together in Izibongo ZikaShaka, but I will choose one example to show it.

Ugasane kade lubagasela,  
 Lwagasel' uPhungashe kwaButhelezi,  
 Lwagasel' uSondaba woMthand' ehlez' ebandla,  
 Lwagasel' uMacingwan' eNgonyameni,  
 Lwagasel' uNxaba kuMbekane,  
 Lwagasel' uFaku eMampondweni,  
 (lines 139-145)

The aggressor who attacks relentlessly,  
 He attacked Phungashe of the Buthelezi clan,  
 He attacked Sondaba of Mthanda in Conference,  
 He attacked Macingwane of Ngonyameni,  
 He attacked Nxaba, son of Mbekane,  
 He attacked Gambushe in Mpondoland,  
 He attacked Faku in Mpondoland.

In the first line, there is parallelism of thought and grammatical structure through the repetition of "gasela". This parallelism is carried through linking until the end of the extract. Parallelism is used to help the audience in understanding and to reinforce the meaning. It is also used as a mnemonic device.

Alliteration and assonance are other salient oral features of izibongo. While they reinforce meaning through sound, they also reveal the beauty of the language and the imbongi's artistic majesty of it. The following is an example of alliteration and assonance.

Udlondlwane luya luhlezi,  
 Luya ludlondlobele,  
 Luyadla lubek'isihlang' emadolweni,  
 Isidlukula dlwedlwe,  
 Uhlany' olusemehlwen' amadoda.  
 (lines 146 -150)

The aggressive one, the omnipresent one,  
 He becomes with great gusto.  
 Even as he eats, his shield is on his lap.  
 The pirate.  
 The lunatic of whom everyone is wary.

In translation the sound pattern is of course lost.

Improvisation and song are the other important oral features of izibongo. African oral traditions are linked to music

Music unites the community as it heroes and their achievements and consolidates the social ethos. Music also reinforces izibongo and makes them more effective.

While chanting the king's izibongo, the imbongi will improvise a song that would be sung together with the audience either in the middle or at the end of the izibongo. The song, which is composed ex tempore, will be in keeping with what the imbongi perceives to be the main thrust of his izibongo.

Mphahlele stresses the fact that music plays a very profound role in praise poetry:

Audience response is ritualised, like the singer or the dancer who must be careful to maintain harmony and rhythm with the other participants. The poet feels a physically present audience. At intervals, women ululate and ecstatic noises come from the men. He sings and speaks his word by turns. (1972:14)

In Izibongo ZikaShaka, there is an example of improvisation and song.

The following song was improvised by Shaka's imbongi, Magolwane, at one of his performances and then used frequently afterwards.

These are the word of the song:

Wagedaged' izizwe,  
 Uyakuhlaselaphi Na?  
 He, uyakuhlaselaphi Na?  
 Wahlul.' amakhosi,  
 Uyakuhlaselaphi Na?  
 Wagedaged' izizwe,  
 Uyakuhlaselaphi Na? (1960:32)

You devour nations,  
 Who else will you attack?  
 I say: Who else will you attack?  
 You defeat kings,  
 Who else will you attack?  
 You devour nations,  
 Who else will you attack?

One very clear conclusion that can be drawn from the issues discussed in this chapter is that one needs to understand both the history and philosophy of life of the society from which the particular praise poetry emanates, before one can fully understand and correctly interpret it.



The imbongi and izibongo play a very significant role in society as reservoirs of the nation's history, as a nexus of the nation's social ethos and, more especially, as the guardian of the nation's values and norms. In the next chapter, I shall argue that the roles played by the imbongi are very similar to those played by our recent and contemporary black South African poets who write in English.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from this chapter is that imbongi is, in every sense of the word, a people's poet. This is because he plays the role of being the spokesperson of the people. He mirrors their concerns and aspirations. I will argue in the next chapter that this is also true of our recent and contemporary black South African poet who writes in English.

Chapter 3

Before looking at the influence of oral tradition on recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English, it is essential to revisit the society from which oral tradition emanates.

Mazisi Kunene (1976:24-41) argues that African society is very deeply steeped in the social ethos. This means in practice that in African society it is the society rather than the individual that is emphasised and communal endeavour is highly valued. Communal co-existence is encouraged and individualism is discouraged.

Kunene further argues that oral traditional literature is a product of this communal form of social organisations. The whole community participates in literature is essentially a dramatisation of significant social events. The poet thus acts as the spokesperson of the society because he mirrors its fears and aspirations and its norms and values.

Oral literature is used to uphold the social ethic since. African society is a community-oriented society. Oral literature is, therefore, in a sense propagandist because it propagates what the society deems right and ridicules what the society considers to be wrong.

In this chapter, I shall argue that these aspects of oral traditional literature reveal themselves in recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English. It is crucial to make the point that, at least until very recently, black poets of the 1970s and 1980s were speaking for an African society that had to resist the hegemony of a white minority monopoly of power, whereas in the days of the earlier izibongo the "African society" that the imbongi represented was of course the society which was socio-politically and culturally dominant. The situation has become more complex now because many of the poets are now "in power": Serote, for example, is not only on MP, but also the chairperson of the parliamentary standing committee on Arts, Science, Culture and Technology.

In this chapter I shall consider the poetry of Kunene, Mtshali, Sepamla, Serote, Gwala,

Madingoane, Mbuli and Hlatshwayo. I shall look at this poetry in the light of oral literature in general and izibongo in particular. The chapter will focus on the thematic concerns of this poetry as well as its stylistic techniques.

### 3.1 Mazisi Kunene.

Kunene has written many short poems. His first volume was Zulu Poems, 1970. This volume was banned for many years. He has published two epic poems: Emperor Shaka the Great and Anthem of the Decades. He has also produced another volume of short poems: Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain. I shall consider poems in this volume.

Some of the arguments I'm going to advance about Kunene's poetry are raised by Wole Soyinka in his article entitled: "The New African after Cultural Encounters." In this essay Soyinka stresses the importance of oral tradition as a viable resource for the contemporary African artist to draw from. He also stresses the need for the contemporary writer to:

imaginatively transform those elements that render a society unique in its own being, with potential for its progressive social transformation. (1982:56)

The remarkable thing about Kunene's poetry is first produced in Zulu and then translated-by himself - into English. I think this is why many of his translated poems fail to elicit some of the oral poetic techniques like alliteration and assonance.

Kunene's poetry reveals a visionary commitment. This visionary commitment centers around his utilisation of an African (Zulu) oral tradition as an attempt at self-retrieval. His concerns draw their significance from Zulu oral tradition.

It (art) must draw its deepest meaning from the high ethical ideals that have guided past generations (the Ancestors). Yet it should take into account the goals and directions of present society. (1982:xvi)

In his poetry, Kunene uses Zulu oral tradition to address present-day problems and to point the way towards transformation of contemporary society. An instance of this can be found in the poem, "Encounter with the Ancestors."

Before considering the concerns of this poem, it is important to understand the significance and symbolism of ancestors in Zulu tradition. To begin with, ancestors represent the past. Since by virtue of their actions the ancestors have approximated the social ideals, they are regarded in Zulu tradition as individuals who are deserving of a higher order of being. This is seen in their association with the mountain, symbolising their heightened status.

Their actions and contributions, in a collective sense, constitute human initiative and social progress. They have established standards of moral excellence which succeeding generations should emulate, Kunene sees the ancestors as embodiments of traditional culture and as a potential source of direction for contemporary society. The poet, as leader of thought in society, should utilise the resources of traditional culture, as embodied in the ancestors, for social transformation.

We must follow the direction of their little finger  
Where begins the story, the beginning of seeing...  
(1982:37)

These lines suggest that the ancestors are the origin of the community, its very foundation- "where begins the story." Ancestors are, therefore a source of direction and self-retrieval. Through the ancestors, the community becomes aware of its roots, its direction and its goals-"the beginning of seeing." The concern for the poet to utilise the resources of traditional African culture for social transformation and social reformation is clearly suggested:

Our guide through the desert must sing then  
Making our minds break the web of light  
To create a new path of wisdom...  
(1982:37)

The poet, as leader of thought in society or "our guide through the desert," must, through his creative imagination, be the catalyst for social enlightenment and cultural consciousness ("...break the web of light") and for subsequent social transformation ("to create a new path of wisdom").

This poem's concerns include the creation or formulation of a new cultural personality who is to be product of this visionary outlook. This is a personality that is integrated and rooted in his/her culture - an unalienated personality, a culture-secured personality.

The child who is born from this vision  
shall be the envy of her age  
she must plant the first season of a million years.  
(1982:37)

We see the significance of oral tradition in bringing about social progress for contemporary and future generations. The creation of the "New African" will lead to the emergence of other such personalities. This poem, therefore, puts forward a case for African culture as a potential catalyst for social transformation.

"Encounter with the Ancestors" is in my opinion a metaphor for cultural self-retrieval. This metaphor is used by Kunene to carry across his message of the integration of the New African personality into his/her own culture. This concern is also advocated by Soyinka:

...Not only to create a "New African"  
but to root him in his own culture.  
(1982:57)

Kunene's vision reveals a unique rootedness in traditional Zulu mythology. Soyinka emphasises the need for an African artist to use resources from a specific cultural matrix for his imaginative creativity. Kunene renews the myths of the Zulu oral tradition in the service of cultural regeneration and cultural awareness. This is apparent in the poem, "A vision of Nomkhubulwane". In this poem we see the visionary utilisation of the oral traditional mythic symbolism of Nomkhubulwane as a potential force for the rechanelling of the society's psychic energies towards cultural regeneration and social transformation. Kunene (1981:XXVI) explains the symbolic significance of Nomkhubulwane. Nomkhubulwane is the daughter of God and a manifestation of God's creative purpose.



She is also regarded as the goddess of balance between the physical and spiritual. She manifests herself in a variety of ways, one of which is through the rainbow. The rainbow symbolises the restoration of order after destructive tropical storms.

"A vision of Nomkhubulwane" is an evocation of the oral traditional celebratory performance of the festival of Nomkhubulwane. The celebration of this festival leads to the people's cultural awareness and this brings the dream of cultural regeneration to fruition. This is suggested by:

Voices rise in the horizon, People are shouting  
They bring the beautiful dream to our earth.  
(1982:18)

Another example of the evocation of the oral traditional mythic symbolism of the goddess Nomkhubulwane in a visionary setting is in the poem, "a Meeting with Vilakazi, the Great Zulu Poet." In this poem, Vilakazi is portrayed reviving traditional culture, thus leading the society towards cultural awareness.

Nomkhubulwane is used in this poem in a symbolic redirection of society towards cultural renewal and self-retrieval. The poet, Vilakazi, is portrayed in the poem as the catalyst bringing about this process of cultural consciousness and cultural regeneration. This produces ecstatic memories of traditional life before the encounter with other cultures.

There are intimations of self-discovery, and expressions of joy and pride in African culture.

As a result of his visionary meeting with Vilakazi, Kunene seems to have been transformed, in a metaphorical sense, into a new personality rooted in a culturally-secure society.

The symbolic redemption envisioned in this poem, to use Soyinka's word, seems

to spring from a cultural matrix of forces  
which alone can confront the machinery of  
oppression (1982:59)

The concerns of this poem are suggested in the following:

...I heard the drums beat behind your footsteps  
And the children of the south began to sing  
They walked on the ancient path of the goddess  
Nomkhubulwane  
And the old dance arena was filled with festival  
crowds  
Your great songs echoed to the accompaniment of  
the festival horn. (1982:56)

Here, Vilakazi is portrayed reviving the ancient mythic symbol, Nomkhubulwane. This is suggested in his metaphorically ritualistic walk "on the ancient path of the goddess-Nomkhubulwane."

Another example where Kunene uses oral traditional symbols to convey his visionary message is in "Phakeni's Farewell." This poem, written in epic style, is a tribute to "one of South Africa's greatest political leaders," Robert Resha. Kunene employs the ritualistic celebratory mode to recreate the heroic deeds of Phakeni in a communal ceremony.

The crowd is portrayed in a posture of respect and reverence.

The round calabash overflows with beer  
Crowds assemble before the circular place

...  
She kneels and tells others to follow her gesture.  
She takes out a barbed spear and points it to the sun  
Others who know her meanings raise their hands.

...  
Suddenly she puts a round grain basket before them  
With lips opened in awe and wonderment, they see:  
It's a pumpkin from the garden of Phakeni.  
(1982:8-9)

The pointing of a barbed spear to the sun is a gesture symbolising Phakeni's strength and courage as well as his creative energies. The "pumpkin from the garden of Phakeni" symbolises the significant deeds of Phakeni which uphold the social ethos by giving life, sustenance and nourishment to the society. Phakeni has demonstrated his intense concern for humanity through his actions. He is also acting as the custodian of the myth.

These are they who sheltered the sacred truths  
Whose kindness made truth round and desirable.  
Who laughed for all things in the universe.  
(1982:9)

Through his courageous actions, Phakeni inspired people to undertake similar actions without fear:

The children of the earth were paralysed with fear  
 Yet not Phakeni  
 He strode to and fro  
 He spoke as if to fire the crowds with courage

...

They made the fierce posture of battle.  
 (1982:9)

Phakeni's heroic deeds bought about hope of a new life:

Your young season was to come with green leaves.  
 (1982:10)

People are filled with expectations of a new order. The "rainbow" is a promise of new order after destruction. It is also a creative force. The allusion to the African creation myth in the last line of the extract below accentuates the expectations of rebirth of the human race.

We were to clear the pathway for the new season  
 We were to wait for the sign of the rainbow  
 You were the promise, you were to lead the festival  
 You were to come with two ceremonial spears  
 To celebrate at the top of the hill,  
 To celebrate the birth of the sacred twins.  
 (1982:10)

The "sacred twins" is an allusion to the twins who originated from the reed in the Zulu creation myth.

Despite fragmentation of the people, the poem ends in a apocalyptic tones. Its ends by giving hope of reunion, self-festival and integration of the society.

The rediscovery of our clansman  
The long embrace, the tears of joy across the desert  
(1982:11)

This poem therefore celebrates and promotes a heroic ideology amidst suffering, In Mazisi Kunene we hear the voice of the poet as a sage and a seer creating a vision of a future renewal of society out of the historically significant and heroic deeds of Phakeni (Robert Resha). He focuses, in epic style, on a hero of stature who is held up during the course of his heroic deeds an inspiring example to the present -day generation.

Kunene sees the role of literature as that of protesting against the infringement of the social ethos and advancing preservation and perpetuation of specific social values from oral tradition which he believes have a potential to transform society. Barnett makes a similar observation.

Since he sees the function of literature as "not merely to entertain but to teach social values and serious philosophical concepts; there is no question in Kunene's mind about the right of the poet to make his protest, ... or write African resistance poems. Like the oral poet in pre-colonial times, Kunene sees it as his duty to uphold an unchanging set of values and attack those who would destroy it. (1982:105)

While I agree with what Barnett says is Kunene's conception of his role as poet, I would disagree with her claim that Kunene conceives of Zulu mythology and the Zulu value system in the service of present and future generations.

Kunene, therefore, taps Zulu oral tradition as a vehicle for expressing contemporary ideas and struggles. Kunene uses sources from the Zulu oral tradition in his visionary outlook. He uses symbols and imagery from Zulu myth and culture to convey his message. It is very important for the critic to understand these images and symbols in order to correctly interpret Kunene's poetry. Barnett support this assertion.

Often we find in the imagery of black poetry, a complicated system of symbols which work on several levels and require knowledge of history, myth and legend. (1983:43)

### 3.2 Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali.

Oswald Mtshali has two published collections of poetry, Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (1971) and Fireflames (1980). The first collection raised a lot of controversy from both black and white critics. Barnett summarises this controversy very aptly:

Not all black readers were happy with Mtshali's work. Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, in an article entitled "The 50s and beyond: An Evaluation, "holds against him mainly the impact he made on Whites: the paternalism of Nadine Gordimer, for instance, in overemphasizing his Blake- like innocence. Black writers were suspicious of his appeal to white readers who, even in South African, bought his book by the thousands, awarded him prizes and lionised him personally. Some of the younger writer were disappointed at the lack of "revolutionary fire." (1983:51)

This controversy points to the complexity of Mtshali's poem in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum. It seems to me that controversy is due partly to Mtshali's style of writing and the

content of his poems in relation to the political situation of the time. Mtshali makes extensive use of satire. He uses satire in a style typical of the imbongi in izibongo.

He uses very vivid and poignant images to convey, often in a humorous way, what appears on the surface to be simple reality. However, behind this mask of simplicity, is the real message of the poet. This style of writing was essential for Mtshali to escape the censor's axe.

Several critics have made observations about Mtshali's style of writing which support the assumption I have made. Piniel Viriri Shava is one of them.

Mtshali's cynical and sarcastic attitude, his oblique and ironic use of vivid, suggestive similes and images and the profound meaning that lies beneath the apparent simplicity of his poetry, all contribute towards their total effect. (1989:143)

So, Mtshali's cynical and sarcastic "attitude," his use of irony and ridicule all contribute towards achieving his aim of "laying bare" the situation, painting the real picture of suffering.

The observation that Mtshali masks his real message behind a veil of simplicity is supported by Alvarez-Pereyre:

...so, out of necessity as well as from personal preference, it seems, he veiled his thoughts and used the "language of slaves" -a network of allusions, references and hints which are clear only to those who share his culture. (1983:179)

In an interview with Ursula Barnett, Mtshali clearly identifies himself as the spokesperson of the black people:

I'm convinced that my poetry echoed the feelings, aspirations, hopes, disappointment of many blacks here in South Africa. (1973:34)

When one looks closely at Mtshali's poetry, other roles emerge. One of these roles is to raise the consciousness of the black people to the oppressive Apartheid system.

In the poem, "If You Should Know Me," consciousness is portrayed through the metaphor of a flame with three tongues:

For all  
I bare my heart  
to see the flint  
to be ignited  
into a flame  
shaped like three tongues  
that tell me -  
look, listen and learn  
what surrounds me. (1971:55)

In this stanza, Mtshali clearly conceives his role as the raising of consciousness among the people of South Africa - "to see the flint/to be ignited."

Another poem in which Mtshali reveals what he sees as his role as a poet is the poem, "The Poet". In this poem, Mtshali recreates, in a humorous way, the process through which the poet goes as he creates his poems. The force of his satire lies in the last stanza where he dramatizes the poet absorbed in his creative work and disregarding what people say about him. He concentrates on his real subject: the life of his society.



Mtshali is asserting, in an indirect way, that the poet should mirror what is happening in his society,

Mtshali, looks on poetry, not as a vehicle or crystallising individual thought only, but also as a means of communicating significant social events and ideas. This is very much in line with the African conception of art as a form for communicating social events and ideas. This suggests that Mtshali may have been unconsciously influenced by oral tradition.

Through his poem in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, Mtshali performs some of the roles performed by the imbongi through izibongo. The Poem, "Pigeons of Oppenheime Park," is a scathing satire on the "Separate Amenities Act" and the "Immorality Act."

In the poem the poet sees two pigeons "Trespassing" on "private property," sitting on "Whites Only" benches and making love in public. In this poem, through his unfailing? satire, Mtshali ridicules the two Acts. He exposes how absurd and irrational they are as they go against nature. These Acts are anti-social and therefore deserve to be ridiculed.

In this poem, Mtshali plays the role of historian of the nation since he records the history of the nation. The "nation", of course, refers to all South Africans. Mtshali is also acting as the conscience of the nation since he ridicules antisocial behaviour. These two roles he plays here are similar to those played by the imbongi.

Here is an extract from the poem to illustrate this:

Everyday I see these insolent birds perched on  
"Whites Only" benches defying all authority  
Don't they know of the Separate Amenities Act?

A white Policeman in full uniform, complete  
with holstered .38 special, passes by without  
even raising a reprimanding finger at offenders  
who are flouting the law.

Oh! Holy Ideology! look at those two at the crest  
of the jumping impala, they are making love in  
full view of madams hobos, giggling office girls  
What is the world coming to?  
Where's the sacred Immorality Act? Sies!

The full impact of the satire lies in the phrases, "Holy  
Ideology!" and "Sacred Immorality Act," because they mean the  
opposite of what they seem to mean on the surface, i.e.  
absurd, ridiculous, anti-social and immoral.

The irony in "Sies" is slightly more complex. Immediately, it is a statement of disgust from a traditional white upholder of apartheid and these prejudices - hence the use of Afrikaans - but under the surface, it is an expression of the poet's disgust at the absurdity of the apartheid laws.

The dominant role that Mtshali plays in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum is that of being the conscience of the Nation. Assuming this role, Mtshali pricks, prods and challenges the Whites who are power. Another role compatible with that of being the conscience of the nations is that of consciousness-raising whereby he acts out his fellow black people in order to get them to voice and the unacceptableness of the way-of-life they forced to lead.

These roles are consonant with those played by the imbongi. The difference between the imbongi and Mtshali lies in the nature of the societies they operate within. The imbongi enjoys a license to criticise with impunity within a fairly compact and unified social structure while Mtshali writes his poetry within an extremely divided society and the ruling powers haven't really given him "license" to criticise.

One poem in which Mtshali assumes these rôles is "An Old Man in Church." This poem is a veiled criticism of the enslaving working conditions to be found among many black people in South Africa. These conditions sap people's human dignity, their machine which is applied to the old man who is the personal of the poem. The church is portrayed as an agency that facilitates the exploitation of the people by the power-that be. All this is suggested in the first section.

I know an old man  
Who during the week is at machine working of  
full thrittle:  
productivity would stall,  
spoil the master's high profit estimate  
is on Sunday he did not go to church  
to recharge his spiritual batteries.  
(1971:34)

Mtshali seems to sympathise with the old man, who any case is a victim. There is something genuine about the old man's passionate devotion and his humility.

At the same time the poet is critical of the old man's naive religious attitude. Note, for instance, that his spirituality and sense of devotion are contrasted with his physical suffering: "raw, knees", "gnarled hands," and "cracked lips." Through this, Mtshali reveals how religion has blunted the old man's consciousness of his oppressive and exploitative working conditions.

He never says his prayer in a velvet- cushioned pew-  
it would only be a whisper in God's ear:  
He falls on raw knees  
that smudged the bare floor with his piety.  
He hits God's heart with screams as hard as stones  
flung from the slingshot of his soul.  
He takes the glided communion plate with guarlid  
hands,  
he lowers his eyes into the deep pond of serenity,  
his brow rippling with devotion,  
his ears enraptured by the rustling silk vestments  
of the priest.  
He drinks the Lord's blood from the golden chalice  
with cracked lips thirsty for peace. (1971:34)

Mtshali is very critical of the rugged materialism of some of the representatives of the church in the face of the appalling poverty of the masses of its black devotees.

The church does not only sap their material powers, it also saps their mental powers. The last section of the poem illustrates this:

The acolyte comes around with a brass-coated  
 coated plate:  
 the old man sneaks in a cent piece  
 that raises a scowl on the collector's face  
 whose puckered nose sneezes at such poor  
 generosity  
 instead of inhaling the aromatic incense smoke.  
 Then the preacher stands up in the pulpit,  
 his voice fiery with holy fervour:  
 "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the  
 earth." (1971:34)

Here, it is the old man who shows himself to be the good Christian and the acolyte is hypocritical. Mtshali reveals some respect for Christian values here. He is, however, critical of specific representatives of the church who recommend passive acquiescence rather than active struggle.

Like the imbongi, through Mtshali propagates a humanistic tradition that affirms the value and dignity of a human being. This may have been part of the influence from oral tradition. Consider, for instance the poem, "Men in Chains."

This is a very powerful short poem with vivid, moving images. It dramatises people stripped of their human dignity, The image of "sheep after shearing" conveys both these men's utter helplessness in the situation and their complete lack of values and dignity. All the "value" has been taken away from them and what remains is bare existence.

The phrase "bleating at the blistering wind" conveys a sense of feebleness and helplessness with equal vividness.

Through sleep-curtained eyes  
 I peered through the frosty window,  
 and saw six men:  
 men shorn  
 of all human honour  
 like sheep after shearing,  
 bleating at the blistering wind,  
 "Go away! Cold wind! Go away!  
 Can't you see we are naked? (1971:22)

Mtshali does not envisage any hope of redemption from this dehumanising situation.

Men may clamour for hope, but the situation is seemingly inevitable:

"Oh! Dear Sun  
 Won't you warm my heart  
 with hope?"  
 The train went on its way to nowhere.  
 (1971:22)

In "The Detribalised," Mtshali pictures a whole way-of-life caused by apartheid society. This is shown partly through the defeatist attitudes of some of the oppressed black masses. Although Mtshali is critical of the person in the poem, he seems to be sympathetic to the fact that the person is forced to conform to apartheid for practical reasons. The person is, after all, a victim and product of apartheid.

He knows  
 he must carry a pass.  
 He don't care for politics  
 He don't go to church  
 He knows Sobukwe  
 he knows Mandela  
 They're in Robben Island.  
 "So what? That's not my business!"  
 (1971:66-67)

The poem mimics the language of the "detrified" so as to expose their absurd cynicism and raise people's consciousness against such cynical and defeatist attitudes. It also reveals the extent to which they have been made to accept the status quo. One can detect a tinge of despair underneath the cynicism.

"Riding on the Rainbow" is a clear statement of hope and an assertion of the value and dignity of the black man. Jazz music is seen by Mtshali as a viable mode of struggle against oppression and source of hope and inspiration, which are symbolised by the rainbow:

And off I go  
 streaking across the sky like  
 David's slingshot hitting "the Giants"  
 into the rainbow's face.

Up and up  
 on a wild horse of jazz  
 we galloped on a network  
 of blue note  
 delivering the message:  
 Men, Brothers, Giants!  
 (1971:41)



Mtshali propagates a heroic culture through the medium of jazz. This is carried through the metaphor of David and his slingshot. This gives hope that no matter how colossal the oppressive system may seem, it can be defeated and overthrown.

Mtshali clearly suggests the value and dignity of the black people by addressing them as "Men, Brothers, Giants." He is therefore suggesting that the power of the black people can overthrow their oppressors.

In "Nightfall in Soweto", Mtshali makes extensive use of repetition to emphasise a sense of helplessness in the face of the power of the oppressive machinery. While people are portrayed as victims of the system, the poet is also critical of the people's moral, spiritual and psychological degeneration:

I am the victim  
 I am slaughtered  
 everynight in the streets.  
 I am cornered by the fear  
 grawing at my timid heart,  
 In my helplessness I languish.

Man has ceased to be man  
 Man has become beast  
 Man has become prey...

Nightfall! Nightfall!  
 You are my mortal enemy  
 But why were you every night?

Why can't it be daytime?  
 Daytime forever more? (1971:56-9)

Mtshali uses linking in the last two lines. This serves to reinforce his and people's sense of longing for a better future as symbolised by daytime. The poem suggests that a state of unnaturalness has been created by a society propelled by exploitation and apartheid. Normally, a person would accept nightfall as a natural and quite pleasant part of the day; in Soweto it has become a moment to be regarded with dread.

In "A Voice from the Dead," Mtshali uses dramatic dialogue and the fable. These techniques are used in this poem to hold up for criticism the Christian myths about God and heaven with a view to forcing people to confront the reality of their oppression and their social problems.

By using ancestors to dramatise the revelation of religious truths, Mtshali vindicates the status that oral traditional society accords the ancestors. Through his mother, a more recent and intimate ancestor, Mtshali finds practical application of the often abstract values which are, incidentally, exposed by Christianity.

My son!  
There is no heaven  
above the clouds.

WHAT!

Yes, Heaven is in your heart.  
God is no picture  
with a snow-white beard.

WHAT!

Yes God is that / crippled beggar  
sprawling at the street corner.

There is no hell burning  
with sulphur and brimstone.

WHAT!

Yes, hell is  
the hate flickering  
in your eye. (1971:31)

It is interesting to note how effectively Mtshali uses the dramatic dialogue in this poem.

It is used to jolt the "son" and the reader into a realisation of

the emptiness and inaccuracy of the myths about God, heaven and hell. One is left with a slight feeling that Mtshali sympathises with the childish perceptions that the "son" has about God, heaven and hell. The conversation of these lifts the veil of ignorance.

The technique of dramatic dialogue has been used in this poem in a way akin to the one in which the call and response technique is used in izibongo. This may point to an influence by this tradition on Mtshali.

The title of the volume, Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, itself suggests an influence from the oral tradition. A cowhide drum is a very important symbol of the oral culture. Its "sounding" is a ritual symbolisation of man's unity with the universe. The poem of the same title, in fact, suggests an explicit link with the Zulu culture. In the poem Mtshali says:

...I am the drum of your dormant soul,  
Cut from the black hide of a sacrificial cow.

I am the spirit of your ancestors,  
habitant in hallowed huts,  
eager to protect,  
forever vigilant.

Let me tell you of your precious heritage,  
of your glorious past trampled by the conqueror,  
destroyed by the zeal of a missionary. (1971:91)

Mtshali suggests his link with the Zulu oral tradition through the use of phrases like "sacrificial cow", "ancestors," "the Zulu dance," and others. It seems to me that Mtshali wants to acknowledge his influence by oral tradition more explicitly in this poem. He is, however, aware that this tradition is no longer dominant, but now "dormant" in his soul as it is in many other people's souls who are, like him, Zulus. It has been "trampled by the conqueror" and "destroyed by the zeal of a missionary."

Mtshali also wants to preserve the oral tradition. This is suggested in the lines:

"eager to protect/forever vigilant." This may be one of the most explicit influences suggested in his poetry in this volume.

In his second volume, Fireflames (1980), Mtshali uses less complex techniques and his message is now clearer and more overt. He makes extensive use of techniques like repetition, naming, call and response and direct statement-making to convey his message more powerfully. His voice of self-assertion rings through this volume and his call to actions reverberates throughout.

The militancy characteristic of the Black Consciousness and subsequent eras is very evident in this volume. One poem in particular which exhibits this influence is "The Raging Generation." In this poem, Mtshali, in izibongo style, praises the heroism of the young, Through them, he propagates a heroic ideology and calls on others to assert their socio-political roles in a similar fashion. He uses repetition and the royal salute, "I salute you," which is typical of izibongo. The last section closes with the "power" salute.

I salute your fearlessness,  
 I stand in awe of your bravery  
 and I bend my knee at the shrine of your  
 steadfastness.  
 I hear your heart-touching songs at the  
 memorial services  
 Where you celebrate the passing of your  
 comrades.  
 Amandla! Amandla! Amandla! Ngawethu!  
 Power! Power! Power! To the People!  
 (1980:33)

The poem is also a celebration of the courageous effort of those young men and women who have dedicated their very lives to the struggle. This is suggested in the dramatisation of a memorial service to celebrate the passing away of their comrades which is used to inspire the other comrades to continue the struggle for freedom. The "Amandla" call gives hope for victory.

The celebratory mode, as evidenced by the memorial service of the heroic deeds of the fallen comrades, is a very important one, in the izibongo tradition. It is an expression of a communal spirit, of unity and celebration of man's greatest accomplishments.

The technique of naming, where the imbongi catalogues the names of war heroes in order to harness heroism, is also used to very good effect by Mtshali. The poem, "A song for South Africa," illustrates this:

Nelson Mandela, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Walter Sisulu, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Govan Mbeki, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Ahmed Kathrada, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Braam Fischer, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Josiah Mbatha, we remember you  
in the island of heroes.  
Robert Sobukwe, we remember you  
in the remote places  
where they have dumped you. (1980:27)

Naming and repetition is used in this section to arouse inspiration so that people will undertake acts of heroism. The poem then ends with promise of hope for liberation.

The swordfish leaped in a parabola  
 Over the surface of the sea;  
 the sharks and whales replied,  
 "beloved children of africa, be ready,  
 take courage,  
 the time is near,  
 freedom will soon be yours." (1980:28)

So, the poet assumes the role of sage, seer and oracle to give hope to the oppressed.

In "Weep not for a Warrior, Mtshali praises heroism which is symbolised by a Warrior.

In foreseeing the everlasting presence of the warrior through his loved ones, Mtshali assumes an apocalyptic tone. This is in line with the conception of the poet in oral tradition as a seer and an oracle. Through the poem, he is advocating resistance to oppression.

As the clouds of war gather,  
 and the southern sky frowns with rage,  
 and the mountains quiver like broth,  
 and the lightning swords the firmament,  
 and the clouds melt into cascades of water,  
 and the gushing torrent collect the corpses,  
 and flush them like logs into the raging sea,  
 the death knell will echo to every corner.

The warrior will lie there, solemn  
 in his impregnable casket.  
 His proud widow and children will say,  
 "Weep not for him  
 He has a brave warrior,  
 Let him rest on the buffalo-hide bed  
 where his forefathers repose." (1980:24)

The aggregative and repetitive use of "and", reminiscent of izibongo, is very effective and striking. It conveys the mood of anger experienced both by the warrior's family and his people. It also suggest the solemnity of the mourning. The additive use of "and" also suggests the cumulative attributes of the warrior. So, the mood of the people and the solemnity of the occasion of mourning all echo the warrior's attributes.

Es'kia Mphahlele, as cited by Michael Chapman, agrees with the above observationn in relation to "Weep Not for a Warrior":

...the traditional voice of prophecy is hallowed by communal ritual, it comes across through the resources of an intense sense of organic unity in the universe. In any time of political upheaval, the voice of prophecy hardens into apocalyptic tones. (19844:193)

Mtshali's poetry in his two volumes discussed above, perhaps more explicitly in the second, reveals profoundly the influence of the oral tradition. This influence is clearly evidenced in the poetic devices that he uses: repetition, dramatic dialogue, satire and the use of naming. These techniques are very widely used in oral tradition literature.

The influence of oral tradition on Mtshali's poetry is also made evident by the roles he assumes in his poetry: spokesman of the people, historian, social critic, and an oracle.

All these roles are similar to those played by the imbongi in izibongo.



### 3.3 Sipho Sepamla.

Sipho Sepamla has published five collections of poetry: Hurry up

to it (1975), The Blues is You in Me (1976), The Soweto I love (1977), Children of the Earth (1983 and from Gore to Soweto (1988).

His poetry in these volumes reveals the profound influence from oral tradition, especially with regard to the roles played by Sepamla in his poetry and the techniques he uses.

These may be likened to those of the imbongi

In Hurry up to it, Sepamla uses African traditions to convey his message of a sense of identity, belonging and solidarity with the black communal audience and, at the same time, to express his vision for the future. This is evident in the poem, "Adriaanspoort."

In this poem, the poet first describe a picnic scene in a very lyrical manner. The following lines describe the scene:

down there below  
 where I can see no spoor  
 of man or animal  
 there is a winding  
 of what used to be  
 there is a swaying  
 of lanky tufts of grass  
 there is a meandering  
 of leafy protea trees  
 there is an aging... (197:33)

Although the place is apparently uninhabited (no spoor / of man or animal), it seems to have a commanding aura of its own. There is a very strong presence of all that used to inhabit the place. This is suggested by the lines: "there is a winding/of what used to be."

It seems to me that this "presence" is spiritual and it brings about a spiritual unity between the poet and the place. Even the vegetation seems to possess its own spirituality. The rhyming of the words, "winding", "swaying" and "meandering" suggests both unity of movement and unity of spirit between the poet and the place.

In this poem, Sepamla assumes the role of the historian of the nation. He dramatises, in a humorous way, some of the distortions made on African history. In the poem, he alludes to the distortion that African history is nothing more than incessant internecine wars.

This is suggested in the following lines:

of dead spirits  
once clashing by day  
only to retreat at sunset  
leaving these parts wild of night  
yet scene under the moon (1975:33)

The poet-historian interprets the history of the nation so as to expose the distortion.

In the lines that follow, Sepamla reasserts the authority of the ancestors in subtly directing the lives of Africans. Through the ancestors, the past and the present are united. This is suggested in the following lines:

there is a spirit moving where we are  
 we turn faces to avoid it  
 hardly being successful  
 for we are part of the being of things.  
 (1975:33)

Even if the generation tries to distance itself from the ancestors, it fails because it is an inextricable part of the past and the ancestors. Ancestors, by virtue of their status in society, give hope and direction to present-day generations. This is clear in the extract that follows, where the poet, through the help of the ancestors, assures an apocalyptic tone as the sage, seen and oracle of the nation.

There are clouds gathering above our heads  
 we say it will not rain  
 hardly being correct  
 for the earth needs to be swept at times.  
 it rains...pule!...it rains...Pule!  
 (1975:34)

The invocation to the rain is reminiscent of the African children's rain song which is recreated by the poet in this context to give a message of hope for renewal and regeneration as symbolised by the rain. Rain symbolises hope for life and a better future. Alvarez Pereyre rightly observes that:

...it is perhaps possible to detect a discreet  
 reference to the future...  
 (1979:222)

The use of the African children's rain song to express joyous hope for the future is a salient borrowing from oral traditions.

In "To Whom it May Concern" Sepamla's masterly use of satire is evident. Again, he assumes the role of historian of the nation. He uses the style and language which was used to write permits for black people to comment, in a satirical way, on the "Group Areas Act". He exposes how the identity, dignity of the person carrying the permit is denigrated by referring to him, not y his name by words like "bearer", "Bantu" and "R/N417181",.

In this way Sepamla like the imbongi, plays the threefold role of spokesman of the people, historian and social critic.

Barnett rightly points out that satire is the most effective poetic device that Sepamla uses:

Satire and irony are Sepamla's weapons  
and he achieves the desired effect with  
great skill. His sharp wit makes it a  
most effective means of bringing home  
his point. (1983:61)

Sepamla exploits oral traditional techniques to convey his message more effectively.

Note how repetition and linking are used in these lines:

Bearer,  
Bare of everything but particulars  
Is a Bantu

Please pass him on  
 Subject to these particulars  
 He lives  
 Subject to the provisions  
 of the Urban Natives Act of 1925  
 Amended often  
 To update it to his sophistication  
 Subject to the provisions of the said Act.  
 (1975:9)

The linking of "Bearer" and "bare" and the repetition of "subject" emphasise the denial of human dignity to the black people and, therefore, the violation of the social ethic.

Alvarez-Pereyre also observes the use of repetition in this poem:

The use of repetition and asides stress  
 the reification of the African. (1983:216)

One particular poem where repetition is widely used is "At the Dawn of Another Day."

In this poem the poet-historian celebrates the dawn of a new era of political consciousness.

The poem is used to raise consciousness about the status quo. So, the poet is at the same time playing the role of social critic.

Repetition is used as an effective poetic device to convey the message of celebration and consciousness-raising, as the imbongi would do in oral traditional literature. The poem is a celebration of the people's struggle against apartheid. The following lines illustrate this argument:

At the height of the day  
 Youth rage spilled all over the place  
     unleashing its own energy  
     confounding the moment  
     exploding the lie

take away  
     your teachings  
 take away  
     your promises  
 take away  
     your hope  
 take away  
     your language  
 give  
     me  
     this  
         day  
             myself...

i shall learn myself anew  
 i shall read myself from the trees  
 i shall glean myself from all others  
 i shall wean myself of you (1977:6-7)

The repetition of "take away" is very reminiscent of the call and response technique used by the imbongi in izibongo. This gives a communal voice to the poem. It is a voice of anger and total rejection of the imposed values.

The repetition of "i shall" suggests a strong and determined desire for self-definition.

The poet-historian celebrates the heroic deeds of the black people and their coming-into-being.

Through this, the poet seeks to perpetuates a heroic tradition in the struggle for liberation. He also wants to uphold the social ethos and criticises whatever militates against it. This consonant with the role played by the imbongi in oral traditional society.

The apocalyptic voice of the poet as seer, sage, and oracle is evident in the last four lines of the extract above. The poet envisions himself and his fellow South Africans- for whom he is the spokesperson- as a personality, who is very clear about his identity and, more significantly, is free. Alvarez-Pereyre argues that

Sepamla, with The Soweto I Love, was playing the role of witness; he also records the signs of the decline of white power... he asserts, in majestic fashion, the growing confidence of the blacks...(1983:226)

As I have argued the poetry of Sepamla reveals an extensive use of the techniques of oral traditional literature to dramatise the experiences of the African communal audience. This is also evident in The Blues is You in Me. Consider, for instance, "Song of Mother and Child."

In this poem, Sepamla employs the oral traditional techniques of improvisation and song to dramatise the tragic effects of the migrant labour system on the family, and ultimately on society. The poem ought really to be quoted in full to reveal its overall impact, but I will only quote the first seven sections to illustrate my argument:

Song of mother and child  
singing for the man  
whose beard grew grey  
in search of gold

Oh clash of cowhide shields  
spears clattering  
into limbo of symbols  
see what birth has given  
in time

O ashes of father  
entombed in the abyss of things  
sing:

Hay' hay' igoli igoli  
Hay' hay' igoli igoli

of widowed mothers  
singing of the living dead  
ageing men who nods so often  
as if to say  
the past must come back

oh! where are the heroes  
where are the heroes  
that the child might lisp  
names that might father sons-of-yield

Hay' hay' igoli igoli  
Hay' hay' igoli igoli (1976:61)



The "song" that Sepamla creates in this poem has resonances of the African lullaby recreated within the context of the migrant labour system in the mines. This lullaby is created to give comfort and solace to the child who has been separated from the father by the migrant labour system. It also gives utterance to the plaintive voice of the mother.

The symbolic motif of mother and child with its evocations of family unity and solidarity, is set in contrast to the cruelty of family disintegration as a result of this system.

Sepamla's next collection of poems, From Gore to Soweto, also reveals a reliance on oral traditional literary forms to convey its message to his audience. The poem "Heroes of the Day" makes abundant use of repetition to carry its message across effectively. In this poem, the poet celebrates the heroic deeds of those who died in a struggle. The poem ends with an expression of hope for freedom. Through the poem, the poet praises a heroic ideology in order to raise people's consciousness in response to the oppressive situation and urge them to action to redress this situation. Although the celebratory mode is dominant, the plaintive voice of protest, vigorous self-assertion and prophecy are never missing:

Oh! Carry me on the wings of the times  
to the site of a modern day burial

I want to sing  
I want to dance  
I want to celebrate  
Heroes of the day

Oh! let me be one of the comrades  
 Who set aside one day's burdens  
     To let their voices shout  
     To let their voices cry out  
     To let their voices chant all day long  
 Songs to the glorious heroes

Let me say it humbly  
 for there is sadness in all this  
 There is hope in dying. (1988:21)

From the foregoing discussion of Sepamla's poetry, a new important conclusions can be drawn. One is that Sepamla assumes roles akin to those played by the imbongi. He makes extensive use of satire, especially in his earliest volume of poetry. Through satire, he acts as the social critic, praising what affirms the social ethos and criticising what militates against it.

#### 3.4 Mongane Wally Serote.

In a review of Serote's No Baby Must Weep, Mandlenkosi Langa outlines, in very eloquent terms, the role that he perceives to be played by Serote through his poetry.

The role of an artist in an oppressed place  
 is to sensitize the oppressed to their oppressive  
 surroundings, sharpen their consciousness and  
 shape the mode of their response. (1977:32)

The role suggested by Langa in these words is that of being the social critic, raising people's consciousness to the circumstances around them and directing the nature of their response to these circumstances.

Here Serote is emulating the role played by the imbongi in oral traditional society.

Serote's poetry employs oral traditional poetic devices of the kind used in praise poetry.

These are parallelism, linking and repetition. He also makes direct statements in addition to his masterly use of ironic symbolism. For his long poems, he has adapted the traditional African epic poem to convey his message. The traditional African epic is a biographical. Serote has adapted this to suit his own needs.

The corpus of Serote's poetry published between 1972 and 1994 suggest an influence by oral tradition. This influence is suggested by both the roles that Serote assumes through his poetry and the content of the poetry. Consider, for instance, the poem "Ofay-Watcher Looks Back." This poem symbolically portrays Serote observing, recording, analyzing and interpreting the history of the black people in an effort to raise their consciousness of the political situation. This is suggested in the following lines:

I want to look at what happened,  
that done,  
As silent as the roots of plants pierce the  
soil,  
I look at what happened.  
(1972:47)

Mzamane defines "ofay-watcher" as:

An Afro-American expression used by advocates of Black Power in the 1960s to describe someone who has set himself up as the watchdog of his community. (1983:83)

Alvarez-Pereyre agrees with Langa about the role of Serote as a poet:

Through him, the whole South African Black community speaks and voices the difficulties it encounters in trying to free itself. (1983:188)

Serote acts as the true spokesperson of the people because he articulates their fears, desire and aspirations. Through his poetry, he propagates a heroic ideology in order to mobilise the black people to act against the oppressive system.

It is interesting to note a change of form in Serote's poetry. He starts with shorter poems:

Yakhal'inkomo (1972), and Tsetlo (1974). After these first two collections, he then changes to longer poems: No Baby Must Weep (1975), Behold Mama, Flowers (1978), The Night Keeps Winking (1983), A Tough Tale (1987), and Third World Express (1992).

Although there are shorter poems in Behold Mama, Flowers and The Night Keeps Winking, there is a noticeable shift towards longer poems.

Jane Watts also observes this change of form from short to long poems and gives an explanation for this:

In the three stage evolution of form, from short, often personal poems, poems with a lyrical quality, to long autobiographical poems and finally to poems between five and ten pages long, with specific pedagogical intentions... (1989:155-156)

I would not agree with the assertion that Serote's long poems are autobiographies simply because they seem to trace the life history of the poet. I think these poems can be more aptly described as social epics. This is because even though the poet is writing about himself, he assumes a persona in the poems and this persona is a symbol of communal suffering. Barnett observe that :

...protest is not made on behalf of the poet but in the name of the "faceless man," the anonymous black man. (1983:43)

I agree with Watts when she identifies the roles played by Serote through his poetry in the following way:

His writing can be seen as a continuous reworking of the past- at first to come to terms with his own and his community's pain and anger, then to analyse the history of his people's struggle against oppression, and, finally, to act as a dynamic force, propelling the liberation movement. (1989:157)

In the poem, "Ofay-Watcher, Throbs Phase," Serote assumes the role of spokesperson of the black people. He captures, through very vivid and striking images, the cycle of apartheid deprivation throughout the entire lifespan of the community.

Through the repetition of the phrase "I come from down there", the poet identifies himself with the black community as its historian, spokesperson and social critic.

I come from there,  
 The children have no toys, they play with mud,  
 The boys and girls have nothing to do,  
 Their minds are laboratories and their bodies  
 apparatus;  
 I come from down there,  
 The parents there are children of other men and  
 women,  
 There, the old just sit and wait for death  
 Like people wait for a train.  
 I come from down there below,  
 My friends are tender people who look old.  
 They are wild,  
 Like rats living in an empty room,  
 They are meek like sheep following the other  
 blindly.  
 They and I come from down there below,  
 Down there below the bottom.  
 (1972:48)

"Below the bottom" is symbolic of the ~~abyss~~-like hole of despair into which the black people have sunk. It is also symbolic of the status to which black people have been relegated. The image of "sheep following the other blindly" reveals both the feeling of helplessness in the face of oppression and the docility imposed by subjugation.

Listlessness and apathy are the other feelings caused by oppression. This is suggested by the image of old people who wait for death "like people wait for a train." Abject poverty and deprivation are captured in the image of "rats living in an empty room."

Yakhal'inkomo (the cry of cattle watching their kind being slaughtered) is intensely lyrical, quite reflective and sharply analytical. The image of the cry of cattle watching their kind being slaughtered explains Serote's role as poet in this collection: recording and analysing the history of the nation and acting as a communal voice against suffering. The poems in this collection convey the brutality of apartheid oppression on the black people through very graphic images.

Serote makes use of ironic symbolism to record, through surgical images the brutality of the apartheid system. This is clearly evidenced in the poem "Alexandra", where the township has become a symbol of communal suffering. In this poem, Serote has masterfully employed the ironic symbolism of the "mother". Alexandra is ironically referred to as "mother". The image of the mother, with its evocations of family affinity, loving care, nurturing and sustenance, is inverted to reveal the negative attributes of apartheid. Alexandra is, in a sense, a "mother" because the poet grew up in the township. Alexandra is itself a victim of apartheid although it is used to enforce it. So, the poet finds himself in a complex and ironic relationship with the township.

And Alexandra,  
My beginning was knotted to you,  
Just like you knot my destiny  
You throb in my inside silences  
You are silent in my heartbeat that's loud to me.  
Alexandra, often Alvei cried,  
When I was thirsty my tongue tasted dust.

Dust burdening your nipples.  
 I cry Alexandra when I'm thirsty.  
 Your breasts ooze the dirty waters of your  
 dongas,  
 Water diluted with blood of my brothers your  
 children,  
 Who once chose dongas for deathbeds.  
 Do you love me Alexandra, or what are you  
 doing to me? (1972:30)

Repetition is used as a very effective poetic device in this poem. It is used to reinforce the central message of the poem: the complex relationship between Alexandra and the poet.

Repetition centers around three words, "you", "Alexandra" and "I". So, poetic form and thematic concerns combine to give the poem a resonating impact.

"City Johannesburg" is another case in point. In this poem, Serote uses the symbolism of the king to refer to the city. This symbolism is suggested by the royal salute at the beginning of the poem. The irony of the salute, and indeed of the symbolism, lies in the fact that instead of the hand being raised, it rushes anxiously to the back pocket. The symbolism of the king, evoking as it does national unity, respect, citizenship rights and protection, is severely shattered when the "king" dehumanises his "subject" and relegates him to the status of a second class citizen.



This way I salute you;  
 My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket  
 or into my inner jacket pocket  
 For my pass, my life,  
 Jo'burg City.  
 My hand, like a starved snake rears my pockets  
 For my this, ever lean wallet.  
 While my stomach groans a friendly smile to  
 hunger,  
 Jo'burg City.  
 My stomach also devours coppers and papers  
 Don't you know?  
 Jo'burg City I salute you;  
 When I run out or roar in a bus to you,  
 I leave behind me my love,  
 My comic houses and people, my dongas and my  
 ever whirling dust,  
 My death...  
 (1972:12-13)

Serote has successfully used the ironic symbolism of the king to refer to the city so as to reveal the dehumanising effects of apartheid.

What is less obvious about this poem and what critics have missed is that Serote has exploited the oral tradition by composing, in a satirical mode, izibongo of Johannesburg City to reveal the dehumanising effects of apartheid. Translated in Zulu "I salute you", becomes "Ndabezitha!" or "Bayethe!", a typical Zulu royal salute characteristic of izibongo.

He also uses the oral poetic technique of repetition to reinforce his thematic concerns.

This is done through the repetition of "Jo'burg City" and "My."

The powerful voice of self-assertion of the imbongi-historian-social critic as the catalyst for action runs through Serote's second collection of poems, *Tsetlo* (1974).

Serote explains the name ditto as meaning

...the tiny bird with the weird sweet whistle  
which it plays while it flies from branch to  
branch in the bush, luring people to follow it.  
...And then it stops. It may lead you to  
honey, to a very dangerous snake or to something  
very unusual. (Preface to *Stet*)

Indeed, the poetry in *Tsetlo* is a call to consciousness. In the poem, "Anonymous Throbs + A Dream," the nine "throbs" image the major aspects of the black people's suffering; each one is throbbing pain of its own. In this poem, the poet-historian chronicles, through the nine snapshots of the black man's condition, the suffering of the black people. Through very vivid and intensely evocative images, the poet jolts the psyche of the oppressed and that of other readers into a consciousness of the black man's conditions. His call to action is encapsulated in his symbolisation of the black man's conditions. His call to action is encapsulated in his symbolisation of the black people's submission to suffering in the willing submission and inferiority of being, is used to shock the audience into a realisation of its state.

I did this world great wrong  
 with my kindness of a dog  
 my heart like a dog's tongue  
 licking too many hands, boots and burns  
 even after they kicked my arse  
 voetsek, voetsek  
 shit, I still wagged my tail  
 I ran away still looking back  
 with eyes saying please. (1974:53)

The insensitivity of the oppressors is evident in the hollow laughter that they give out.

How can you laugh...  
 When you see me come  
 dressed in rags that I picked from your  
 rubbish bin... (1974:53)

This is the righteous rebuke of the poet as self-critic. The rebuke is without any trace of self-pity. By exposing the insensitivity of the oppressors, Serote implicitly reverses the image of a dog and uses it against them to expose their moral and spiritual decadence.

The Zulu saying banako konke kodwa yizinja. (they've everything material but they are as contemptible as dogs) is a relevant one. It is used to refer to people who possess everything but have no regard for fellow human beings.

The rebuke in the above extract is symbolic of the poet's acquisition of confidence and courage to confront his suffering and to call the black communal audience to similar action.

This is set in direct contrast to shoulder his paternal responsibilities. The newly-acquired confidence will obviate this helplessness.

...my children holler "Pap Papa Papa  
and I just look away as if to count my toes.  
(1974:53)

Serote focuses his audience into self-confrontation, self-analysis and self-retrieval by dramatising his own process of introspection. Like the eponymous bird, Tsetto, he is making a call to consciousness.

I  
eye me  
why because I  
is a cruel memory  
(1974:54)

In the last "throb", Serote conveys his message of hope and it is at this stage that the poet-sage-seer oracle is at play. He recreates a heroic past which is embodied in the symbolic significance of Shaka, to propagate a heroic ideology and to make a call to his black communal audience to assert themselves in a vigorous fashion:

When he was dying  
Shaka had a dream  
that why black brothers must not fuckaround  
(1972:54)

The message of hope rings through Tsetlo with a comforting poignancy that indeed lures one to assert oneself and expedite the end of the "dry white season". The image of the "dry white season" suggest the transience of suffering and points to a hope for freedom. This is clear in the poem, "For Don M(Matera) - Banned".

It is a dry white season  
 dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out  
 and with a broken heart they dive sown gently  
 headed for the earth  
 Not even bleeding.  
 is a dry white season brother,  
 only the trees know the pain as they stand erect  
 dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,  
 indeed it is a dry white season  
 but seasons come to pass  
 (1973:58)

The repetition of "it is a dry white season" emphasises the fact that it is a time of suffering. Even nature seems to echo the suffering experienced by Don M who is representative of the black majority. It is important to note how Serote has used images from the natural world to portray human suffering.

In No Baby Must Weep, Serote has used the oral traditional epic genre to reconstruct a communal history of suffering with the aim of revealing, and holding up for praise, the resilience of the black people so as to perpetuate a heroic ideology. This heroic ideology is essential in harnessing the courage of the people in the service of the struggle for liberation. Serote has managed to transform the oral traditional epic into something.

He succeeds in giving the epic an autographical flavour.

The symbolic journey that the poet undertakes traverses various forms of suffering that black people are subjected to. This is essentially a journey to self-retrieval and self-discovery. This is made finally clear by the end of the of the poem:

ah  
africa  
is this not your child come home?  
(1975:61)

Serote is indeed the true poet-historian in this poem. He is writing the history of his time and of his people. Serote exposes the social malaise caused by apartheid. He vents his anger against the township youth in order to jolt them into consciousness. By jeopardising the moral fibre of the society, they are undermining the social ethic and, therefore deserve to be criticised, Serote uses the oral technique of naming in public which is effective in conveying his message. He wants the young people to see themselves for what they are so that they can become properly aware.

these less than dogs  
 drunkards  
 smoking pipes  
 cigarettes  
 dagga  
 benzine  
 petrol...

who dirtied their paws  
 and licked them  
 (1975:25)

However, Serote is not so naive as to chastise the youth without knowing where to ultimate responsibility for this moral depravity lies. He chides them for their complicity in yielding to the system and thus compromising the social ethos. He wants them to be conscious of this. He wants them to know that the people responsible for this are

the gods of destruction  
 who know nothing about songs  
 who are more petty than birds  
 who can't even listen  
 or be moved  
 by the sight of machine-gunned children  
 (1975:25)

Serote assumes the role of spokesperson of the people which is akin to that of an imbongi in oral traditional literature.

i am your son mother i am my father's son  
 cup your hands beneath my breast  
 let the waters of my wounds flow and wash these  
 hands that made me  
 these hands clayed me in that moment  
 when the river flowed when the river ebbed  
 when the river burst  
 and the flesh broke  
 and the water became flesh when the flames burnt  
 agony  
 ecstasy  
 god turning away leaving his shadow prolonged in  
 some wretched room  
 I emerge a wound in my gut  
 using broken tongues and bleeding heart  
 kneeling on worn-out knees  
 (1975:36)

In the above lines, the repetition of "son" and "hands" is apparent. Through it the poet wants to emphasise the unity and solidarity in the family as well as a sense of belonging. This filial affinity is, however, bitterly broken by the suffering of the "son". The suffering family that is depicted in this poem is representative of a bigger African family. The repetition of the phrase "when the river" suggests that this unity has survived the trials and tribulations of suffering. Through the poem, the poet propagates, in praises, the importance of building up unity and solidarity in the society.

Serote uses the stream of consciousness technique in this poem. Through this technique, experience is filtered through, first the plaintive consciousness of the poet as a child, and then the revolutionary consciousness of the poet as an adult.



Experience is filtered through first the plaintive consciousness of consciousness in an unorganised manner. This allows the poet to respond in a spontaneous way to his experiences. This technique is in line with orality. Chapman observes the following about Serote's technique in No Baby Must Weep:

...an aspect of modern sensibility has manifested itself as a desire to return the static, print-bound word to the condition of music to set words and syntax free from the confines of "deliberate" arrangement and to recover spontaneity of response...a privileging of the oral impulse of sound elevated above sight-accords well, not only with the ancient African conceptions of poetry, but also with those of the modern social revolutionary seeking to restore vitality and to rescue man from the horror of immutability

The poet finally reaches a point where he can now go it alone, without his mother-figure.

It is out of this moment of resolution, which is symbolised by breaking his dependence on his mother, that hope for freedom can come. The dominant symbolism of the river suggests the moment of the struggle and the attendant feeling until they reached bursting point. This "bursting point" is the communal resolution to take action and out of this emerges shared optimism.

i can say  
one day the world will break

i can say  
one day the laughter will break

i can say  
one day the sky will weep  
i can say one day  
this flower  
will stand in the bright sun (1976:61)

Behold Mama, Flowers (1978) and The Night keeps Winking (1983)

deal with similar thematic concerns and poetic form in the poems shows more similarities than differences.

Behold Mama, Flowers summarises the collective experiences of the black people:

the indignity of defeat, the slaughter of cattle urged by Nongqawuse and the subsequent defeat of the Xhosa near the Fish River, the fall of Shaka and that of Dingane.

.the day when the future turned its back  
on you

...We could not look at the women  
because we knew now that the storm had taken  
our houses. (1978:5)

Although this volume chronicles certain focal points in the struggle against white domination, its central theme is hope for freedom.

i can say  
 your dignity is locked tight in their resting  
 places  
 in the places where you shall drink water  
 around the fire where you shall laugh with your  
 children  
 i can say otherwise  
 your dignity is held tight in the sweating cold  
 hands of death

...

i will say again  
 behold the flowers, they begin to bloom!  
 (1978:61)

This abiding hope is also apparent in The Night keeps Winking.

we must now claim our land, even if we die in the  
 process  
 Our history is a culture of resistance  
 (1983:6)

In the epic poem A Tough Tale, the poet-historian-visionary  
 records the heroic history of the struggle and utters a prophecy  
 of a new era. Although the history of suffering is a "tough  
 tale" to tell, the poet is duty-bound to tell it in order to give  
 hope of the dawn of a new era..

we want the world to know;  
 we have come a long way now,  
 we are not like spotless whiteshirts  
 we are khakhi  
 it is the time, the road, the dust, the heat,  
 the rain and the wind  
 which did it all...  
 we page through each other's faces  
 we read each looking eye.  
 it has taken lives to be able to do so.  
 we move like a tortoise  
 as we journey home.  
 where are we that we are not at home? (1987:7)

Chapman observes that

...the poem in the first part employs  
as a central metaphor, the hole of the  
mine worker, while the second part concludes  
with a theatrical affirmation of what the  
poet-spokesperson, despite the "long journey",  
"the one story", "the tough tale" sees as the  
inevitable future. (1988:30)

So, while the first part of the poem chronicles the history of  
the struggle against apartheid and all its manifestations and  
consequences, the second part engenders hope and optimism.

me I smile my friend  
for in my country  
through struggle, through great pain  
through knowledge  
the masses defend and built the ANC  
the workers defend and built Sactu  
the masses, the workers, the student, the learned  
defend and built the ANC, Sactu, and the SACP  
which  
like the hour-arm on a clock  
takes time to come and go  
we organise ourselves  
and so engrave hope and optimism  
on our future  
(1987:48)

J.J.T. Mkhize observes that in this poem Serote is acting as a  
true historian and spokesperson of the black communal audience.

Serote's record of the struggle in this poem shows the poet's articulation of the aspirations of the oppressed from the inside- he is not only a poet, but also the voice of the working class. (1991:178)

The epic poem, Third World Express, reveals Serote as visionary poet, envisaging national reconciliation and the restoration of African communal values.

In the heart of this time  
it is simple things which are forgotten,  
desecrated  
and defiled  
they are fossilised into past which is out of  
reach

...  
What is it we need!  
a thought to share  
about the bread we broke and together ate  
a song we shared, which left magic in our hearts  
(1992:1)

The apocalyptic voice of freedom is carried through the powerful metaphor of Third World Express which symbolises the collective movement of the people towards freedom.

Towards the end of this poem, the celebrator mode becomes dominant, The poet-sage-seer-oracle celebrates, in praises and through repetition, the advent of freedom:

it is that wind  
 it is that voice buzzing  
 it is whispering and whistling on the wires  
 miles upon miles upon miles  
 on the wires in the wind  
 in the subway track  
 in the rolling road  
 in the not silent bush  
 it is the voice of the noise  
 here it comes  
 the Third World Express  
 they must say, here we go again.  
 (1992:35)

The metaphor of the "Third World Express" is a very broad and all-encompassing one indeed. It is at once a conglomeration of all the struggles of people in Asia, Africa, South America, and more significantly, in South Africa. It encompasses hope for freedom and the reconstruction of human integrity and human dignity.

The "Third World Express" is a symbolisation of the retrieval and affirmation of the humanism embodied in oral tradition.

In his poetry, therefore, Serote reveals clear signs of having been influenced by oral tradition. These include the use of oral poetic techniques in the composition of his poems: free verse lines, direct statement-making and repetition. The roles that he plays through his poetry confirm this influence: historian, social critic, spokesperson of the people, sage, seer and visionary. Like the imbongi through izibongo, Serote seeks to uphold a humanistic tradition and holds up for criticism all those who undermine it.

### 3.5 Mafika Pascal Gwala.

Gwala's own comment on his role as a poet is very significantly with that of the imbongi and the tradition of izibongo.

In all my writing, I've had to strive for a positive negation against the cultural system of the oppressor. I see my role as that of awakening the consciousness, opening out the negative reality of lies and complacency despite desperation encountered. (1989:71)

Gwala is, therefore conscious of his socio-political role as a poet. One particular role that he obviously relishes is that of being the conscience of the nation, the social critic.

In the poem, "In Defense of poetry", Gwala deliberately stretches the usual meaning of "poetic," to include political consciousness; being critical of the present socio-political situation so as to raise consciousness against it. So, in this poem Gwala advocates a democratic and humanistic tradition.

As long as  
this land, my country  
is unpoetic in its doings  
it'll be poetic to disagree  
(1982:10)

J.J.T. Mkhize observes that Gwala's attitude is critical and uncompromising.

History is a very important weapon in Gwala's poems. As a historian he employs it in the service of consciousness - raising. He has a radical view of history in which he sees the African as a protagonist - active in making and recording his own progress in history.

Mkhize puts this assertion aptly:

In Gwala's poetry, the black man is put  
at the centre of things. He is a creator  
or a producer of history. (1991:36)

Gwala regards history as a viable weapon for self-retrieval and psychological liberation.

Black writers and artists had decided to trace  
their lost steps into their blackness so as to  
plod better armed with ideas into the future.  
This tracing of steps unavoidably meant change  
in cultural beliefs and political perspectives.  
It had come down on us, more markedly this  
time, that only the black man can liberate  
himself psychologically. (184:38)

The conception of history as a liberatory force is suggested in Gwala's poems; for instance, "Afrika at piece."

As our heroes die  
As our heroes are born  
Our history is being written  
With the black moments given  
looking the storm in the eye  
our hope is not gone



Our blackman's history  
 is not written in classrooms  
 on wide smooth boards  
 Our history will be written  
 at the factory gates  
 at the unemployment offices  
 in the scorched queues of dying months...

Our history is being written  
 on laps in the bush  
 Or whizzes out of smoking steel mouths  
 Ours history is being written. (1982:44-45)

The poet-historian records the history of the black people and as he writes this history, he exposes aspects of this history that militate against the social ideal: unemployment, apartheid education, discriminatory labour practices and apartheid brutality. He is the custodian of the history of the black people. By recording the struggle against apartheid in the last section of the extract above, the poet engenders a heroic ideology in the process of his conscientisation of black people.

The writing of the history by the poet together with his black communal audience, is an attempt at self-retrieval and self-definition in the face of circumstances that deny them their identity and human dignity.

Through writing African history, the poet recreates a heroic past in order to encourage heroism. This part is a source of satisfaction, pride and positive self-assertion to the Africans. This is evident in the following lines:

Our history is black women marching  
on Pretoria Building  
Shouting  
"Amandla"

Our history is being written  
with indelible blood stains  
with sweeping black souls  
in the streets of John Vorster...

Those 1976 bullets were not sacramental bread  
meant for the faithful  
we've had the Bullet refrain vibrating.  
walls at Silverton...

We shall sing songs Tiro would have love  
Songs MaNgoyi would have sung

We shall sing songs Mtuli kaShezi  
would have composed  
(182:45-46)

Alvarez-Pereyre observes that Gwala exploits African tradition to convey his message more effectively. The ethical attributes of this tradition are used as a viable weapon in the struggle against an oppressive system.

Gwala is also a man who constantly relates the virtues of the past to the present fight, with the aim of making the blackman someone who is proud to be what he is and proud therefore of his national and pan-African heritage... (1983:227)

The poet analyses the status quo for his black communal audience to sensitize it to the circumstances. This is what Gwala has done so successfully in the poem, "Getting Off the Ride".

In the extract below, Gwala exposes and analyses social effects of the system of apartheid. He is more particularly concerned with the effects of this system on the youth.

He identifies with them by using elements of the township language they use.

I'm from those squatted mothers...  
 I'm one of the sons of those black mamas...  
 I'm the black mama's son who vomits  
 on the doorstep of his shack home, pissed with  
 concoction.  
 Because his world and the world  
 in town as separate as mountain ranges  
 and the deep sea.  
 I'm the naked boy  
 running down a muddy road,...  
 I'm the pipeskyf pulling cat  
 Standing in the passage behind Ndlovu's  
 barbershop...  
 I'm the staggering cat on Saturday morning's  
 West street...  
 I'm the bitter son leaning against the lamp post  
 not wishing to go to school...  
 (1977:62-63)

In this poem, Gwala employs a combination of praise song and a musical improvisation of jive rhythms to celebrate his awakening to consciousness of the oppressive situation around him. He is assuming the role of spokesperson of the people by articulating their suffering. He is also a participant in the struggle for liberation. He uses repetition to reinforce his message.

Then I smell the jungle  
 I get the natural smell of the untamed jungle;  
 I'm with the mamba  
 I learn to understand the mamba  
 I become a khunga-khunga man  
 I'm with the Black Ghost of the skom jungle  
 I get the smell of phutu in a ghetto kitchen  
 The ghetto, a jungle I'm learning to know  
 I hear the sounds of Africa drums beating  
 And the sounds of the Voice come;  
 Khunga, Khunga!  
 Untshu, Untshu  
     Funtu, Fintu!  
 Shundu, Shundu!  
     Mojo, Mojo!  
 O---hhhhhhhhhhmmmm!!!

This improvised song is a combination of a praise song and a battle song is designed to mobilised the black people into action. This is observed by Michael Chapman:

...the poet is compelled to break out of privacy into a field of collective experience. By "naming" in public invocation, by locating himself solidly within the sphere of identifiable Black Experience, by chronicling the times and enunciating a program of consciousness-raising, the poet-spokesman creates a voice that does not remain with the individual, but becomes communal, striving to make speakers of the audience...(1984:230)

The observation is clearly evidenced where the poet makes a call and the audience responds in a style reminiscent of the imbongi and izibongo in oral traditional literature.

The poet makes the community participate as "speakers".

I'm the lonely poet  
 who trudges the township's ghetto passages  
 pursuing the light,  
 The light that can only come through a totality  
 of change:  
 Change in minds, change  
 Change in social standings, change  
 Change in means of living, change  
 Change in dreams and hopes, change  
 (1977:64)

"Getting Off the Ride" is a critique of the oppressive system whose actions are against social norms and values and therefore undermine African humanism. This is consonant with the conscience of the nation, praising those who respect humanism and ridiculing those who violate it:

When I dance to Miriam Makeba  
 Miriam Makeba's "Jol" "inkomo" that brings back  
 the proud and angry past of my ancestors  
 by whom tribe did not be taken for nation;  
 I hate this ride.  
 When I learn no Latin from faked classics  
 When 2x2 economics shows me it's part of the  
     trick-teaching me how to starve  
 When Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola ads, all the sweets  
 things are giving me wind in the belly...  
 (1977:66)

The poem suggests a refusal to be judged according to western values. It also implies a self-discovery and a determination to achieve self-definition. The thematic concerns of this poem are in-keeping with the African social ideal and uphold African humanism by offering a critique of the oppressive system that militates against the affirmation of human worth and dignity.

I ask again, What is Black?  
 Black is when you get off the ride.  
 Black is point of self realisation  
 Black is point of new reason  
 Black is point of: NO NATIONAL DECEPTION!  
 Black is point of determined stand  
 Black is point of TO BE OR NOT TO BE for blacks  
 Black is point of RIGHT ON!  
 (1977:66-67)

Gwala is very critical of western civilisation as embodied in technological advancements.

As man advances technologically, he degenerates spiritually.

Gwala is in support of a humanistic ideology as espoused in African oral traditions.

Man has been to the moon  
 spreading umbilical concepts  
 of electronics and space radiation  
 fast breeding robot men;  
 computers have given man  
 a faded character  
 - all part of cancer identity  
 in ugly mirth we rejoice

over every technological success  
 and call it progress  
 Thus welcoming  
 the Age of the Plastic Man  
 (1982:78)

Thengani H. Ngwenya argues that Gwala sees Western values as

...lacking authenticity...  
 ...sham and bogus...  
 (1992:45)

Gwala evokes oral traditional culture with its humanistic values in the service of the struggle for freedom. This is evident in the poem, "Worlds to a Mother."

Mother,  
 the feed-in of the blues has saved us;  
 Your Afrika blues are not addicted  
 to lies and prejudice  
 Mother,  
 they lied to me about Jesus  
 about brotherly love and salvation  
 They lied to me about the biblical pierce.  
 (1982:14)

Ngwenya argues that in this poem, Gwala is not merely making an empty, romantic journey into the past. On the contrary it is a profound attempt at self-retrieval through a recreation of the values embodied in oral tradition. He is acting as the custodian of the social ethos which is embodied in traditional culture.

Gwala's evocation of the myth of Mother Africa is never unduly nostalgic, as is usually the case with African poetry that advocates a "return to glorious past". Instead, he uses the ethical attributed associated with Mother African to expose the moral perversion that he sees as the inherent quality of western culture. (1992:45)

Gwala then assumes the role of sage, seer and oracle. In the poem, "There is...", Gwala celebrates the resilience of the black people and ends the poem on a tone of hope for a new order.

Undeniably there is.

There is a truth  
with rings wider than a poet's eye

There is a battling nature  
Now threatened by pollution  
and sprawling cities

There is, continually  
Nature's freedom  
despite the moon landings  
despite the heart transplants

There is, with all the odds against  
a will to watch a child grow  
Even if it is in littered street  
Or in a shack where rain pours

There is laughter  
brimful with the turbulence of man



There is a hope  
 fanned by endless zeal  
 decisive against the spectre of Sharpeville  
 hardened by the tears of Soweto  
 (1982:1)

Gwala is extremely critical, to the point of cynicism, of technological advancement which, in the above extract, is set in contrast to the appalling social problems like health hazards, living conditions in the slums, and others. However, despite his apparent cynicism, there is genuine hope for the future, hope for freedom.

Gwala has clearly been influenced by oral tradition in his poetry. He assumes roles akin to those played by the imbongi in oral traditional literature. He exploits oral traditional poetic techniques in the composition of his poetry in order to convey his message to the black communal audience more effectively. The most dominant oral technique that he uses is repetition. This is very effective in reinforcing the message of the poem and instilling sense of urgency into it. Ngwenya makes the following observation.

Besides his vibrant use of language registers, parallelism in order to enhance the force of his poetry, so that technique serves the functional purpose of reinforcing the urgency of his social message. (1992:47)

Improvisation and song constitute another device that Gwala uses very effectively in his poems. It is used to give weight to his thematic concerns. He combines jive and blues rhythms with traditional African music in his affirmation of the African identity and dignity.

### 3.6 Ingoapele Madingoane.

On the outside of the back cover of Madingoane's Africa my beginning are the words:

Those conditions of life which every fair and honest human being can describe without a pause inspired me to write the epic "black trial" (1979)

The message of "black trial" is filtered through the suffering consciousness of black people. This is why there is spontaneous and fugue - like chanting of the message of the poem.

In "black trial", Madingoane has exploited the African epic genre to dramatise the struggle of the black people against oppression. However, "black trial" is not a classical African epic involving a hero of great stature, remote in time and place, nor does it deal with legendary or traditional material, but it is a social epic - a dramatisation of the struggle of the black community and its projected future goals.

This observation is made by Msimang.

The term "epic" - as applied to "black trial" - most accurately used in its Brechtian sense - its focus not on a remote past, but on the socio-political present... (1982:204)

Since "black trial" is a contemporary social epic focusing on the socio-political situation, Madingoane uses it to raise the consciousness of the people to the socio-political order of the time. He is acting as a social critic - a role akin to that of the imbongi in oral traditional literature. Assuming this role, Madingoane analyses the situation in order to mould people's response to it. He also warns people against anti-social behaviour, like hatred. Like the imbongi, he becomes the communal voice.

though man inflicted his grievances  
on me  
and turned them into this bitterness  
that i so resent keep me from hate  
for if i hate  
i will fall into the valley of hopelessness  
and drown like  
man  
hater of himself  
in this lagoon of  
man hate man  
(1979:1)

The poet-social critic is completely appalled by the hatred which is the product of oppression. Like the imbongi he propagates humanistic values like love and peace so as to affirm the dignity and integrity of the oppressed.

oh how i wish that man  
could discover himself  
and let peace of mind  
flow  
like the original  
river of love the fellow man  
as thou lovest thyself  
(1979:3)

The poet sees hope of traditional regeneration in the ancestors. Ancestors represent the nation's past and they are the embodiment of culture. They give direction to the future. Through them the past and the future mingle. The poet seeks self-affirmation in his traditional culture.

thus have I to attend to the needs  
of my ancestors  
send back what is theirs  
in a cloud of incense  
and beg them a chance  
to prove my belief  
in me as man and africa my mother  
(1979:5)

In composing this poem, Madingoane has been immensely influenced by oral tradition.

This is seen in the high status he accords to ancestors. He considers them a source of light that nation can have recourse to in order to resolve the dilemmas of present day existence.

Madingoane employs a combination of oral techniques to dramatise his encounter with the ancestors. These techniques are: dramatic dialogue, call and response, war song, and ritualistic incantation. ?? I Suggest: All these techniques of "black trial /six" its resounding impact.

These sections seem solemn pieces of advice, praise verses and call to war, all at once.

They are very effective in propagating militancy among the oppressed people.

leap high deprived soul  
move faster than yesteryear  
and climb the freedom wagon  
go man go

don't crawl to your future  
you are bound to be brave  
reach your goal blackman  
stand up man stand up and  
go man go  
blackman go

drag it off brother man  
 off your back it ain't yours  
 break this damn sucker's chain  
 drop the burden from your shoulders  
 move on brother go  
go man go  
blackman go

leap higher deprived son  
 jump the lagoon of dark despair  
 walk to the point of salvation.  
 blow the horn raise the alarm  
 beat the drum and let them dance  
go man go  
blackman go

Improvisation and song play a great role in lending this extract its celebratory tone. This musical improvisation is evident in the repetition of the incantatory praise and battle song combination: "go man go/ blackman go". This is a celebration of the newly acquired consciousness, the resilience of the black people, a prayer for courage and call to battle.

Msimang observes that

What is of particular interest in this extract is the sudden change of rhythm as the ancestors talk back to the poet. It is very much reminiscent of the dramatic scene during the process of drumming...  
 One cannot miss the solemnness of a man in prayer. (1982:208-209)

Sometimes the poet returns to the past and assumes the role of historian of the black community. The poet "names" the heroes of Africa to restore pride in the motherland and to engender a heroic ideology in the fight against oppression.

towering high over horizons so silent  
 beneath you lie badimo beso giants  
                   shaka africa's warrior  
                   martyrs  
                   moshoeshoe from the mountain kingdom  
                   christians of africa  
                   khama the great  
                   (1979:31)

The poet's pride in his Africanness permeates the poem. He identifies completely with Africa and is very proud to be African. Through this pride, he wants to encourage pride in African culture among black people. African culture and mythology are symbolised by "ogun abibiman", a god from Yoruba mythology. Repetition, parallelism and linking are used to convey this message of pride in Africa more effectively

i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 i am the blazing desert yonder  
 a tall proud grain amidst the sand  
 egypt my head the Nile my oasis  
 flow on Nile flow on my lifeblood  
 i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 I am man  
ogun's image  
 mad from the soil  
abibiman  
 thus  
 I talk about me  
 for  
 I am africa  
 (1979:19)

The poet's union with his father is symbolic of the unity and solidarity among the black people of Africa and those of South Africa in particular. Hope for the realisation of the dream of freedom lies in this unity and solidarity. This is celebrated through repetition and linking:

hail ogun  
 hail abibiman  
 land of my sons  
 sons of my soil  
 bed of my roots  
 roots of man  
 man son of africa  
 I want you  
 back  
 back home in africa (1979:20)



The woman motif is very dominant in "black trial".. The motif, in

one instance, symbolises African beauty, hope for freedom as well as Africa itself.

say how beautiful  
run the rows  
of your plaited hair  
mosadi      hee mosadi

mosadi      say how smart  
how womanly is the fold  
is sefaga seo around your neck  
of your doek      mosadi

mosadi      hee mosadi      say what a counsellor  
is that african emblem  
on your dress      mosadi  
(1979:29)

Then the poet-historian, in true epic fashion, chronicles the struggles of other African countries and this is used as a source of inspiration for the black people of South Africa in their own struggle against oppression. These struggles are used to urge the black people of South Africa to pick up the cudgels in the struggle for liberation. This is evident in "Africa my beginning:"

viva frelimo  
africa my beginning  
and africa my ending

I remember ja toivo  
 namibia is not lost  
 you might as well know germany  
 is no more in  
africa my beginning  
and africa my ending

azania here I come  
 from apartheid in tatters  
 in the land of sorrow  
 from that marathon bondage  
 the sharpeville massacre  
 the flames of soweto  
 i was born there  
 i will die there  
 in

africa my beginning  
and africa my ending  
 (1979:34)

The repetition of "africa my beginning / and africa my ending" encapsulates the poet's sense of organic unity with Africa.

Madingoane's vision in "black trial" is that of freedom for the oppressed black people, their reintegration into African culture and their organic unity with Africa. In the poem, he acts as an exponent of African tradition. He advocates an Afro-centric modernity.

Madingoane has successfully exploited the African epic genre in the service of the struggle against oppression to assert the dignity and identity of the African people, so as to harness heroism and to raise the consciousness of the African people of South Africa in relation to "those conditions of life which every fair and honest human being can describe without a pause".

### 3.7 Mzwakhe Mbuli

Mbuli has published one collection of poems, Before Dawn (1989) and five audio-cassettes: "Before Dawn", "Change is Pain", "Resistance is Defense", "Africa" and "Izigi".

Mbuli's poetry is similar of the poetry already discussed in terms of its thematic concerns and the use of oral techniques like repetition, parallelism and linking.

It is important to note that Mbuli's poetry is primarily performance poetry. This means that, unlike the poetry discussed so far, Mbuli's poetry is composed in order to be recited and listened to and not primarily to be read. The second important point is that his poetry is mostly accompanied by music.

Mbuli is the finest contemporary practitioner of oral poetry. This observation is very important because it presupposes that we should consider extralinguistic features as well in our criticism of his poetry. These features include the gestural (the clenched fist, the index finger pointing of the floor, the shooting act) as well as the toyi-toyi dance -all to which add to the meaning.

Other-techniques typical of Mbuli's poetry are chants, the call and response, lilting, incantation, declamation over the backdrop of music, name calling, as well as what Cronin quoting Ong, calls "agonistically -toned features" (1989:43)

Cronin adds some more points that should be taken into account in the criticism of Mbuli's poetry:

...this is a poetry that can only be understood and analysed in its relationship to a range of traditional and contemporary oral and verbal practices: songs, chants, slogans, funeral orations, political speeches, sermons and graffiti. (1989:35)

The roles that Mbuli plays through his poetry are similar to those played by imbongi in oral traditional literature. In the poem "Why Tricks Not Solutions" he identifies himself as the spokesperson of the people. As such, he upholds what affirms the social ethos and criticises whatever militates against it. Like the imbongi, he is the conscience of the nation and the custodian of truth in society:

I am the conscience of the nation  
 I and money do not mix  
 I and the truth do not collide;  
 Inside me the spirit of residence never  
 diminishes.  
 (1989:77)

Through his role as the conscience of the nation, he advocate resistance to the anti - social actions of the apartheid regime.

Mbuli the social critic also reveals himself as a sage, seer and oracle. In this role, the poet analyses the status quo in the society and makes predictions. He identifies with a higher power that is capable of protecting him from the sinister forces of the oppressor. This is ancestral power linked to that of

Mvelingqangi (God) who is the ultimate power that controls everything.

I am a qualified graduate  
 From the University of wisdom,  
 I am the think tank;  
 Not from the jumble sale of wrong ideas.

Who can understand my inner voice of reason?  
 Who can understand my poetic-prophetic spirit  
 given?  
 And therefore cannot be destroyed  
 Advantageously I am being remote - controlled;  
 By human - made designs.  
 (1989:77)

In so far Mbuli believes in ancestral power and the power of Mvelingqangi to control things ("I am being remote - controlled"), he is an exponent of African tradition. Mbuli's voice rings with authority emanating as it does from the backdrop of an ancestral voice, for Jingles Makgothi has now assumed the status of an ancestor since he has approximated the social ideal. This is clear in what follows:

Dynamite at Cosatu House;  
 Dynamite at Khotso House;  
 Dynamite at Khanya House;  
 Dynamite at Mzwake House;  
 "No! The truth is yet to come";  
 Exclaimed the late Alex poet Jingles Makgothi.  
 (1989:77)

The first three buildings houses prominent anti-apartheid organisations (COSATU, SACC, SACBC), but the fourth one is the poet's house. This shows how much the South African Police feared Mbuli and the power of his poetry.

It is important to add that when Mzwakhe performs this poem, he starts it odd with a steady, slow voice but when he reaches the last four sections, the voice gathers both volume and speed, giving the prophecy a sense of urgency.

Another important and interesting point to note is that this poem is performed to musical accompaniment. This makes the poem very solemn.

Mbuli is very conscious of the influence of oral tradition on his poetry. In fact, he deliberately and self-consciously sets out to champion this tradition:

The African poetic tradition is oral. (1989:78)  
Mbuli earnestly believes in the resilience, heroism, collective power and ultimate invincibility of the black people. This is encapsulated in the symbolism of "crocodile".

The people are like crocodiles in the river;  
And no one can fight crocodile inside the river;  
South Africa, why therefore, buy time?  
When crocodiles are against you;  
Why give chase to lizards?  
When crocodiles are against you.  
(1989:78)

Like the imbongi, Mbuli sometimes plays the role of historian of the nation. Assuming this role, he records the significant historical events of the nation and analyses their socio-political significance.

The finest example of this historical consciousness is the poem "Kuse Sandlwana".

This poem recounts the Anglo-Zulu war battle of 1879 in which the Zulu army defeated the mighty and hitherto invincible British army. This poem is used by the poet to instill pride in the peoples as well as to harness heroism.

In the poem I] uses the African oral literacy technique of ukulanda umlando (chronicling of history). Through this technique, history is told in the present tense as well as the past to give it a lively flavour and to recreate the war scene. The poet begins by setting the mood of the day:

Kuse Sandlwana Ngonyaka ka 1878  
Lapho kwaduka khona uthuli;  
Kuse Sandlwana lapho ekaCetshwayo no Battle Frere  
Yatholana phezulu;  
Kuse Sandlwana lapho yaqhudelana khona.

Here is my English version of these lines:

Is it at Sandlwana in the year 1897;  
Where dust was stirred  
It is at Sandlwana where the armies of  
Cetshwayo and Battle Frere clashed;  
It is at Sandlwana where they competed.



The poet by no means considers war a positive and ethically good thing. On the contrary, it is anti-social and by its nature, life-denying. At the same time, he considers it a heroic option in the face of circumstances that deny people their dignity. War is one option through which people which people can restore what has been taken away from them.

Kuse Sandlwana lapho kwaphogeka khona umlando;  
 UZulu wagana izozo gede wagoma ukufa;  
 Uzule wangoba ecosha umNgise ngezikhali;  
 Maye isibindi uyabulala, Maye sibindi uyaphilisa.

Kuse Sandlwana lapho indelelo no kweyisa  
 Kwaletha usizi nezinyembezi  
 Kwadala ukuchitheka kwegazi;  
 Kwasala izintandane, kwasala abafelokazi.  
 (1989:79)

This may be translated into English as follows:

It is at Sandlwana where history was made;  
 The Zulu people go angry and choose death;  
 The Zulu people defeated the English at war;  
 Courage kills, courage gives life.

It is at Sandlwana where rudeness  
 Brought sorrow and tears  
 Caused the shedding of blood;  
 Breeding orphans and widows.

Mbuli then uses war cries and slogans to dramatise the dramatise the battle scene: "Uyadela wena osulapho" (Happy are you who have reached the enemy).

This slogan dramatises the heroism of the Zulu people. It is meant to arouse usuiga (inspiration) to the fight. The victory of the army is dramatised in the victory slogan:

Ngadla Shaqa! Ngadla Shaqa! Ngadla Shaqa!  
Mabaye abathakathi. (1989:80)

In English the victory slogan would be as follows:

I've got him! I've got him! I've got him!  
kill the witches.

This slogan is meant to give hope for victory to the present society's struggle against oppression.

Another example of a poem where Mbuli plays the role of historian is "Education Hijack." In this poem he first traces the history of Bantu Education:

In 1953 Dr Einselen;  
In 1953 Dr Verwoed;  
Together introduced Bantu Education;  
And this was the brainchild of the regime in  
power;  
Disguised through these philosophers;  
And since that era, education remained in crisis.  
(1989:44)

The poet does not only trace the history of Bantu Education; he also analyses its hidden intentions. He decides that its intentions are sinister and, therefore, anti-social. This is suggested through the metaphor of "poison".

In terms of toxicology;  
The science of poison;  
Bantu Education was poisonous;  
Like F-diet for Africans in poison.  
This system was for Africans only;  
Since oppression cannot be reformed;  
New labels and new names;  
Do not remove the poison.  
(1989:44)

Name - calling is a very important aspect of Mbuli's poetry. It reveals the anger of the poet and the people of the anti-social behaviour at the powers -that-be. It reveals his ultimate rejection of the distorted values of the oppressors and positive assertion of alternative values that uphold the social ethos.

Talk to me nor more;  
You makers of this system;  
Talk to me no more;  
You architects of this philosophy;  
Apartheid the philosophy of fear;  
Talk to me no more;  
You designers of this academic holocaust.

Talk to me at last  
About education charter campaign;  
Yes, talk to me only;  
About the people's education for all.  
(1989:45)

The repetition of "Talk to me no more" is an absolute rejection of the false education offered to be the people by the oppressors. The power of repetition as a poetic device is beautifully illustrated here.

Celebration is another salient feature of Mbuli's poetry. This is a direct influence from izibongo where the imbongi celebrates those events in society which uphold the social ethos and, therefore, are socially significant. The celebratory mode is through the music of celebration as well as through ululation and other ecstatic noises. A good example of this is the poem, "The Nobel Awards". This poem is a celebration of efforts towards the achievement of peace in South Africa which have gained international recognition.

The poet regards peace as a noble virtue, a fulfilling experience and a reward for the struggle for justice.

Peace is universal;  
Peace is divine;  
When people pursue a noble goal;  
To be attained;  
Regardless of painful dimensional circumstances.

Peace is like a crown;  
Peace is never a fraction;  
Neither half nor quarter.

In a heroic struggle;  
A struggle for total emancipation;  
Nobel Awards are inevitable;  
Yes, international solidarity is inevitable  
(1989:52)

The poet praises the efforts of those who work for peaceful transformation in order to encourage the people to strive for peace in their struggle for freedom. The Nobel Awards that have been given to South Africans are a sign of recognition of the peaceful efforts of these people. Awards are also a symbol of solidarity.

The poet is aware that complete peace is impossible under oppressive conditions:

Peace cannot be;  
 So long as injustice prevails;  
 Peace cannot be,  
 When destruction of family life continues.

Peace cannot be;  
 When conditions that give rise to hatred and  
                   bitterness are regarded as God-given;  
 Peace cannot be;  
 So long as apartheid remains vicious and alive.  
 (1989:52)

In spite of the conditions that militate against peace the poet propagates, in praises, a peaceful struggle against apartheid.

The salient poetic techniques that are used to great effect in this poem are: declamation to the backdrop of music, parallelism, linking, repetition, ululation and ecstatic noises.

All these devices lend the poem its celebratory tone.

Another poem in which Mbuli combines various techniques to great effect is "Soul".

This poem recounts, in the traditional epic poem, the exploit of a hero of stature who has died tragically. He died in prison and then disappeared without trace. While the people wait for inquiries to find out what happened, the soul is tormented and lives in a state akin to the Christian limbo. The poet informs the nation what happened:

Listen to my cry,  
In life situation I was human;  
But now I wonder in sorrow;  
I'm the soul with no landing;  
I was moved where you are;  
from home to prison;  
And from prison to space;  
When I am gone to a region of no return;  
You wait for internal enquiry;  
I am the soul gone, gone forever.  
(1989:58)

This is a heroic voice carried through by the ancestral voice of lament for the hero's death which still remains mysterious. It is an ancestral voice because it is a voice of a hero who died in jail: someone who has approximated the social ideal and therefore deserves a higher status. The mysterious nature of the voice bears witness to the fact that is indeed an ancestral voice:

Perhaps you wonder about me;  
 I am like a wind in the wilderness;  
 Since you are mortal;  
 You cannot see me;  
 Since you are mortal;  
 You cannot feel me nor touch me;  
 I am invisible, I am the soul;  
 I am soul in agony;  
 I am the soul in perpetuity  
 (1989:58)

The ancestral voice gives the poem a resonance that is heightened and spiritual, emanating as it does from an ancestor who is himself a victim of the sanctioned murder that characterised apartheid.

In live performances as well as on cassette, the poem is accompanied by hummed song which is very reminiscent of a traditional African dirge; here it is recreated within the context of the oppressive apartheid system to give utterance to the plaintive voice of the African masses. The brutality of the system is revealed in very precise images:

You wonder, you remember;  
 You recall our last day of meeting;  
 Yes, I was in prison;  
 I attempted an escape;  
 For I could not take it any longer;  
 However, I was compelled to escape my own body;  
 I am the soul of a fiend you knew;  
 My blood stains abide indelible on the prison walls;  
 And my testimony bears no witness of justice.  
 (1989:58)

This poem has very profound religious overtones from an African perspective. It symbolises a desecration of a ritualistically divine process death. The ancestral voice is pleading for the redress of this anti-social behaviour. He wishes to be reintegrated and reaffiliated into African society as a legitimate ancestor. This can only be done through a ritualistic feast of return (ukubuyisa)

I am where I am;  
 for bullets that keyholed my bones;  
 Today you talk of disappearance;  
 Hence I crossed the border;  
 From life to death;  
 And from death to space  
 I wonder for my landing;  
 I grieve for my designation;  
 No trace, no grave;  
 Dig me out of this pit so to rest;  
 For I am the soul in perpetuity.  
 (1989:59)

In this poem, Mbuli uses the medium of the ancestral voice to reveal the atrocities apartheid. The omniscient ancestral voice declaims to a hummed dirge in the background.

It is a dramatisation of the suffering through which those who fought against apartheid went.



### 3.8 Mi Hlatshwayo

Hlatshwayo represents the poetry of the labour movement. The function of this poetry lends the oral tradition, and more specifically izibongo, a major new influence. The aim of this the poet is to propagates, in praises, a heroic ideology in order to mobilize the workers into picking up the cudgels on their struggle for better deal for themselves. Ari Sitas makes this assumption about the poetry of the labour movement.

This poetry is kinetic; it sets out mobilise people; and the whole context of performance is vital to this function.  
(1989:64)

The labour movement poet plays similar roles to those played by the imbongi. Like the imbongi, he acts a repository for popular memory and consciousness by recording the history of the struggles of the workers. Mi Hlatshwayo, as cited by Moses Ngaosheng,

...as cultural activists we want to record our own history- the history of the worker's struggle.  
(1989:36)

The imbongi of the labour movement also acts as the conscience of the people, praising whatever upholds the social ethos and criticising anything that goes against it.

This kind of poetry is in a sense propagandist because it upholds and perpetuates what is socially acceptable while discouraging what is socially unacceptable. This observation is made by Ari Sitas:

...they are, in a particular praise poets of the labour movement, praising and criticising as the form demands... it is almost a metonymic, to use the jargon, assumption of the role.  
(1989:63)

The poetry of the labour movement in general, and that of Hlatshwayo in particular, does not only serve the purpose of mobilising people, recording the history of the labour movement, offering a socio-political critique, but also has an apocalyptic purpose: giving a people-centered vision of the future. Mi Hlatshwayo himself, as cited by Moses Ngoasheng asserts that the importance of working class culture is

...to make the vision of a new South Africa which will not know oppression and exploitation.  
(1989:37)

The influence of izibongo on Hlatshwayo's poetry is very apparent as I will show by examining some of his poems. Hlatshwayo himself suggests that in his writing he wanted to use the izibongo genre in the service of the worker's struggles. He finds izibongo a viable medium for the articulation of the aspirations of the workers.

It was here, amid the spontaneous singing which marked all worker gatherings, that I saw the possibilities of refashioning the struggles of workers. (1989:42)

Ari Sitas points out that some of the oral features suffer as a result of translation.

However, some are still evident.

The poem "The Black Mamba Rises" shows numerous borrowings from izibongo. This poem uses images from the animal world, images of a kind that are dominant in izibongo.

One particular image that is often used by izibongo is that of a mamba. This is used times in this poem:

The Black mamba that shelters in the songs  
Yet others shelter in the trees!

The old mamba that woke up early in the  
Morning at St Antony's  
Let's sit down and talk, he  
Now says.

Why tease the mamba in its  
Century old sleep? (1986:30)

The mamba, as the king of snakes, commands authority and respect.

It is powerful and in fact invincible.

However, the mamba that symbolises Dunlop workers in this case is a different one, a peaceful one; but it has the potential to fight and conquer if the situation demands that it does so. It is indeed very dangerous. It only "rises" because the powers-that-be are teasing it. It has been subjected to suffering. That is why it is now angry and ready to strike. Nonetheless, it does not discriminate on the basis of race:

The mamba that knows no  
colour...  
(1986:33)

This "mamba" is the resounding voice of the labour movement; it is the wagging finger of warning to the oppressor; it is the power of the workers and their promise of victory.

Another salient image in izibongo is that of a buffalo. This image suggests strength, resilience and fighting spirit. It is used here to urge workers into action. There are various instances in which this image is used in the poem, e.g.

You black buffalo  
Black yet with tasty meat,  
The buffalo that turns the  
Foreigners' language into,  
Confusion...  
(1986:31)

In this extract, the union is seen as an intellectual base for workers through which they sow confusion within the ranks of the oppressor. The image of the buffalo is used to instill a sense of pride in the black worker. It is also used to reveal the elusiveness of the worker activists. It symbolises the collective power of the worker to transform the situation:

You powerful black buffalo,  
Powerful with slippery body,  
The buffalo that pushed men  
into the forest  
In bewilderment the police  
Stood with their mouths open  
(1986:32)

The resilience of the workers is further suggested by the image of the dangabane weed.

This image is used very widely in izibongo to suggest resilience.

Consider, for instance the following line from izibongo

ZikaDingiswayo:

Umaf'avuke Njengendangabane,  
(1960:5)

This may be translated as

The one who dies and resurrects like a dangabane  
flower

Hlatshwayo uses this image in similar fashion in the poem "The Black Mamba Rises."

Dying and resurrecting like  
A dangabane flower...  
(1986:30)

The image of a spear is another important image borrowed from izibongo and used in this poem. This image is often used by the imbongi when he chronicles the conquest of the king. Consider the following line from Izibongo ZikaShaka:

Inyathi ejame ngomkhonto phezu koMzivubu,  
(1960:22)

In English it may be as follows:

The buffalo that stood with a spear over the  
Umzimvubu river.

In "The Black Mamba Rises" image of a spear is used in a manner very similar to izibongo. It is used to declaim the victories of the labour movement:

Who stabs an old man and]  
A young man alike,  
Using the same spear  
Who stabs a man's bone  
Inflicting pain in the heart.  
(1986:30)

The collective voice of the workers is seen by the poet as a victory on its own. This "spear" is used as a metaphor for this collective voice:

The spear that thundered at  
Dawn at St. Anthony's  
The spear that devoured the father and the sons  
And the daughters  
Devouring them whilst singing  
Yet the songs were just a decoy.  
(1989:31)

Hlatshwayo combines izihasho with izibongo to give the poem a tone that is both endearing and satirical, as in the extract below:

Ngudungudu, the woman  
Who married without any  
Lobolo,  
Busy boiling foreigners'  
Pots  
Yet yours are lying cold  
(1986:29)

The word "Ngudungudu" sounds like part of izihasho of the labour movement and gives the poem an endearing tone which is downplayed

by the satirical comment that follows.

The worker has given himself free of charge to the employer to increase the employer's wealth while his own pockets remain empty.

Hlatshwayo sometimes uses popular izihasho to reveal certain aspects of the labour movement; like the following:

Even Sikhumba - the leather that  
Overcomes the tanners  
(1986:30)

This is a comment on the resilience of the labour movement. It is also a comment on the fighting spirit of the workers.

Another oral technique characteristics izibongo that is used in Hlatshwayo's poetry is formulaic language. The language is borrowed from izibongo and can easily be traced as, for instance, the following:

There were echoes of approval there on the  
TV at Auckland Park Saying:  
Never again shall it retrieve  
Never again shall it return  
Yet it was beginning to tower with rage  
(1986:31)

This extract dramatizes the conviction of the powers-that-be that the labour movement will never be powerful; they are hardly aware of its prodigious growth. This formula can be traced to izibongo ZikaShaka.



Uteku Lwabafazi bakwaNomgabi;  
 Betekula behlez'emlovini;  
 Beth'uShaka kayikubusa,  
 Kayikubankosi,  
 Kant' ilaph'ezonethezeka.  
 (1960:20)

In English this section might be as follows:

The jest of the women of Nomgabi,  
 Jestng while enjoying the sun,  
 Saying Shaka shall never rule,  
 Shall never be king,  
 Yet he was beginning to flourish.

Another example of formulaic language that has been borrowed directly from izibongo is the following

Praise poets, messengers  
 Observers,  
 Run in all directions,  
 Stand on top of the mountains,  
 Report to Botha in Pretoria  
 Report to our heroes on the  
 Island,  
 Report to the angels in your  
 Prayers,  
 Say unto them-here is a  
 Flood of workers,  
 The employers have done what  
 Ought not be.  
 (1986:32-3)

This is a way of spreading the message of the labour movement through traditional methods of sending messengers all over the land to proclaim the message of resistance to oppression. This is a tactic characteristic of izibongo, as we find in Izibongo ZikaDinizulu

Gijimani Ngazo zonk' izndlela,  
 Niyobikel' abakwaSidladla nantini.  
 Nabakwa Vuma,  
 Nith' amanz' oMkhuze Ningawaphuzi,  
 Ngob' uDinizul' indab' uyenzile.  
 (1960:108)

In English this extract might be as follows:

Run in all directions  
 Report to the people of Sidladla and Ntini.  
 And the Vuma people.  
 Say unto them - Don't drink the water of  
 Mkhuze river,  
 Because Dinizulu has done what  
 Ought not to be.

So, the poem "The Black Mamba Rises" is written in tribute to the workers but in the tradition of izibongo.

Musical improvisation is another oral technique that Hlatshwayo employs to very great effect in his poetry. Jessica Sherman has written about the importance of songs in African culture. She points out that songs were (and to some extent still are) sung at home as well as at occasions where the community assembled. She observes further that songs are still important today:

Today workers sing about their hardships  
and victories as before.  
(1989:83)

This musical improvisation is evident in the poem, "Worker's" "Lamentation for Ancient Africa". In this poem, the poet grieves for ancient and wishes her to be revived.

This is an attempt to redeploy African values in the service of the struggle for liberation and to use them as a source of hope for the workers. The song of lament is evident in the following extract from the poem:

Recall  
Marriage ceremonies  
Recall in our struggles  
That spirit  
When we were a community of concern  
On in grief  
One in joy  
Maye!  
Maye Africa!     (1986:36)

Repetition is a salient oral technique that is employed very extensively in this poem.

Repetition is a very powerful oral feature used to reinforce the central message of the poem. The poem reveals an intense longing for a liberated Africa.

Real Africa arise  
 From: the mudpacks in our imijondolo  
 From: the miners' sweat in the bowels  
 Of the earth  
 From: our crowded dawn trains  
 From: the yawning queues of the unemployed  
 At the labour offices  
 Can the real Africa  
 Resurface?  
 (1986:37)

Hlatshwayo uses political slogans very economically to reinforce the central message of the poem. A good example of this is:

Mama iAfrica return  
 Mayibuye iAfrica  
 Resurface.  
 (1986:34)

The slogan "Mayibuye iAfrica" has often been used in political meetings and rallies to mobilise people into action. Hlatshwayo uses it in this poem to mobilise workers to play an active role in the struggle for liberation. The slogan is also important because in it is encapsulated the ultimate dream of the liberation movement: to reclaim what rightfully belongs to the people.

It would appear that the main function of Hlatshwayo's poetry is to persuade the workers to participate more actively in the struggle for liberation. He uses the history of the struggle as an instrument to inspire the workers into fighting for freedom. He selects those aspects of this history that are heroic in order to achieve his purpose. A good example of this is one of his poems "Phangisa Msebenzi" which has not translated into English. I have translated the sections I quote for the readers' convenience. Translated into English, the title means "Hurry up, Worker".

Msebenzi uyayibona nje lenkundu  
 Amadoda Nabafazi base Africa  
 Isibaphendule abantwana abakhasayo  
 Yebo siluzalo luka ma-Ngoyi  
 Abacindezeli bethu abawuhloniphi  
 Umlando wobughawo  
 (Oliphant, 1991:39)

Worker! Do you realise the mist of confusion?  
 Men and women of Africa  
 Have become infants,  
 Yes, we are the descendants of B.J. Marks,  
 The descendants do not respect  
 The heroic history of the oppressed.

History is used to conscientise and mobilise workers into taking an active part in the struggle for better life.

Repetition is used very effectively to reinforce the message of the urgency of the need to achieve freedom. This sense of urgency is very effectively conveyed in.

Phangisa msebenzi  
 Phangisa dadewethu  
 Phangisa mfowethu  
 Msebenzi lelihora ngelakho  
 (1991:39)

Hurry up, worker  
 Hurry up, sister  
 Hurry up, brother  
 This hour is yours.

The poetry of Hlatshwayo, therefore, reveals a very high level of indebtedness to oral tradition in general and izibongo in particular. It reveals liberal borrowing from izibongo of kings like Shaka, Dingane and Dinizulu. Hlatshwayo has borrowed images, techniques and language from izibongo of kings in the service of the workers' struggles. He very successfully combines izihasho, political slogans and traditional and political songs in his poems to achieve his purpose of conscientising and mobilising workers in their struggle for liberation.

#### Chapter 4: Conclusion.

#### Towards a Relevant Aesthetic, The Case for an Alternative Approach.

The previous chapter has suggested that any criticism of blacks South African poetry in English that does not take into account the influence of oral tradition on this poetry, is sadly deficient. An alternative critical framework needs to be forged that will take into account the dominant force at work in the literary production of black South African poets who write in English.

This thesis argues that oral tradition has a very important influence on the writings of these writers. Oral traditional literacy techniques have been re-established and refashioned in the service of conscientisation and mobilisation of the black people.

Even though the majority of the poets dealt with in this study are townbred, they nevertheless carry within them a knowledge of the traditional role of the artist in African society. The modern South African poets have exploited this role in the service of their society's struggles. Jane Watts observes:

Wise authors will attempt to preserve such of the old culture as can be integrated into the new culture they are attempting to forge. They will act as sympathizers, building upon those remnants of tradition that have survived into urban society... (1989:22)

The influence of the African worldview, or what I have termed the "philosophy of life" of the African people in South Africa, on the writings of contemporary black South African writers discussed in this thesis, is a very important one. Any critic who wishes to engage with this poetry should, as a prerequisite, understand the particular worldview that informs the poetry. Lewis Nkosi makes this assertion:

Not only are our European friends ignorant of all the psychological phenomena which form the strands of the African consciousness, but Africans themselves have hardly analyzed their motivations. We would, therefore, need to know how we conceive reality in the traditional African society, and how these insights have helped to shape our social institutions in a particular way. (1965:50)

Kofi Awoonor also recognises the influence of the African worldview on the creative sensibilities of African writers. He regards the African literary tradition as self-contained.

The African writer creates within a cultural tradition, a tradition that defines its own aesthetics and functions. (1976:166)



It is quite possible, as indeed some writers have admitted, for a writer not to be aware of the influences he/she has been subjected to and thus not to make a conscious effort to use these influences in his/her writings. These influences, however, manifest themselves in their writing. Mzwakhe Mbuli, for instance, grew up in an urban setting, but he is aware that his poetry has been influenced by oral tradition. In an interview with Pace magazine, he traces his influences thus:

As a boy I used to accompany my father to the hostels to settle disputes among faction fighters from Umsinga, KwaZulu. These occasions would be graced by imbongis (praise singers). I suppose all the praise stuck at the back of my mind and now it's surfacing to shape up my poetry.  
(1994:18-19)

The link between oral tradition and recent and contemporary black South African poets who write in English is a very profound one. The poetry discussed in Chapter Three surely confirms this fact. These poets have refashioned the izibongo and imbongi tradition to celebrate communal struggles.

Ruth Finnegan argues that orality and literacy overlap and that it is very difficult to draw a fine line between them:

What is more, there is no clear cut line between "oral" and "written" literature, and when one tries to differentiate between them- it becomes clear that there are constant overlaps.  
(1977:2)

I have attempt to demonstrate that the role of recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English is to act as communal voice, to record the communal struggles, sometimes to perform a didactic function and to create a communal myth of liberation.

This assertion is made by Jane Watts.

Black South African writing has to teach, to inform, to motivate the reader or the spectator directly as a condition of its validity as literature.  
(1989:23)

Conventional western literary forms are not compatible with the role of literature as perceived among Africans. As I have suggested in Chapter Two of this thesis, literary forms inevitably embody the philosophy of life of the society that has given rise to them. The black South African writers discussed in Chapter Three utilise oral traditional poetic techniques because these are compatible with the role of the writer and of literature as perceived by the society to which they belong.

In oral traditional literature, political commitment emanates from the very role of the writer in society. This general point is reinforced by Terry Eagleton, when he summarises Marx and Hegel's conception of the interrelatedness between ideology and literary form:

Forms are historically determined by the kind of "content" they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionised as that content itself changes.  
(1976:22)

This is in line with the central argument of this thesis - that the contemporary black South African writers dealt with in Chapter Three have adapted oral traditional literary forms in the service of present-day content. In other words, the nature of the context that inspired their poetry and constitutes the content of this poetry determines the forms they use. Oral forms have proved compatible with the message these writers wanted to convey. This is why they have "changed, transformed, and revolutionised" oral forms to suit their message. Their role; as I have argued in this thesis, is similar to that of the imbongi in oral tradition: recent and contemporary poets have refashioned the forms used by the imbongi in the service of their own content and context.

Celebration, which is predominant in izibongo, is central feature of recent and contemporary black South African poetry in English.

The writers discussed in this thesis celebrate the resilience of the black people and their heroic struggle against oppression, with the aim of harnessing heroism which is an essential component in their struggle for liberation. Indeed, this poetry bears a substantial number of the characteristics of oral traditional poetry like the use of formulaic language, repetition, parallelism and linking and the use of powerful ecological images.

The poets discussed in Chapter Three have been engaged in a new but traditional commitment, an undertaking for which the conventional western literacy forms have not been adequate. This commitment necessitates the employment of oral literary forms that are compatible with the objectives they seek to fulfil as writers.

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