

Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance

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INTRODUCTION

The wide-ranging and critical research, together with the incisiveness and generosity with which he has assessed the value of the work of others, make Duncan Brown's book a welcome and cogent argument for that symbiotic interdisciplinarity that is increasingly becoming a *sine qua non* in academic life. I welcome the opportunity to review a book written by one who is working in a milieu in which debates about the value of Africa's contribution to world literature, arising from its treasure trove of linguistic diversity, are advanced and, in some cases, now anachronistic. The debate itself is not only about literature since it is inextricably linked to how communities living within the same borders and, indeed on the same planet, view each other. Brown's book is an invitation to us all, particularly in southern Africa, to contemplate the common humanity that binds us all together, in spite of ourselves, by opening our eyes to the richness of our cultural legacy, even through the

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apparently uncompromising incidental divisions of racial, economic, social and historical origin.

Our identities as social groups are partly defined by our stories, our myths about where we came from, and by our other forms of oral literature such as proverbs, riddles, metaphors, and similes. In this lies an opportunity for seeing both commonalities and differences, with the attendant danger of interpreting the differences as being in antagonistic oppositional, rather than dialectic but mutually supportive relations. Literal rather than metaphorical interpretations of our material and other cultural legacies lead to antagonisms that cause pain and death. In his seminal work, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: metaphors as myth and as religion* (1985: 58), Campbell wrote, "In the popular nightmare of history, where local mythic images are interpreted, not as metaphors, but as facts, there have been ferocious wars waged between the parties of such contrary manners of metaphoric representation ... One cannot but ask: What can such tribal literalism possibly contribute but agony to such a world of intercultural, global prospects as that of our present century? It all comes from misreading metaphors, taking denotation for connotation, the messenger for the message; overloading the carrier, consequently, with sentimentalized significance and throwing both life and thought thereby off balance. To which the only generally recognized correction as yet proposed has been the no less wrongheaded one of dismissing the metaphors as lies (which they are, when so construed), thus scrapping the whole dictionary of the language of the soul (this is a metaphor) by which mankind has been elevated to interests beyond procreation, economics, and *the greatest good of the greatest number*."

Brown's concern in this book, which he seeks to achieve by adopting a "literary-critical" (p.16) approach, is to "recuperate" African oral poetry by placing it in the mainstream of literary studies, specifically in southern Africa, but also on the world stage. He seeks to do this not only by pointing to the existence of such literature, but also by giving it an interpretation informed by modern literary theory. Although he concedes that several collections have in the past contained samples of

this literature, he nevertheless regrets the fact that it has not been given a prominence commensurate to its significance as South Africa's most original and earliest contribution to world literature. Nor has it been given enough attention in departments of literature in universities. And Brown is not unaware of the implications of literary studies beyond the academic domain. Particularly in the context of the colonial and apartheid South African societies from which the texts discussed in the book came, the literal interpretations or outright dismissals of African oral poetry as primitive or, in the case of praise poetry, as mere flattery, negatively impacted on how the ruler related to the ruled, leading to the "ferocious wars" which Campbell has referred to above. And since the quintessence of praise poetry is 'naming', that is, announcing to all who care to listen, who the subject of praise is, where s/he came from, the vicissitudes of their life, and what their hopes and fears are, to dismiss this art is to dismiss the subject, "to ... [take] the messenger for the message". Some missionaries, for their own purposes, saw the importance of literature for the identification of a people's 'difference' and sought to promote literary creativity among their converts as an antidote to what for them were negative influences from traditional oral forms. Opland (1984) quotes R.H.W. Shepherd, Director of the Lovedale Press, as justifying the press's encouragement of African writing thus: "No individual and no nation will reach their highest development without a thoughtful and reverent love for *good literature*" (emphasis mine). The question as to what is good literature, in these particular circumstances, is parallel to the one which linguists and language planners often have to contend with: What is a *dialect*, as opposed to a *language*? The decision is not always based on linguistic criteria, but on political and economic considerations, so much so that the cynical among linguists have concluded that a language is a dialect spoken by people with an army and an airforce. Each dialect/language is sufficiently flexible and complex to articulate both the worldview and thoughts of its speakers, just as the oral poetry of each people contains sufficient resources to articulate their identity. Translation, which is responsible for providing us access to the literary treasures of cultures

other than our own, is a recurrent issue in Brown's book. In the Introduction (p.8), he states that Stephen Gray, in his 1989 *Penguin Book of South African Verse*, sought "... to emphasize linguistic proximities rather than divisions", when he defined translation as "a major life-sustaining activity within the system", and as serving the function of "unblocking channels of communication to insist on the reciprocity of human feelings."

Voicing the Text has five chapters preceded by an Introduction (pp. 1-31) which, because of its detailed and wide-ranging survey of the field, is a chapter in itself. In this part of the book Brown eloquently presents the state-of-the-art in terms of where the study of African oral poetry in South Africa began, what achievements have been made, and what the challenges for contemporary scholarship are. In doing so, Brown engages in a collegial disputation with his predecessors in the field, historians, anthropologists, linguists, literary critics, and compilers of collections of oral poetry and, whether in agreement or disagreement with them, demonstrates that buoyant spirit of skepticism that is the hallmark of an inquiring mind. The felicitous variation of his linguistic expression, at times laconic, and at others Ciceronian, keep the reader going from the beginning to the end of the Introduction. This is how the rest of the book is written.

The main chapters are themselves judiciously ordered, not just in terms of the chronological sequence of historical events that gave rise to the poetry, but also in terms of the thematic concerns and textual strategies of the poets. Praise poetry is crucially responsive to the socio-political developments that affect communities in which it is composed and performed. It is in response to this that the author argues that, in handling historical oral texts such as the ones which his book addresses, "... we require a model of historical retrieval which sets up a dialectic between past and present". Further, he says that the model "must allow the past to interrogate and direct our reading even as we remain aware that our recuperation of history is necessarily impelled by present needs and ideologies" (p.23). Thus each chapter is prefaced by an overview of the historical, social, political, and economic background to the specific

period, not to mention the work of literary critics and students of orality attempting, with varying degrees of success, to place South African oral poetry in the context of traditional academic concerns.

THE SOCIETY OF THE TEXT.

Chapter One is on the songs, stories, and legends of the /Xam Bushmen. It is structured in the same way as all the others: there is the title, followed by a discussion of the topic, with only some icons signalling the move from one issue to the next. I would have been happier with sub-headings in the place of icons. This is a technical book, and one that should find its place on the 'required reading' lists of academic departments in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education Faculties. Unless they are in literary studies, readers of this book may wish to focus on one aspect of a topic, and sub-headings would facilitate this, even though there might be the usual concomitant risk of coming out with a partial, nay distorted, impression of the author's project.

The chapter begins with a scene near the end of Plaatje's *Mhudi*, with two native characters celebrating the wonders of technology as they travel in a wagon, not having to worry about carrying heavy luggage for days on end to reach a destination that will now take much less time. However, this celebration is ironic since, as Michael Green (quoted here: p.34) points out, "[T]he overt celebration ... is ... compromised by the negative effect of that technological advance on the very people carried along in it into the future." This latter point is underscored by //Kabbo's poignant story about how he and other /Xam people, accused of stealing a cow sixty years earlier than *Mhudi*, were ferried to court and then to prison in a wagon, together with all the paraphernalia of their hunter-gatherer life. Brown uses these two episodes to point to the fact of the colonizer's power lying in his technology, a power that was used to subjugate the natives, which subjugation is the main theme of the Bushman's poems, songs, paintings, and stories. These oral traditions represent "some of the earliest accounts in southern Africa of colonization from the perspective

of the colonized” (p.36). In spite of this, Brown observes, the official history of the Bushman has portrayed them as beyond the pale. He then outlines the history of the /Xam Bushman who, prior to the arrival of the Dutch, numbered between 150 000 and 300 000, with only about 5000 remaining today (p.38). Pointing out that acculturation through contact with other African groups, but especially with the colonists, has largely dislocated /Xam society, the author gives details of how the less than charitable attitudes towards the /Xam informed the actual interaction between them and the SADF (pp.38-40). Their hunting expertise was ruthlessly exploited by the latter in tracing freedom fighters in the Namibian war. So well did the Bushmen acquit themselves that they were rewarded by *Soldier of Fortune* thus: “If you’ve never seen a two-legged bloodhound at work, come to South West Africa and watch the Bushman at work” (p.40).

The official perception of Bushman society as static and anachronistic meant that there was no attempt to record their oral traditions. The linguists and anthropologists who did any work among them (p.37), valuable though some of it is in that some of their data can be used for literary study, did not address thematic issues. So Brown sets out to “... [allow] the Bushman to ‘talk back’ through their songs and stories.” Sticking to his role as critic, he sets out to try and “... maintain a dialectical relation between the ‘difference’ of their texts and their ‘identity’.” In this way he seeks to “create conditions of interpretation and reception in which the texts of the Bushman may speak to us today, both of an intricate mythology, and the harsh intrusions of colonialism” (p.36).

The /Xam are an egalitarian society, and so they do not have poems for leading figures as other southern African groups do. Brown (p.48) quotes Hewitt as saying that this social structure prevents “... the emergence of a literary elite comprised of individuals specifically recognized and rewarded for their talents.” The whole quotation from Hewitt comes as a vindication of modern Linguistics, especially of Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics, since Brown has earlier on (p.37) grudgingly conceded to the usefulness of linguistic research as “... also

valuable, even though tending to emphasize context-free typologies over the social and symbolic resonance of the communication” of the oral texts. Because they are hunter-gatherers, the /Xam have a lot of time to engage in creative work. And this includes (p.38) “... making neck laces and beads, engraving, ... dancing, singing songs, and story-telling.” This, in contrast to Shona society for example, where stories and riddles are performed only in the post-harvest season, is done in any season and at any time among the /Xam. Further, since the occasion of performance is regarded as an opportunity for passing on both the art and the messages in these cultural forms, the Shona children are given a chance to ‘mimic’ the older performers, allegedly to give grandmother a rest. In /Xam society story telling is reserved for adults and “... is closely bound with a sense of social and personal identity” (p.53). And the fact that the stories are sometimes explicit about the human anatomy may explain why the art is the preserve of adults.

The /Xam texts which Brown analyses are those recorded by W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd between 1870 and 1884. He sees several problems with these (42-43), among them the fact that they have gone through extensive processes of transcription and translation, and that they were narrated by prisoners to people who were in authority over them in a metropolis far away from the normal context of their performance. Due to the literal translations, some of the stories are not easy to follow. Brown gets round this by recasting Bleek and Lloyd’s translations (p.46) in order “... to create a readable English text by regularizing the syntax and grammar ...”, but seeking “... to allow the text its strangeness by retaining something of the distinctive phrasing and register of Bleek and Lloyd’s direct translations.” This is a strategy that the author regularly employs to good effect throughout the book and which has made the forms speak to me more clearly than would otherwise have been the case.

The problem of processing text is one that all field researchers have to contend with, even when they are working among communities that are still fairly stable. And Brown earlier on (p.31) refers readers to Ruth Finnegan’s thoughtful article on this issue. His own problem in this

chapter is exacerbated by the long period between the time when the texts were collected and the time of writing his book. His solution is the best in the circumstances. Nor is Brown the only one who has had to contend with this problem of the status of Bushman texts. Arthur Markowitz (1971), whose collection of similar texts is based on the work of H. Vedder, G.W. Stow, Carl Einstein, G. McCall Theal, T. von Held, Isaac Schapera, and Bleek and Lloyd, found the translations of these researchers difficult to understand. These people "... had recorded their tales with scientific exactitude, adhering meticulously to the Bushman manner of narration with its endless repetitions and digressions. These, though invaluable to the student, made the stories almost unintelligible and impossible of enjoyment as literature. On the other hand, they lost much of their primitive appeal if related in modern, every-day language." His solution was to stick to Bushman vocabulary, "... which, though it has no numeral higher than three, is amazingly rich in verbs and adjectives" (Introduction). However, Clifford Geertz's (1989) question needs to be topmost in the minds of all of us working in the area of oral traditions: "What happens to reality when it is shipped abroad?" We go out into the field, THERE, and come back to write HERE, "... with the world of lecterns, libraries, blackboards and seminars all about us" (p.58). But recasting these texts is not the only way that the author gets round the problem. He sees (pp.48-53) several similarities between the narrative traditions of the /Xam and those of the !Kung in present day Botswana, both in their thematic preoccupations and in the way they perform their arts.

Brown (p.53) states that most of the stories of the /Xam deal with the life of the Early Race who, according to their myths, are their ancestors. These latter are intimately linked to animals for the reason that in Bushman cosmology all animals were once people. The detailed analysis and interpretation of the texts is found between pages 55 and 71. One such text is the story 'The Jackal and the Hyena' (pp.59-60), which Brown describes as partly aetiological, since it is used to 'explain' why the hyena's back part is small. This follows from Jackal's elaborate plan to cheat Hyena out of the meat of an animal that Hyena

had killed. Brown points out that the story is about the ownership of a kill. In addition to that, there was need to ensure the fair sharing of the carcass, if the survival of the group was to be ensured. These issues are controlled by a custom designed to maintain human life (p.60). This story underscores Jackal's customary trickery and selfishness, in contrast to 'The Jackal and the Lion' (p.61). Here Jackal loses his meat to the marauding Lion, but manages to kill it, "... with the help of a sorceress and his own cunning." This restores peace for some time and the 'people' live life to the full. This time the jackal is portrayed as a hero.

On the significance of these and similar stories, the author, in agreement with Guenther (1989: 150) concludes that because the jackal and lion story expresses a yearning for peace and restitution, it "... may stand as an early exemplar of what has come to be our national narrative: colonial intrusion; dispossession; and the brutal destruction of whole societies" (p.62). Further, Brown also pays attention to those contemporary stories that are inspired by the experience of hunting, and which have nothing to do with the Bushman's mythology about the origins of the race. An example of these is the story 'Habits of the Bat and the Porcupine' (p.65). These stories inculcate a practical and intimate knowledge of the environment that is essential for survival and happiness. The formulaic opening line of some of them, 'Mamma/father used to tell me ...', is parallel to that used by the Shona when they quote a proverb to advise someone against acting foolishly, 'Our ancestors used to say ...', which lends authority to the message contained therein. But Brown also sees another, equally important function of the formula: that "Oral literature is characterized by its use of repetition as a rhetorical device ...". //Kabbo, the narrator of 'Habits of the Bat and the Porcupine', "... could have lent rhythm to his delivery [through this refrain], thus creating an anticipatory structure into which his listeners could then have fitted each new section to ensure coherence, even if a line or two had escaped them" (pp.65-66). This leads him on to a discussion of the significance of the principle of circularity which the repetition, also found in many African poems and

stories, emphasizes. After quoting what he calls Van der Post's (1979) "... extremely lyrical" account of the Bushman (p.63), the author makes the important point that Van der Post does not "... allow the Bushmen to 'talk back' to him about the particularities of their lives." This is precisely what Brown set out to correct, in order to reverse the tradition of proceeding as if the Bushmen and their cultural forms did not exist.

The penultimate section of this chapter (pp.67-71) is devoted to the Bushmen's songs. Some of these address religious themes, while others articulate personal experiences. Those on religion and medicine are believed to have come from god. The performance of these and other songs takes place at trance dances, with women clapping and singing, while the men dance in order to enter a state of trance (p.67). An important aspect of /Xam songs discussed here is the use of metaphor both for aesthetic purposes and in expressing social concerns. Although their stories contain metaphors, it is in mood songs that these, as well as symbols and images are extensively used. An example is //Kabbo's song (p.67), in which the loss of his tobacco pouch causes him 'famine'. Most of the difficulties that we encounter in translating poetry from other cultures are due to the cultural specificity of metaphors, a specificity that arises from the fact that they serve to articulate our deep thoughts about our experiences and are often derived from our close observations of both natural phenomena and the conduct of people around us.

In his conclusion, Brown explains the title of this chapter by pointing out that Bushman literature is essentially about "... an originary mythology firmly located in social circumstance." This theme links Bushman literature to the pressing, contemporary concerns in South African literature and politics, such as racial conflict and the destruction of indigenous populations by an encroaching, technologically more powerful, colonizing people.

POETRY, HISTORY, AND NATION.

In the second chapter (pp.75-115), Brown turns to a discussion of Zulu praise poetry against its historical background, seeking to explain its nature, function, and arguing for its rightful place in literary studies in South Africa and beyond. Specifically, the chapter is about the poem 'Shaka'. Several reasons are advanced for this, since in the previous chapter more than one form of oral literature was studied: 'Shaka' is a praise poem, and is thus an example of what is viewed as the "... highest form of literary expression in almost all African societies in southern Africa; and continues to play an important role in South African political and social life" (p.76). Although praise poetry has not been adequately represented in surveys of South African literature and in the syllabi of departments of literature, together with Bushman literature, it is the country's most original contribution to world literature. Further, it has influenced the poetry of a whole generation of black writers. Perhaps most importantly, many critics have struggled to find suitable theoretical paradigms within which to study Soweto poetry and performance. This has been due to their ignorance of either the cultural institutions in which the poetry thrived, or of the aesthetic models which shaped it. The historical background to the poem which the author provides (p.84ff.), together with his critical analysis of the same, seek to redress this situation. His contribution lies in breaking down those linguistic barriers that have stood in the way of critics and have denied them a vision of the extensive linguistic and generic hybridization that characterize contemporary South African poetry.

As in the previous chapter, Brown takes critical cognizance of the work of other scholars, both from mainstream literary disciplines and from other areas. But he points out (p.79) that people like Vail and White, literary-historical scholars, "... struggle to acknowledge simultaneously the historicity and textuality of the praise poems, tending to collapse the poetic nature of the texts into the larger power relations of the societies from which they originate." However, the criticisms of

Vail and White, and of other researchers from areas other than English, are to be viewed in the light of what Brown said previously, that "... the boundaries between disciplines is increasingly becoming permeable" (p.36), which he welcomes. He is clearly of the same view as that of Karl Popper (1959: 16-17), who wrote: "If we ignore what other people are thinking, or have thought in the past, then rational discussion must come to an end, though each one of us may go on happily talking to himself. Some philosophers have made a virtue of talking to themselves; perhaps because they felt that there was nobody else worth talking to. I fear that the practice of philosophizing on this somewhat exalted plane may be a symptom of the decline of rational discussion." In contrast to the approach adopted by other writers, Brown focuses on both the sociology and the poetics of oral literature, following the example set by Gunner and Opland, of "[Reading] the textuality of izibongo as integral to its social function."

Here, as in the other chapters, the issue of the status of the text to be studied is at the fore. The texts of Zulu praise poems, including 'Shaka', which is the concern of this chapter, are housed in the James Stuart archive: Stuart collected them in the Zulu original; Daniel Malcolm translated them but died before publishing his manuscript, then Trevor Cope published some of the poems, his role as editor being "... to select the most representative of the poems (26 out of 258), polish them ... and annotate them (for Stuart's and Malcolm's notes were very brief)" (1968: viii). The 'polishing' involved removing grammatical indelicacies such as those found in the Bleek and Lloyd translations of Bushman texts. Further, the extant poem 'Shaka' comes from Stuart's amalgamation of bits from several performances, with all repetitions excised and "... only the best and most definitive verses adopted" (p.81). These and other interventions lead Brown to wonder as to what extent 'Shaka' approximates the versions that were performed at Shaka's court. He resolves this problem by pointing to "... the customary and memorized nature of izibongo [which] suggests that the text we have is likely to be reasonably accurate ..." (p.83). Being "... a poem of power and intensity, ... [it] should be of immense value to

literary studies.” It can be used as a guide in the exploration of lines of communication of social, historical and literary continuities which would otherwise be unavailable. Failing to do this would be to pander to “... the Romantic myth of essential truth that is supposed to flow directly from the artist’s own individual mouth or pen.” Brown is guided, instead, by the insights emanating from structuralism and semiotics, by which a concern with an inspired original is viewed as less crucial than the value to be placed on “... transfer from one signifying system to another to serve a purpose in a given context” (p.84).

While conceding that the critic’s difficulties caused by the instabilities of poems such as ‘Shaka’ are real, the author points out that most of them come from three sources: failure to come to grips with the nature and function of izibongo, with its peculiar textual strategies, and the density of historical reference and allusion (p.86). He then traces izibongo to its source in personal praises, beginning with the lullaby (‘isihlabelelo’), which is composed by the mother for her child, followed by a personal praise name (‘isithopho’), either self-composed or given by one’s peers. This is eventually elaborated to become one’s personal izibongo. The epithets in these are often an amalgamation of those of the person concerned and those of friends, relatives, ancestors, etc. Their function is to name and establish the subject’s identity within the community. On this Gunner and Gwala (1991: 9) have said, “As a genre izibongo has its base in biography and experiences and imaging of the self ...” and, (ibid: 18) “Praises, whether for kings or ordinary people, for historical or living figures illuminate the figure involved.” Praises serve the more inclusive function of establishing what Brown calls “cognitive maps within society, of relations between humans and animals, individuals and individuals, ... ruler and ruled” (p.87). The specific sub-genre of royal izibongo derives from personal ones by way of extension, development and formalization by the imbongi.

This artist is not an employee of the chief or king, neither does he come from a special class nor does he become a poet by descent. He learns the art from observing others. His status as imbongi is signified by his dress and the weapons that he carries. Shaka had Mshongweni

and Mxhamama kaNtendeka as his main izimbongi. They, as do those who have learnt praising after them, deliberately sought to make their compositions an art and, as Cope says in words quoted here (p.89) "... [consciously strive] after literary effect ..." and "... there is a conscious effort to attain a richer, more evocative, more emotive, and a more memorable use of language." In the process, the imbongi performs the function of "negotiating relations of power within society" since he is licensed to pillory the king when the latter deviates and does not live to the expectations of his subjects. But otherwise he praises the king by way of epithets that list his achievements, and of others that point to the legitimacy of his occupation of the throne. This is done by reciting the names and exploits of the king's progenitors, another way of reminding him of the way kings behaved, and from which he dare not himself deviate. Yet the role of the imbongi as critic has been overplayed by some. Brown suggests that this has come from some Africanists' desire to portray indigenous societies as less autocratic and archaic than they are viewed as being by others.

In the performance of 'Shaka', the poet began with an opening formulaic salutation to the king, or by listing his praises: 'Dungwana son of Ndaba'. This served to bring the audience to order. The end of the performance was signalled by a sentence: 'I disappear.' The audience participated in the performance by exclaiming 'Musho!', for 'Speak/Praise him!' Since this is a regular refrain, it created a dramatic effect (p.97). The epithets in the poem served to name the subject, and included those of other chiefs or kings in Shaka's lineage. They were inspired by similarities observed between the subject's appearance and conduct and natural phenomena. So Shaka is the 'lion' or 'elephant', to suggest his strength. His military prowess earned him the epithet 'hawk'. Otherwise his personal appearance contributed others such as 'He who is dark like the bile of a goat' (p.99). Others sought to convey a sense of the king's speed, the size of the bounty that he brought after a raid, and also, by comparing him to the wind or ocean, to suggest that his power was not only like that of these forces of nature, but that it had their blessing. These images have both a thematic and a formal function.

According to Coplan (quoted here (p.99)), metaphorical images and allusions do this because they "... are ordered according to an emotional and aesthetic logic of incremental effect." Metaphor and allusion, which derive from the shared experience of the community and are thus common currency, are used extensively in izibongo to articulate experience in changed and changing social and political circumstances (pp.99-101). Here Brown exemplifies this by referring to Shaka's exile from the Zulu clan, when he was denied refuge by Macingwane. In the poem this is equated to denying snuff to the fugitive. Sharing snuff is viewed in many African societies as a sign of good will, a social lubricant, just as refusal to do so is a sign of hostility, the opposite of good neighborliness. Further, a neighbor may go next door to ask for live coals on the pretext that they do not have the wherewithal to make a fire in their own hearth, when in fact all they want is to test the loyalty of their neighbor. In the poem 'Shaka', Macingwane's refusal to help the fugitive Shaka is metaphorically transformed into the equivalent of one neighbor refusing to help another in need of snuff, which later attracted Shaka's wrath after his ascendancy to the Zulu crown: "Macingwane, you said you had none, You were giving yourself trouble", as the poem says.

Brown thinks that the tripartite structure of 'Shaka' (p.101), which may be due to Stuart's editorial intervention under the influence of the Western-heroic tradition, is potentially helpful to the print-trained critics. These often have to struggle to interpret 'Shaka' since it combines the two themes of the stature of a heroic leader and of how a nation was founded. This structure links 'Shaka' to that of the Western epic as defined by M.H. Abrams in that it treats a serious subject, the building of a nation; it is focused on one central figure Shaka, on whose actions the fate of many depended. The textual strategies employed in the poem deliberately foreground both the individual exploits of Shaka and the achievements of the nation as a whole. The lines are each a breath unit, with a pause at the end. And each praise ends with a cadence. Both pause and cadence are complemented by the imbongi using repetition, which is extensively employed, and parallelism, to

create oral rhythm. There is parallelism by initial linking, by simile, and that of the negative-positive type. Here Brown recasts Cope's English translation in order to show just how prevalent this strategy is in the poem. His own intervention here finds support in the textual strategies found in Shona praise poetry where the negative-positive type is prevalent. The Lion totem Chief is 'praised' as "They who do not subsist on plunder; They whose food comes along the waterway", used to warn him against literally appropriating the predatory propensities of the totemic animal.

Izibongo are crucially responsive to historical and political developments, as seen in Shaka's praises being different from those of his predecessors. Whereas the latter lived in peaceful co-existence with their fellows, the emergence of the Zulu nation after inter-tribal wars leading to conquest and annexation had a direct bearing on the types of praises composed and performed. Before Shaka the values of diplomacy in settling disputes, cooperation in communal endeavours, and so on, were extolled, whereas under Shaka those of military prowess and boldness came to the fore. These were complemented by those that were essential for keeping the new body politic intact: compliance with rules and the law, obeisance to the king and respect for all in authority, and so on (pp.104-105). This dichotomy is reflected in the poems of the former period being composed of very simple praises reminiscent of those in personal ones, but which were then expanded into statements and extensions. An example is the praises of Senzangakhona (p.105). By contrast, because Shaka consolidated and extended his political power and domain, it became necessary to use epithets and poetic structures that reflected the new order. The couplet or triplet used in the praises of chiefs in the past, and which comprised a simple praise plus extension, was elaborated into the stanza, made up of statement, extension, and development to conclusion, with the latter generally conveying meaning that contrasts with that of events related in the rest of the stanza. These praises sought to articulate relations of power between Shaka and his subjects and between him and surrogate chiefs (p. 106). While the stanza has a central role in 'Shaka', the poem has narrative passages since it is

intended to present the story of how a nation developed. These passages are characterized by parallelism by initial linking. So the lines begin with statements about Shaka's heroic exploits, rather than with his praise names:

He destroyed Zwide amongst the Ndwandwes,
He destroyed Nomahlanjana son of Zwide, ...

The narrative in these poems introduces a formal principle that is a feature of izibongo, that of cyclical construction. Occurrences mentioned earlier are recounted for rhetorical effect, as are the praise names of Shaka. Brown points out that the circularity in the narrative passages has led Snead to talk about the 'cut' in such poems. But although Brown finds Snead's other ideas about 'black texts' problematic (p.108), he sees the idea of the 'cut' as serviceable to him in this discussion. The circularity in 'Shaka' is the means by which the imbongi recreates and re-evaluates history, but within the constraints imposed by the "... the customary and memorial nature of the form", which "prevents the imbongi from arbitrarily recasting past events or their significance" (p.108). Izibongo establish a dialectic between history and the present, by which past events are re-evaluated through the looking glass of the present, while present ones are gauged in terms of the past (p.109). The poems thus serve to establish a sense of *historical continuity in a society without recorded history*. This places a burden on the imbongi to be always conversant with the history of the chief and the community that he serves. But the recounting of history is not the only or the most important function of izibongo. Brown makes the point that the listing of Shaka's ancestors in the poem may also have a religious function, given the crucial role accorded to the spirits of the dead in influencing the fortunes of the living. These spirits, apparently among the Zulu as among the Shona, are not merely praised, but attempts are made to control their involvement in secular affairs. In Shona society, when one experiences misfortunes that one deems undeserved, one goes and kneels under a muchakata (*Parinari*

curatellifolia) tree, to 'grumble/complain/shout at' the guardian spirits.

Among the difficulties encountered by critics, both from within and from outside African culture, in studying izibongo, including 'Shaka', is that of the ubiquitous and obscure references to historical events, as well as the use of archaic vocabulary. Brown (p.111) warns us from being overly concerned with attempts to solve these since we thereby run the risk of "... turning criticism into a pedestrian exercise of tracking down references." He suggests that excerpts of the poem might be anthologized, with footnotes to explain such references. This is a reasonable way out. Yet my own experience with the praise poem of the Lion clan of Zimbabwe proved my tortuous search for the significance of two lines rewarding (Pongweni, 1996: 33-34). The lines read: "Thank you (you) who lie buried at the junction/the parting of the ways;

Where the clan parted on the death of the father." Archival and oral evidence both explained that the clan scattered when their father had been executed for routinely stealing his neighbors' cattle, to the extent that he now owned a herd far bigger than even that of the chief. The Lion people are now spread all over Zimbabwe, with each group having modified its praise poem to avoid being detected as the offspring of the cattle thief. For example, the praise name for those in southern Zimbabwe is a crafty deverbal noun which, in its deviousness, is hyperbolic. They call themselves 'Murambwi', 'The rejected one.'

Overall, Brown sees the placing of 'Shaka' in the mainstream of literary studies as solitary in the context of contemporary South Africa. While in more recent years the Apartheid state sought to promote the narrow ethnocentrism immanent in 'Shaka', which arose from the Zulu king's conquest and assimilation of lesser groups into one Zulu dominated polity, in order to bolster its homeland policies, the poetic licence of the imbongi remains the loophole through which resistance to appropriation of African culture can be expressed. For example, Brown states that praise poets earned the wrath of security police for criticizing Matanzima, a Bantustan collaborator, while a journalist (1994) used many of the formal techniques of izibongo in an open letter warning King Zwelithini to dissociate himself from Inkatha's narrow approach to

unfolding political developments. The author, because of these and other roles that izibongo continue to play, and because of their literary value, convincingly argues for a place for the genre in South African poetry. It is a vehicle for the transmission of momentous events, and is "... an opportunity to consider the challenge of a unique form of social and aesthetic expression" (p.115).

ORALITY AND CHRISTIANITY.

Whereas in Chapter Two Brown was concerned with poetry that flourished within a largely homogeneous socio-political milieu under Shaka's hegemony, and which culled its imagery from a largely undisturbed, idyllic physical and social environment, in this chapter he turns to poetry in the discussion of which words such as *syncretism* and *hybridization* in form and content, and *encroachment*, *dislocation*, and *confrontational co-existence* at the political, economic, and social levels are the currency. For after the decline of the Zulu nation as constituted by Shaka, there developed a leadership vacuum into which Isaiah Shembe, a prophet and messianic evangelist who composed hymns, and other people stepped. While he had his base in the Christian church, Shembe's hymns and sermons sought to maintain and revitalize Zulu social values and traditions which, like in izibongo, were concerned with pressing secular issues. At the same time he strove to reconcile these concerns with the abstract and futuristic messages of Christianity.

The clash between Shembe's syncretism and the uncompromising ethos of the missionaries led to him forming the Church of the Nazarites as a vehicle for his project. His move was part of a more widespread religious and historical movement, as indicated by Brown (pp.131-132). In the hymns he hybridized Christian songs with Zulu ones to forge a form that powerfully articulated both religious and political resistance to colonial oppression, which his hymn 45 calls "... a disgrace that has befallen you/ in the land of your people", where the "you" refers to the "... maiden of Nazareth", that is, the Zulu nation (p.120). He is also praised for his evangelical courage, for providing comfort to people

disillusioned by the turn of events, and for building a physical and spiritual home for them, Ekuphakameni. Otherwise the other themes of his compositions read like a political manifesto (p.124): "... ownership and occupation of land; economic dispossession; African nationalism and ethnicity; the ideological and educational role of the missionaries; the suppression of orality by the epistemological and cognitive authority of the Western tradition of print; and the pattern of psychological subjugation and black resistance." For Brown, these preoccupations posit Shembe as an essential link between Zulu nationalism personified by Shaka, in the way that his hymns draw on izibongo and articulate colonial subjugation on the one hand, and the concerns of black consciousness and black theology on the other.

Through the tension arising from their confrontational dialectic with official modes of communicating the relations between the colonizing power and the colonized in the domains of politics, economy, and religion, Shembe's hymns must, as Brown argues, be viewed as "popular art". They articulate the issues that deeply affect people whose well being is not the priority of officialdom, except in so far as they must be kept in check, and they do so not only in irreverent ways, but from unofficial spaces such as Ekuphakameni. Yet Brown cautions that a thorough study of these forms may reveal a deep-rooted conservatism (p.129), and that critics should therefore be on guard against merely valorizing "the people"; nor should they fall into the trap of relegating them to the dust heap as expressing "false consciousness". Rather, they should be seen for what they really are: forms that convey the beliefs of a people and what those beliefs can tell us about the historical circumstances that inspired them, all of which will enable us to understand why the forms continue to play a vital role in South African life even today, when the technology-driven, aggressive power of the settlers that elicited Bushman and early Zulu protest poetry has all but taken over.

Realizing that Shembe's hymns, despite their theological syncretisms and formal hybridizations, are essentially the creations of one inspired by Christian religion, Brown is guided by Bleek and Blakely's (1994: 3)

views on how to study religious texts, that "... [they] should be studied in [their] socio-cultural contexts, to be grasped by being human among humans..." (pp.130-131). This accords with what Brown sees as having been lacking in some studies of oral traditions, and of praise poetry in particular: the contemplation of masses of data from the field, followed by their interpretation as art forms that have distinctive aesthetic values and speak to us about the human conditions that gave them birth. The issue is not that this approach to literary studies is new, but that it has not been extended to the criticism of South African oral forms with the same vigor and consistency that other literatures have received. A socially responsive literary criticism of African oral literature will serve to open up vistas of epistemological commonalities, contrasts, and 'differences' that can only enrich our lives as it dissipates ignorance, suspicion, and downright contempt of others and their cultures. Brown's arguments for the common humanity that our literatures convey, despite the fact that each has its own 'difference', recalls what the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1850, ll 384-386), saw as the function of the 'esemplastic' (Coleridge's coinage) faculty in their contemplation of nature and in the process of poetic composition. Wordsworth says that this faculty facilitates: "... observations of affinities/In objects where no brotherhood exists/To passive minds. ..."

and, in *The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, that "... upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and moral feelings."

Just as Brown was concerned with the institution of the Zulu kingdom as personified by Shaka and the imbongi in the preceding chapter, so here he is focusing on Shembe's church movement and on Shembe himself through a study of the sociological significance and poetic qualities of the hymns. For the author, these express a striving for political and cultural survival on the part of a community that had been dispossessed and displaced. To illustrate the vehemence of the animosity that the independent churches elicited from mainstream Christianity, Brown quotes Rev. Allen Lea (1928) as saying, "Native denominationalism has run perilously near to madness" (p.134). This, in

the face of the strict moral code and work ethic that Shembe sought to inculcate in his followers. Further, even though he was concerned to revive and bolster Zulu nationalism, Shembe preached non-racism and non-sectarianism, referring to God as 'uThixo kaAdam', that is 'The God of Adam/of all people'. Brown (p.137) then outlines the commonalities between Zulu religion and custom, pointing out that the bone of contention was over the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, "... since it asserted the equality and indivisibility of the father and son, an idea unacceptable to Zulu morality and social authority" (p.137). The power structures in the Church of the Nazarites were a copy cat of those in Zulu society. Shembe had a reputation as a healer even before he joined the Baptist Church, which gave him a character similar to that of the somatic type of sangoma. He occupied the positions of both Christian leader and traditional seer, spoke through an intermediary when preaching, just as a king did. Further, he was concerned to establish his lineage and, in the process settling cases, giving wisdom, etc, all through church elders the equivalent of amakhosi and indunas of traditional society (p.139).

Shembe's compositions have textual structures similar to those of Christian hymns. Their print versions have short lines constituting numbered verses with biblical imagery. They are inter-spaced with praises such as "Hosanna" and "Hallelujah" (see Hymn 58), are limited in length and have hymnal choruses (p.143). Yet they also have features that distinguish them from the Western hymn. They draw heavily on the Psalms and the Old Testament in their discourse, particularly on the prophet Isaiah, many of them being not so much concerned with praise and worship of God as with deeply personal matters. An example of such hymns is 162 (pp.143-144), which Brown says "... combines a local diction (in its reference to *aloe, cough medicine*) with the biblical refrain *Amen. Amen. Amen*" in its expression of the challenges one faces in keeping the faith and in playing the role of evangelist in Shembe's particular circumstances. Further, he points to the formal patterns of izibongo found in this hymn, namely parallelism, repetition and naming. This analysis supports Brown's point about the hymns of Shembe and

other post-Shakan poets being hybridizations of traditions of composition vying for space. Yet here he passes an opportunity to exploit evidence of the other strategy employed by these artists, namely syncretism. Hymn 162 says: 1. "... The aloe of the veld/it is not as bitter/as your word Simakade/in the hearts of many//2. ... The cough medicine of the mountains/it is not as bitter/as your word Simakade/in the hearts of many." The first point to be made is that this hymn asserts the efficacy of traditional medicine 'from the pulpit' of a Christian church owing its existence (indirectly) to Western missionaries who, as Brown has pointed out, sought to persuade converts to the new faith to abandon their ways. The bitterness of the aloe is reflected in its Shona name, *gavakava*, a noun derived from the reduplicated verb *kava-kava*: *kick-kick*, which is what one does in excruciating pain when the aloe is rubbed on a fresh wound as an antiseptic. It is also used in a concoction to cure those with excessive bile. Secondly, since this book is an argument for the accommodation of African oral forms in anthologies of South African literature so that they become available both to the general reader and to academic departments, such an argument should include not only a discussion of the themes but also the aesthetics of these compositions, which Brown's study does elsewhere. The intensity of personal soul searching on the part of the singer is vividly conveyed by the similes in the two verses, where the bitter aloe and the cough medicine are compared to the word of God. But the similes are also synaesthetic metaphors in that they represent "... the mapping of one perceptual process on to another, of conceptualizing one sense in terms of another" (Goatly, 1997: 55). The "aloe of the veld" and "the cough medicine of the mountain" taste bitter on the tongue, yet here they do so "... in the hearts of many." Western trained readers of such poetry will readily understand its message, and value the creative ingenuity it demonstrates since synaesthesia is prevalent both in their ordinary speech and their literature. For example, Danesi (1993: 126) talks about some conventionalized metaphors which constitute "... a reflex discourse pattern [the English] have acquired from their culture", and by which they regard **ideas** as geometric **objects**. Ideas are circular, central

to a discussion, diametrically opposed, and so on. Further, Goatly (ibid, p.54) says, "To make knowledge available or direct attention to it you make it light: elucidate, enlighten, highlight, illuminate, cast/shed/throw light on (a subject)...."

In his interpretation of hymn 101 (p.146), Brown observes that Shembe displays a complex vision in his employment of images, some of which are both biblical and of Zulu origin and so have "double valency". But many of the hymns do not address the deity, being directed instead to social and spiritual concerns, to the nature of Shembe's calling, and so on. These contrast with those that address God and which, nevertheless, use the strategies typical of izibongo by listing epithets which celebrate His greatness: the "eagle which has wings"; "rock of the old"; the "fortress"; the "beautiful hen"; and "hen of heaven". He then points to the ambiguity of each such hymn in its combination of the "Christian hymnal tradition, and a praise plus extension similar to the Shakan stanza" (p.145). The epithet "rock of the old" recalls for me the Anglican hymn 135, 'Rock of Ages', which goes: "Rock of ages, cleft for me,/let me hide myself in thee;/let the water and the blood,/from thy riven side which flowed,/be of sin the double cure:/cleanse me from its guilt and power." Shembe's hymn pleads with "... the eagle which has wings" to lift them up so that "we may enter and hide ourselves in you rock of the old." Whereas for the mainstream Church Jesus was crucified, "cleft for me", and what is left is for believers to worship Him and ask for forgiveness, the "water and the blood ... Be of sin the double cure", Shembe and his congregation are so disillusioned by their condition of subjugation that, in their own metaphor, the eagle (Jesus) has yet to open His wings for them to *hide* under.

The most enjoyable and enlightening part of this chapter is that where Brown discusses hymn performance (pp.148-150). Pointing out that Shembe attributed his introduction of dance in the Church to a dream, and that he claimed biblical justification for it, the author says that by doing so, the evangelist "gave new meaning to one of the central ritual institutions of Zulu society." The performance is of the call-and-

response style, with the rest of the group following the prophet himself or some other lead singer. The Nazarites have both western-type Christian services and religious dance ceremonies, each with its own appropriate time and space. Many of the hymns are specifically for dance, and had a rhythm that "constituted" the hymn. There are various musical instruments used in the hymn performance and dance (p.149), some of which have affinities with western ones. But, as Brown points out, "The syncretism of Nazarite ritual and belief is graphically illustrated by the dress of the dancers", with Shembe himself donning a "kilt", "pith helmet", "Zulu beadwork, tuxedo and top-hat", while his followers bore "sun umbrellas" and put on "Zulu traditional dress." The significance of hymn performance is that it became transformed into what Brown calls "a ritual of empowerment for Shembe's followers ...". Since most of them had been dispossessed in both the economic and political spheres of life, "... the unisonality of group performance" served to create what Benedict Anderson termed *imagined communities* "that bind individuals together in the face of conflict and division." The centrality of performance means that the hymns cannot be fully understood except within the context and on the occasion of their performance. While the beginning of the dance is signalled by the beating of the drum, the singing may start with any one of the verses in the song and last for a long time, with the lead singer taking the group over the same verses repeatedly, even if the song has only a few verses. Brown reminds us of the principle of cyclical composition he previously discussed in the first two chapters. But here, both his own comments and those he quotes from Muller (1994a: 136) are most revealing. Shembe's use of the principle of cyclicity is seen as having political significance because, according to Muller, "... this trope most powerfully reflected the symbolic contest between colonized and colonizer, whose organization of time and space was symbolized in the principle of linearity." I would argue that the reordering and repetition of verses in performance each time gives each verse a new shade of meaning, depending on what comes before and after it in a specific rendition. If cyclicity has political and cosmological significance, then it

might be linked to African societies' conception of their relations with the dead. After a specified period following the death of an adult, there is a ceremony for "returning his/her spirit into the family so that it can protect them", as the Shona put it. The 'same' person who previously provided for the family in a different form, at a different time, continues to do the same in changed circumstances. His/her name may be given to a child, who will grow up and be expected, nay urged, to behave like the deceased, with members of the family using the honorific plural to address him/her. Cyclicity in the composition and performance of oral poetic forms in the specific contexts discussed here may thus be viewed as a palliative for current suffering, in the 'knowledge' that things will come full circle, and also as a warning to those responsible for that suffering. The warning is also conveyed by many African language proverbs and metaphors. The Shona say, "A sin eats up its perpetrator", in the course of time. And when a habitual deviant is eventually cornered, they say "Today, the tortoise has come across one bearing an axe", which can pierce through the hitherto impenetrable shell.

The operative words in Brown's discussion of these art forms are "syncretism" and "hybridization". Apart from the foregoing, he sees more evidence of these strategies also being employed to convey Shembe's "... powerful vision of nationalism and apocalypse in many of the izihlabelelo." But here the evangelist is influenced "... by the linear teleology of Christianity" (p.151). He comes across as simultaneously advocating both a specifically Zulu and a general Africanist nationalism. And hymn 173, which the author uses to illustrate Zulu specificity, sounds like a recasting of a popular Zulu song performed, among other occasions, at wedding ceremonies: compare "Give way that he may enter..." with "Sithunyiwe! Vhulani amasango singene": "We have been sent. ... Open the doorways so that we can enter." This hymn contrasts with No 17 (pp.152-153), which has a pan-African nationalist thrust. This theme links Shembe's mission with the concerns of the black consciousness movement. As Brown says, "Shembe also anticipates the use made by BC poets of Christian teleology, as modified by the secular implications of black theology, in

evoking the apocalypse of social revolt and revolutionary change.” He then uses hymn 28 to show that the strategy adopted in this and similar hymns lends “... the imagery profoundly political reverberations.” Versions of this hymn are in fact widely used in the southern African region and by various church denominations. In Zimbabwe it is sung at funerals to remind all mourners to think about the Second Coming: “Where will you be when the trumpet sounds?/When it sounds calling on the dead (to rise)?/Where will you be?” In other words, ‘Will you be among the saved or among the sinners/strangers’ who, as Shembe’s hymn says, must “run away” from the approaching Jehovah?

This chapter ends by looking at perceptions of Shembe as Black Messiah. Brown regards the equating of the evangelist with God, such as Muller, Oosthuizen, and Gerard do (p.156), as simplifications of a symbolic identification of the figure. To appreciate the essence of the hymns’ references to Shembe, there is need for one to be “... alert to the ambiguities and polyvalencies of religious and poetic language.” Evidence against concluding from the hymns that Shembe was the Messiah is in fact found in hymn 60, where he is called the “Servant”, and his own son referred to him as “Thunyiwe ka Nkulunkulu”: ‘The messenger of God/of the Almighty.’ Brown also finds Sundkler’s concept of the biblical/African mask plausible in explaining Shembe’s status. Because the hymns say he was sent by God to save the Zulus, Shembe the prophet “... is privileged to wear the mask which they will recognize as God”, as Sundkler puts it (pp.156-157).

On the basis of both the aesthetic, formal, and thematic richness of the hymns of Shembe which he has demonstrated in this chapter as having pivotal relevance to contemporary literary and socio-political concerns in South Africa, Brown ends by arguing for their inclusion, along with the songs and stories of the Bushmen and Zulu izibongo, in a new anthology of South African poetry. This he says, “... would broaden debates about what constitutes poetry, and set up important negotiations between ‘traditional, elite and popular’ genres in South African literary historiography” (p.157).

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS, TRADITION, AND MODERNITY.

In the fourth chapter Brown seeks to demonstrate that there is a historical continuity in “black oral poetry and performance stretching back to the /Xam Bushmen and izibongo of Shaka and Dingane” (p.166). In the process, he aims to show how the poetry produced during the Black Consciousness (BC) movement of the 1970s explored the potential of performance poetry in the face of draconian legal and political measures designed to thwart strivings for the restoration of cultural, social, and political values associated with the free nationhood of a mythologized past. In order to focus what is clearly an enormous project, the author concentrates on the work of Ingoapele Madingoane, specifically the poem titled ‘africa my beginning’ (1979), part of a sequence in English, ‘black trial’, which also includes one with the same title as the collection. These poems, says Brown, are concerned with “[tracing] the spiritual, ideological, and historical development of their speaker -- ‘blackman’ -- from a state of self-loathing and passivity to one of self-assertion and social commitment” (p.165).

The “sociological purposiveness” which Brown quoted (p.151) Vilakazi as seeing in Shembe’s hymns, and which is transparently the agenda of Madingoane’s ‘blackman’, introduces a new factor which all creative artists had to reckon with, the routine banning of all works and people considered by the state to be a threat to the status quo. ‘africa my beginning’ was banned soon after its appearance for the reason that it “invoked the help of ancestral spirits in the liberation struggle ...”. In this particular case however, the banning was of no great consequence since the poet had performed both ‘africa my beginning’ and ‘black trial’ before, and continued to do so after it. The authorities were correct in seeing subversion in BC poetry since, as Madingoane’s case shows, it is poetry that speaks from unofficial spaces and in unofficial language. This points to “... the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression ...” (p.166) that Brown wishes to explore in this and

the other chapters of this book. In studying the poems of Madingoane, his specific aim is not so much "... to open up a new area of literary study ..." as to "... suggest a reorientation through orality of a fairly well established field of literary investigation". The reorientation is necessitated by the fact that, as the author says, Madingoane and other younger poets' works have not been given a prominence in literary studies comparable to that accorded to that of earlier poets (Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, Sipho Sepamla, and Oswald Mtshali). The poetry of the younger generation is inextricably linked to performance, being eminently oral, whereas that of the others is print-based. Consequently, the critical paradigms developed for the latter poetry cannot be extrapolated wholesale to the interpretation of Madingoane and his peers' works.

Madingoane's poetry is to be understood within the context of the social and political philosophy that inspired and guided the BC movement. To this end, Brown quotes Biko's and Boesak's (pp.169-170) definitions of black consciousness. These broadly accord with Franz Fanon's conception of what it means to be black, and of how black culture should relate to that of the colonizer in a context where the latter seeks to supplant the former. Brown is careful to sound a note of warning, in agreement with Fanon, against the tendency of some Africanists both to valorize and glamorize the African past as if it were some immutable germ stone encased in a time capsule. Instead, African culture has responded to technological developments, both imported and indigenous, and for better or for worse. Fanon is quoted (p.172) as saying "... I feel myself as a soul as immense as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers, my chest has the power to expand without limit." Given Fanon's hypothetical context which precedes this quotation, in which some (obviously) white war veteran with an amputated leg tries to persuade him to accept the disability that Fanon's blackness is supposed to represent, just as the veteran has accepted his own deformity, this quotation is a spirited assertion of *blackman's* rightful place in the scheme of things, and a celebration of the abundant and boundless innate resources that the Maker bestowed on him/her to

be. This assertion of the intrinsic value of blackness is encapsulated in 'an African proverb' in Champion's collection, *Racial Proverbs* (1938: Introduction): "An African is a rubber ball; the harder you press him down, the higher he bounces." BC poets were themselves wary of the danger in portraying a valorized picture of the past. And so they took their inspiration not only from past African achievements, but also from the Negritude movement and the American black power rhetoric, and from Fanon himself (p.172).

Brown traces the beginning of what came to be known as Soweto poetry to the mid-1960s, most of it appearing in the magazine *The Classic*, a deliberately misleading name since it was actually that of the laundry opposite the shabean in which the magazine was conceived. [This reminds me of Zimbabwean academic nationalists, who visited shabeens in the townships to mobilize the masses even when political parties were banned. When these illegal places were raided by security police, these men's alibi was that they were conducting 'participatory research', and were there neither for the beer nor for the unconscionable purpose of politicizing their hosts]. The context in which *The Classic* began is further evidence that Soweto poetry was 'popular' art in that the shabean was an illegal institution. Yet these poets used it to create a platform from which they challenged the status quo. Another magazine of similar status was *Staffrider* (p.175), which came on the scene following the 1976 Soweto riots. It is therefore not surprising that, after Soweto poetry was popularized by the success of Mtshali's *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (1971), subsequent works were banned, starting with Matthew and Thomas's volume *Cry Rage!* (p.173). This led to the formation of several cultural groups, which sought to promote black poetry and drama. Brown lists a number of volumes of Soweto poetry which appeared between 1973 and 1986, which include both collections and those produced by individuals (p.174). The policy of Bantu Education had a lot to do with this massive production of poetry. Because it denied Africans access to Western literature, which they came to reject anyway, mainly due to its alien and alienating cultural baggage, they turned to models of traditional poetic composition such as

izibongo, and to "... jazz and blues music, African-American verse, the rhetoric of the political platform, and even plain speech" (p.174). Soweto poets also saw the matter of the language of expression as a critical issue in their project. While they were cognizant of the role of English as the vehicle of their oppression, they were equally wary of the apartheid-driven divisions that could arise from the employment of their own mother tongues. So they composed in English, but one which was a hybridization of several, mainly 'unofficial' varieties, ranging from Americanisms, tsotsi-taal, expletives, etc. This was their way of both protesting against and publicizing the limitations of Bantu Education. Brown quotes Chapman (1982: 13) as saying that "Soweto poetry made 'its rejection of Western literary and cultural continuities almost a stylistic and moral imperative' " (pp.174-175).

Even though called 'Soweto poetry', the poems appearing in *The Classic* and *Staffrider* have formal and ideological differences. The early poetry addressed a white, liberal audience and used strategies of composition which such a readership was familiar with. On the other hand, *Staffrider* poetry was militant, urging resistance and involvement in political struggle rather than mere protest (p.176). Brown quotes Chapman (1982: 22) as saying, whereas previously the poets strove for Western justice as their ultimate goal, they now replaced this with "the highest of African ideals", namely heroism (pp.176-177). This shift earned the compositions the ominous label 'Black Power poetry' from the Minister of Police of the time. The poetry also became a *causis belli* among literary critics seeking to find "... appropriate aesthetic models and evaluative paradigms" (p.177). Many were dismissive of the poetry, while others and the poets themselves found the criticisms unacceptable since for them, they were a reflection of the cultural values of the colonizers. The most eloquent retort came from Motlatsi (pp.178-179) who, in the Introduction to a volume of Soweto fiction, wrote: "... We are not going to be told how to re-live our feelings, pains and aspirations by anybody who speaks from the platform of his own rickety culture." Pointing out that such a response amounts to advocating "black standards" or "a black aesthetics", Brown argues that

there is a need for such a concept to be defined and to have its efficacy demonstrated, so that it becomes “more than simply an oppositional or rhetorical riposte” (p.179). Brown (pp.180-181) is in agreement with Chapman, who sees Madingoane and his contemporaries as attempting “to move beyond the realm of the text and approach the domain of gesture and act.”

Brown’s contribution to the debate is to urge critics to desist from viewing this poetry as “product” rather than “process”, as “object” rather than “practice”. The old approach, he observes, has led to a situation where “very little attention has been paid to a host of oral poets working within the Soweto milieu in the wake of the events of 1976” (p.181). These events are crucial in that historically, the performance poetry came to the fore only after 1976 and the concomitant radicalization of the black community. This latter development saw the formation of several cultural groups, which further popularized oral performance. It was at this time when Mutloatse came with his ‘poemdras’: ‘Prose, Poem and Drama all in one’, and Dumakude kaNdlovu with his ‘Read-poetry’ (p.182). Brown points out that there may have been several reasons for Soweto poets preferring performance to publication: “the affirmation of African cultural traditions by the ideology of black consciousness; a desire to avoid the gate-keeping of white-owned literary magazines and publishers; and the need for forms appropriate to a political context of intense repression and covert organization” (p.182). These goals were achieved through the adoption and adaptation of traditional izibongo, song, and music. The performance of such poetry provided an opportunity to actualize the communal values of the BC movement through its requirement of audience participation. This had the function of reviving an African past which colonialism and apartheid sought to suppress. The poets themselves became suspicious of those among them who published or owned publishing outlets, since oral performance came to be viewed as “authentic witness”, apart from the fact that it was one way of avoiding censorship and the confiscation of materials by officials of the state.

Brown observes that Madingoane’s ‘black trial’ is based on a variety

of performance genres of both the past and present, pointing out that the photograph of the poet on the cover of the printed version of 'africa my beginning', showing him perform, is a deliberate indication of the performance nature of the poetry (p.187). After outlining the 'debate' between Msimang and Chapman on the best way of representing Madingoane's poem (pp.187-189), the author points out that Msimang's "conception of oral performance appears to be closer to 'recitation' -- the printed text read aloud", and that the latter seems "unaware that orality involves not simply a mode of dissemination, but also deliberate textual structures that allow the poem to live and function both in its immediate performance context and more broadly in its society" (p.188). The irony is that these structures can be represented in print through the typewriter's facilities of both rigidity and space precision, a point made by Olson in 1950 in regard to American 'projective verse' (p.189). Brown thus takes sides with Chapman and Olson on the grounds that the various facilities provided on the typewriter can enable the poet to recreate the atmosphere of actual performance: "the changes of pace and intonation, the pauses for breath or emphasis, staccato or languorous rhythms ..." (p.190). This is employed successfully by Madingoane in 'black trial/seventeen' where, as Brown points out, he uses "double space-bars in the middle of lines to suggest pauses, line endings to arrest the rhythm, and margin indentation to indicate increased pace and emotional urgency in delivery."

While he sees the need for editorial sensitivity in the use of technology to capture the nuances of performance, Brown finds the way 'black trial/nine' is represented most effective (p.191). There are balanced phrases at the beginning of each stanza, with space-bars in between to indicate pauses in performance. The rest of the structure serves to expand upon the contents of the opening phrases (pp.191-192). This leads the author to employ in his analysis of this poem the notion of 'rhythmography', widely current among oral literature critics, seeing rhythm as one of the defining features of 'black trail'. Here he observes a similarity of strategy between Isaiah Shembe, who saw it as having a sacred significance, and Madingoane in their exploitation of rhythm.

The latter “uses repeated patterns of sound ... as a means of consciously reclaiming an African cosmology and a communal identity in the face of economic exploitation and dehumanization by the apartheid state” (p.192). Brown notes that this harnessing of rhythm as a serviceable trope in asserting Africanity in adversity was recognized by Fanon, who quoted Senghor, the foremost proponent of Negritude, as saying that “It [rhythm] is the first condition and hallmark of Art, as breath is of life ...” (pp.192-193).

Madingoane himself said his poem is an epic, in the sense of Abram’s definition Brown quoted earlier, but specifically an African one (p.194). Brown grants it this status since it is “an extended verse narrative, often highly symbolic in mode, focusing on a mythologized speaker (‘blackman’), and is concerned with the fate of a (black South African) nation.” The hero here begins by articulating his deep sense of “personal alienation and self-debasement”: “black child/nature’s blunder ...”, and moves on to asserting a “communal identity and commitment”: “...i will join the masses that went before me/and as one we shall fight/the ancestral war until justice/is done” (pp.194-195). The perception of the current struggle for self-determination in this poem as a continuation of that waged by the ancestors was shared by the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) choir. It is an effective way of giving a sense of historicity and therefore legitimacy to contemporary concerns. The ZANLA song ‘The Masses of Africa’ (Pongweni, 1982: 62-65) expresses the themes of individual alienation and despondency, beginning with an appeal to the struggling peoples of Africa and beyond to cooperate with ZANLA in defeating the common foe, colonialism, and then detailing aspects of the price of freedom. In its performance the leader sings one phrase alone, with the chorus joining him/her to complete the line, a technique which emphasizes communal bonding, just as in Madingoane’s performances there was “audience refrain, interjection, and encouragement” (p.183). The following lines come near the beginning: “... It is time that we united/ In order to overcome this deadly enemy .../Let the precious blood of our heroes/Flow like the raging Falls .../Freedom will crown our efforts

...”, followed by: “If death should come today/I would accept it with every part of my body; .../ My body will have performed/ my duty to my nation,/The duty which is mine,/This side of the grave.”

Brown points out that the African specificity of Madingiane’s ‘epic’ may, as suggested by Mazisi Kunene, derive from the textual strategies of izibongo, the traditional narrative epic, and from indaba. But he says that in comparison to Kunene’s *Emperor Shaka the Great*, Madingoane’s poem is heterogeneous in both form and register in that it “moves from symbolic abstraction to prosaic statement ... from mythology to the rhetoric of the political platform” (p.198). In form it has both the “epigrammatic lyrics” reminiscent of Serote’s early poems, as well as prose poems that recall Mutloatse’s ‘poemdras’. While Brown (p.199-200) suggests that this unevenness in style may be due to the poet’s difficulties with both language and genre, he nevertheless sees a potentially deeper explanation for it, taking his cue from how Chapman handled a similar issue with regards to Serote’s poetry. Through his admixture of register and form, Chapman says, Serote sought to reflect a historical process in which man experiences vicissitudes of fortune, yet being able to persevere over long periods of time. From this Brown sees a third possible model for Madingoane’s poem, namely the Brechtian contemporary epic. From this perspective ‘blackman’ can also be viewed as a hero concerned, not with mythology or ancestral rituals, but with urgent socio-political problems so that he can be an agent of change.

Recalling the conservatism characteristic of popular forms that he discussed in the second chapter, Brown is critical of Madingoane’s failure to “grant women status as social agents” (p.203). Noting that the poet’s dedication of *africa my beginning* portrays women as mothers and mourners of men, the active social agents, the author concedes however that debates about feminism may not have been available to the poet at the time of composing ‘black trial’. I would add that, since Madingoane was working within the black consciousness milieu, he was not the only one to display gender insensitivity, if such it was. Brown has earlier on quoted Biko (p.169) as saying of the BC movement that

“Its unadulterated quintessence is the realization by the *black man* of the need to rally together with *his brothers* around the cause of their oppression – the blackness of their skin ...” [my emphasis]. Apart from the possibility that BC activists may have been unaware of debates on feminism, nevertheless the point could also be made that in practice, if not in their writings and public pronouncements, women played some crucial roles, and for which they were recognized.

The issue of gender notwithstanding, Brown correctly sees ‘black trial’ as occupying an important place in the articulation of South Africa’s literary and historical development. Among other things, it reminds people to guard against “overwhelming pressure[s] today towards conditions of reconciliatory amnesia” in the way it “points to a long history of degradation and deprivation which cannot simply be erased by changes in the tiers of government.” Further, it provides a link with the early poetry of the likes of Peter Abrahams and H.I.E. Dhlomo, without which the literary-historical origins of Soweto poetry cannot be fully appreciated. On the basis of these and other considerations (pp.206-208), Brown argues that, even though extracts of ‘black trial’ have been included in many collections of South African poetry, especially in Couzens and Patel (1982), it has not been given the prominence that it deserves. When this is redressed, an attempt should be made to exercise editorial sensitivity to the oral character of the poem to ensure that it is cast in a suitable print form, a project that should be preceded by “the development of a coherent theory ... of oral-print transfers” applicable to this and similar poems.

POETRY, POLITICS, AND PERFORMANCE.

This last chapter of the book is devoted to the works of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula. In order for the reader to understand both the similarities and differences between the two, there is a brief biographical spill on Mbuli at the beginning (pp.213-215), followed by an outline of Qabula’s life, and then a detailed discussion of his poetry (pp.215-239), before Brown returns to Mbuli to add more biographical

information, and then analyze his poetry. These poets have contrasting backgrounds in linguistic, geographical, and class terms, even though their poetry addresses shared national concerns and both poets seek to exploit the potential of oral performance. Mbuli has both a national and international profile, having attended school longer than his counterpart Qabula, whose work was confined to trade unionism, and in the Natal region. Further, Mbuli was born and brought up in an urban setting, which exposed him to technological innovations in his youth. Even there he had the opportunity to observe izibongo performance for visiting chiefs at hostels. Qabula's strengths lie in his close familiarity with traditional Xhosa culture, from which he acquired a knowledge of the nature, function and performance of izibongo, and was comfortable composing both in Xhosa and Zulu. He also readily empathized with the working conditions of union members, particularly the deprivations immanent in the policy of migrant labour, which affected 70% of the men in his home area, and being himself the son of a miner.

Some of Qabula's poems were published in the collection *Black Mamba Rising: South African worker poets in struggle* (1986), and were originally in Zulu but were later translated into English (p.216). Others are contained in his autobiography, *A Working Life: cruel beyond belief* (1989). Brown observes that, in spite of the differences between the poems of Mbuli and Qabula, they were viewed by critics in the 1980s as the same, and so the two were called 'worker poets'. Since this term implies a concern with various issues pertaining to how trade union organizations address political and economic matters affecting their members, it is clearly inapplicable to Mbuli. Brown says that this confusion led to a special issue of *Staffrider* on 'worker culture' (8[3&4] 1989) carrying poems by people from different social strata. The appearance of *Black Mamba Rising* caused spirited critical debates, particularly in response to Cronin's review of it, in which he argued that the poetry it carried challenged old conceptions of what poetry is and does. Rather than being elitist and for consumption as a pastime, it is poetry that "march[es] in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land". Cronin wrote (p.217). Qabula's own retort

(p.217-218) to the dismissive critics was equally feisty: "... I've got people I'm working and living with – the people who are living in the university of the compound, the university of the hostel, and who are living in shacks. I'm talking **with** them. So you talk **to** your people, I'll talk **with** mine' [emphasis mine]. It seems to me that the view of the poet as dispensing essential truth under oracular inspiration is insidiously undermined by Qabula's choice of prepositions in the last two lines of his response.

In view of the debate outlined in this part of his book, Brown undertakes what he calls a "doubly recuperative exercise": to establish Qabula and Mbuli's works as *oral* poetry, and as *poetry*. This is the way in which the dangers of the 1980s debates can be avoided, namely those "of [having] poetry subsumed under the trauma of the political moment -- of the collapse of its distinctive textuality into larger debates about politics, culture, and social transformation" (p.218). Those debates have left Brown wondering as to whether their focus was the poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula, or whether they were about something else. He states that the poems were in fact received as poetry by the audiences and that most critics of the time were sympathetic to their ideological thrust, placing value on the "content" or "message". Useful though this may have been in the prevailing circumstances, Brown (p.219) says it is now necessary "to grant the poems their status as aesthetic forms in society ... to combine a poetic and a sociological analysis ... rather than to reduce the poems to functional utterances."

Qabula's poetry was inspired not only by his experiences of the policies of migrant labour as the son of a miner, but also by his own, first during the Pondoland rebellion, and later as a worker himself. His bitterness at the working conditions on the shop floor is reflected in the title of his autobiography. He even composed some of his poems while on the top of a forklift, and in his autobiography described the entrance to Dunlop as an "enormous factory gateway to Hell." It is for this reason that, as Brown (p.222) says, the book "is a biographical narrative intertwined with the larger historical narrative of the development of the Trade Union movement in the 1980s, and of radical worker rhetoric."

Two related factors in Qabula's prior experience galvanized him into poetic composition: his exposure to izibongo in rural Transkei, together with his knowledge that such poetry was not restricted to a special class of people in society. This led to his belief that anyone could be a poet, and not only 'amaintellelectuals' (p.221). Further, the Chief for whom some of the poetry was composed was the guardian of the community and, as such, his praises were the means by which the subjects negotiated their relations with him: praising him for his heroic exploits, criticizing him for his failures, and so on. The Trade Union in the work place assumed the role and status of the traditional Chief. And so Qabula composed his best known poem, 'Praise Poem to FOSATU', an amalgamation of 12 militant trade unions. He wrote this poem "after collecting bits and pieces" of information about the union "from reports", in the manner that izimbongi composed theirs. The state responded to the radicalization of the trade union movement by requiring unions to be registered so that their activities could be monitored. But the few that complied did not attract as many members as those that did not (p.223). The role of praises in the trade union movement which Qabula pioneered was given prominent recognition when, in 1985, he and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo were asked to perform 'Tears of a Creator' at the Durban launch of COSATU, a nation-wide organization of the majority of unregistered trade unions. In writing his poems, Qabula assumed one of the strategies that distinguish them from those of traditional Xhosa izimbongi, who depended purely on memory. But he put the art to good use because, apart from having grown up among them, his familiarity with the work of izimbongi was further deepened by the Bantu Education system's inculcation of tribal culture and history, yet another ironic example of the system shooting itself in the foot.

Although *Black Mamba Rising* first appeared in 1986, Brown's discussion in this chapter is based on a second, undated edition in which the mistakes in the first were corrected and which also has longer versions of some poems. In his 'Praise Poem to FOSATU', Qabula modified the traditional functions of izibongo so that his poem could

serve as a means of negotiating relations between the workers and FOSATU. Through it he praised the union and expressed what the workers expected of it, as izibongo did of Chiefs. But in performance he donned a union T-shirt or overalls. And he used a public address system in order for his voice to reach the much larger audience of union members. In delivery he used traditional rhythms and intonation complemented by facial expressions and gesture, resources that have more recently been curtailed by the need to remain close to the microphone (p.227). Given this central role of technology in oral performance at the time, one cannot but laugh at the futility of the Transkei 'homeland' authorities' solution to the problem of irreverent poets at their 1976 'independence celebrations': denying the poets access to the microphone!

Brown says that in his composition of 'Praise Poem to FOSATU', Qabula exploited the formal principle found in izibongo, that of 'naming' through the use of epithets and that these serve as an organizing principle in the poem. But instead of those that in izibongo were drawn from the natural world to "[describe] the physical, moral, and political qualities of the chief", Qabula followed the practice of other modern izimbongi in employing epithets with imagery culled from the industrial context. In praising the federation (pp.228-229) he nevertheless found images from nature irresistible. FOSATU's strength was that of "the lion"; its capacity to protect members made it "the forest of Africa", or "the hen with wide wings/That protect its chickens"; "its potential to undermine management" made it "the mole", and so on. As the last one illustrates, the theme of each epithet is expanded to show what it implies. In this way Qabula's poem has a coherence of thematic concerns that is absent in izibongo. Brown observes that the poet also employs the circular principle in his poem, with the epithets serving as the 'cut' by which the audience is reminded of the theme of the poem, namely the federation. The poet also used dramatic sketches (p.230) to further vivify the poem, three of them in 'Praise Poem to FOSATU'. These serve to satirize management and its informers, the "sell-outs". This theme is given realism through the use

of the pidgin Fanakalo, created to enable speakers of mutually unintelligible languages to communicate. [Brown spells the name of this language variety in two different ways (pp.226 and 230)]. The pillorying of management is set against praise for FOSATU, which is portrayed as a hero whose inspiration comes from the ancestors. There is further syncretism in the poem in the appeal to religious wisdom (p.231). The poem achieves dramatic intensity through parallelism by initial linking borrowed from izibongo. Another traditional technique exploited in the poem is that of indicating how member unions are related to the federation, which comes from izimbongi's concern to establish the ruler's lineage: 'Who is organizing at Bakers?/ 'Of course Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union./'But where does it come from./'From FOSATU' (p.232). Brown points out that izibongo do not usually contain continuous narrations of events because they are generally eulogistic, but that in the unions a poet's knowledge of history is valued. Qabula himself is quoted (p.232) as saying he was concerned to "preserve the history of the life of the workers." He achieves this by giving FOSATU the epithet 'black forest', one which was used to praise a union leader in the 1920s. Yet in practice, as Brown points out, (pp.233-234), the poet's use of history "is more allusive, metaphorical, and anecdotal", which the author attributes to "the influence of models of oral transmission." The poet's problem with narrating events chronologically went as far as Qabula providing conflicting dates about his own life, Brown says. We are also told that the problematic parts of the poem where Qabula relates historical events came at a time when Inkatha was recasting Zulu history to justify its narrow tribal concerns. And because Qabula rejected this political stance, he attracted Inkatha's wrath.

Brown (p.235) presents a persuasive argument for "[granting Qabula's poems] their symbolic and experiential resonance: the power of persuasion and emotion which emerges from the complex intersections of belief and purpose in a charged political context." This is that not only Qabula, but Mbuli also, bundled together different and conflicting ideas from various "political, religious, and mythological

belief-systems”, a practice which “characterizes much of the cultural and social history of this country.” In the relations of abstand between peoples from various backgrounds, stakeholders’ narrow posturings have continually undergone transmogrification under the impetus of pressing concerns of the moment. It is in this context that the likes of Qabula and Mbuli have resorted to “whatever resources have been to hand.” Given this, Brown sees as unrealistic the expectations of critics such as Sole, that poetry produced in a climate such as he outlines here should meet the demands of a thorough and consistent analytical paradigm. Brown (p.235-236) outlines various reasons for why Qabula’s poetry should occupy pride of place among that of others. It reminds all readers of the workers’ contribution to the struggle in the 1980s through the voices of the workers themselves, voices which are not represented in South African historiography. Further, by managing to adapt an indigenous art form to the articulation and negotiation of relations between workers and management, Qabula devised a much needed channel of communication, given the varying degrees of literacy among union members.

Apart from the poem in praise of FOSATU, Qabula composed others using models other than izibongo. Brown uses as an example of these the poem ‘Migrant’s Lament – A Song’, in which the repetition typical of African oral poetry is syncretized with the Christian hymn or prayer, just as Shembe did. This strategy raised certain expectations in the audience but which were not fulfilled later. As Brown states, the piece quoted on page 237 is structured around the refrain ‘If I have wronged you Lord forgive me’, which is apparently an appeal for divine assistance. Yet it later points to the political system as the cause of the people’s suffering and which must be fought through the union. The poet’s latest poems do not draw on izibongo in that they have become more narrative, which is a feature of the folktale and ‘indaba’. They also address issues relating to the broader political struggle. An example given by Brown is the poem ‘Africa’s Black Buffalo’ (p.237), in which an allegorical narrative is built around the black buffalo, a traditional motif.

In conclusion Brown discusses the importance of Qabula's more recent work with the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal, Durban, and also that in the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW). Through the latter Qabula has assisted aspiring poets to learn the art of composition, many of whom perform at COSAW gatherings. Thus, just like izimbongi who did not attend training sessions but learned their art by observing accomplished ones perform, Brown sees Qabula and Mbuli as having served a similar role in respect of up and coming poets.

As Brown has already pointed out, even though both Qabula and Mbuli's works addressed concerns of the struggle, Qabula's audience was specifically the trade union membership, and that in Natal, whereas Mbuli's was national. This is because he, in contrast to Qabula, "occupies a political space which is largely 'popular' rather than specifically unionist" (p.239). This is confirmed by the fact that it was Mbuli who was asked to perform at the celebration of Bishop Tutu's Nobel prize, and who received a commendation from Nelson Mandela, then incarcerated in Victor Verster Prison. Further, Mbuli is more at home in a technologized context, often performing his poems against a background of a variety of popular musical styles ranging from mbaqanga and isichatamyia to reggae and rap. Audiences readily respond to such a performance style since these music types and Mbuli's work are broadcast on radio stations. No wonder his popularity has been compared to that of pop stars, a perception confirmed by fans mobbing him when Brown hosted Mbuli at the University of Natal in Durban (p.240). Mbuli also has a better command of English, the language used in most spheres of modern life in the country.

During the 1970s and 1980s Mbuli joined a number of cultural and political organizations that helped to shape his vision of political developments in South Africa (pp.240-241). In his early school years he was influenced by the BC movement, and thereby attracted the attention of the state machinery, especially in the context of the policy of 'Total Onslaught'. The banning of BC organizations saw many publications being banned and people arrested and held in solitary confinement,

including Mbuli. His cassette 'Change is Pain' was banned, though not his book *Before Dawn*. The banning of political leaders created a power vacuum into which members of the clergy stepped (p.244). In the repressive atmosphere that these developments ushered in, such organizations as were able to operate found inspiration from diverse formations. This is the source of the hybridizations to be found in Mbuli's poetic compositions. They are also syncretic in form since his performances bring together rhythms from diverse models and those typical of izibongo, which he learnt from izimbongi performing for visiting chiefs at hostels. Brown says that in the early part of his career Mbuli performed without musical backing, although the audience responded by humming or singing. Latterly he has performed with his band at concerts. The need to remain close to the microphone has cut down Mbuli's body language. But, as Brown says, he has resorted to facial expressions, which "enact a 'sense' of the poem, while hand gestures punctuate climactic or dramatic moments" (p.245). Brown says Mbuli's performance "is more demonstrative and lively" and that he "dresses more consciously in Afro-fashions" (p.246).

Although he is first and foremost an oral poet, Mbuli's literate education has enabled him to write his poems, which he revised several times over long periods of time. However, he was forced to compose orally when held in solitary confinement for 176 days. Most of the poems are in his book *Before Dawn* (1989) and are taken from his two albums 'Change is Pain' and 'Unbroken Spirit'. Nearly all are in English (p.246). The author observes that in performance "Mbuli delivers the lines in rhythmical fashion, with a marked pause at the end of each line", and that the pause is marked by a semi-colon in the print version. Brown is critical of this convention since it introduces a clash between the use of the semi-colon as rhythmical and as grammatical marker. He prefers to have the line-break functioning to indicate a pause in delivery, with an explanatory note at the beginning of the book. In terms of form, Brown sees few similarities between Mbuli's poems and rural izibongo as they neither 'name' nor deploy sets of epithets or praise names. However, the influence of the old genre is apparent in

Mbuli's use of parallelism and repetition "to develop an intensity of delivery appropriate to the energies and angers of the political funeral or rally" (p.247). This is employed to good effect in the poem 'Change is Pain', in which Mbuli "uses repeated constructions -- a form of call-and-response -- to build to a rousing climax": "Change is unknown in my ghetto;/Change is an endless bucket system in Alexandria;/Change is pain in Africa; .../Change to a free non-racial society is certain; .../And the ruins of autocracy shall fall."

Although, as the above lines suggest, Mbuli is galvanizing the audience into war in the way that izimbongi did, Brown says that the poet stressed "that his poems urge actions in the social world, not necessarily armed combat", and that they serve "in sustaining and comforting those engaged in political activity." The extracts from the poem 'The Spear Has Fallen' (p.248) support the poet's claim that he customarily moves from comforting to exhorting his audience. Mbuli also uses imagery culled from the natural world for both thematic and formal purposes, and many of his poems make use of similes and metaphors. Brown here (p.249) gives the poem 'Crocodiles' as an example, and points to the centrality of 'crocodiles' in the simile "the people are like crocodiles in the river" in it and says that it serves to portray "the conflict between the state and the people." I would add that it can also be read as a boast: just as the crocodile is extremely agile and therefore difficult to kill while it is in water, its habitat, so are the people who are fighting the state on their own terrain. Brown (p.252) sees "the emphasis on the declarative persona" in some of Mbuli's poems as possibly coming "from the influence of the personal izibongo or 'boasts' which African people create for themselves", or from the poet's familiarity with "the performance arrogance of rap and dub artists." So the simile may be read as a boast and an exhortation. Another traditional rhetorical device used by Mbuli is wordplay, which Brown attributes to the widespread use of riddles, tongue-twisters, proverbs, etc, in African societies. He gives as an example Mbuli's poem "Triple 'M' " (p.249), in which the poet created an acronym from the names of homeland leaders to convey a satirical view of them. Overall, Mbuli avoided the

obfuscation of the Western lyrical tradition in his compositions, having developed his art under the influence of Soweto poetry and of the izibongo tradition. Brown says the poet adopted 'making plain' as his poetic strategy (p.250), and that in composition Mbuli "moves from the defamiliarizing to the familiar, from metaphor to slogan", in the process creating "a sense of commonality with the audience, a commonality reinforced by the call-and-response mode." The poem 'The Noble Charter' illustrates this point. Whereas other Soweto poets sought to fashion an English language that would convey a sense of "their African background and ghetto ordeals", Mbuli leaned "towards high diction that is elevated and biblical", a practice that "[reveals] a visionary impulse similar to that of Madingoane, and before him, Isaiah Shembe."

There are several other important aspects of Mbuli's poetry which Brown discusses in this chapter: the 'prophetic' nature of the poetry which many have commented on and, related to this, "the creation of a declamatory and visionary persona who speaks with the authority of testimony, and represents at once an intensely personal and a collective experience" (p.251); the lack of ideological coherence and failure to adhere to historical chronology imposed on the poet by the exigencies of contemporary South Africa (p.253), and so on. The book ends with Brown (pp.254-255) pointing to the question of the significance Mbuli's poetry in South Africa's changed circumstances and to the implications of those changes for the poet's career. Given the time at which he was writing this, Brown speculates about what the outcome of Mbuli's arrest might be. Brown himself puts on the seer's hat when he 'prophetically' writes "... it remains uncertain ... whether, if the evidence against him is overwhelming, we are faced again with the unpredictability of the *popular*, and a graphic representation of the broader disaffection of many ex-activists from the policies and concerns of the new government." As for Mbuli's own suspicions as to why he might have been "framed", we could put the words of the often quoted mixed metaphor in the poet's mouth: "Along the untrodden paths of the future, I see the footprints of an unknown hand", given the poet's protestations of innocence all the way to prison.

This is a well-researched and competently written book. Brown has managed to bring together in one volume the artistic oral creations of the indigenous peoples of South Africa, from the /Xam Bushman to Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli, by critically tracing their distinctive thematic and formal concerns. Because of the way they display both similarities and dissimilarities with the art forms of those of their more technologized, western-origin fellow citizens, Brown argues for a metaphorical rather than a literal reading of them and therefore for their inclusion in literature syllabi and collections that are truly South African. They are one important way in which the oppressed 'talked back' to the oppressor, and in which the ruled continue to 'talk back' to the ruler even today. So versatile is African oral poetry, and so informative and educative is it, that a thorough understanding of the African 'difference' is well nigh impossible without a serious study of it.

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