

ORALITY, TEXTUALITY AND HISTORY

ISSUES IN SOUTH AFRICAN ORAL POETRY AND PERFORMANCE

by

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## Abstract

A vigorous oral tradition has existed throughout South African history, and in many ways represents our truly original contribution to world literature. Despite this, oral literature is largely absent from accounts of literary history in this country. While the particular oppressions of South African political life have contributed to the exclusion of oral forms, the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text is a feature of literary studies worldwide, and appears to be related to the critical practices that have been dominant in universities and schools for most of this century. In this study I consider ways of recovering oral forms for literary debate, and offer what I consider to be more appropriate strategies of 'reading'. My aim is to re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen, through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianised oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s.

Recovering oral poetry and performance genres for literary debate requires the development of an appropriate critical methodology. Through a consideration of advances in the study of orality, I aim to suggest ways of reading which grant credence to the specific strategies and performative energies of oral texts while locating the texts in the spaces and constrictions of their societies. A great many oral texts from the past survive only in printed, translated forms, however, and a key aspect of such a critical project is how - while acknowledging the particular difficulties involved - one 'uses' highly mediated and artificially stabilised print versions to suggest something of the dynamic nature of oral performance in South African historical and social life. This thesis also considers how texts address us across historical distances. I argue for maintaining a dialectic between the 'past significance' and 'present meaning' of the poems, songs and stories: for allowing the past to shape our reading while we remain aware that our recuperation of history is inevitably directed by present needs and ideologies.

These ideas are explored through five chapters which consider, respectively, the songs and stories of the nineteenth-century /Xam Bushmen, the izibongo of Shaka, the hymns of the

Messianic Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe, Ingoapele Madingoane's epic 'Soweto' poem "black trial", and the performance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula in the 1980s.

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## Introduction

A vigorous oral tradition has existed throughout South African history, and in many ways represents our truly original contribution to world literature. Despite this, oral literature is largely absent from accounts of literary history in this country. While the particular oppressions of South African political life have certainly contributed to the exclusion of oral forms - which are largely associated with black societies - the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text is a feature of literary studies worldwide, and appears to be related to the critical practices that have been dominant in universities and schools for most of this century. In this study I shall consider ways of recovering oral forms for literary debate, and shall offer what I consider to be more appropriate strategies of 'reading'. My aim is to re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen,<sup>1</sup> through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianised oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s. In doing this, I shall be reacting against the established line which is based upon the printed word, and which begins with Thomas Pringle and ends with Douglas Livingstone or Mongane Wally Serote. I shall argue, nonetheless, that orality and literacy intersect continuously in South African literary history.

Recovering oral poetry and performance genres for literary debate requires the development of an appropriate critical methodology. Through a consideration of advances in the study of orality, I aim to suggest ways of reading which grant credence to the specific strategies and performative energies of oral texts while locating the texts in the spaces and constrictions of their societies. A great many oral texts from the past survive only in printed, translated forms, however, and a key aspect of such a critical project is how - while acknowledging the particular difficulties involved - one 'uses' highly mediated and artificially stabilised print versions to suggest something of the dynamic nature of oral performance in South African historical and social life. This thesis also considers the question of how texts address us across historical distances, and argues for readings that resist either a simple antiquarianism (in which the study

of the past is self-justificatory and occurs ostensibly in terms of past concerns) or the contrapuntal relativist position (in which the past is simply 'rewritten' according to modern agendas). I shall argue for maintaining a dialectic between the 'past significance' and 'present meaning' of the poems, songs and stories: for allowing the past to shape our reading while we remain aware that our recuperation of history is inevitably directed by present needs and ideologies.

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. Hence, this study has a particular moral purpose, which seeks to avoid what Robert Weimann regards as the self-reflexively 'academic' nature of much contemporary literary criticism:

Criticism ... no longer fulfils the cultural needs and expectations of society: it has become "related to the institutional procedures of education rather than to the education of a social class". In other words, so much academic criticism is written to fulfil professional requirements that it is possible to say that the "primary function of writing literary criticism has ... become certifying college and university teachers of literature". (1977:30-31)

While my study constitutes a thesis for higher-degree purposes and hence is "written to fulfil professional requirements", it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history. In examining the complex functioning of oral forms in their societies, the study wishes to repudiate still wide-spread assertions about the lack of sophistication in the African oral tradition and, accordingly, to affirm the full human creativity of our society. At the same time, it seeks to restore to debates about poetry, both locally and internationally, the necessary dialectic between the oral and the written. The concern to retrieve a cultural history does not, however, imply that the study will simply valorise African cultural forms. Rather, it will attempt

to suggest ways of 'reading' the texts or messages that do not avoid what might seem to many of us today to be conservativisms associated with certain societies or practices (such as the highly authoritarian nature of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka or Dingane, or the moral strictures of many of the African separatist churches). The challenge is to engage creatively with the forms in their own historical and discursive contexts while remaining alert to their possible significance for us today in very different circumstances.

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Oral poetry and performance have been important features of South African society since the development of the first human communities on the subcontinent, from the songs and stories of the Bushmen and Khoikhoi to the praise poems ("izibongo", "lithoko") of African chiefdoms. In addition to prominent 'public' forms of panegyric to the leader, other forms of oral poetry have flourished - and continue to flourish - in African societies: songs to the clan; family songs (especially at weddings and funerals); love lyrics; children's verse; work songs; lullabies; personal izibongo; religious songs; songs to animals; and songs of divination. The influence of missionaries on the oral tradition gave rise to forms which drew on the harmonies and poetics of the Christian hymn, such as Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" or the compositions of the Messianic Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe. With urbanisation following rapidly on colonial occupation, oral forms were adapted to industrialised, politicised contexts. Migrant workers in mine compounds have used forms of praise poetry for most of this century in order to praise or criticise indunas or shift bosses. Sotho miners have developed a new genre of oral poetry called "sefela" which aesthetically encodes their experiences as migrant workers, while Sotho women perform poetic narratives ("seoeleoele") through the medium of song and dance in shebeens and bars (Coplan, 1987:13-14). In the apartheid 'homelands', particularly Transkei, praise poets played an important role in orchestrating resistance to rulers like Chief Kaiser Matanzima and others. A number of poets had also adapted oral forms to the printed page, amongst them H.I.E. Dhlomo, Mazisi Kunene, B.W. Vilakazi and A.C. Jordan, while in the first four decades of this century S.E.K. Mqhayi, possibly the best known twentieth-century oral poet in South Africa, had

successfully combined the African mode of oral performance with the Western technology of print. (He was named "imbongi yesizwe jikelele" - praise poet of the whole nation.) During the political upheaval of the 1970s, Soweto poets like Ingoapele Madingoane experimented with oral performance as a means of disseminating poems while avoiding not only threats of state censorship, but the 'gatekeeping' of white-controlled literary magazines. Oral poetry has also been linked for many years to trade-union activity in South Africa with reports, for example, going back to a traditional imbongi named Hlongwe who in the 1930s in Durban praised the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (Sole,1987a:108). During the 1980s, poets like Alfred Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo utilised the form of izibongo in mobilising support for the union movement, while Mzwakhe Mbuli achieved acclaim for his poetry performances at mass meetings and political funerals (he became known as "the people's poet"). There are even reports of praise poems being recited at university ceremonies, notable examples being a poem by Pumelele M. Pumulwana at the Fort Hare graduation in 1939, and another by Chief S.M. Burns-Ncamashe on the installation of the new chancellor of Rhodes University on 30 March 1977 (Opland,1984:191). Recently, Nelson Mandela was the subject of a poem by Mzwakhe Mbuli and two izibongo on his inauguration as State President. An imbongi also performed at the opening of South Africa's first democratic parliament.

Despite this abundance of forms, many of which still 'live' in the daily experiences of South African people, there is a profound lack of critical debate about oral poetry and performance in South African literary studies. While some research has been conducted on oral literature in African languages (see, for example, the work of H.I.E. Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi, D.P. Kunene, Mazisi Kunene and others), and important collections of oral poems have appeared, the oral tradition has largely been 'written out' of literary history.<sup>2</sup> It is only now being recovered, both through the work of sociologists and anthropologists, and through a revisionist awareness of the processes of exclusion, occlusion and effacement that have occurred in the construction of the cultural history of this country.



In literary studies the customary trajectory of South African poetic history, as represented in critical accounts and anthologies, has largely been that of the Western tradition of print. In their book A Critical Study of South African Poetry in English (1957), for example, G.M. Miller and Howard Sergeant give little attention to black poetry: the only black poets they refer to are H.I.E. Dhlomo, whose work is strongly influenced by his mission-school education, and the 'coloured' writer Peter Abrahams. Though they identify the colonial assumptions which characterise much early white South African poetry, they remain committed finally - in keeping with their times - to a European (literate) aesthetic. They dismiss African forms such as music and Bushman rock art as "primitive" (1957:9); and, though they express their impatience with the morally discursive poetry of a white intellectual élite around the turn of the century, they seek not African alternatives, but what they perceive to be the energising impulses of European modernism and symbolism (1957:11). (This is profoundly ironic, of course, in view of the debt of European modernism to north and west African cultural forms.) Although titled A Book of South African Verse, Guy Butler's influential 1959 anthology tacitly redefines the term "South African verse" to mean "South African verse written originally in English", and on this basis includes only the work of white literate poets. Like Miller and Sergeant before him, Butler labels African culture as "primitive" (1959:xxxi & xxxii). In revising A Book of South African Verse twenty years later in very different historical circumstances, Butler and Mann (1979) reveal - not unsurprisingly - a far greater sensitivity to questions of race and language, and acknowledge explicitly the difficulty of compiling an anthology in a "complex multi-lingual society in the midst of turbulent transition" (1979:14). Accordingly their collection A New Book of South African Verse in English includes the work of certain black writers: those associated with the mission press (like J.J.R. Jolobe), poets drawing on oral forms in printed verse (like Mazisi Kunene), and the Soweto poets. The bulk of the poems in the anthology, however, continue to fall within the Western print tradition. Michael Chapman includes neither praise poetry nor Khoikhoi/Bushman poetry in A Century of South African Poetry (1981), but - like Butler and Mann - includes selections by black poets working in English. His influential study South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (1984) discusses oral poetry only as it influences the work of the Soweto poets. In The Paperbook of South African English Poetry (1986) he addresses

directly the difficulties of whether to include translations, particularly of poems in African languages. Although he finally rejects such an alternative as comprising little more than tokenism in that insufficient examples exist in English translation to result in fair coverage (1986:18), Chapman does represent Jack Cope's translations of Bushman and Khoikhoi pieces, as well as Alfred Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" which was composed originally in Zulu. He also includes the work of white English poets who have drawn on the African oral tradition, such as Jeremy Cronin and Keith Gottschalk. Voices from Within (1982), which Chapman compiled with Achmat Dangor, includes a section of seven pages on "traditional" poetry in translation, as well as poems by S.E.K. Mqhayi, A.K. Soga, and B.W. Vilakazi. This collection is subtitled "Black Poetry from Southern Africa" and perhaps reflects the danger of 'ghettoising' not only black but oral forms, of setting them apart from other forms of South African verse. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel's anthology The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891-1981 (1982) includes an impressive century of black South African poems, but specifically excludes oral and African-language verse. Malvern van Wyk Smith's historical study of South African literature, Grounds of Contest (1990), ignores oral forms entirely.

Though its largest section is devoted to printed poetry in English, Jack Cope and Uys Krige's influential anthology The Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968) appears to be the earliest general South African anthology to offer a fairly comprehensive selection of African oral poetry. Chapman is correct, I think, that the decision of the editors to "balkanize the volume into different sections for the different language groups is unfortunate" (1986:18). This sentiment is echoed by Stephen Gray who says that the poets "may all have been on the same bus, but white English speakers drove it while blacks had the seats reserved in the back" (1989:xix). Nonetheless, I feel that Cope and Krige's anthology promised to erode the linguistic separations that have been a feature not only of South African political life but of South African literary history. (Their anthology includes in one volume poetry originally in English, and - in translation - poems in Afrikaans, "Bushman", "Hottentot", Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu.) The editors acknowledge the difficulties of transcription and translation in the anthologising of oral texts - their editorial interventions are not always unproblematic, a point to which I shall return - but regard it as

necessary, at least, to represent the oral tradition in South African poetry. In his Penguin Book of South African Verse (1989), Stephen Gray defines his task in relation to that of Cope and Krige. Wishing to emphasise linguistic proximities rather than divisions (1989:xix), he talks of translation as "a major life-sustaining activity within the system" and as "unblocking channels of communication to insist on the reciprocity of human feelings" (1989:xix). He includes as a result a variety of African oral texts, many of which have been translated by poets of some renown. Within southern African literature, Colin Style and O'lan Style's Mambo Book of Zimbabwean Verse in English (1986) is one of the few collections to offer a range of both printed poetry and translated oral poetry. Despite the brief "Note on Translations" which follows their Introduction, however, the editors themselves are unable to offer any coherent theory of the translation process, referring instead to the "idiosyncratic charm" carried over into English by translations which tend towards the literal (1986:xxix). Jeff Opland's recent anthology Words that Circle Words: A Choice of South African Oral Poetry (1992) offers extensive translations of oral poems, which set in dialogue with one another Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Bushman and Khoikhoi forms. Although serving an important recuperative function, however, the anthology is in danger of effacing the important lines of continuity and influence between oral and printed forms, and of reinforcing perceptions that oral poetry is an area of specialisation on the margins of South African literary studies. The only critical survey which includes oral and African-language forms in the broader literary history of the subcontinent is Michael Chapman's very recent Southern African Literatures (1996). This comprehensive study treats the songs/stories of the Bushmen and Khoikhoi and the izibongo of African societies both as the earliest texts of our literary history and as continuing influences within that history.

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As this brief summary suggests, oral poetry has not been entirely excluded from South African literary history, but occupies a minor place - sometimes designated 'specialist' - outside of the mainstream printed tradition. The suppression and/or marginalisation of the oral proceeds from

two related problems, which are implicit in the anthologies and studies discussed above: the ontological (the linguistic/textual 'status' of the poems as mediated through the processes of transcription and translation) and the paradigmatic (the inability of traditionally literate paradigms in criticism to account adequately for oral poetry). As I suggested at the outset, a study of this nature - which seeks to recover oral poetry and performance for literary debate while remaining largely reliant on printed texts - needs to engage with these problems and offer workable solutions.

As regards the ontological difficulties, the nature or status of many oral texts as they have come to be recorded in print is at best ambiguous. (Of course, the same may be said of the printed versions of Shakespeare's plays, which first appeared only after the playwright's death, relied at least partly for reconstruction on the memories of actors, and have been 'edited' by centuries of scholars.) Except when an actual live performance is witnessed - which is only possible with contemporary, local poets - oral poems survive through a process of mediation. They are generally transferred from an oral to a printed form through the agency of a literate intermediary, who often holds a position of political power over the poet or informant. Such is the case with the bulk of the African praise poetry that survives: it has been transcribed and sometimes translated into another language (usually English) by missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists, historians and the like. Similarly, the songs and stories of the nineteenth-century /Xam Bushmen, including their own 'memory' of earlier myths or legends, are available to modern readers largely through the work of W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd, who in the 1870s conducted a series of interviews with a group of Bushman convicts in Cape Town. These texts have more recently been given currency by Stephen Watson's 'versions' from Bleek and Lloyd's manuscript in Return of the Moon (1991). To talk simply of 'transcribing' the poem has a neutrality which ignores the fact that a literate epistemology is necessarily at work in the transference of the poem from the oral to the printed medium, and that the 'transcriber' may lack the cultural understanding or phonetic repertoire to capture the full 'meaning' of the poem, including that of an aesthetic impact: an aesthetic impact as measurable against a set of specific circumstances and audience expectations. The printed form may also give poems a fixity which

obviates their very significance as oral performance: the texts of izibongo - such as those of Shaka or Dingane - varied to a greater or lesser extent with every delivery, and the specific demands of the occasion made each performance a distinct 'event'. A frank, if alarming, admission concerning the process of mediation in the oral-print transfer is found in the Introduction to Cope and Krige's anthology. Acknowledging the problem of variations in the performance of izibongo, the editors say: "No two reciters will deliver the poems in the same order or sequence with the result that any single transcription appears like a jumble of dissociated images and historical tags. In these extracts images and sequences have been reassembled in a more comprehensible order" (1968:20). The influence of Western assumptions of 'aesthetic unity' are clearly evident in this statement. Yet the ontological question is not limited to those texts which are mediated by a second party, for even when we 'know' that the printed record is accurate, as in the case of the oral poets from the 1980s who are literate and have produced books, the status of oral poems on the page is at best uncertain.

The ontology of the poems is further problematised - as I have suggested - by the fact that most are performed originally in languages other than English, and are hence accessible to many people only in translation. Like transcription, translation involves an important process of mediation, as an extreme example quoted by Susan Bassnett-McGuire should indicate. Edward Fitzgerald said of translating Persian poetry in 1851: "It is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them" (1980:3). In her book Translation Studies, Bassnett-McGuire argues that although translation has been an important aspect of literary production and study since at least Graeco-Roman times, and serves to create enriching areas of contact between cultures/historical periods, critics have not investigated with any coherence the theory and practice of translation. At worst literary critics, particularly today, have tended to read and teach translations from the source language as if they were original target-language texts. The seriousness with which translation has been viewed at key historical moments, however, is indicated by the fact that, as an example, Edward Dolet was executed for

heresy in France in 1546 for 'mistranslating' one of Plato's dialogues "in such a way as to imply disbelief in immortality" (Bassnett-McGuire,1980:54).

In attempting to conceptualise translation as a literary activity, Bassnett-McGuire argues that it should not be conceived of in narrowly 'linguistic' terms, but in fact belongs properly to the field of semiotics (1980:13). Hence, she argues that the text must be seen in relation to the signifying systems of its society, both in the source language and the target language. Drawing on developments in literary theory, particularly on Roland Barthes's emphasis on the role of the reader in 'creating' the text, Bassnett-McGuire emphasises the fact that every translation is in fact a 'reading', which involves the processes of decoding and recoding (1980:16). Yet she points to the difficulties experienced in translating from one language to another when there is no equivalent of the literary form within the signifying systems of the target language - a difficulty experienced particularly in translating *izibongo* into English - or when there is no linguistic/semantic equivalent of a word, phrase or idiom in the target language. The difficulties of translating poetry are exacerbated by the fact that the structures of rhythm and rhyme often differ greatly from one language or language group to another, something which is particularly marked in the case of English and African languages. Further, the question of finding corresponding literary forms in the source language and the target language is of particular concern in the practice of translating oral poetry and performance genres. Ruth Finnegan points out that whereas written poetry is primarily typographically marked, critics who are involved in oral studies identify the poetic status of oral texts not through one absolute criterion, "but [through] a range of stylistic and formal attributes - features like heightened language, metaphorical expression, musical form or accompaniment, structural repetitiveness ... , prosodic features like metre, alliteration, even perhaps parallelism", as well as through the fact that the poem is 'italicised' or 'set apart' from everyday life and language (1977:25-26). But the question of how to represent oral poems in translated, written forms remains vexed. Like most translators, Finnegan herself opts for the print convention of short lines and stanzas, thus seeking to create an equivalence of effect between the source language and target language.<sup>3</sup>

Translation also often involves difficulties when the cosmogonic and ethical assumptions of the source language and target language are disjunctive. Eugene Nida, for example, cites the case of Guaica, a language of southern Venezuela, from which translation into English is problematic, since the language does not follow a dichotomous classification of 'good' and 'bad' but a trichotomous distinction (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980:30). In such a situation the translator appears to face the problem of 'untranslatability'. Yet his/her task is similar in this respect to that of the literary historian: how to make a text from another historical period (or society) available or accessible to us without reducing its 'otherness' or 'strangeness': hence, equivalence in translation, without which meaning is impossible, need not imply 'sameness'. We approach a problem here to which we shall return when discussing the question of historical retrieval: how to maintain a necessary dialectic between the difference of a text which is outside of our immediate cultural experience and its similarity as an artefact which can address us across social or historical distances.

My own procedure in working with printed and translated representations of oral texts is, as far as possible, to trace in some detail the processes by which the texts have come to assume their present form. In doing so I draw attention to their highly mediated status as a means of discouraging attempts - including my own - to treat the texts as stable objects. In discussing the izibongo of Shaka, for example, I examine the records of James Stuart who recorded the praises around the turn of this century. In addition, I examine Stuart's creation of a 'composite text' from different versions of the praises, the translations of Stuart's records by Daniel Malcolm, and finally the editorial interventions of Trevor Cope in bringing the izibongo into print. Having acknowledged these processes of mediation, however, I regard the texts - despite conceptual and ideological difficulties - as 'useful' in making available the political visions, aesthetic understandings, spiritual insights, symbolic identifications, economic imperatives, social pressures and quotidian lived experiences of South African people in history. My view of the processes of transcription and translation, therefore, endorses Bassnett-McGuire's as broadly semiotic. While acknowledging that the transfer of meaning is inevitably contingent on political

circumstances, I emphasise the value of the perceptions that may accompany such transfers from one signifying system to another.

The second difficulty faced by critics in dealing with oral texts is paradigmatic, for the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text seems to have its basis - at least partly - in the institutional practices of schools, universities and colleges in the Western world. The majority of poetry courses have until fairly recently operated according to the principles of New Criticism, which have favoured the complexity - paradox and ambiguity are prized qualities - of the crafted lyric: the short lyric is, of course, regarded as suitable teaching material for the tutorial or seminar room. The charged (and often unruly) rhythms of oral performance, in contrast, would present distinct teaching problems, or challenges. This suppression of the oral by a literate culture is reflected in the customary trajectory of literary history as formulated in academic institutions: consider, for example, how despite important developments in the United States such as 'projective verse' and 'beat poetry', academics and their students typically identify American poetic history in the print-bound forms of Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot and Robert Lowell rather than in the oral or 'open' expression of Walt Whitman, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg, as well as in that of Native Americans and African Americans. In our own case, South African English poetic history is usually arrayed along the print line of Thomas Pringle, Roy Campbell, Ruth Miller, Douglas Livingstone, Mongane Serote. Afrikaans poetic history also reveals a literate emphasis: from Eugene N. Marais and C. Louis Leipoldt to Totius, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Elisabeth Eybers, D.J. Opperman and Antjie Krog. Similarly, in African languages the emphasis is on those poets who were mission-educated and who as a result of the mission presses had a chance of seeing their work in print, or - more recently - those associated with academic institutions and publishers. As these examples suggest, traditional methods of recording literary history have in themselves been directed towards printed texts in the construction of lists of authors, whereas many oral texts cannot be attributed in the conventional sense to an individual 'author' for they employ epithets or phrases which form part of the general cultural currency of the society. It is necessary, then, to develop a new language of literary criticism and response which is able to suggest the complex functioning of oral poems as aspects of social as well as literary life.



The resistance of literary studies to oral challenges is, of course, ironic in view of the debt of almost all poetic forms to oral rhythms and vocalisations, and the vital and continuing existence of oral genres worldwide. The importance of developing a new critical methodology for oral texts, however, resides not only in its possibilities for recuperating marginalised or suppressed forms, but in its implications for reconceptualising the study of poetry as a whole: the field would include 'established' oral texts like Homer and Beowulf (which reveal many of the ontological problems discussed above), the English Romantic poets who speak beyond the confines of the printed page with 'inspiration', the word itself suggesting the breathing of performance, and poets like Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney who in their different ways evoke the tones and rhythms of the modern visionary. In South Africa such a critical methodology - as I have said - should permit the construction of a more inclusive poetic history, in which print and performance poets could be set in dialogue with one another.

My own concern in this study is literary-critical, and I am not involved therefore in actually collecting or recording oral poetry for study through field work. (My research, nonetheless, has involved my attending oral performances to gain insight into contexts and techniques of delivery.) I am aware of Isabel Hofmeyr's insistence that oral scholars must leave their desks in order to visit the communities about which they write, and I support her belief that such research may help restore to literary criticism a sense of individual and collective humanity which can easily be lost by scholars secluded in their studies (1993:181). I would insist, nevertheless, on the value of reinterpreting texts which have already been recorded (including texts from societies which no longer exist, such as those of the /Xam), or of recuperating texts which have disappeared from sight. Literary studies seems to me capable of making a considerable contribution in this area through its specific skills in textual analysis. This is not to deny the importance of interdisciplinarity in oral studies as advocated by Karin Barber (1989:13); my own study draws on research from, amongst other disciplines, anthropology, African language studies, sociology, history, religious studies, ethnomusicology and politics.

As I have suggested, the material which forms the basis of my study has already been recorded, and I accept the problems of mediation through transcription and translation involved in the process. What I wish to do is to draw oral poetry and performance into mainstream debates about South African literature. While certain other critics in South African literary studies have also accepted the challenge offered by oral forms, much of the research remains scattered in spite of the recent worldwide upsurge in publishing on oral literature.<sup>4</sup> Effort has thus involved finding occasional articles in journals or dusting off studies which have not been removed from the library shelves in twenty or more years. A great deal of criticism on oral poetry also remains somewhat superficial, and the challenge for criticism now is to offer interpretations which have a coherent and an astute conceptual basis.

Studies of oral poetry worldwide have, until fairly recently, been either anthropological-classificatory or literary-formalist in approach.<sup>5</sup> Anthropological studies have emphasised the role of the text as a carrier of cultural information and paid little attention to poetic form,<sup>6</sup> while literary studies have tended to remove forms from the time, place and circumstances out of which they have emerged. The ideas of Milman Parry, who in the 1920s and 1930s studied the Homeric tradition and its parallels with modern Slavic epics, and those of his student Albert Lord have dominated discussions of oral poetry in departments of literature. Both Parry and Lord treat oral poetry as a universal genre characterised by common techniques of composition and delivery rather than as emerging in distinct forms in disparate historical circumstances. Certainly Parry's emphasis on the performance poet's ability to improvise directed much-needed attention to the individual-aesthetic shaping of material in contrast to the anthropological reading which had located the poems in the 'collective consciousness' of the tribe. Parry is unable to account, however, for the functioning of poetry within specific societies. Instead, as Ruth Finnegan has argued, criticism of the Parry-Lord school tends to confine itself to the "study of detailed stylistic points and formulaic systems leading to statistical conclusions" (1976:127).

Responding to such readings, a number of critics have recently argued for the necessity of developing models which acknowledge simultaneously the textuality and historicity of oral texts, of combining a sociology with a poetics of oral literature. Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias define the problem as follows: "The issue was how to put textuality back into history, and history back into textuality" (1989:2). The movement away from the dehistoricised readings of the Parry-Lord school was prefigured in the work of Ruth Finnegan.<sup>7</sup> She located the development of Zulu praise poetry, for example, firmly in the aristocratic structures of Zulu society (1978:122). Similarly historicised readings of African oral poetry and performance genres have been offered by, amongst others, Karin Barber, Landeg White and Leroy Vail, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Elizabeth Gunner. Jeff Opland, whose work on Xhosa poetry of the nineteenth century has been very influential, has drawn on the ideas of Parry and Lord, especially on their discussion of the process of composition during performance. Opland is careful, however, to locate the development of poetic forms within the specificities of particular societal moments. The solution proposed by Barber and de Moraes Farias to the problem of combining a poetics with a sociology of oral literature has affinities with the redefinition of literary studies advanced by Terry Eagleton at the end of Literary Theory: An Introduction - a return to the study of rhetoric (1989:3). Hence the crucial questions for criticism become: what does the text seek to accomplish in the spheres of social and political action, and how does it accomplish this (by what rhetorical features/formal strategies)? Such a historicisation of poetic form can avoid the limitations of a universalised generic reading by locating the poems within the concerns of their society while at the same time granting the poems their status as shaped utterances. Consequently, my reading of the izibongo of Shaka treats the textuality of the poem as integral to its social and historical function: I argue that the formal and rhetorical structures used by the praise poet allow the poem to accomplish its complex negotiation of power between ruler and ruled in early nineteenth-century Zulu society. Similarly I argue that, in very different circumstances, Alfred Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" modifies the textual strategies of izibongo in order to address the relations between workers and their union federation in the 1980s.

Yet in writing criticism on performance poetry one immediately confronts the problem of imposing literate paradigms onto oral forms, a problem allied to the fact that we can only return to many oral texts via the mediated - sometimes translated - transcript. Witness even the difficulties of terminology: terms such as 'oracy', 'orature' and 'oraliture' have been proposed to escape the tyranny of a literate epistemology. (Opland uses the Xhosa verb "bonga", which he defines for his own purposes as meaning to "utter poetry about": he thus seeks to avoid the terminological difficulties raised by attempts to find a suitable English verbal equivalent (1983:33).) Ruth Finnegan points out that studies of orality have been carried out almost exclusively by literate academics, particularly those with traditional literary training, and argues that this has led to the development of inappropriate paradigms. She claims that even concepts like 'author' and 'title', which are central to discussions of written texts, are problematic in dealing with oral literature: many oral texts do not have titles, and are not individually or collectively authored, but involve accretions, residues and layering (1978:6-7). Olabiyi Yai raises even more fundamental questions by positing that the very notion of 'text' is a writing-based one since it involves a process of reification which is inappropriate to oral performance (1989:61). Such conceptual problems, Yai argues, point to the fundamental disjuncture between oral (African) production and written (Western) criticism, with no constructive interplay occurring between the two. To overcome this disjuncture between production and criticism, Yai proposes the adoption of indigenous critical practices which are "embedded in the process of production and performance of oral literature" (Barber and de Moraes Farias, 1989:5); and he points as an example to the fruitful collaboration between performance poets and academics in the mounting of oral poetry courses at universities. He is supported in this kind of call by, amongst others, Landeg White (1989:35) and Henry Louis Gates Jr (1984:8). This is an area requiring extensive investigation. My own attempts to move beyond the limitations of literate criticism, which have involved research into the aesthetic strategies and critical practices of the specific societies in relation to their performance genres, remain a small indication of the direction to be followed.

Useful explorations of oral/literate critical practices have been limited also by a history of colonisation in which orality and modes of oral transmission were branded as inferior by the

intruding literate culture. In the orthography of spoken African languages - usually undertaken by missionaries - the written forms, while bequeathing important historical records and documents, often represented gross ruptures with the spoken forms and, in significant ways, were to affect the development of those languages. Further, political, judicial and economic power were invested in the printed word. Relevant to the South African context is an account of the role of writing in the colonisation of Peru:

It is necessary to understand that for centuries the oppressors of the peasants made them regard paper as a god. Paper became a fetish: Arrest orders are paper. By means of paper they crush the Indian in the courts. The peasant sees papers in the offices of the governor, the parish priest, the judge, the notary - wherever there is power; the landowner, too, keeps accounts on paper. All the reckonings you have made, all your logical arguments, they refute by showing you a paper; the paper supersedes logic, it defeats it. (Quoted by Harlow 1987:12)

In South African history, Jean Comaroff records the power and mystique attached to the written word in the nineteenth-century Tswana custom of using printed paper as a bandage in the belief that the magical power of the words could heal wounds (1985:203). Leroy Vail and Landeg White also remind us that, in the Social-Darwinist paradigms of Europe in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, literate societies were perceived to be higher up the evolutionary scale than those characterised by oral transmission (1991:2-3). Residues of this attitude remain. Even Walter J. Ong in his influential book Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (1982) is unable to perceive that oral societies may possess developed senses of history. He claims that they live "very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (1982:46).

Southern Africa, nonetheless, is characterised by complex intersections of orality and literacy. Jeff Opland points out that in the case of Xhosa society, the existence of entirely oral literatures is more or less confined to the pre-colonial era (1984). Almost all oral cultures in

southern Africa have been influenced by their contact with the literate cultures of the colonial settlers. Opland in fact records the history of Xhosa poetry written for publication from 1870 onwards, arguing that poets like Thomas Mqanda "exploit[ed] the new technology of printing and the new medium of publication to reach an audience potentially wider than the imbongi could reach through an oral performance" (1984:179-181). Further, as indicated earlier, oral texts which have survived such as the songs and stories of the /Xam or the izibongo of Shaka and Dingane have undergone significant modifications through the processes of transcription and translation. As regards the twentieth-century poets, many of them can and do write, and the threads of orality and literacy intertwine in their work. Hence the disjunctures between oral poetry and literate criticism described by Yai may be less severe within the South African context and may, in fact, be an oversimplification of the situation in most colonial and postcolonial societies. While Yai's concern about the reification of oral texts in print remains a real one, the intersections of orality and literacy outlined above may give certain oral texts a degree of 'unstable' stability which Yai cannot envisage. His assertion of the necessity, nevertheless, for greater attention to indigenous aesthetic models and critical practices remains crucial.

A further consequence of the fact that studies of orality have been carried out almost entirely by academics with literate training is to be found in the current lack of emphasis on performance in studies of oral poetry. Tonkin points out that there do not exist in literate criticism "satisfactory notations for performance features" (1989:39). Rycroft and Ngcobo (1988) have attempted, nonetheless, to annotate the performances of izibongo recorded by James Stuart, and Sherzer has offered a highly complex system of signs to represent the performance of oral poetry by the Kuna Indians of San Blas, Panama (1990). Recreating the performance of the oral poem remains a key difficulty for a written criticism which would need to account for the repertoire of gestures, the modulations of voice, the pace of delivery, the rhythmic intonations, and the audience participation. No accounts can match the live performance. Even taped versions of the poems - as in the case of certain modern poets - are generally recontextualised: they are often recorded in a studio rather than at a social gathering. The use of reports about oral deliveries of the poems, where these are available, may help us nevertheless to lift the

poems imaginatively off the page by suggesting something of their vibrancy in performance. This is particularly the case with James Stuart's accounts of the performances of izibongo, and the reports by journalists on occasions in the 1980s at which Mzwakhe Mbuli delivered his poems. In addition, the critic or reader may be assisted in recreating the rhythms and energies of oral delivery by the choice of an appropriate print form in representing the oral text: the short line convention of lyric poetry, the extended lines of the epic, the lack of punctuation in the prose poem, the continuous prose of the story, or the alternating voices of the dramatic sketch. Similar effects of returning the written form to an oral conceptualisation may be obtained in the use of typography: line-breaks, spaces, margin indentation, or changes in type-face can suggest pauses, accelerated or arrested rhythms, changes in volume or pace, and the like. In each chapter I consider the appropriateness of the print forms used to represent the oral texts under discussion.

\* \* \*

While considerations of textuality and performative context are central to my project of recuperating oral forms for literary debate, all of the texts to be dealt with in this study are historical oral texts, and a crucial question for criticism is how one 'reads' these texts in changed circumstances. If - as I suggested in my aims - we are to move beyond a simple antiquarianism while at the same time avoiding an arbitrary recreation of the past in terms of present concerns, we require a model of historical retrieval which sets up a dialectic between past and present. This 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.

The first aspect of such a recuperative strategy is the historicisation of literary form. Robert Weimann argues that while the impersonal nature of the New Critical model of poetry resulted in the banishing of the author from "both the texts and contexts of history", it also dissociated the 'structure' or 'form' of literature from its social function (1977:4). He contends, in contrast, that the form of literature is "correlated to its function in society", and that such a consideration may allow us to connect the "genesis" of the text - its shaping and being shaped by

its original social context - with its "reception": the ways in which it is read by modern readers. Hence, we may establish the necessary dialectic between "past significance" and "present meaning" (1979:9). Weimann wishes to return literary history to its evaluative function, yet he points out that this requires a perception of human activity in which "there is an interrelationship between the physical appropriation of the world (as an extension of objectivity) and the unfolding of man's sensuous and aesthetic activities (as a projection of his subjectivities)" (1977:10). This position allows for a radical critique of formalism, in which form had been divorced from social concerns, while at the same time undermining perceptions that a concern with the structures of past literature is simply aestheticist (1977:16-17).

The second interrelated aspect of such a model of retrieval is that of historical process. Weimann points out that all literary histories have a social function, whether they acknowledge this or not. Yet the problem, he argues, is to bring into relation past significance and present meaning so that both contribute to the literary history which the critic constructs. Weimann asserts that the two are in fact "ultimately indivisible", and that the literary historian must face both their contradiction and unity (1977:49-50). Fredric Jameson perhaps more cogently expresses the duality of contradiction and unity within the historical process. He stresses that the relationship between ourselves as readers and temporally distant texts is not a relationship between individual subjects, but the confrontation of two distinct social forms or modes of production (1988:174-5). Accordingly, Jameson argues that we should read historical texts not only in terms of identity, without which comprehension is impossible, but in terms of difference, so that the texts may question our present:

We will no longer tend to see the past as some inert and dead object which we are called upon to resurrect, or to preserve, or to sustain, in our own living freedom; rather, the past itself will become an active agent in the process and will begin to come before us in a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgement on us, and through us on the social formation in which we exist. (1988:175)



Both Jameson and Weimann insist that literary history has a social function and both, with different emphases, insist that it is evaluative. Yet both argue that the evaluation is dialectical, for as we interrogate the past in terms of our own concerns, we allow the past to call into question the social practices of our present-day society.

Using the model outlined above, I shall aim to relate literary form to societal function, finding in this correlation the basis for historical retrieval. While I wish to recover a repressed cultural past - for my thesis has an explicit social and, hence, evaluative purpose - I remain aware that that past must be allowed its difference as well as its identity so that the dialectic between past significance and present meaning may be fully respected and examined. An important aspect of this dialectic is the problem of retrieving the cultural forms of African history in the present context: this history was manipulated for forty years by the apartheid government in order to enforce the racial separations of its divide and rule policies. More recently versions of tribal history have been deployed by conservative separatist organisations like Inkatha (and the white right wing) to support demands for ethnically-defined federal 'states'. While Black Consciousness had begun in the 1960s and 1970s to wrench African history from its apartheid entanglements, I hope that in this study the oral texts of the past - including poems like the izibongo of Shaka which have been 'read' by Inkatha official pronouncement as supporting demands for Zulu separatism - will be heard calling into question reactionary separatist ideologies. At the same time, these oral texts may be seen to make available new perceptions which challenge and confirm us in the processes of political renewal.

\* \* \*

The thesis comprises five chapters. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of South African oral poetry and performance, but instead to take up some of the forms which have had a profound impact on the social history of the country. As well as treating the better-known kinds of oral poetry such as praise poetry, I have deliberately included forms which have received little

critical attention such as the songs and stories of the Bushmen and the Christianised Zulu hymn: forms which have significantly influenced human life on the subcontinent. I have also sought to draw into critical debates about orality forms like Soweto poetry which utilise the rhythms of oral delivery, but which have been treated by critics largely as printed verse. By including the oral performance poetry of the 1980s, I have tried to indicate that orality remains a living tradition in South African society.

While the focus is largely on poetry and allied forms such as the hymn, I discuss in the first chapter both the songs and the narrative forms of the /Xam Bushmen. This is because Bushman societies have generally not maintained rigid generic distinctions between verse forms and narrative, or between sacred and profane genres. Instead, both the singing of songs and the telling of stories have been integral to the daily life of the band. Furthermore, the songs and stories themselves in their performance appear to blur the conventional distinctions between prose and poetry. Accordingly, I have treated both forms under the general rubric 'oral performance'. The other chapters restrict themselves to specific kinds of poetry or song, since the societies from which the texts emerge attach particular political, social or aesthetic significance to their 'poetic' form.

Chapter One is entitled "The Society of the Text: The Oral Literature of the /Xam", and involves a close reading of the texts recorded by Bleek and Lloyd in relation to the particular history and structures of Bushman society. I consider the songs and stories as treating in symbolic ways many of the most pressing concerns of /Xam life including sexuality, death, distribution of food, human origins, and the relations between peoples. Here, I set the complex mythological, social and historical understandings revealed by the texts in dialogue with literary representations of the Bushmen. The chapter proceeds to consider how the songs and stories of the /Xam 'talk back' to modern understandings, undermining many of the images which have been imposed on the Bushmen and which in the last four centuries have 'legitimised' their brutal treatment in southern Africa. A constant concern in the chapter is a rejection of the notion of Bushman society as a static, anthropological curiosity. While the songs and stories of the

Bushmen, together with those of the Khoikhoi, are probably our earliest forms of South African literature, this chapter also traces recent developments in Bushman history, and charts the emergence in the last three decades of new performance genres.

In contrast to Chapter One which treats the texts of a largely egalitarian and non-stratified society Chapter Two, "Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Shaka kaSenzangakhona", discusses the praise poetry associated with the centralisation of the Zulu monarchy and the development of the Zulu nation. The chapter explores the role of izibongo and the imbongi in negotiating relations of power between ruler and ruled, and investigates the textual strategies used by the form to accomplish these negotiations. Central to the chapter is the question of developing an appropriate language of critical response for praise poetry, and I consider the significance for criticism of placing the izibongo of Shaka and others at the centre of our literary history. Finally, this chapter asks how Zulu praise poetry of this kind speaks to us now, and I consider the implications of the praises of Shaka in relation to claims about the Zulu monarchy and Zulu nationalism in a modern democratic state.

Chapter Three, "Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites", examines the hymns produced in the first part of this century by the Messianic Zulu evangelist, Isaiah Shembe. With the undermining of the power of the Zulu monarchy, new Zulu leaders emerged who occupied new societal spaces, and new forms of social expression were heard. Shembe's hymns are 'popular' forms, which syncretise izibongo with the poetics and rhythms of the Christian hymn in order to articulate religious and political resistance to colonial occupation. They reveal a strong Zulu nationalism, and seek to reinterpret Christianity and the figure of Christ in terms of black beliefs and experiences. I suggest that Shembe's hymns could usefully be read against 'canonical' black writers such as Sol T. Plaatje and H.I.E. Dhlomo, whose work reveals many of the same concerns. I also argue that the hymns anticipate the Black Theology of Soweto poets in the 1970s.

Chapter Four, "Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial'", comprises a 'rereading' of Soweto poetry from the perspective of orality. In a close discussion of Madingoane's extended poem, I argue that, while Soweto poetry is extensively influenced by oral forms, it has been largely treated as a print phenomenon, and critical attention has focused on poets like Serote, Mtshali and Gwala, whose work is fairly amenable to recuperation by conventional print paradigms. This has led to the ignoring of younger Black Consciousness poets - like Madingoane - who used oral forms both to recall an African past and as a means of disseminating their messages in ways that circumvented the white publishing industry and state censorship. My discussion considers the dialectics of 'tradition'/'modernity' and 'mythology'/'history' in relation to "black trial". Finally, the chapter treats the poem as a text which insists on its historical 'difference', and which resists any simple attempt at critical appropriation.

In the last chapter, "Poetry, Politics and Performance: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula", I discuss the adaptation of oral forms to a highly politicised, urbanised environment. I point out that during the 1980s critics were for the most part unable to engage constructively with the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula as oral texts, and argue for relocating this poetry in the discursive field of orality. I also distinguish carefully between the concerns of the two poets and the functioning of their work: they have generally been lumped uncomfortably together under the term 'worker poetry'. Yet the poems achieved their resonance in the crisis of the State of Emergency, and the chapter considers to what extent the poems 'live' beyond their historical moment.

I stated at the outset that the concern of this thesis was to draw oral forms into the mainstream of literary studies in this country. Poetic histories are constructed largely in critical studies (like this one) and in anthologies, and accordingly I return, throughout, to the implications of oral forms for a new anthology of South African poetry: an anthology which, without dismissing the real achievements of poems and poets of the printed word, would grant oral forms a central place. Such an anthology may serve to establish new lines of literary and

social continuity in our society, and to affirm the range of human creativity and possibility in this country. In doing so, the anthology would have to address the questions of transcription, translation, critical methodology and historical retrieval, and might wish to adopt the kind of 'solutions' proposed in this Introduction and developed in the course of the study.

### Notes

1. In accordance with the current practice in anthropology and sociology, I use the term "Bushmen" rather than "San" throughout this study .
2. Collections of poems which have appeared include the following: Tswana: Schapera, 1965; Zulu: Cope, 1968; Sotho: Damane and Sanders, 1974; Shona: Hodza and Fortune, 1979; and more recently Opland, 1992, and Gunner and Gwala, 1994. Isabel Hofmeyr has argued that claims about the marginal status of oral literature "often come from English departments" - my own institutional location - and that "[s]een from other vantage points the position looks somewhat different" (1995:134). It is indeed the case that schools and universities teach oral literature in African language classes, and that there has been a certain amount of research on the subject by African scholars. However, the bulk of the teaching and research on the subject restricts itself to morphological explication or structural classification, and (as Hofmeyr herself acknowledges) there is still a great deal of work to be done in orality studies both locally and internationally. Further, there remains almost no recognition of the place of oral literature in poetic or literary histories of South Africa, as a survey of critical studies and anthologies indicates.
3. Finnegan deals with this question at some length in her article "Problems in the Processing of 'Oral Texts': Some Reflections on the Researcher's Role in Innovation and Consolidation" (1991).

4. Three collections of essays on South African oral literature have appeared recently, edited by Groenewald (1990), Kaschula (1993) and Gunner (1994). While these books go some way towards making critical material more readily available, there is still an enormous amount of work to be done in this area. As regards the international upsurge in publishing on oral literature, see particularly the books in the series "Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture".
5. For a comprehensive historical account of developments in thought about orality from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, see Vail and White's essay "The Invention of 'Oral Man'" (1991:1-39).
6. Certain anthropologists have moved beyond such a 'functional' conception of oral texts. See particularly the work of David B. Coplan (1987;1994) and Deborah James (1993).
7. Vail and White argue that only Finnegan's first book, Limba Stories and Storytelling (1967), reveals a coherent attempt to "relate in any detail the literature to the society that values it" (1991:27). However, I would argue that a careful reading of her work reveals her constant concern to historicise the oral forms she discusses.

## Chapter 1: The Society of the Text: The Oral Literature of the /Xam<sup>1</sup>

The ending of Sol. T. Plaatje's Mhudi (1930) - a novel which has received a great deal of attention in South African literary studies - registers the beginning of a modernising colonial history, and forces Plaatje to subvert his own modes of pastoral and romance to accommodate the intrusion of a technologised future. After the rout of the Matabele from what is now the North-west Province, the protagonists Ra-Thaga and Mhudi in their newly-acquired wagon leave the Boer couple Phil Jay and Annetje :

[Ra-Thaga] mused over the hallowed glories of being transported from place to place like White people, in their own wagon.

Gone were the days of their primitive tramping over long distances, with loads on their heads. For them the days of the pack-ox had passed, never to return again. The carcase of a koodoo or any number of blesbok, falling to his musket by the roadside, could be carried home with ease, leaving plenty of room in the vehicle for their luggage. Was it real, or was it just an evanescent dream?  
(1957:224-225)

In an illuminating reading of this concluding scene of the novel, Michael Green talks of "its ambivalent attitude to the modernisation that the colonising technology represents":

[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. Taking into account that the dominant experience of modernity in South Africa was the kind of "neurotic obsessiveness" that Horkheimer and Adorno identify in modern subjectivity - "control, manipulation, exclusion of any deviance from the imperatives of systematic regulation of others and the environment, bureaucratic

management, a subjugation of every issue to the demands of technical, efficient regulation, etc." (Pippin,1991:152) - in other words, apartheid, the apogee of a developing systematising of segregation - entering history, grasping the future, is a near-destructive act for the protagonists of Plaatje's historical vision. (1995:16)

Approximately sixty years before the publication of Plaatje's novel, an oral narrative by a Bushman informant, //Kabbo, had evoked a similarly destructive historical moment, in which the wagon - as well as the gun which is an implicitly coercive presence in //Kabbo's narration - represents precisely such a "systematic regulation of others and the environment". Because he was a prisoner in the wagon, rather than its owner, //Kabbo reveals none of the ambivalence of Plaatje's protagonists towards the colonial project. He had been arrested for stealing a sheep and, in narrating his story to W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd in the 1870s, offered a disturbing account of his arrest - an account which Bleek and Lloyd transcribed and translated into English:

My wife was there; I was there; my son was there; my son's wife was there, while she also carried a little child; my daughter's husband was there; we were like this (in number). Therefore the Kafirs [black policemen] took us, when we were like this, while we were not numerous; ( ) the Kafirs took us, while we were not numerous.

We went to sit in the wagon; the Kafirs took us away, as we sat in the wagon. Our wives also sat in the wagon. They got out of the wagon; they walked upon their feet. The wagon stood still; we got out of the wagon; we lay down, when we had first made a fire. ( ) We roasted lamb's flesh; my son's wife roasted a springbok, which I had killed with my arrow. We smoked; we lay down. The day broke; we made a fire; we smoked early in the morning.

Then we left them, we went away to the Magistrate; while we (who were in the wagon) ran along, we were upon the road, while our wives ( ) walked along upon their feet. We ran, leaving them, while we altogether ran, leaving them.



Then we went to talk with the Magistrate; the Magistrate talked with us. The Kafirs took us away to the jail at night. We went to put our legs into the stocks; another white man laid another (piece of) wood upon our legs. ( ) We slept while our legs were in the stocks. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:295-297)

The power and authority of the colonial state resided in its technology: the wagon in which //Kabbo and the men travel leaves the other members of the band behind, as they cannot keep up; the "jail" imprisons them; the stocks physically restrain them. And through its curious registering of agency and causation ("Therefore the Kafirs took us", as Bleek and Lloyd translate //Kabbo's words) and its omitted reference to the offence for which these Bushmen were imprisoned, the narrative sets the hunter-gatherer's mode of life - symbolised by the "arrow" and the "springbok" - against the aggressive, modernising history represented by police, magistrate and the law.

The oral literature, engravings and paintings of the Bushmen offer, amongst other things, some of the earliest accounts in southern Africa of colonisation from the perspective of the colonised. Yet the history of the Bushmen has been characterised by successive representations of themselves as 'other'. My concern in this chapter is to undermine such alterities by allowing the Bushmen to 'talk back' through their songs and stories. This does not imply a naive elision of my own intervention as critic; rather I shall attempt to maintain a dialectical relation between the 'difference' of their texts and their 'identity'. My intention is to create conditions of interpretation and reception - in the study of literature - in which the texts of the Bushmen may speak to us today, both of an intricate and developed mythology and the harsh intrusions of colonialism. In so doing, I hope to assert the full human creativity and potential of a group dehumanised and destroyed by colonial and, later, apartheid policies, and hence to contribute towards the development of a more inclusive and coherent understanding of southern African literary and historical life.

The songs and stories of the Bushmen, records of which survive in the work of anthropologists and linguists, are probably our earliest forms of literary expression; little critical attention, however, has been paid to the Bushmen in South African literary studies. Despite the efforts to recuperate and understand the texts by Laurens van der Post (1958;1961) and Stephen Watson (1991), these songs and stories have not featured to any extent in literary interpretation. In contrast, a number of studies have been carried out in the discipline of anthropology, including notably those by Megan Biesele (1975a;1975b;1976;1993;1995) and Mathias Guenther (1989), in which the texts are seen to provide evidence of social practices and belief systems. Though such studies are extremely useful to the literary critic - the boundaries between disciplines are becoming increasingly permeable - anthropologists generally offer little discussion of thematic intricacy or the contribution to meaning of generic convention. Rarely do they engage with the texts as rhetorical acts: rhetorical acts which may continue to speak to us across social and historical distances. The research conducted by linguists like Roger Hewitt (1985;1986) is also valuable even though it tends to emphasise context-free structural typologies over the social and symbolic resonance of the communication. As part of my project of recuperating oral poetry and performance for literary study, I wish to explore ways in which we may read the texts of the Bushmen - texts that are available to us in the records - as seminal in any construction of South African literary history. Ntongela Masilela has pointed to the political purpose such a project could attain:

[T]he arrival and construction of South African literature in English on the cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literatures in African languages, which had been in existence for millennia in South Africa. At the moment this literature exists in a state of temporary defeat. It is a literature whose natural evolution has been disrupted and momentarily side-tracked. As the hidden consequences of the present political and social crisis are beginning to indicate, especially on the cultural plane, the relationship between our literature in English and our indigenous literature in the African languages will

have to be re-examined and re-defined in post-revolutionary or post-apartheid South Africa. (1987:50)

My treatment here of the /Xam Bushmen will not endorse colonial and apartheid perceptions of Bushman society either as static or fascinating in its evolutionary anachronism (a 'window on the Pleistocene'). Drawing on current anthropological and historical research, as well as on developments in literary theory and oral studies, I shall locate the oral texts of the /Xam carefully within their historical and discursive contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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Bushman hunter-gatherers have lived south of the Congo-Zambezi line for at least 11 000 years, and possibly as long as 40 000 years (Biesele,1993:xix). Prior to the arrival of the Dutch, there were perhaps 150 000 to 300 000 Bushmen living throughout southern Africa (the evidence of rock paintings and engravings suggests the extent of their range) although only about 50 000 are left today. Of those remaining, only about 3 000 live permanently as hunter-gatherers; most Bushmen now work as herders, farm labourers, game trackers or soldiers. Linguistically and socially the Bushmen are close to the Khoikhoi: in fact, some linguists regard the two languages as forming a single family called "Khoisan", characterised chiefly by its click consonants (Hewitt,1985:650); and ethnographers, historians and anthropologists have often found it difficult to maintain distinctions between the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi.<sup>3</sup>

Bushmen have generally lived - and in some cases continue to live - in small bands consisting of related families, often based around permanent waterholes. These bands may combine for group tasks where necessary, including defence or communal hunts. A band generally keeps to a particular area where its hunting, collecting and water rights are respected by others, though access to water is shared in times of drought. Membership of the band is not fixed, as marriage takes place outside of it, and bands may disintegrate when the older people

die and the children marry into other bands. There is generally no clearly identified leader, though individuals may achieve respect through age, wisdom or skill in a particular area of life.

Historically, Bushmen have lived largely by hunting and collecting, moving frequently - usually within a defined area - as the seasons and migrations of game have dictated. Recent research has indicated, however, that various groupings turned to herding and agriculture when climatic conditions were favourable, and that some were involved in activities such as mining and trading. In The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass (1992) Robert Gordon has argued that the myth of the pristine hunter-gatherer existence, in fact, has served to justify the exploitation, oppression and eradication of the Bushmen. Hunting is an important activity, nonetheless, and is carried out by the men with bows and poisoned arrows, spears, throwing sticks and snares. It does not provide the bulk of the food, but only between ten percent and forty percent depending on conditions with the larger amount being collected by women (Campbell,1980:107). (Meat, especially fat which is highly prized, has an important symbolic significance in Bushman societies.) The life of hunting and gathering leaves a great deal of leisure time for creative activity, much of which is spent in the making of necklaces and beads, in engraving, painting, dancing, singing songs and storytelling. Bushman societies are generally characterised by complex mythological and aesthetic systems which help to mediate relationships between individuals, groups and the environment.

The way of life of the Bushmen was severely disrupted by contact with pastoralists and agriculturalists, particularly white settlers but also African peoples, notably the Tswana and the Xhosa. A number of historians have suggested, though, that conflict between Bushmen and African groupings has been overemphasised, and recent research indicates that tensions arose only when the expansion of agriculture and pastoralism began to threaten traditional hunting grounds (see Campbell,1980:101; and Willcox,1978:81-82). As their way of life became unsustainable, many Bushmen turned to other activities, including farm labour, stock farming (often with stolen livestock), and raiding and trading in bands which drew in African and

Khoikhoi members.<sup>4</sup> On the Eastern Cape frontier in the nineteenth century, Bushmen were used by British troops in their military operations. In a direct continuation of this practice, the South African Defence Force (SADF) during its occupation of Namibia and incursions into Angola in the 1970s and 1980s formed a battalion of Bushman trackers (31 Battalion), which was drawn from Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Angola. An article in the magazine Soldier of Fortune expounded upon the 'instinctive abilities' and 'natural adaptations' of the Bushmen to ground warfare:

Able to survive long periods on minimal food and water, the Bushman has an instinctive, highly developed sense of danger, and has proved to be an astoundingly good "snap" shot ... [but his] forte is tracking ... . If you've never seen a two-legged bloodhound at work, come to South West Africa and watch the Bushman. Actually the Bushman puts the bloodhound to shame. [In addition, Bushmen are] good at estimating mortar projectile strike distances because of their age-old weapon - the bow and arrow. (Quoted in Gordon,1992:2)

Following the implementation of United Nations' Resolution 435 in Namibia and the withdrawal of the SADF, 31 Battalion was disbanded and the demobilised soldiers and their families resettled at Schmidtsdrift near Kimberley, where they live in extreme poverty. The exploitation and abandonment of the Bushmen by the SADF is the most recent chapter in a long history of brutal treatment by the colonial and apartheid states.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial policy towards the Bushmen was largely characterised by extermination, and A.E. Voss (1987) has explored in some detail the representations of the Bushmen in nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing which provided ideological legitimation for the acts of genocide. In 1850, for example, David Livingstone wrote that "the Bushmen of the Desert are perhaps the most degraded specimens of humanity" (Voss,1987:26), and Francis Carey Slater's The Karroo (1924) described the Bushmen in similar terms:

In the far days that are gone there dwelt in the depths of the desert,  
 Scattered and wandering pygmies; hideous, filthy and squat:  
 Fitting kindred of Ishmael - their hands against all men were lifted -  
 Hating all that was human with blind and inveterate hate. (Slater, 1957:205)

A similar attitude was evident in the actions of British troops under Colonel Durnford who, at the time of the Langalibalele rebellion in 1875, reportedly used rock paintings for target practice (McGibbon, 1993). Bushmen were systematically driven off their lands, and then hunted down by commandos when - deprived of their hunting areas - they resorted to killing livestock. (A report in the Natal Witness about a Bushman 'hunt' in 1873 described them as "lower than vermin".) Routine punishments for stock theft included torture, flogging or hanging, and death was often preferable to capture. Bushman children who survived the raids of commandos were generally carried back to the farms as labourers. More recent history is no less bleak. In Botswana, in which the largest number live today, Bushmen are labelled "Basarwa" and are discriminated against legally and socially by the Batswana.<sup>6</sup> As Gordon argues in great detail, the position in Namibia is equally dire (1992).

As the attitudes and practices outlined above might suggest, there has been little respect for and hence little attempt to record the utterance - particularly cultural utterance - of the Bushmen. //Kabbo's narrative, which was referred to earlier on, is handed down to us from our most extensive record - in fact our only real source - of traditional Bushman expression: the transcriptions and translations made between 1870 and 1884 by a German linguist, W.H.I. Bleek, and his sister-in-law Lucy C. Lloyd. Bleek had come to South Africa in 1855 to work on a Zulu Grammar for Bishop Colenso. While in Natal he developed an interest in Bushman language and mythology, but it was only when he moved to Cape Town in 1870 to take up an appointment as curator of Sir George Grey's library that he had the opportunity to further his interest. He discovered that there was a group of Bushman convicts, of whom //Kabbo was one, working on

the construction of the new breakwater at Cape Town harbour, and arranged to have several of them passed into his custody. Together with Lloyd, he spent a great deal of time learning the /Xam language, and devising a phonetic script for it. The two transcribed and translated the songs and narratives of their main informants, /A!kunta, //Kabbo, ≠Kasin, Dia!kwain, /Han≠kass'o and !Kweiten ta //ken. With the exception of /A!kunta, the informants were from two families: Dia!kwain, his sister !Kweiten ta //ken and her husband ≠Kasin all came from the Katkop mountains; while //Kabbo and his son-in-law /Han≠kass'o lived near the Strontbergen, about a hundred miles east of Katkop (Hewitt,1986:17). These six represented probably the last surviving generation of /Xam Bushmen, for when Bleek's daughter Dorothea travelled through the Prieska area in 1910/11 she noted: "I found just a handful of old people left here and there, some of them relatives of our former men" (Bleek D,1923:viii). After Bleek's death in 1875, Lloyd continued the work of collection until 1884. The Bleek and Lloyd records, now housed in the J.W. Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town, comprise 12 000 pages of material, collected and painstakingly annotated in 138 notebooks of which 15 contain material gathered by Lloyd from two !Kung informants after Bleek's death.

The status of the narratives and songs recorded by Bleek and Lloyd is somewhat ambiguous since, like so many oral texts which survive only in printed form, they have been highly mediated in the process of their transcription and translation into English. Bleek and Lloyd were in a position of power over their informants, who for most of their time spent with the two remained convicts. While it appears that this power was wielded humanely, as is evident from the decision of two of the informants to remain with Bleek for some time after their prison terms had expired, the narrating context remained one of authority and subservience, and thus very different from that of the non-stratified, hunter-gatherer band which would have provided the customary audience for the stories and songs. The process of the narration was also artificial: the Bushmen's oral songs and stories were written down by Bleek or Lloyd as they were being uttered, with frequent pauses for clarification or explanation, and were generally translated later, sometimes in discussion with the informant. Lloyd's praise of //Kabbo is enlightening in this respect:

He was an excellent narrator, and patiently watched until a sentence had been written down, before proceeding with what he was saying. He much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:x)

In addition we have little way of assessing fidelity to the original Bushman intention in the translations made by Bleek and Lloyd, as there are no /Xam speakers still alive; more fundamentally, we do not know to what extent the two were adequately able to understand and transcribe what they had heard.

Bleek and Lloyd appear to have been scrupulous, nevertheless, in their attempts to record the accounts of their informants. Omissions in the texts were indicated by parentheses, and even when they were at a complete loss as to how to understand phrases, allusions, or even the plain sense, the linguists appear to have remained as close as possible to the actual words spoken or enacted by their Bushman respondents. None of the repetition has been deleted, and the translation strikes the reader as literal in its reliance on some very awkward syntactical structures in English. As the section quoted earlier on from //Kabbo's narrative may illustrate, the result is that for readers trained in the Western print tradition the songs and narratives are often difficult to follow. Certainly the experience of teaching these texts to students has strongly reinforced my sense of the problems of Bleek and Lloyd's English translations. In her recent book which deals with modern Ju/'hoan storytelling - Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan (1993) - Megan Biesele perceives the need to make the narratives she has recorded accessible to a non-Bushman audience, and argues that there are ideological problems with the Bleek and Lloyd methodology of seeking absolute fidelity to the source:

Clearly word-for-word translations misrepresent the verbal reality of the



performance by chopping it up into alien linguistic categories. The flow of meaning in the original is made to seem discontinuous, and the effect in general is stilted and quaint, putting further distance between the story as read and the story as it was told. The effect is illustrated to some degree by the Bleek and Lloyd translation of a hundred years ago ... which mirrors the philological emphasis of its time. In contrast, a modern view takes the position that understanding the dramatic content of the communication is hindered by making speakers of the other language sound like bad or laboured English-users. (1993:xii)

While Biesele is correct in pointing to the drawbacks of turning Bushman oral performances into often clumsy and ungrammatical English prose for the sake of 'accuracy' in translation, her own approach may run the risk of simply appropriating the culture for Western literary expectation and consumption. My own position on this question lies between that of Bleek and Lloyd and that of Biesele: I see the need for translations which retain a sense of the 'difference' of the text - and so resist any simple co-option - but which are sufficiently accessible to make 'meaning' possible. In this, my thinking is somewhat akin to that of Mathias Guenther, who in his book Bushman Folktales (1989) has published certain of the Bleek and Lloyd texts, along with stories which he collected from the Nharo in Botswana. In offering translated versions of the /Xam texts, Guenther has removed some of the parentheses, awkward phrasing and explanatory comments so that the texts 'read' more easily, though he adheres where possible to Bleek and Lloyd's formulations. An example of the method I propose, which attempts to make the texts somewhat more familiar without removing their strangeness, could involve the following adaptations. A section from "//Kabbo's Intended Return Home" in Bleek and Lloyd's version reads:

The Flat Bushmen go to each other's huts; that they may smoking sit in front of them. ( ) Therefore, they may obtain stories at them; because they are used to visit; for smoking's people they are. As regards myself (?) I am waiting that the

moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward in the path.\* ( ) For, I verily (?) think that I must only await the moon; that I may tell my Master (*lit. chief*), that I feel that it is the time when I should sit among my fellow men, ( ) who walking meet their like. They are listening to them; for, I do think of visits; (that) I ought to talk with my fellow men; for, I work here, together with women; ( ) and I do not talk with them; for, they merely send me to work. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:301-303)

Drawing on the notes and information provided by Bleek and Lloyd, as well as on more recent anthropological research, I would recast the account in this manner:

The Flats Bushmen go to each other's huts, that they may sit in front of them smoking. They obtain stories there, because they are used to visiting, for they are smoking people. As regards myself, I am waiting that the moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward on the path. For I truly think that I must only wait for the moon, that I may tell my Master that I feel that it is time to sit among my fellow men, who meet their kin while walking, and listen to them. Yes, I do think of visits, that I ought to talk with my fellow men; for here I work together with women, and I do not talk with them, for they merely send me to work.

My version attempts to create a readable English text by regularising syntax and grammar, and removing parentheses and archaic diction. It seeks nevertheless to allow the text its 'strangeness' by retaining something of the distinctive phrasing and register of Bleek and Lloyd's direct translations. The songs and stories discussed in this chapter are drawn largely from Bleek and Lloyd's Specimens of Bushman Folklore (1911), and to a lesser extent from Guenther's Bushman Folktales. (I have specifically used texts from published sections of the Bleek and Lloyd records so as to allow readers easy access to the material which I analyse.) With the exception of //Kabbo's narrative of his arrest referred to earlier, I have recast the language and syntax of all

the songs and stories drawn directly from Bleek and Lloyd along the lines suggested here. In addition, I have made slight modifications to Guenther's versions where I have felt these to be necessary.

Besides the Bleek and Lloyd records in the Jagger library, Specimens of Bushman Folklore - the first major publication of the collected material - and Guenther's Bushman Folktales, the sources for Bushman literature are scattered and often difficult to locate. Other sections of the Bleek and Lloyd collection were published by Dorothea Bleek in The Mantis and his Friends (1923) and in the journal Bantu Studies.<sup>7</sup> Bleek's daughter also recorded a number of Nharo tales, seven of which appeared in The Naron: a Bushman Tribe of the Central Kalahari (1928). In 1874 J.M. Orpen presented a series of Maluti Bushman stories in an article in the Cape Monthly Magazine. A large collection of Bushman narratives was made in the late nineteenth century by Gideon Retief von Wielligh, mostly from /Xam speakers near Calvinia. These were published in four volumes between 1919 and 1921, where they were substantially rewritten to appeal to a popular Afrikaans readership. There have been a few collections of narratives from the !Kung, including a book of German adaptations by Fritz Metzger in 1952, and Portuguese translations of material from Angola collected in the 1950s by Manuel Viegas Guerreiro (1968). At about the same time material was being collected by Lorna Marshall and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, and some of their /Gwi stories appeared in The Harmless People (1959). Other sources include E.W. Thomas's collection of Hei//kum stories in translation (1950), and P. Schoeman's Hunters of the Desert Land (1957). More recently, Bushman oral literature has been recorded by Megan Biesele from the !Kung and !Xo people in her doctoral thesis (1975a) and in individual articles, while her book Women Like Meat (1993) offers versions of Ju/'hoan tales with commentary and analysis. She provides perhaps the best source of contemporary Bushman material, and I have used her "Song Texts by the Master of Tricks: Kalahari San Thumb Piano Music" (1975b) in my discussion of new performance genres.

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As //Kabbo's account of his arrest suggests the /Xam, though they continued to live largely as hunter-gatherers, had come into contact by the 1870s with the colonial state. Guenther argues that "the /Xam of the north-central Cape were enclosed by frontier farms and forced, within the span of a generation, into a life of precarious foraging, combined with marginal herding ... or of oppressive farm labour" (1989:17), and he refers to the account provided by the traveller G.A. Farini:

He describes a rather bustling frontier life in the Northern Cape, consisting of white and coloured ranchers owning tens of thousands of acres and thousands of head of cattle, of traders and hawkers, cattle treks, ox wagons and stage coaches, ferry operators, winkels (trading stores) and, all over the place, toiling or lounging about, Bushman and Baster farm labourers. (Guenther,1989:17)

Dorothea Bleek refers to the informants as "colonial Bushmen" (1923:v-ix), and there is no doubt that to varying degrees they were acculturated: each had a Dutch as well as a /Xam name (//Kabbo, for example, was known as "Jantje Toorn", and his son-in-law /Han+kasso as "Klein Jantje"), and Dia!kwain had worked for a white farmer. The portraits of the narrators in Specimens of Bushman Folklore, in which they are clothed in Western fashion, confirm the impact of the colonial state on their society and sense of identity. The /Xam social order was disintegrating rapidly by the 1870s, and many of the narrators said that they had heard the narratives and songs which they recounted "from their parents" (Bleek D,1923:vi). As Lewis-Williams suggests, however, it is clear from the accounts of the Bleek and Lloyd informants that they still lived in nomadic groups, survived for the most part by hunting and collecting, and defined themselves largely in terms of traditional belief systems and aesthetic forms (1981:28).

A difficulty in discussing the oral literature of the /Xam, obviously, is that with the society having been destroyed by the turn of the century, little information exists about its precise social

institutions or practices. A close reading of the Bleek and Lloyd records and the material published by Dorothea Bleek and others nevertheless provides valuable information and suggests important parallels with more modern Bushman societies such as the !Kung of Botswana. Biesele warns of the danger of essentialising Bushman society by reading oral performances from the late nineteenth century in terms of modern accounts: "Just as the ecological anthropologist cannot answer the question 'What do San hunter-gatherers eat?' without reference to very localised and specific conditions, neither can the student of folklore make many generalisations about their oral traditions" (1976:304-5). Yet sufficient commonalities appear to exist between the !Kung and the /Xam to enable us to draw on more recent anthropological research as part of the exercise of returning to the Bleek and Lloyd records from a contemporary perspective. As I said in the Introduction, my aim is to use such written records in recreating a sense of the 'living' oral performance in a working society, while at the same time remaining alert to the question of how the texts might continue to address us in present circumstances.

Bushman societies are highly verbal in character, and various oral forms are performed by members of the band. As Hewitt argues, the lack of stratification in Bushman society has strongly influenced its literary production:

The band is a highly egalitarian, non-stratified and non-authoritarian social unit and these features have left an unmistakable imprint on [the] rich and exclusively oral literature [of the Bushmen]. In particular the absence of economic differentiation and the positive employment of strategies designed to obstruct the growth of personal power within the community are factors which preclude the emergence of a literary élite comprised of individuals specifically recognised and rewarded for their talents. (1985:651)

Bushman oral literature comprises sacred and profane stories as well as songs which can be part

of communal religious life or which can reflect personal moods/responses to events. Though specific words exist in different Bushman societies for songs and stories respectively, the genres often treat the same events or subject-matter, and can overlap in terms of textual strategies or performance context.

Because the society is not stratified and does not maintain institutionalised generic distinctions which are highly visible and socially significant, my discussion of Bushman oral literature is not confined only to the songs - which can fairly easily be understood as 'poems' - but also extends to the stories. Unlike Zulu izibongo which occupies a specific cultural space and serves a particular political function within the monarchy, for example, the telling of stories and the singing of songs permeate every aspect of Bushman society. To focus only on one form of expression would seem at best arbitrary, or at worst to risk imposing the generic categories of Western criticism onto a literature which has its origins in precolonial Africa. Furthermore, the stories themselves in their performance appear to blur Western distinctions between prose and poetry. While convention - or even common sense - might suggest that narratives involve the unfolding of plot and the development of character in time and circumstance, and that poems are generally concerned with the intense evocation of experience, Bushman narratives appear to mingle such 'prose' and 'poetic' elements and identifications. Certainly the development of plot and character is crucial, yet the narrators - as we learn from modern !Kung society - develop a rhythm of delivery which uses sound patterning, pauses, abrupt breaks, and fluctuations of tone and volume in much the same way as oral poets. In addition, the symbolic intensity of many of the stories suggests that they are closer to Western conceptions of the prayer or lyric than the prose narrative. This symbolic intensity is conveyed in the oral delivery by the lively performance of the narrator: in his/her dramatic bodily movement, facial expression, verbal animation, and climactic or dismissive gesture.

The blurring of the narrative/poem division in the stories suggests that the recuperation of the oral literature of the /Xam for critical debate may involve our recasting the form of the

texts: that is, finding an appropriate convention with which to represent them in print. Bleek and Lloyd themselves were rather ambivalent on the question of generic divisions. While they separated 'poems' or 'songs' from 'narratives' or 'stories' by following the Western print tradition of marking the poems or songs typographically in short lines, they used punctuation in many of the narratives in order to create the effect of lines delivered in a poetic rhythm. (This is not to deny that the somewhat arrested rhythm of the narratives could almost certainly have been exacerbated by Bleek and Lloyd's laborious process of transcription.) The following extract from "The Girl of the Early Race, Who Made Stars" can be seen to point to the potential in the narratives of poetic rhythm accentuated both by parallelisms and the convention of insistently punctuating phrasal and clausal divisions of the full sentence or unit of sense:

The darkness comes out; they (the Stars) wax red, while they had first been white. They feel that ( ) they stand brightly around; that they may sail along; while they feel that it is night. Then, the people go by night; while they feel that the ground is made light. While they feel that the Stars shine a little. Darkness is upon ( ) the ground. The Milky Way gently glows; while it feels that it is wood ashes. Therefore it gently glows. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:75)

Such sidereal narratives seem to me to have the status of prayers or hymns within a ritualised performance context, a point emphasised by /Han=kass'o's narrative "What the Stars Say, and a Prayer to a Star" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:81-83), approximately half of which comprises a prayer to Canopus.

In his collection Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam (1991), Stephen Watson has engaged with the problem of how adequately to represent the stories of //Kabbo, Dia!kwain and others in print. Inspired by the 'poetic' nature of the /Xam narratives, he has rewritten them - quite substantially - as lyric poems, thus following the procedure of Jack Cope and Uys Krige in The Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968). While I am sympathetic towards Watson's

project, I feel that - like Bieseles's attitude to translation - it risks a simple appropriation of /Xam culture. Watson is aware of the danger, particularly of portraying the Bushmen as inhabitants of "some mythical-poetical Eden", but believes that the advantages of his method outweigh the disadvantages in that the form of poetry "cast[s] into relief features which would almost certainly have been lost in even the best prose translation" (1991:16-20). My own feeling is that we need a form which retains the impetus of the unfolding plot, but which registers the rhythms of poetic delivery. Such a form - like the oral-influenced epic tradition - may need to move beyond the short line of the lyric, or to use lines of very different lengths to evoke the changing pace and pauses of narration. According to this method, I would recast the sidereal narrative quoted from Bleek and Lloyd above in the following way. As suggested earlier, my recasting extends to the translation:

The darkness comes out,  
 the Stars wax red, while they had first been white.  
 They feel that they stand around brightly,  
 that they may sail along,  
 while it is night.  
 Then, the people go by night,  
 while they feel that the ground is made light,  
 while they feel that the Stars shine a little.  
 Darkness is upon the ground.  
 The Milky Way glows gently:  
 it feels that it is wood ashes  
 therefore it glows gently.

In order to register the ambiguous forms of their ontology and to capture in print something of their performative aspect, I have recast along these lines all of the narratives dealt with in this chapter. (These include the narratives published by Guenther, who follows Bleek and Lloyd's



prose convention.) For the songs, I have remained for the most part with Bleek and Lloyd's practice of short, recognisable 'poetry' line divisions.

Storytelling is an important activity in Bushman societies, and many similarities exist between the narrative traditions of the Cape /Xam of the nineteenth century and the !Kung of Botswana today in terms of both thematic concerns and performance styles. There is no set time for storytelling, which may occur during the day or at night, or while visiting friends and relatives in other bands. Storytelling is especially the province of the older people, and is intimately bound up with a sense of social and personal identity, as an old !Kung woman affirmed:

The old person who does not tell stories just does not exist. Our forefathers related for us the doings of the people of long ago and anyone who doesn't know them doesn't have his head on straight. And anyone whose head is on straight knows them. (Quoted in Bieseke, 1976:308)

As the !Kung woman's comment suggests, the bulk of the stories which are performed concern the doings of the Early Race ("the people of long ago"), the mythological ancestors of the Bushmen who are closely associated with animals since, according to Bushman cosmogony, all animals were once people. As well as these stories dealing with origins, there are others dealing with more recent history, hunting and other topics. In terms of style it is difficult to tell a narrative of recent events from one dealing with the Early Race, and no formal distinction is made between stories which are sacred and profane. The /Xam used the broad term "kukummi" to cover all forms of narrative, though the !Kung use the term "n≠wasi" (stories) to refer to historical or hunting narratives and "n≠wasi o n!osimasi" to indicate stories of the Old People. A good storyteller is judged both by his/her knowledge of the doings of the Old People and by general verbal ability (Bieseke, 1976:308).

The stories of the Early Race serve the important function of mediating, discursively, the

major social, political and economic problems facing Bushman society. Biesele says of !Kung narrative cycles about the Old People:

Basic themes ... include some of the problem points of living, such as marriage and sex, the food quest, sharing, family relationships, the division of labour, birth and death, murder, and blood vengeance. Other concerns include the creation of the present world order and the relationship of hunter-gatherers to peoples with more advanced economies. (1976:303)

The Bushmen regard the conduct of members of the Early Race with scorn or amusement, though this does not detract from the importance of the stories, for neither the /Xam nor the !Kung find any disjuncture between the profound and the humorous. (Here we may compare a number of other mythologies, including those of ancient Greece, in which the deities' power over human affairs is in no way diminished by their own often foolish or short-sighted behaviour.) Hewitt points to the cosmological and epistemological importance of the stories of the Early Race:

This fictive early period is thought of as a formative one for the San, where the raw materials of life, both cosmological and social, were constantly interacting, re-arranging themselves, revealing social truths and the natural order of things. It is this area that provides narrators with an opportunity to create out of a mass of motifs, plot structures and character galleries performances of great cultural penetration. In the hands of a reflective performer narrative materials which are commonly used for pure entertainment may become moulded, re-interpreted and elaborated to create performances profoundly embedded within the deepest layers of San philosophical and religious thought. (1985:654-655)

Amongst the most important of the stories dealing with the period of creation are those

involving the trickster god, referred to by the /Xam as /Kaggen and by the !Kung as Kauha. (The trickster god of the Bushmen is akin to Heiseb, the god of the Khoikhoi.) Unlike other narratives of this period which may be narrated as single episodes, the trickster stories are generally performed in cycles in 'tit-for-tat' fashion to the accompaniment of uproarious laughter, since they are often bawdy and scatological (Bieseles, 1976:316-317). They concern the tricks which the god has played upon him, or which he plays upon others - especially his wives. Amongst the Bleek and Lloyd records, numerous narratives are devoted to the single figure of /Kaggen (twenty-one in all), and /Hanǀkass'o, in particular, is concerned to link the narratives into cycles which stress the connections between the trickster's several escapades.

The /Kaggen narratives explore various aspects of his conduct, character and magical powers. /Kaggen is usually associated with the Mantis, although there are many other guises that he may assume. He is generally credited with the creation of several of the animals as well as the moon, and certain of the narratives recount how aspects of the physical world result from his use of his magical powers in escaping his enemies. Though his conduct is often anti-social, /Kaggen always acts ultimately to preserve life. Bieseles has argued that the oral literature of Bushman societies plays an important role in the "systematics of knowledge" (1993:43), and through the antics of /Kaggen the trickster narrative performances treat many of the pressing issues of /Xam life.

In the story "!Gaunu-ts'axau, the Baboons and the Mantis" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:17-37) as narrated by /Hanǀkass'o, for example, /Kaggen sends his son !Gaunu-ts'axau to fetch sticks to throw at the baboons. However, the baboons realise what !Gaunu-ts'axau is up to, and beat him to death with such violence that one of his eyes is dislodged from its socket. They then begin to play a ball game with the eye. Realising that something is amiss, /Kaggen seeks his son, and manages to retrieve the eye by joining in the baboons' game and stealing the 'ball'. He escapes to a body of water, where he leaves the eye with the instruction to reconstitute the full form of his son. On his return to the water he sees his son sitting in the sun on the bank, and joyfully showers

him with gifts which he has made.

Although the plot structure is not highly complex, the story negotiates some of the central concerns of Bushman life, particularly the relationship between the human and the animal realms which emerges compellingly in considering baboons because of their hominid physiology. With the narrative structured around the tensions between people and baboons, no explanation is felt to be required for /Kaggen's wishing to throw sticks at the troop: the antagonism is simply assumed. As omnivorous foragers, baboons often compete for food resources with hunter-gatherers, and may in fact be dangerous adversaries since a full-grown baboon can easily kill a human adult. As is common in accounts of the Early Race, the divide between human and animal is blurred: /Han=kass'o refers to the baboons as "the people who sit on their heels"; he grants them the power of speech; and he presents them as playing a ball game. The conclusion of the narrative, however, re-establishes the division between human and animal, and reasserts the hierarchy of power, as /Kaggen uses his magical abilities to restore his son to life and hence to defeat the baboons.

We can imagine /Han=kass'o utilising the techniques both of fictional narrative and of poetry or song in creating a vivid and dramatic confrontation between /Kaggen and the baboons. In building up the tension of the baboons' decision to kill /Kaggen's son, he has the opportunity to employ dialogue, which would considerably enhance the performative aspect of the story as the narrator could alter the tone and pitch of his voice for each character. Riddle features prominently in this dialogue, as the baboons initially struggle to ascertain what it is /Kaggen wishes to do with the sticks. It is only the fourth baboon to arrive who can solve the riddle:

And he came up to them.

He said: "What does this child say?"

And the other one answered:

"This child says he wants to fetch sticks for his father,

so that his father may take aim  
at the people who sit upon their heels."

Therefore, this baboon exclaimed: "It is ourselves!"

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:19-21)

The story also makes use of a poetic refrain - divided into short lines even by Bleek and Lloyd - to create a sense of patterning in the performance, as each baboon utters the same words when called upon to join the group around the child:

First going

I listen

To the child yonder.

/Kaggen's escape with the eye to the water - an action that serves to regenerate the son - touches upon another central aspect of Bushman life: the religious trance. Men who enter trance states are believed to be able to see and drive out the spirits of the dead (/gauwasi) who cause disease and dissension within the community. One of the most common metaphors for trance, which appears regularly in rock art, is the experience of being underwater. Hence, in this narrative, the figure of /Kaggen shadows that of the /Xam shaman who, like the trickster, uses his specific powers to save life and restore social order.

Closely allied to /Kaggen are other trickster figures from the Early Race, including the jackal.<sup>8</sup> Two narratives by Dia!kwain and ≠Kasin deal with the distribution of meat through accounts of the jackal's ability to outwit other animals. In "Jackal and Hyena" (Guenther, 1989:147-149), Dia!kwain offers a humorous story of how the jackal is able to trick the hyena out of a quagga which he has just killed. The hyena asks the jackal to tell his wife of the kill, but the jackal claims that she will not believe him, and offers to guard the kill while the hyena fetches his spouse. In the hyena's absence, the jackal builds a hut of long sticks, on which

he places the quagga meat and near to which he builds a fire. He then asks his own wife, who has joined him, to make a thong ("riem") out of mouse intestines, with which he offers to pull the hyena up to the meat when he returns. With the hyena suspended in mid-air, the jackal cuts through the thong, and the hyena falls to the ground narrowly missing the fire. After much remonstrance, the hyena again attempts the ascent, but with the same result. This time, however, he falls directly into the fire, burning himself badly, and the jackal takes the meat for himself.

Although Bleek and Lloyd do not offer a great deal of information about the performance, we can imagine that Dia!kwain must have narrated the events with great relish in conveying the suspense of the hyena's second attempt to climb up to the meat on the mouse-gut thong. My typographical representation seeks to capture the suspense of performance, as well as to emphasise the alternating 'voices' of jackal and hyena in the oral delivery:

And the hyena said:

"O jackal! When I come up and reach you  
 at your place up there  
 you shall feel pain on your skin!  
 You must give me a riem that is strong enough  
 to go up with.  
 For the children are dying here because of hunger,  
 while you are not pulling me up,  
 so that I may get food for the children.

And the jackal said:

"The riem was strong enough.  
 The reason the riem broke, letting go of you,  
 was because I pulled too hard.  
 I will give you the same riem again  
 and we will see if it will break again."

And the jackal gave the hyena the riem.

And he said:

"You must not do again what you did before.

For this riem I am now giving you is strong,

hold on to it well."

And the jackal said:

"Tie the riem fast to your body

so that I may pull you.

Let me see if I cannot pull you up.

When the riem is on your body,

let's see then."

And the jackal pulled the hyena.

And now he said to his wife:

"When you see that the hyena might be coming up here,

cut through the riem

so that the hyena cannot come up here

but fall into the fire."

(Adapted from Guenther, 1989:148)

The conjunction "and" at the beginning of each new section suggests - in the print version - an urgency of narration which should engage the listeners' attention in the inevitability of the unfolding plot. The compulsion of Dia!kwain's story, however, is found particularly in his evocation of character, as the jackal's cunning is registered by both his ironic speech and duplicitous actions, and counterpoints the stolid stupidity of the hyena.

"Jackal and Hyena" is in part aetiological, since the hyena's fall into the fire accounts for its small hindquarters: "That is why the back part of the hyena is very small,/ because formerly it was burnt in the fire" (Adapted from Guenther,1989:149). The story however also addresses the question of the ownership of a kill, an issue which with the constant danger of lions, hyenas and jackals was pressing for /Xam hunters. Even when ownership had been established, the matter of ensuring the equitable distribution of the meat was vital to the survival of the band. Both /Xam and !Kung societies have specific customs regarding the hunter's rights and duties with respect to his animal; and while "Jackal and Hyena" provides a highly amusing account of the jackal's selfishness, the story points towards real suffering and need in the hyena's plea about the hunger of his children, and acknowledges the importance of such customs in the maintenance of human life.

‡Kasin's story "The Jackals and the Lion" is also concerned with the ownership of a carcass: it is less humorous, though, for this time it is the jackal who loses his meat. As a member of the Early Race who has both human and animal attributes, he hunts eland with a bow and arrow. The lion, however, constantly drives him off his kills. Finally, with the help of a sorceress and his own cunning, he kills the lion, and establishes a period of peace and bounty for his community. Here, instead of indicating simple self-interest as in "Jackal and Hyena", the jackal's trickery works for the common good:

There now seemed to be peace.

For their father walked about and did not talk.

Thus, the place seemed comfortable now,

for peace now seemed to reign.

There were places where the jackal did not talk at them.

For peace now seemed to reign,

for the place had become so,



peace reigned at it:  
 that little children might not fear,  
 for there is peace;  
 that now the little children  
 might fetch water for him  
 so that he might drink,  
 for now they were all satisfied with him.

(Adapted from Guenther, 1989:151)

†Kasin's lyrical evocation of the restorative effects of the jackal's actions is striking and - as Guenther suggests - may have projected his own feelings about the crisis facing /Xam society:

Did he, perhaps, recognise himself, and his people, in the jackals, when they were at the mercy of the lion oppressor who took away their food with gratuitous force and thereby threatened their very survival? The song of praise, to peace, to contented children, to well-being, was for †Kasin, perhaps, a song of hope, or of nostalgic memories of a time before the marauding settlers. (1989:150)

Certainly the understanding of the jackal figure as folk hero in this story finds a modern counterpart amongst the Nharo of the Kalahari, who narrate the actions of a fox-trickster who works as a garden servant for a foolish but brutal Afrikaans farmer (Hewitt, 1985:660). In its longing for peace and restitution, †Kasin's story 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. At the same time, it suggests in analogous ways something of the human value and possibility which was destroyed, and which will need to be recovered if - in present circumstances - we are to try to construct social and political histories which emphasise commonalities rather than divisions.

Myth as modern analogy is evident not only in the narratives concerned with the trickster god, but in those of the Early Period that deal with other topics including the creation of the stars as closely associated with the therianthrope members of the Early Race. These sidereal narratives are symbolically dense, and in fairly elaborate plot structures involve a large cast of characters including the Dawn's Heart Star (Jupiter) and his wife the Lynx. One of the more accessible of these stories is Dia!kwain's brief account, "The Great Star, !Gaunu, which, Singing, Named the Stars" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:79-81), in which the smaller stars are named by the great star, and become forever a sign to the porcupine that dawn is approaching.

One of the earliest and most influential literary recuperations of the Bushman creation narratives has been that of Laurens van der Post, particularly in The Lost World of the Kalahari<sup>9</sup> (1958) and The Heart of the Hunter (1961). The importance of his work lies in his identifying the creativity of the Bushmen, and in his recovering something of their complex mythology. As Masilela has argued, in a context in which the state was formulating and implementing its apartheid policies van der Post articulated a common South African humanity beginning with the people brutalised by both white settlers and African peoples:

The importance of [the work of] van der Post in our cultural history is (for its relevance in the present context is even more fundamental), to have attempted to construct a singular and unified structure of our own culture. The achievement has to be seen in the context of the fact that the state was moving against this very attempt by instituting the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid. What is even more remarkable is that [his] sense of history informed [him] that only by beginning with the First People (the Khoisan people), and by placing them at the centre of [his] enterprise can a historically authentic structure of South African history be constructed. Indeed, the base and fundamental layer of our unified and multi-complex culture, is the still unexamined but incomparably rich culture of the Khoisan people. (1987:58)

Van der Post's account of the Bushmen is extremely lyrical, and often seductive:

His paintings show him clearly to be illuminated with spirit; the lamp may have been antique but the oil is authentic and timeless, and the flame was well and tenderly lit. Indeed, his capacity for love shows up like a fire on a hill at night. He alone of all the races, was so much of its earth and innermost being that he tried constantly to glorify it by adorning its rocks with painting. We other races went through Africa like locusts, devouring and stripping the land for what we could get out of it. (1979:32)

Yet such lyricism is double-edged, for even as it asserts universal human creativities, it appropriates the Bushmen for van der Post's own specific concerns. While his openness about his biographical reasons for seeking out the Bushmen is laudable (this is particularly evident in The Lost World of the Kalahari) and suggests an attempt to acknowledge his own subjectivity, van der Post does not at any stage allow the Bushmen - even the living Kalahari Bushmen - to 'talk back' to him about the particularities of their lives. Instead they are subsumed under a Jungian paradigm, where they represent for van der Post the instinctive child within us which Western society has destroyed, and which our contact with the Bushmen may allow us to recover. While he would no doubt regard his observations as extremely positive, van der Post often comes dangerously close to Social Darwinism in his descriptions of "the Bushman" as "child-man" (1979:13), "the little hunter" (1979:22), "this little man" (1979:28), and in passages like the following:

Even as a child it seemed to me that his [the Bushman's] world was one without secrets between one form of being and another. As I tried to form a picture of what it was really like it came to me that he was back in the moment which our European fairy-tale books described as the time when birds, beasts, plants, trees,

and men shared a common tongue, and the whole world, night and day, resounded like the surf of a coral sea with universal conversation. (1979:21-22)

In the process of asserting the 'common humanity' reflected in the creation tales, van der Post is in danger of transforming 'the Bushman' into the 'other' who precedes society, history and economic need, and who lives in Edenic unity with the natural world.

Apart from the tales concerned with mythological origins, however, many Bushman narratives emerged - and continue to emerge - directly from the events of everyday life, particularly hunting. //Kabbo provides a detailed account of hunting practices, for example, in the text entitled "Habits of the Bat and Porcupine" (Bleek and Lloyd,1911:247-253). Here is an extract:

Mamma told me about it,  
 that I should watch for the porcupine,  
 if I saw the bat;  
 then I would know that the porcupine was coming,  
 for the bat came.  
 And I must not sleep:  
 I must watch for the porcupine,  
 for, when the porcupine approaches, I feel sleepy,  
 I become sleepy, on account of the porcupine;  
 for the porcupine is a thing which is used,  
 when it draws near,  
 to make us sleep against our will,  
 as it wishes that we may not know  
 the time at which it comes;  
 as it wishes that it may come into its hole  
 when we are asleep. (Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd,1911:249)

Formally, his narrative is structured around variations on the refrain "Mamma/Father used to tell me", which probably derives from the fact - mentioned earlier - that many of the narrators claimed they were recounting stories told to them by their parents. In //Kabbo's text, however, the phrase has a greater significance than simple acknowledgement of informational origins. Oral literature is characterised by its use of repetition as a rhetorical device, and through his refrain //Kabbo could have lent rhythm to his delivery, thus creating an anticipatory structure into which his listeners could then have fitted each new section to ensure coherence even had a line or two escaped them. At the same time, the repetition emphasises the principle of circularity on which the narrative is based, and which characterises many African oral poems and stories. In the case of the Bushmen, the emphasis on repeated cycles may proceed from the fact that their lives were to a large extent governed by the cycles of the natural world: the sun, the moon, the seasons, and so on. The repetition of the phrase "Mamma/Father used to say" also helps to establish a sense of communal knowledge and wisdom, which serves to bind the members of the band together.

The narrative contains sound advice, nevertheless, on how to hunt a porcupine (//Kabbo's narratives are generally characterised by their attention to practical detail): ensure that the time of night is right ("the time at which the Milky Way turns back"); stay awake; check the wind direction; and remain quiet. In addition to its practical advice, the account opens up to the realm of the mythological in the suggestion that the movement of the porcupine is associated with the falling of the stars, which echoes Dia!kwain's creation narrative "The Great Star, !Gaunu, which, Singing, Named the Stars":

Father taught me about the stars;  
that I should do thus  
when lying in wait at a porcupine's hole.

I must watch the stars -  
 the place where the stars fall  
 is the one I must watch thoroughly.  
 For this place is really where the porcupine is,  
 where the stars fall.

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:253)

In this narrative, as in most Bushman literature, there is no sense of disjuncture between the mythological and the everyday, so that an ostensibly practical hunting narrative conveys understandings of great lyrical intensity. There is, in fact, no sense of division for the Bushmen between the physical and the spiritual worlds: instead they are perceived to form a continuum.

\* \* \*

While narratives comprise a great deal of the literature performed by the /Xam, !Kung and other groupings, songs are also important forms of social articulation, and may be either part of communal religious life or intensely personal creations. Religious or medicine songs are perceived to be 'given' by god (the !Kung believe Gao!na sends the lesser god //Gauwa with the songs). They are often named after animals - such as the Giraffe, Gemsbok and Eland songs - and are performed at trance dances, at which the women clap and sing while the men dance in order to enter trance. The singers believe that these religious songs have power or "n/um", the same term used to describe the power of trance, though they may be sung light-heartedly during the day when they are perceived to have no "n/um". Healing songs are of less interest to literary scholars than to anthropologists, however, as the words of the songs either have little or no meaning, or the meanings have been forgotten.

Personal or 'mood' songs are more individualised verbal responses to events, and range from apparently simple expressions of longing, such as //Kabbo's song on the loss of his tobacco

pouch and his consequent 'tobacco hunger'

Famine it is,  
 Famine it is,  
 Famine is here.

Famine it is,  
 Famine it is,  
 Famine is here (Bleek and Lloyd,1911:235)

to songs which employ complex textual strategies and reveal highly developed aesthetic and social insights, such as Dia!kwain's "The Broken String". Unlike narratives and religious songs, as evidence from !Kung society suggests, mood songs are often performed without an audience, to the accompaniment of a single-stringed musical bow or a four- or five-stringed instrument known as a "//gwashi".

In her recent study Women Like Meat Biesele has pointed to the centrality of metaphor in Ju/'hoan society, claiming that "[m]etaphor permeates Ju/'hoan expressive life, which in a few words can be characterised as highly oblique, indirect, and allusive" (1993:23). This literary figure was equally important in the aesthetic and social life of the /Xam. While many of the narratives employ metaphor extensively, or can themselves be read as extended metaphors, it is in the mood songs that metaphor, symbol and image come to the fore. Even in his very brief song quoted above, //Kabbo employs metaphorical transformation in registering his craving for tobacco as a "famine". Dia!kwain's song entitled "The Broken String" is constructed around the central metaphor of the broken string, and functions in a way analogous to the Western lyric, which perhaps accounts for its being the Bushman text most frequently included in anthologies of South African poetry.

As the footnote to "The Broken String" indicates, Dia!kwain had heard the song from his father Xaa-ttin, who composed the lament "after the death of his friend, the magician and rain-maker !Nuin/kui-ten, who died from the effects of a shot which he had received when going about in the form of a lion" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:236). While the visionary is an important aspect of Bushman society, in which shamanism opens vast psychic spaces and symbolic stores, the emphasis on therianthrope transformation in Bleek and Lloyd's note elides the fact that !Nuin/kui-ten was shot by a white farmer after he had killed an ox. I quote the song here in full, with only slight linguistic modifications to Bleek and Lloyd's translation and the alteration of those of their line divisions which - in my view - seem somewhat arbitrary and, on the page, do not create a convincing sense of the performed song:<sup>10</sup>

### The Broken String

People were those  
 who broke the string for me.  
 Therefore,  
 the place became like this to me,  
 on account of it,  
 because the string  
 was that which broke for me.  
 Therefore,  
 the place does not feel to me,  
 as the place used to feel to me,  
 on account of it.  
 For, the place feels  
 as if it stood open before me,  
 because the string has broken for me.  
 Therefore,



the place does not feel pleasant to me,

On account of it.

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:237)

With this lament in mind Harold Scheub argues that "[o]ral poetry is a complex interplay of images. It is more than mere accumulation, but that is where it begins, as the solitary image wrenched from its wonted environment is pulled into new contexts" (1987:483-4). "The Broken String" works around a main and a subsidiary image: the string which has broken; and the changed landscape.

The breaking of the string refers obviously to a musical instrument, especially since the subject was himself a singer, composer and rainmaker (the musical bow was used in the rain ceremony), and the song would have been performed to musical accompaniment. Hence the death of the shaman leaves a silence within the band, and within the speaker. The image also suggests the breaking of the string of a hunting bow, one of the most prized possessions of Bushman men, and hence the destruction of something of value. As Hewitt argues, however, the reference to the string resonates with more complex meanings. Another practice of rainmaking involved leading an ox with a leather thong across the area where it was hoped that rain would fall. If the thong broke, which it did with a sound similar to that of a stringed musical instrument, it was perceived to be a particularly bad omen, and signified despair to the band (1985:665). Hence, through the association of images, the song evokes the absolute desolation which the shaman's death signifies. Such an interpretation is supported by Dia!kwain's explanatory comment that the string "was what he used to hear, when !Nuin/kui-ten had called forth the Rain-bull. That was why things were not like they had formerly been" (quoted by Scheub, 1987:482-3).

The symbol of the string, then, registers at once the silencing of the shaman in death, the intensely personal pain felt by the speaker, and the larger breakage within society which the

death would have represented. Similarly, the changed and desolate nature of the place reflects simultaneously the grief of Xaa-ttin, the loss of an important figure in the band, and the fact that nothing can ever be the same for the /Xam again. The song identifies the agents responsible for the change as "People", the farmers whose arrival in the area would change unutterably the course of /Xam history. The power of "The Broken String" lies in the fact that, even as it is a moving personal lament on the death of a great figure, it is a haunting anticipation of the destruction of /Xam society.

Bushman oral literature has continued to develop new forms in response to changing historical circumstances. In the 1960s amongst the Northern Bushmen, for example, many young performers began to use the thumb piano of African societies. One performer in particular gained immense popularity at /"ai/"ai, near Ghanzi, by combining the highly personalised reflections of the mood song with the religious tradition, thus evoking an individualised relationship with the trickster deity which is both tortured and inspirational (see Bieseke, 1975b:171). As well as new kinds of mood songs, other innovative forms have emerged. The community associated with the Kuru Development Trust at Ghanzi, for example, performs various dramatic sketches which in hybrid associations mix traditional performance genres with other African and Western influences. The community has also produced remarkable new styles of oil painting.

\* \* \*

As I have tried to indicate in this chapter, the literature of the Bushmen represents an originary mythology firmly located in social circumstance. The later expression also embodies a large and continuing theme in South African literary and political life: the clash of cultures; racial confrontation; and the destruction of indigenous inhabitants by the technology of a stronger colonial power. The texts of the /Xam suggest not the primordial child-man which van der Post describes, nor the idyllic African past evoked in popular media and advertising,<sup>11</sup> but a complex

imaginative response to pressing social and economic needs. At the same time, the literature of the /Xam returns us to certain formal issues within literary studies. While anthologies usually include either prose or poetry, the oral performances of the Bushmen seem to blur such generic distinctions, and compel us to seek new methods of representation for oral texts appropriate to the actual southern African context.

### Notes

1. My title obviously echoes Jonathan Raban's The Society of the Poem (1971). Raban's book and Michael Hamburger's The Truth of Poetry (1972) remain central texts for the study of poetry.
2. The movement towards increasingly historicised readings of oral literature is paralleled by developments in the study of Bushman rock art. The work of David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson, particularly in their seminal study Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art (1989), undermined contemporary naturalist perceptions of rock art by arguing that the paintings and engravings emerged from the complex mythological systems and psychic spaces of religious trance. Lewis-Williams and Dowson's assertion of the creative abilities and highly developed understandings of rock painters parallels the important work of Parry and Lord in insisting on the value and power of oral literature, in the face of institutional denigration of its worth. However, just as literary scholars have recently sought to root texts more firmly within contexts of generation and reception, so rock art researchers have begun to question whether Lewis-Williams and Dowson's trance theories, though valuable, may not serve to locate the paintings and engravings in a transcendental mythical space, beyond politics, history and economic pressures. Anne Solomon, for example, has recently argued for a more overtly politicised paradigm, which is alert particularly to the gender relations of Bushman societies (1994).

3. See for example Alan Barnard's Hunters and Herders in Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples (1992).
4. See Wright (1971;1994) and Guenther (1994).
5. At the conference "Texts and Images of People, Politics and Power: Representing the Bushman People of South Africa" (Rock Art Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery, 4-7 August 1994), members of the Schmidtsdrift community, some of whom were still soldiers, provided harrowing accounts of the methods used by the SADF to force the members of 31 Battalion to move to Schmidtsdrift. A recent newspaper article on the Schmidtsdrift community provides some insight into the conditions of life there (Anon.,1993), though its assertions about the role played by the SADF do not square with accounts from community members themselves.
6. Bessie Head's novel Maru (1971) explores this theme through the discrimination experienced by the protagonist once it is discovered that she is a "Mosarwa". Kenneth Good examines the political and legal position of the Bushmen in Botswana in some detail (1993;1994).
7. See "Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushmen; from Material Collected by Dr W.H.I. Bleek and Miss L.C. Lloyd between 1870 and 1880" (1931-36) and "Special Speech of Animals and Moon Used by the /Xam Bushmen" (1936).
8. The trickster god is sometimes thought of as a member of the Early Race, and at other times to have ascended to the sky to become god. The /Xam generally regard /Kaggen as a supernatural being but, as Hewitt argues, the notion of a deity is less developed amongst the /Xam than amongst the Central and Northern Bushmen (1985:658).

9. For an extended discussion of The Lost World of the Kalahari see Lloyd (1993).
10. Bleek and Lloyd break the first line of the song after the pronoun "who", for example:

People were those who  
Broke for me the string.

This division seems to me to create a rather limp line-ending, and to draw attention away from the opening word "People" and the reinforcement of culpability/agency in "those" which resonates through the rest of the song. Furthermore Bleek and Lloyd's line division does not seem to register the way the singer would pause - as !Kung singers do - at the end of each sense-unit, so generating the rhythm of delivery. Hence my recasting is as follows:

People were those  
who broke the string for me.

At other points in the song I have altered line divisions in this fashion.

11. Barbara Buntman has argued that Bushmen are especially attractive metaphors for advertisers, since they are perceived to offer uncontested, uncontroversial images of a black Africa, they are not seen to be associated with political parties or conflicts, they allow advertisers to present a movement from an idyllic past to a post-apartheid future without the disruptions of history, economics or politics, and they can be used metonymically to represent an unpolarised Africanness which mediates between black and white (1994). See Tomaselli (1992;1993) for representations of the Bushmen in South African film.

## Chapter 2: Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Shaka kaSenzangakhona

On 9 April 1837 the American missionary Rev. George Champion visited the court of the Zulu king Dingane. Amongst his records of the meeting is the following observation:

A man stood not far from the great houses full of praise, shouting at the top of his voice and calling Dingan, the elephant's calf, the black one, the conqueror of all the lands &c. We waited a little for the monarch to hear his flattery, and at length the servant whose post is at the gate told us he wanted to see us. (1967:90-91)

In these lines Champion describes one of the most important cultural and political institutions of Zulu society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the praise poetry of the king or chief. Despite his detached and somewhat condescending tone - he dismisses the form as mere "flattery" - Champion provides amongst the earliest first-hand accounts of the performance of Zulu praise poetry in South African history.

Almost all African societies on the subcontinent had (and in many cases still have) one or more poets who performed poems about the rule and lineage of the chief or king and about his relationship with his subjects. The occasions for such performances, as Champion describes, would range from the arrival of visitors to great ceremonies, including declarations of war and celebrations of military victories. This form of poetry is highly complex, and is regarded with great seriousness by both ruler and ruled. It has particular prominence in Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Sotho societies, and many similarities exist between the praises performed by the different groupings.

In contrast to Bushman bands which are largely egalitarian in their social organisation, traditional Zulu society is highly stratified and patriarchal. Power is centralised in the hands of

the king or chief, and is devolved through local chiefs and headmen to the leading men of individual households. Whereas Bushman societies, in keeping with their more informal social structure, generally do not maintain absolute distinctions between literary genres, Zulu society - being larger, more highly structured and more politically complex - has more clearly defined social and cultural institutions, of which the praise poetry of chiefs is perhaps the most prominent. Hence my focus in this chapter will be on a single literary form with a specific social function and distinctive textual features. This is not to suggest that Zulu people do not perform other kinds of oral literature, including different kinds of praises, work songs, love lyrics, wedding songs, lullabies, children's verse, stories, riddles and prayers.

In discussing the praises of Shaka I shall argue in this chapter for placing praise poetry (Zulu/Xhosa: "izibongo"; Sotho: "lithoko") in a central position in South African literary history. There are a number of reasons for granting praise poetry this status. Firstly, it is regarded as the highest form of literary expression in almost all African societies in the subcontinent, and continues to play an important role in South African political and cultural life. Secondly, alongside the songs and stories of the Bushmen, praise poetry probably constitutes our truly original contribution to world literature. (Despite this, it is poorly represented in survey studies of South African literature and in the syllabi of departments of literary studies.) Thirdly, its influence on black literary production in this country has been pervasive, and the next three chapters consider, amongst other things, how in disparate historical and political contexts the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the poems of Ingoapele Madingoane, Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli all draw on the tradition of izibongo. The necessity for detailed attention to praise poetry as a literary form is illustrated by the difficulties encountered by many South African critics - who have had little knowledge of the cultural institutions or aesthetic models of African societies - in finding appropriate paradigms for Soweto poetry and the performance poetry of the 1980s: forms that bear the influence of oral assumptions.

By placing izibongo at the centre of our literary history, I wish to contribute to breaking

down the linguistic barriers which have characterised literary and cultural analysis in South Africa, and which do not recognise the high degree of linguistic and generic hybridisation in our society. My thesis seeks to draw into the mainstream of literary study - specifically into English departments, which are my institutional home - forms that have received more attention from other disciplines than from that of literature. At the same time - as I stated in the Introduction - the thesis is written not only to fulfil academic requirements, but to serve what I regard as a larger social purpose: the importance of cross-cultural 'translations' of language and experience in a society that has been divided for so long by the ethnic imperatives of colonialism and apartheid.

A great deal of research has been conducted on izibongo by scholars in departments of African languages. In this chapter I draw on the work of such pioneering figures as E.W. Grant, G.P. Lestrade, H.I.E. Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi, A.C. Jordan and Mazisi Kunene, while also pointing to certain limitations in their critical approaches. Early articles such as Grant's "The Izibongo of the Zulu Chiefs" (1927), Vilakazi's "The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu" (1938) and Dhlomo's "Nature and Variety of Tribal Drama" (1939) served to direct critical attention to forms of oral creation that had been ignored by scholars, and - especially in the cases of Grant and Vilakazi - to record original performances for posterity. Grant offers some discussion of the imbongi and his mode of recitation, and provides detailed annotations for the izibongo of Senzangakhona, Shaka, Dingane, Mpande, Cetshwayo, Dinizulu and Zibebu. Unfortunately, he offers little discussion of the poetics of the form. In contrast, Dhlomo and Vilakazi pay careful attention to the 'literary' qualities of the oral texts which they discuss, thereby asserting the potential of black creativities usually denied by colonial ideology. Vilakazi, in particular, provides valuable insights into the rhythmical structures of izibongo, especially into what he calls the "breath-group", the verbal units defined by the performer's regular pauses for breath (1993:61-67). Yet both Vilakazi and Dhlomo assume that oral societies are by definition 'primitive', and both implicitly and explicitly equate 'civilisation' with European culture. (Amongst many other examples, Vilakazi refers to "primitive poets" and "primitive Bantu man"



(1993:58,59), while Dhlomo talks of "backward races", and theorises about the art forms of "civilised man" against those of "primitive man" (1993:195,201.) Despite the rancorous debate which these articles provoked between themselves,<sup>1</sup> Dhlomo and Vilakazi remain fairly firmly within Eurocentric poetic paradigms, and are unable to engage fully either with the specific nature of oral poetry or with the complex aesthetic structures of African forms. More recent critical studies of orality in departments of African languages have also struggled to grant performance poems their status as living forms in society. With some exceptions, such studies tend to be either morphological or structural-classificatory, explicating oral literature in terms of grammatical and syntactic forms or setting up generic categories for the texts. These studies grant little attention to the status of the poem as a human document: as an act of rhetoric with the capacity to persuade, to mobilise, or to negotiate relations of power.

Amongst the most influential studies of Zulu izibongo by African language scholars are those by Trevor Cope, and D.K. Rycroft and A.B. Ngcobo. Cope's Izibongo: Zulu Praise-poems (1968) - part of the Oxford University Press series on oral poetry from southern Africa - remains probably the most valuable text on Zulu izibongo. The book makes available recorded versions of a number of praise poems, including the praises of Shaka which I intend to discuss here, and expands upon both the poetic strategies of izibongo and the role of the poet and the form. Cope however experiences some difficulty in connecting the form of izibongo to its function (his otherwise useful chapter entitled "An Appreciation of Zulu Praise-poems" includes separate sections on "The Function of Praise-poems" and "Praise-poems as Poetry: Poetic Qualities"). Cope is also unable to create a dynamic sense of izibongo as utilising particular textual and performative strategies in order to accomplish specific social ends. Instead, he tends to lapse either into literary formalism or social history. In their book The Praises of Dingana: Izibongo zikaDingana (1988), Rycroft and Ngcobo offer a scholarly explication of the records of that king's izibongo, and provide a wealth of information for the critic. Yet the very informational density of their study is in many ways self-defeating, as the poem itself tends to disappear under the weight of historical and grammatical annotation. I shall return to this question later in the chapter.

Studies of izibongo have also been conducted fairly recently by literary scholars. Amongst the most prominent of these is Leroy Vail and Landeg White's Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (1991), in which the authors offer a compelling account of the social functioning of different forms of praise poetry in southern Africa. Yet - like Cope - Vail and White struggle to acknowledge simultaneously the historicity and textuality of the praise poetry which they discuss. Instead, they tend to collapse the poetic nature of their texts into the larger power relations of their societies. In contrast, my concern is to combine a sociology with a poetics of oral literature - as Barber and de Moraes Farias suggest - and I read the textuality of izibongo as integral to its social function. In doing so, I draw especially on the work of Elizabeth Gunner and Jeff Opland who, whatever their differences of approach and purpose, have sought to remain alert to both form and function.

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My reasons for choosing the izibongo of Shaka as a test case are various. The poem is well known, and even though critics have generally been extremely uncertain as to how to 'read' the text, sections have been fairly frequently anthologised. The praises deal with one of the major figures of our history, and there are numerous accounts - both oral and written - of Shaka's life and accomplishments.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the poem itself provides us with a text of great power. We have a compelling account of a great, if ruthless, leader as well as of the growth of a nation.

The text of Shaka's izibongo published by Cope is drawn from the most extensive source for Zulu izibongo from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - the James Stuart archive.<sup>3</sup> Stuart was born in 1868 in Pietermaritzburg, and collected Zulu praise poems between 1888 and 1912 during his years of service as a magistrate in what is now KwaZulu Natal. He had extensive contact with most of the leading oral poets in the region, and meticulously transcribed and

annotated the performances he witnessed. Certain of his informants were old men who could provide first-hand accounts which stretched back to the time of Dingane's reign. Stuart left South Africa in 1922 for London, where he continued to research and publish Zulu oral literature. In all, he collected and transcribed 258 poems during his travels in Natal.<sup>4</sup> His manuscripts are lodged in the Killie Campbell Africana Library archives, while copies of the sound recordings he made are stored in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Sections of the print archives concerned with the social and political history of the Zulu people have been published in the James Stuart Archive: Volumes 1-4 (Webb and Wright: 1976,1979,1982,1986).

Stuart did not translate the izibongo which he collected, a task undertaken by Daniel Malcolm. Malcolm was born in Durban in 1884, and grew up in Bulwer. He served as Chief Inspector of Bantu Education for 30 years, and on retiring became the first lecturer in Zulu at the University of Natal, a post he held for twenty years. Malcolm died in 1962 before he could publish his translations, and it was only with Cope's intervention that certain of the poems appeared in print. Cope defines his editorial role as being to "select the most representative of the poems (26 out of the 258), polish them (for Malcolm's translations were mostly first drafts in manuscript), and annotate them (for Stuart's and Malcolm's notes were very brief)" (1968:viii). Cope's "polishing" means that the translated izibongo reveal few of the grammatical and syntactical awkwardnesses evident in the Bleek and Lloyd records of Bushman texts. In the process of annotation, he drew particularly on A.T. Bryant's Olden Times in Zululand and Natal (1929).

While "Shaka" - as Stuart titled the poem - has a similarly ambiguous status to that of other oral texts which survive only in printed records through processes of transcription and translation, this particular text reveals several problems more specific to itself. Firstly, what Cope does not mention is that Stuart created his versions of the poems by amalgamating a number of different performances. A working note in Stuart's handwriting on an early version of "Izibongo

zika Tshaka" in the Killie Campbell archives (dated 14.1.21) suggests something of the nature of his editorial intervention, and reveals the Western print assumptions about 'aesthetic unity' and 'conciseness' which underpinned that intervention: "Tshingana, Ndabuko, Mkungo and Mgidhlana's versions collated and made into a single piece. All repetitions struck out. Best and most definitive verses adopted" (File 29a: KCM 23481). For the final version of "Shaka", Stuart drew on at least thirty-three different versions in an apparent effort to establish an 'authentic' text. As Vail and White have argued (1991:58), this project proceeds from the mistaken assumption that the comparison of a range of Shakan izibongo will lead to the recovery of an 'urtext' from which all the versions derive, whereas the performance of izibongo - while drawing on customary praises - is in every instance a distinct textual event. A second fact which Cope does not mention is that his "polishing" is not limited to Malcolm's translations, but extends also to Stuart's Zulu versions. As well as regularising the orthography (a practice he acknowledges), he makes a number of small changes to the poem "Shaka", switching the order of lines in certain sections, and in one case adding four lines, apparently drawn from Stuart's earlier versions. Cope's editorial hand is evident in a comparison of the opening sections of Stuart's and Cope's texts:

Stuart:           UDlungwana woMbelebele!  
                   Odlung' emanxulumeni,  
                   Kwaze kwas' amanxulum esibikelana.  
                   USishaka kasishayeki, kanjengamanzi!  
                   Bazohushay' abakwaNtombazi, nabakwaLanga.  
                   UNodum' ehlezi, kaMenzi!  
                   ILemb' eleqamany' amalemb'e ngokukhalipha;  
                   UShaka ngiyesab' ukuthi nguShaka,  
                   UShaka kuyinkosi yasemShobeni. (File 28:289.KCM 23478)

Cope: UDLungwana kaNdaba!

UDlungwana woMbelebele,  
 Odlung' emanxulumeni,  
 Kwaze kwas' amanxulum' esibikelana.  
 UNodumehlezi kaMenzi,  
 USishaka kasishayeki kanjengamanzi,  
 Ilemb' eleq' amany' amalembé ngokukhalipha;  
 UShaka ngiyesab' ukuthi nguShaka,  
 UShaka kuyinkosi yasemaShobeni. (1968:89)

Cope's version omits the line "Bazohushay' abakwaNtombazi, nabakwaLanga", adds the opening praise "UDlungwana kaNdaba", and alters the order of some of the epithets, so creating a slightly different effect from that of the Stuart version. The third problem with the Stuart/Cope text is that, while Shaka reigned from 1816 to 1828, the izibongo were recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are uncertain, therefore, as to what extent they correspond with those which would have been performed at Shaka's court itself. Nonetheless, the customary and memorised nature of izibongo suggests that the text we have is likely to be reasonably 'accurate', a sense confirmed by comparisons with the earliest records of the izibongo of Shaka which date from the reign of Dingane and which include examples recorded in the 1850s.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the 'oral' textual problems, "Shaka" - in the form that it has reached us - is a poem of power and intensity, and should be of immense value to literary studies. We may recognise the ambiguities of its ontology, including its artificial solidification in print, but continue to use "Shaka" to explore lines of historical, social and literary communication which otherwise could have remained inaccessible. Such a critical project involves our maintaining a 'dialogue' between the textual event which, in drawing both on historical accounts and interviews with more recent audiences and izimbongi, we may envision as having taken place in Shaka's court, and the rather different text - published by Cope - which prompts/provokes a distinct set of critical expectations and assumptions. Such a dialogue - or dialectic, in view of the difficult 'translations' involved -

should prove enlightening: the critical expectations aroused by the fixed Stuart/Cope text may be permitted to provide a framework of understanding within which to 'identify' the poem, while we bear in mind that its performative status in the Zulu royal court would have insisted on its distinctiveness and hence its resistance to the appropriations of later cultural transmission. Unless we are prepared to acknowledge that despite the 'instabilities' of transmission, translation and reception we can recreate something of a speaking voice, we are in danger of arriving at an impasse: a blocking of communication which is not inevitable but ideological, and is a legacy of the Romantic myth of essential truth that is supposed to emerge from the artist's own individualised mouth/pen. Accordingly, any alterations to the text are seen as departures from the inspired words of the original. Yet as I argued in the Introduction in discussing Bassnett-McGuire's theory of translation, the insights of structuralism and semiotics suggest that rather than concern ourselves with the loss of an inspired original, we might instead perceive the value of transfer from one signifying system to another to serve a purpose in a given context.

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Recuperating "Shaka" for literary debate requires a fairly detailed knowledge of its historical context. The poem emerges from a period in which Zulu power was being consolidated and then forcefully extended under Shaka's reign.<sup>6</sup> The early nineteenth century in the KwaZulu Natal area was characterised by fierce battles between a number of chiefdoms over land and political control. Prior to Shaka's accession to power, the Zulu were a fairly minor grouping, and had been conquered by - amongst others - the Mthethwa under Dingiswayo. The Mthethwa controlled the coastal area, while the other dominant force the Ndwande, under Zwide, controlled the northern areas. Shaka was born in 1787, son to Nandi and the Zulu chief Senzangakhona. During his childhood he was driven together with his mother from the Zulu, and granted refuge by Dingiswayo to whom the Zulu were tributary. Amongst the Mthethwa Shaka achieved great fame as a warrior, and after the death of Senzangakhona in 1816 he was installed by Dingiswayo as chief of the Zulu clan, whose might and influence he rebuilt through prowess in

warfare. Amongst the important innovations that he introduced was the regiment system - an idea adopted and extended from Dingiswayo's armies - by means of which he established a standing army and created a highly militarised ethos in Zulu society. He also developed the short stabbing spear; unlike the long spear which was thrown from some distance and left the warrior effectively unarmed once it had been launched, the short spear was used for close combat and was ideally suited to the attack formation of the 'horns', in which the enemy's flanks were enclosed by attacking regiments while, from the front, the main force of warriors engaged the enemy at close range.

After the death of Dingiswayo at the hands of Zwibe in 1818, Shaka assumed chieftaincy of the Mthethwa, and extended his power and influence by conquering other groups and including the warriors in his armies. The poem "Shaka" catalogues the successes of his military campaigns. By 1824, when Shaka moved his capital from Mkhumbane to Ngoye (also known as Bulawayo), he had built the Zulu chieftaindom into a strong, centralised power-base, in which the authority of the king exceeded by far that of prior chiefs. As Jeff Guy argues, the Zulu kingdom was at this stage "the most formidable power in south-east Africa" (1994:xviii). In 1827 Shaka had a second royal kraal built at Dukuza and divided his time between his two capitals, but his increasingly cruel and despotic acts were already causing unhappiness with his rule. In the following year he was assassinated by his brothers Dingane and Mhlangana, and after a dispute over succession in which Mhlangana was killed, Dingane assumed the kingship.

Such is the context to which the poem "Shaka" responds and in which it would have been performed. While the historical circumstances of Shaka's rule are well-known, however, many readers and critics remain uncertain as to how to make sense of its 'literary' self-expression, and praise poetry has consequently received little attention in literary studies. Here is a section of "Shaka":

The beast that lowed at Mthonjaneni,

And all the tribes heard its wailing,  
 It was heard by Dunjwa of the Yengweni kraal,  
 It was heard by Mangcengeza of Khali's kraal.

Fire of the long grass of scorching force,  
 That burned the owls on the Dlebe hill,  
 And eventually those on Madeblana also burned.

He who travelled across to Ndimma and Mgovu,  
 And women who were with child gave birth easily;  
 The newly planted crops they left still short,  
 The seed they left amongst the maize-stalks,  
 The old women were left in the abandoned sites,  
 The old men were left along the tracks,  
 The roots of trees looked up at the sky.

He who reached the top of Bhuzane mountain,  
 He came across a long line of buck,  
 He passed by Mcombo as the cattle were leaving.

(Cope, 1968:90-92)

Most readers and critics will immediately identify the text as a poem recognisable in the short-line convention according to which Stuart, and later Cope, registered the imbongi's rhythmic delivery of the praises. Many today, however, are likely to have difficulty in subjecting the text to 'critical appreciation'. The uncertainties certainly arise from the ontological instabilities of version-poems like "Shaka", but actually proceed from three related problems: a misunderstanding of the nature and function of izibongo; an inability to make sense of its textual strategies; and a difficulty with the density of historical reference and allusion in the poem. I shall consider these problems with reference to "Shaka". Some general discussion of forms of praising is required, however, before I can usefully undertake a detailed analysis of this particular poem.



Royal izibongo cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of izibongo.<sup>7</sup> As in most African societies on the subcontinent, Zulu social life is characterised by the many different forms of praises that people perform, including praises to birds, wild animals and cattle (often as part of a communal ritual of thanks for their milk), personal praises, praises to the clan, praises to the ancestors, and the praise poems of the king or chief, such as those of Shaka. The larger function of praising is to establish cognitive maps within society - of relations between humans and animals, individuals and other individuals, personal identity and communal life, and ruler and ruled.

Personal praises have an important bearing on royal izibongo, and require particular attention. The first literary form associated with the individual in Zulu society is the lullaby ("isihlabelelo"), composed by the mother for the child. This is then followed by a personal praise name ("isithopho") which may be self-composed, or granted by peers or parents. Over a period of time the isithopho is elaborated into the individual's personal izibongo, which may reflect flatteringly or otherwise on the person's physical appearance or moral character. Such personal izibongo are highly intertextual, since they often comprise elements which are self-composed, others which are drawn from the praises of friends, relatives or ancestors, praises which are given by others, or which are simply part of the cultural currency of the society. Izibongo of this kind serve to mediate personal and social identity in that they define the individual in relation to the group or the community. Male praises are performed especially at the solo "ukugiya" dance, at which the warrior dances vigorously and ferociously to the recitation of his praises. H.I.E. Dhlomo identified the significance of personal izibongo in this context:

They were used to excite and delight. They were a fairly faithful and inspired record of your career and character. In youth they told your measure of promise, your inclinations and your dormant but dominant qualities; in advanced age, the story of your achievements and adventures. (1977:48)

While Dhlomo emphasised the role of personal izibongo in a highly-militarised male context, Gunner has pointed to the important role personal izibongo play in Zulu women's lives, and the ways in which - often in bawdy or humorous fashion - they treat many of the problem points of their experience (1989b). The following lines from the izibongo of MaHlabisa, recorded and translated by Gunner, illustrate the form:

She scurries up and down with her skinny little legs, where the old men are.

She outdrinks the Madondo crowd, she knocks it back.

She outdrank the Madondo lot and the Nsindwana people.

Dig! As fiercely as a furnace!

Red bird that ploughs up everything and scratches men for food. (1989b:22)

(Zulu society defines identity not only in personal izibongo but by means of clan praises, known as "izithakazelo", which also serve as a polite form of address.<sup>8</sup>)

Royal izibongo are in many ways an extension, development and formalisation of personal izibongo. Instead of the king collecting his own praise names or accounts of his military/political prowess, however, this would be done by someone else - an "imbongi" (plural "izimbongi") or praise poet. A poem like "Shaka", for example, comprises a set of praise names that has been collected, shaped and memorised by the imbongi, and would have been performed before the king and his subjects in an order that varied from occasion to occasion. Royal izibongo are regarded with greater seriousness by members of the society than are personal izibongo, and they function in more complex and far-reaching ways.

The imbongi is not paid by the chief or king, does not come from a separate caste or class, and is not designated as a poet through heredity: he (the office is reserved for men) has to earn the acclaim of the people (Opland, 1983:64-65). There is no formal apprenticeship for izimbongi:

an aspirant poet learns the craft of oral composition and performance by hearing other izimbongi perform, and then memorising their poems and adapting or extending them. A number of izimbongi may perform for, or be attached to, a chief but generally one or two will emerge through popular acclaim as the official (iz)imbongi. The office of imbongi is signified by the poet's dressing in skins and carrying two sticks, or a knobkierie or shield and spear. A poet who has not earned popular acclaim may generally not wear the skins or carry the spears/sticks/shield. The two principal izimbongi of Shaka were Mshongweni and Mxhamama kaNtendeka (or kaSoshaya) of the Sibisini clan, the latter of whom also served as Shaka's main attendant, and was killed by Shaka's assassins. A third imbongi called Mhayi, who is known to have served Phakathwayo and Dingane, may have also served Shaka (Rycroft and Ngcobo, 1988:17).

Drawing on interviews with more recent izimbongi, Cope argues that "[p]raise composition is consciously an art; there is a conscious striving after literary effect and a conscious effort to attain a richer, a more evocative, a more emotive, and a more memorable use of language". (The memorable and evocative expression in izibongo, of course, exploits the euphonic nature of the Zulu language.) Yet Cope points out that the specialisation in the Zulu tradition of izibongo is especially in the performance, since the praises are largely "a matter of collection and perfection rather than of creation" (1968:25-27). Opland claims that the emphasis on collection and memorisation, in fact, distinguishes the Zulu form of praise poetry, which he describes as "primarily memorial", from the Xhosa form, which is "primarily improvisational" (1983:258). He connects the distinction to the specific social and historical formations of Zulu and Xhosa societies: the Zulu kingdom was largely centralised from Shaka onwards, and achieved a high degree of political and cultural stability and order; Xhosa society, in contrast, had no paramount chief and remained far more dispersed. Accordingly, its cultural institutions did not develop the same degree of uniformity, nor were they as concerned with maintaining social cohesion and national unity.

Despite the breadth and complexity of praising in southern Africa, the role of praise poetry in African societies has been seriously misunderstood by a range of commentators. On witnessing a display of scenes from Zulu life by a group of performers at the St George's Gallery, Hyde Park Corner, London, in 1853, Charles Dickens wrote the following:

The chief has sometimes the condescension to come forth ... . But lest the great man should forget his greatness ... there suddenly rushes in a poet, retained for the purpose, called a Praiser. This literary gentleman wears a leopard's head over his own, and a dress of tigers' tails; he has the appearance of having come express on his hind legs from the Zoological gardens; and he incontinently strikes up the chief's praises, plunging and tearing all the while. There is a frantic wickedness in this brute's manner of worrying the air, and gnashing out: "O what a delightful chief he is! O what a delicious quantity of blood he sheds! O how majestically he laps it up! O how charmingly cruel he is! O how he tears the flesh of his enemies and crunches the bones! O how like the tiger and the leopard and the wolf and the bear he is! O, row row row row, how fond I am of him!" (1853:338-339)

Such misconceptions about the nature and function of izibongo continue to occur up to the present day. Though he does not reveal the extreme colonial arrogance and prejudice of Dickens, Farouk Asvat is similarly unable to conceive that praise poetry might be anything more than the expression of blind adulation. In rejecting the claims made by Jeremy Cronin for the volume of 'worker' poetry Black Mamba Rising, Asvat says:

The examples that Cronin quotes are nothing more than praise poems to selected organisations, like the praise poets of old that sang out to monarchs in blind faith in spite of their injustices. (1987)

A king or chief could only maintain power for a limited period by force, and hence royal

izibongo served as a discursive means of stabilising society and creating social cohesion; this does not imply, however, that the poetry expressed the unquestioning loyalty which Dickens and Asvat describe. The term "praise poem" is something of a misnomer, for it implies that the role of the imbongi is simply laudatory or adulatory. The verb "bonga" (which is the root of "imbongi" and "izibongo") in fact means "to praise" or "to criticise" depending upon the context. The position of imbongi is perceived to be an extremely responsible one and - as suggested earlier - the izibongo of the chief are considered to be the highest form of poetry in African communities. The function of the praise poet is to negotiate relations of political power within the society, and accordingly the imbongi is "licensed" by the poetic form to criticise the king where this is perceived to be necessary. (Landeg White offers an extensive account of the notion of "poetic licence" in forms of official izibongo (1989).) As well as criticism, the imbongi articulates the expectations subjects have of their ruler, and he delivers praise for political and military successes. Opland points out that the imbongi serves not the chief, but the chiefdom, functioning as "a mediator between ruler and ruled" (1984:176-177):

His poetic assessment of the chief is not blindly adulatory. He has the ability to inspire strong emotions and also to sway opinion. If he criticises excesses in the behaviour of the chief, he also exhorts his audiences to mend their errant ways. He is loyal especially to the chiefdom; he is the bard, the tribal poet, and he sees the welfare of the chiefdom as his concern. He incites warriors to courage in battle, or pacifies inflamed emotions. He establishes the moral norm, urging tribesmen to respect their chief, his ancestors, and their own forefathers but decrying whatever threatens the ideal polity. From this central role in society flow others. Since his poetry is concerned with his contemporaries as well as their antecedents, the izibongo of the imbongi incorporates the history of the chiefdom. His poetry can identify the chief he serves, and he functions therefore as a herald; he is a cheerleader, custodian of lore, mediator, prophet, literary virtuoso. His essential role is, however, political, concerned with the well-being of the polity. (1983:68)

Archie Mafeje has compared the role of the imbongi with the role of the newspaper cartoonist in Western society, and Opland suggests links between the "licence" accorded izibongo and the licence afforded politicians of Western parliaments (1983:83). Drawing on the studies of Swazi ceremonies conducted by Max Gluckman, Opland argues that the imbongi's freedom to censure the king constitutes a "ritual of rebellion" which functions to confirm the validity of the kingship by institutionalising criticism (1983:69-71).

The extent of the imbongi's licence to criticise has, however, been the subject of much debate. Certainly, there are many examples of unflattering treatment of rulers in Xhosa and Zulu izibongo. The praises of Mtshiki, son of the early nineteenth-century Gcaleka chief Hintsu, refer to him as follows:

He's a fart who expels wind,  
 whose bum puckered as his guts ballooned,  
 then filled once again as the air erupted.  
 A dandy, a transient with wanderlust,  
 lounge on struts like a man of great beauty. (Opland,1992:182)

His father appears to have enjoyed little more approval from his imbongi. He is criticised for his dallying and lack of preparedness for war: "The late riser has seen nothing,/He will never see the python uncoil". This criticism is followed by a series of elaborate sexual metaphors in which the king's lack of forthright action is presented as sexual licentiousness: "Eee, what is the matter with this man/That his testicles are swollen?/Is it because he ceaselessly picks the young fruit?" (Scheub,1987:477). (As the criticisms of Hintsu and his son quoted above suggest, the imbongi was also licensed to use explicit scatological or sexual language which would otherwise not have been considered socially acceptable. Such sexual references are generally not evident in recorded izibongo, either because the texts have been bowdlerised, or because the izimbongi were

reluctant to use such language in front of those recording their performances.) Criticism was also levelled at Shaka's father, Senzangakhona. In his izibongo he was customarily called "gatepost on which owls perched" in apparent reference to his paying insufficient attention to the danger posed by neighbouring chiefs (Rycroft and Ngcobo, 1988:29).

The poem "Shaka", at least in the print form in which it survives, contains a number of important instances of criticism or advice. Shaka is censured for what appears to have been an unwise and ill-directed military campaign, undertaken through his own impatience -

Powerful limbs, calf of a beast,  
The kicking of this beast puzzled me,  
It kicked the milker and left the one holding it (98) -

and his izibongo reveal great dissatisfaction with the indiscriminate violence of his rule:

King, you are wrong, because you do not discriminate,  
Because even those of your maternal uncle's family you kill,  
Because you killed Bhebhe, son of Ncumela of your maternal uncle's family. (110)

Further, the praise of Shaka near the beginning of his izibongo - "He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,/The madman who is in full view of the men" (88) - appears to be double-edged. It certainly recalls the famous incident recorded by Thomas Mofolo (1981:50-51) in which, while being sheltered by Dingiswayo, Shaka courageously killed a madman who was terrorising the community; yet the identification of Shaka with the madman suggests his own lack of control (a criticism repeated later in the poem: "He who for lack of control attacked Nkuna" (102)). This reading is supported by the fear with which madness is regarded in Zulu society, and by the emphasis in the praise on Shaka's being a madman "in full view of the men".

What we need to bear in mind, of course, is that such criticisms may have been incorporated and 'interpreted' after the events by Stuart's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century respondents.

In any case the poem, in the form we have it, also suggests that Shaka is misdirected in his present concerns ("Searcher of the south, come and search northwards,/Come and search where there is sun" (104)), and emphasises the leader's need to develop certain skills which he lacks:

Help me Maphitha and Ngqengelele,  
And give him a cow that he may learn to milk into the mouth,  
And give him a sharpened stick that he may dig for himself. (106)

Shaka is further advised by the praise poem not to undertake certain campaigns:

Trickster, abstain from enemies, it is summer,  
The grass is long, it will get the better of you (94)

to amend his conduct:

The people's cattle, Shaka, leave them alone, they are a cause of disaster  
They tie sharp knives on their tails ... (104)

and to turn his attention to other matters: "Return, Trickster, indeed you have finished this matter" (100).

Such criticism is important to note as we attempt to develop a 'theory' and 'practice' of the form-in-society; the 'critical' licence appears, however, to have been somewhat overemphasised by certain critics, particularly Africanist critics eager to defend indigenous



societies against charges of autocracy and archaism. Mbulelo V. Mzamane - it seems to me - valorises the praise poet in describing him as "the conscience of the nation" (1984:147-8), and Mazisi Kunene risks historical anachronism in suggesting that izimbongi acted "as democratic agents to reaffirm the approval or disapproval of the whole nation" (1979:xxv). Vail and White argue that such claims need to be carefully historicised. In support of their argument, they trace developments in Ndebele praise poetry, emphasising that it is not a static form but responds to and articulates changes in social and historical circumstances. They point out that during the period in which the Ndebele nation was being established, there was very little criticism or debate in the praise poetry (1991:98-99). Similarly Groenewald suggests that Ndebele praises of the mid-1980s were not concerned to any significant extent with negotiating relations between ruler and ruled, but instead sought to ensure a position of power for the royal family in a context of Bantustan politics in which its members had been excluded by the 'overlord' - the apartheid government - from political decision-making (1988:69). The criticism and advice which appear in "Shaka" - my warning above about the possibility of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interpolations notwithstanding - are fairly extensive, and suggest that the form did license Zulu royal izimbongi to register disapproval where necessary.

In performing their izibongo to Shaka, Mshongweni, Mxhamama kaNtendeka and Mhayi - as we learn from Grant's more recent accounts - would stalk up and down before the king and the assembled subjects declaiming the praises with great animation and as loudly as possible. Grant describes a performance of the praises of Shaka, probably by the famous Zulu imbongi Gwebisa in 1927, which suggests something of the dramatic nature of this poetic institution:

The old man appeared clad in a leopard-skin, and wearing around his temple a garland of the small bladders of animals. He carried his shield and his long, carved stick. As the recital proceeded the imbongi became worked up to a high pitch of fervour, and was evidently living again in the glories of the past. His voice became loud and strong, his face was uplifted. Shield and stick would be suddenly raised

and shaken in the air. Gestures became more frequent and dramatic. The reciter would leap in the air, or crouch with glaring eyes, while the praises poured from his lips, until he stopped exhausted. (1993:86)

Usually izibongo begin with an opening formula - a salute to the ruler, or the recitation of his clan praises - the primary function of which seems to be to attract the attention of the crowd so as to create silence for the performance; and the poems generally end with a concluding sentence such as "I disappear". In this poem, the initial greeting to Shaka, "Dlungwana son of Ndaba", may serve as an opening formula, and the final line "Finisher off! Black finisher off!" may function as a closing formula, though the opening and closing formulae are often omitted in the print versions of izibongo. The recitation involves the participation of the listeners whose shouts of "Musho!" (Speak/Praise him!) regularly punctuate the poem, giving it something of the nature of a dramatic performance.<sup>9</sup>

The poem "Shaka" evokes the power, majesty and achievements of the king: it establishes the lines of his legitimacy, explores the nature of his rule - suggesting new interpretations of past and present conduct - and evokes pride in the growth of a powerful nation. This we may assume was the point of actual dramatic renditions in Shaka's court, and has been extended and reinforced by Stuart in his stitching together of a number of accounts to create an epic sense of the national leader he describes in an unpublished historical study as "a great subject - not unlike Napoleon" (File 53; KCM 24160). The formal principle of izibongo is that of 'naming', and generally the poems comprise a series of epithets or praise names which follow one another in no particular order, describing the physical, moral and political qualities of the chief or king. (It is significant that little is in fact said of Shaka's moral character, an omission which may stand as covert criticism on the part of his izimbongi.) Many of the epithets are customary: there are the opening praise name "Dlungwana" - meaning "the one who rages" - and the appellation "spear that is red even on the handle" (88), which takes in both Shaka's prowess in battle and his revolutionary introduction of the stabbing spear; and there are the references to Shaka's

ancestry, including his descent from Ndaba (his great-grandfather and the first Zulu king) and his being the "son of Menzi" (Senzangakhona). Other names are drawn from proverbs, such as "Grass that pricks while still growing" (112) which refers to Shaka's greatness being evident at an early age. The epithets may also be taken from the izibongo of other chiefs or kings, and hence serve to establish the legitimacy of the king's rule, as well as to set his conduct in relation to those rulers who have preceded him. There are numerous examples in the poem, including the lines

The young viper grows as it sits,  
Always in a great rage,  
With a shield on its knees (96)

in which Ndaba's praises are used by the imbongi to suggest Shaka's impatience for battle. In addition, Shaka is linked with Senzangakhona in the phrases "Painful stabber" (96), "High star of Mjokwane" and "Brass walking-stick, son of Mjokwane" (110), all of which are the praise names of Shaka's father.

Amongst the most important of the epithets are those drawn from the natural world, in which the material features of early nineteenth-century Zulu life are symbolically transformed in order to reflect on social and political concerns. Certain of the animal images are customary, such as references to Shaka as the lion or the elephant (animals commonly associated with the strength and power of kings or chiefs). Other images, however, reveal his specific attributes. His physical beauty is evoked in the simile "He who is dark as the bile of a goat" (96) - darkness of skin-coloration being regarded as attractive - and the metaphor "Butterfly of Phunga/With colours in circles as if they had been painted on" (98). Shaka's stealth, cunning and accuracy in striking are indicated in the lines:

Hawk that I saw descending from the hills of Mangcengeza,

And from those of Phungashe he disappeared;  
 They said "Hawk, here he is, there he is",  
 Whereas he was silent in the forest like the leopards and lions. (98)

At another point the imbongi stresses both Shaka's speed and the vast number of cattle he has captured in the claim: "Shaka did not raid herds of cattle,/ He raided herds of buck" (98). Other images from the natural world include "South wind of attack" (102) and "He is curved like the ocean" (106), in which the king's power is akin to, and sanctioned by, the natural order. Coplan has argued that the significance of such imagery in izibongo is not simply thematic, but formal:

Structurally the poems are a series of verbal pictures created from the limitless figurative resources of African language. As elaborations upon a mutually resonant set of master metaphors, these images are ordered according to an emotional and aesthetic logic of incremental effect. (1987:12)

Certainly the principle of formal structuring around a concatenation of images is evident in a wide variety of South African texts which are influenced by izibongo, from Soweto poetry and the poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli, to plays like Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972) and Woza Albert! (1983).

As the elaborate use of epithets may suggest, izibongo are highly metaphorical and allusive in their mode, bringing images which have cultural currency into new contexts of meaning. (Like that of Bushman groupings, traditional Zulu social life employs metaphor extensively, with the metaphor as literary device having particular prominence in izibongo.) Hence, in suggesting Shaka's difficult youth - when he was forced to seek refuge after having been exiled from the Zulu clan - the poem uses the image of snuff:

He who asks for snuff from Macingwane at Ngonyameni,  
 Macingwane, you said you had none,

You were giving yourself trouble ... (102)

As the somewhat ironic understatement of the last line suggests, Shaka on assuming the Zulu chieftainship destroyed Macingwane, allegedly for having refused to take him in as a child. A more complex and compressed metaphorical trope is evident in the imbongi's use of the "ford". Early on in the izibongo, the ford suggests the trickery of chiefs supposedly supportive of Shaka yet who withhold vital information:

The people of Zihlandlo son of Gcwabe and those of Mepho son of Ngwane,  
I criticised them, the evil-doers,  
They did not tell the king the ford,  
They made him cross at the one still dripping with saliva,  
Which was recently vacated by Ntube of the Majolas;  
They made him cross at the one with hippos and crocodiles,  
The hippos and crocodiles gaped with mouths wide-open. (92)

The image is more complex, however, than it may first appear, for the dangerous or slippery ford is also a proverbial image for someone who is untrustworthy: the imbongi here exploits the metaphorical implications of an actual historical event to register concern at the treacherous nature of Zihlandlo and Mepho. The ford image re-emerges in a new guise at the end of the poem to suggest Shaka's absolute control of his kingdom: "Little leopard that goes about preventing other leopards at the fords" (116).

Though "Shaka" - like most izibongo - is largely irregular in structure, the poem in the Stuart/Cope text falls into three broad sections: the first (lines 1-15) comprises the generalised praises of Shaka; the second (lines 16-426) constitutes the bulk of the poem and recounts Shaka's extensive military victories; and the third (lines 427-450) returns to a generalised consideration of the leader.<sup>10</sup> While this tripartite structure may be the result of Stuart's

editorial intervention, in which the Western-heroic tradition of the epic narrative registers Stuart's own sense of royalist Zulu history, the generic parallels with the epic tradition can prove enlightening for print-trained critics and readers in their endeavours to make sense of a poem concerned not only with the stature of a heroic leader but also with the founding of a nation. The definition of the Western epic, as offered by M.H. Abrams, certainly appears closely to match the formal and thematic concerns of "Shaka":

In its strict use by literary critics the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depend the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. The "traditional epics" (also called "primary epics" or "folk epics") were shaped by a literary artist from historical or legendary materials which had developed in the oral traditions of his people during a period of expansion or warfare. (1981:50)

More recently black poets like Mazisi Kunene and Ingoapele Madingoane have exploited the formal and ideological proximities between indigenous forms and the Western epic in composing extended verse narratives (termed by both poets as 'epics') which draw - amongst other influences - on the structures and concerns of izibongo. I return to these questions in Chapter Four of this study when I discuss Madingoane's "black trial".

In exploring the creation of the Zulu kingdom by armed conquest, "Shaka" utilises a number of textual strategies in order to evoke a vivid sense of personal and national achievement. Izibongo generally have little rhyme or metre, though a rhythm is established by the pace of delivery: each line comprises a breath-unit with a pause at the end, and each praise concludes with a final cadence. Cope captures this rhythm successfully, for the most part, by judicious use of punctuation and margin indentation, with commas indicating slight pauses, colons and semicolons indicating non-final cadences, full stops indicating final cadences, and

indentations marking the beginnings of new sections of praises (1968:64-65). In addition to cadence and pause, the imbongi establishes his oral rhythm by the use of repetition and parallelism. Probably the most common rhetorical device in "Shaka" is simple repetition, which in performance can powerfully stir the emotions of an audience. The most compelling example uses the customary metaphor of "devouring" to register the complete defeat of an enemy:

He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more. (96)

What Cope refers to as parallelism by initial linking (1968:41-43) is also used to build a dramatic sense of the extent of Shaka's military campaigns, and the momentum of the process of conquest:

He attacked Phungashe of the Buthelezi clan,  
 He attacked Sondabe of Mthanda as he sat in the council,  
 He attacked Macingwane at Ngonyameni,  
 He attacked Mangcengeza of the Mbatha clan,  
 He attacked Dladlama of the Majolas,  
 He attacked Nxaba son of Mbhekane,  
 He attacked Gambushe in Pondoland,  
 He attacked Faku in Pondoland. (96)

This form of parallelism is more widespread than Cope's English translation suggests, for at another point Cope consciously varies the verb form in his translation though Stuart's Zulu text repeats the same verb "wadi" (he ate/devoured). While the Zulu reads

Wadi' uNomahlanjana ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni,  
 Wadi' uMphepha ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni,  
 Wadi' uNombengula ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni ... (101)

Cope's translation is as follows

He devoured Nomahlanjana son of Zwidi of the Maphelas,  
 He ate up Mphepha son of Zwidi of the Maphelas,  
 He killed Nombengula son of Zwidi of the Maphelas ... (100)

Parallelism by initial linking also serves a structural function in the poem. From lines 56 to 110, the repetition of "He who ..." is used to introduce each new aspect of Shaka's praises, creating a compelling rhythm of delivery and granting this section of the poem a regular structure which assists the audience in making sense of the wealth of information that is offered. Other forms of parallelism in the poem include parallelism by simile ("He who bored an opening amongst the Ponds,/ Even today the opening is still wide open" (108)) and negative-positive parallelism ("They were not contending over anything at the Nyuswa's;/They were contending over castor-oil seeds in deserted sites" (94)). In both instances the function is to emphasise particular aspects of Shaka's conduct.

Like all cultural forms, izibongo are responsive to changes in political and historical circumstances, and the praises of Shaka differ from those of earlier Zulu chiefs. Prior to the emergence of Shaka the Natal/Zululand area had been controlled by a number of lesser chiefs



who interacted with each other in both peaceful and aggressive ways; under Shaka, however, power in the Zulu kingdom was strongly centralised and militarised. Cope argues that as a result

the ideal of inter-tribal balance, in which the values of reciprocity, shrewdness, and diplomacy played the most important part, was replaced by the ideal of dominance, in which the values of forcefulness and fearlessness, martial power and national glory, played the most important part, together with the values of good order, respect for authority, and obedience to discipline, which were necessary to the new system. (1968:22)

He points out that with the rise of the Zulu nation, imagery in izibongo began to change. Chiefs, for example, were no longer compared with small animals, as quick, shrewd or crafty, but with large powerful animals, such as the lion and elephant in the case of Shaka, and direct confrontation came to be prized over diplomacy (1968:31-32). However, the very formal organisation of the praises also changed: whereas the praises of chiefs had earlier been closer to personal izibongo since they were performed for rulers who controlled smaller groupings, the development of a nation-state involved the extension of izibongo to encompass the deeds and victories necessary to national loyalty, and led to the development of what, in the print form, has been termed the "praise stanza".

In tracing the emergence of the stanza, Cope (1968:50-63) draws on Mazisi Kunene's scheme of dividing Zulu poetry into three periods: pre-Shakan (c.1750-1800); Shakan (c.1800-1850); and post-Shakan (c.1850-1900).<sup>11</sup> In the pre-Shakan phase the simplest praises or epithets, akin to those found in personal izibongo which are not generally elaborated, were extended into what Cope refers to as statement plus extension, generally in the form of a couplet or triplet. An example from the praises of Senzangakhona is as follows: "Buffalo that goes overlooking the fords,/He is like Mzingeli of the Mfekana people" (Cope,1968:74). With Shaka's consolidation and extension of political structures, however, more complex discursive forms were

required to negotiate relations of power, and the simple praise plus extension was elaborated into the stanza, comprising statement, extension and development to conclusion. The conclusion generally gives a contrary twist to events recounted in the stanza. There are numerous examples in "Shaka" of this stanza form, through which the imbongi is able to explore the responses of people to their king

The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,  
 Joking as they sat in a sheltered spot,  
 Saying that Shaka would not rule, he would not become chief,  
 Whereas it was the year in which Shaka was about to prosper (90)

or establish a more complex and detailed sense of his conduct

He whose routes they inquired from Dunjwa,  
 Whereas they should have asked Mbozane about them,  
 As for him he was hurrying to Nomagaga,  
 A cock came and prevented him. (92)

In Kunene's scheme the Shakan stanza is followed by the development of the "great stanza", though this does not concern us here.

While the development of the stanza in Zulu izibongo is extremely important, Rycroft and Ngcobo warn of the danger of overlooking the role played by narrative passages in izibongo such as those of Shaka (1988:33-36). The poem is concerned with the development of a nation through military conquest, and it includes a number of passages which do not begin with a statement in the form of a praise name, but which offer self-contained narratives of Shaka's actions. The lines quoted earlier listing Shaka's military conquests may serve as examples, but a further illustration is contained in the following lines which construct such a narrative through

parallelism by initial linking:

He destroyed Zwide amongst the Ndwandwes,  
 He destroyed Nomahlanjana son of Zwide,  
 He destroyed Sikhunyana son of Zwide. (112)

This narrative passage, which occurs towards the end of the poem, points to another formal principle of izibongo: its cyclical construction (akin to the cyclical form of the Bushman songs and stories). The imbongi appears self-consciously to return to events referred to earlier and repeat them for rhetorical effect. In similar vein, the praise names of Shaka - mentioned previously in the poem - are repeated in a dramatic interjection about two-thirds of the way through the performance:

You are a wild animal! A leopard! A lion!  
 You are a horned viper! An elephant!  
 You are big as the great mountains of Mpehlela and Maqhwakazi,  
 You black one,  
 You grew while others loitered.  
 Snatcher of a staff!  
 He attacks, he rages,  
 He puts a shield on his knees. (108)

Stuart's editorial note, quoted earlier, indicates that he sought to remove "repetition" as far as possible in creating his composite text. It remains unclear, however, whether he meant by that comment his desire to edit out the cyclical repetitions of the imbongi in his performance or whether he wished to remove the repetition of whole sections of praises which resulted from collating different 'versions' of Shaka's praises. Whatever Stuart's editorial intention, the cyclical nature of izibongo remains clearly evident in "Shaka", and appears to be bound up with African

ontology which - in contrast to the linear, progressive and teleological colonial-Christian model - emphasises the circularity of religious, social and historical life. James A. Snead, in his article "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture", draws attention to the "cut" in black cultural texts, which he defines as "an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break ... with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (1984:67). Snead argues that black texts are constructed on cycles of repetition, the end of each cycle being marked by an explicit verbal, rhythmic or musical<sup>12</sup> signal that foregrounds the formal principle of circularity. Snead's argument is in many ways problematic: he tends to essentialise "black culture" (is there such a category as "black texts"?); and he risks a crude empiricism in defining the terms of his argument (his premise may be summarised as follows: cultural reservoirs are not inexhaustible therefore black culture is correct to foreground its own circularity). Yet his explanation of the "cut" as a form of textual organisation is enlightening. It appears that Shaka's praise poem is constructed on a cyclical principle, and that at key moments the imbongi 'cuts' back to a prior series through an explicit repetition of elements which have gone before.

The circularity of the historical model leads to a constant recreation and re-evaluation of history, and an imbongi is praised not only for his formal skill, fluency and eloquence, but for his knowledge of the past (Opland,1983:80-81). Just as personal izibongo locate the events of an individual life within the happenings of the community, royal izibongo place public events in a larger frame of reference. Recording history is not the primary function of the izibongo of the chief, but is a vital part of the form's concern to maintain the chieftom, establish the lineage of the ruler, and assess his conduct. The poem "Shaka" is especially concerned with history, as we have seen, since it seeks consciously to bolster national pride.

In his poems the imbongi creates a sense of history as rhetorical presence without annulling what Barber refers to as the "gravitational pull" of the past (1989:20). History in izibongo is constantly re-evaluated and revised, yet the customary and memorial nature of the form prevents the imbongi from arbitrarily recasting past events or their significance. Barber's

comments on Yoruba *oríkì* may apply equally to Zulu *izibongo*: "They represent the 'past in the present', the way the knowledge of the past makes itself felt stubbornly and often contradictorily today. They represent a way not just of looking at the past, but of re-experiencing it and reintegrating it into the present" (1989:14). Scheub argues that it is specifically in their performative aspect that *izibongo* articulate new understandings of history, for the alternating crescendos and cadences of delivery establish a rhythmical 'grid' on which images and symbols are constantly realigned:

Successive historical fragments are swept into this unique metrical organisation that connects events emotionally, in ways they may not be linked in time and reality, so that they are experienced in new relationships. A fresh view of history is generated, as the discrete images are moved by contiguity and new rhythmical affinities into new relationships. The process seems random only if the observer is seeking the chronological sequence of history. But there is in such poetry a new alignment of materials, as the line blends emotion and image, as rhythm gives these an illusion of continuity, allowing the argument of the poem to move into the foreground. This argues for new relationships which taken together form an attitude to history that transcends cause and effect linkages and enables history to move to a new level of cultural insight. (1987:485)

Within an oral society which has no physical means of storing information, the institution of *izibongo* (both personal and public) thus serves the important function of establishing a sense of historical continuity, which permits present conduct to be examined in terms of past events, and past events to be re-examined according to the imperatives of the society of the day.

While the praises served to establish Shaka's greatness and legitimacy, however, the entire purpose was not political and historical. The references to his ancestry ("son of Ndaba", "voracious one of Senzangakhona", "the rival of Phunga and Mageba") could also have served a

religious purpose. As Gunner has argued, too great an emphasis on the political and historical function of izibongo obscures the extent to which the form permeates the spiritual life of the society (1984:36). In traditional Zulu religion the focus is particularly on the spirits of ancestors who are perceived - as intermediary presences - to influence the affairs of the living. Though there is a concept of an originating deity, Nkulunkulu, attempts must be made to control the behaviour of the ancestors through divination and the use of medicines. One way to make contact with an ancestor is to recite his/her praises (usually at a religious ceremony). Hence the izibongo of the chief serve an important function in the religious life of the community, since they invoke and address the ancestors of the leader and his followers. Especially at crisis points, such as when rain is required or war is to be undertaken, the imbongi performs the praises of the ancestors to enlist their assistance - as Shaka's izimbongi Mshongweni and Mxhamama kaNtendeka would have evoked the assistance of Ndaba, Senzangakhona, Phunga and Mageba. At such moments the imbongi performs the role of priest or "vestigial shaman" (Opland, 1983:72).

The density of reference in izibongo, however, whether proceeding from historical or religious imperatives, remains a problem for critics and readers in different historical circumstances. Indeed, the poems can often appear almost impenetrable. Vilakazi has referred to the difficulties of the "emotional shorthand" of izibongo, for "[f]rom a very short passage much history and a lengthy meaning may be revealed" (1993:58), and other scholars have recommended the use of contextual studies in making sense of the form. In the case of "Shaka", the Stuart/Cope text has been artificially stabilised in print, so that the problem of historical references looms larger than it would in the transience of performance. While this stabilisation can offer historical scholars a wealth of material and data, it raises the difficulties of transferring the effect of delivery to the literary reading. The problem is not of course unique to Zulu izibongo, but is general to the socially-specific oral text.

The original audience would have been familiar with the events and figures referred to by the poet, but interviews and research suggest that listeners would not necessarily have taken

cognisance of all the details: they would have concentrated rather on the poem's overall trajectory and the dramatic nature of the performance. Opland says of the analogous case of Pondo personal praises:

It seems that in such a situation the **sound** of the izibongo is what encourages the dancers, rather than the words themselves. As Monica Wilson remarked, "Praises are gabbled so that many, even of a Pondo audience, do not catch half of what is said, and the allusions are not understood by many. Geza insisted that 'the words do not always refer to the deeds the person is praised for, but are a collection of praises referring to remote or distant events'" (Hunter, 1936/1961:372). The recitation of biographical or autobiographical poems frequently forms part of some other noisy activity, such as dancing or fighting; they are uttered in an excitable manner, in a rush, and the words are often lost in the surrounding noise. (1983:39-40)

Similarly Coplan claims of royal izibongo: "On occasion choreography supersedes poetry, for the fewer the words, the better the poet is able to represent history in action" (1987:13). While historical information and explication are both valuable and necessary in recuperating izibongo for literary study (I have drawn in my reading of "Shaka" on the historical information provided by Cope and Mapanje and White), we should beware of turning criticism into a pedestrian exercise of tracking down references. As I suggested earlier, the limitation of Rycroft and Ngcobo's project seems to be that the poem - as a text which seeks to persuade, to exhort, to address the needs of a human community - collapses under the weight of their annotation and explication.

Vail and White point to the similar problems of the Oxford University Press series on oral poetry from southern Africa:

The information ... provided is invaluable and is a necessary preliminary to interpretation. But by reducing the texts to a set of complex historical 'allusions', the different editors in the series have missed the opportunity of demonstrating that history as metaphor is not simply history as code. It is history as drama, evaluation and judgement: history with the metaphysics included. The metaphors, elaborated into patterns of interpretation, are not simply vehicles for the events themselves. They are the means of comprehending those events in terms of permanent or changing systems of values, a means of being equal to events and hence of transcending them. (1991:73)

The presentation of izibongo in print does indeed seem to require both editorial sensitivity and an appropriate analytical procedure, for the annotations necessary to appreciate the significance of the praises of Shaka or Dingane are no more extensive than those required for us to appreciate the point of a Shakespeare text. An editor seeking to include izibongo such as those of Shaka in a more wide-reaching anthology of South African poetry might, nonetheless, decide to represent the poem by an excerpt from one of the sections with fewer historical references, or to 'contract' the poem - as Mapanje and White have done (1983:25-28) - so obviating the need for detailed footnoting. While the obscurity of many of the references in "Shaka" is a problem, the poem remains a powerful human document which offers a 'living' sense of a historical moment of immense significance, and an appreciation of its force does not depend on exhaustive archival research. Our ability as literary critics lies in our responsiveness to the rhetorical power of images and metaphors, to the eloquence of the symbolic transformations of people and events. As a necessary supplement to the detailed explications of the historian, the cultural annotations of the anthropologist, and the morphological investigations of the linguist, we can perhaps investigate not only power **and** the praise poem (as the politically orientated title of Vail and White's book has it), but recognise the power of the praise poem as, in the domain of literature, the making of meaning - personal or public - is governed by the expressive act.



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The title of this chapter - "Poetry, History, Nation" - is intended to reverberate against present circumstances, for the question of how we read "Shaka" at this juncture in our national history extends beyond the problem of its referential specificities. Placing a poem like "Shaka" at the centre of literary study in this country makes available articulations of South African history by those who participated in and shaped that history, and points to the complex discursive dynamics of Zulu political and aesthetic life. Yet the problem arises that Zulu history and social formations - particularly the kingship and the aristocracy ("amakhosi") - have recently been mobilised by conservative organisations like Inkatha in the cause of political power based on ethnic-separatist tactics. To add to the difficulty of conservative tactics utilised in highly contested modern politics, the Zulu kingship was for many years encouraged by the apartheid state as supporting the retribalising policies of 'Bantu Education', ironic testimony to which lies in the fact that many Zulu speakers in KwaZulu Natal can recite the izibongo of Shaka from memory because they were taught them at school as a bulwark against the aspirations of modernising ideals.

"Shaka" may however 'talk back' to such conservative co-options.<sup>13</sup> Through the imbongi's advice to and criticism of Shaka, the poem undermines perceptions of African societies as characterised by power relations of unprecedented tyranny and cruelty. Further, in its articulations of the majesty and authority of Shaka, the poem perhaps calls into question Inkatha's manipulation of the Zulu monarchy for the ends of regional power. Certainly izimbongi have often stood at the forefront of resistance to attempts by the apartheid state to recreate tribal divisions through the 'homeland' policy, in which chiefs were used as apartheid administrators in a perversion of their historical role. In the former Transkei, for example, praise poets suffered security police harassment for their open criticism of Bantustan rulers like Kaiser Matanzima. Recently an open letter to King Goodwill Zwelithini from a Zulu journalist used many of the formal techniques of izibongo to warn and advise the king that, under the sway of

Inkatha, he could be in danger of betraying the history of his nation, lineage and office:

Your majesty, your people have a right to see you carry yourself in a manner that makes us proud of the throne. Could you live with the knowledge that you were the king who presided over the demise of what was so painstakingly built by Shaka?

Mageba, history tells us that kings have cast aside their lieutenants before. Now is the time for you to act decisively in the interests of your subjects and make a break with your prime minister.

It is he who poses the greatest threat to the survival of Zulu institutions and is tarnishing the image of Zulu people in the eyes of fellow South Africans.

It is your prime minister, Ngonyama, who should take ultimate responsibility for the blood that has for the past decade stained the beautiful hills that make your kingdom so dear to its inhabitants. (Makhanya, 1994)

"Shaka" raises difficult questions about the place of the Zulu monarchy in a modern, democratic state: it articulates a history which cannot simply be suppressed because of present agendas, but insists upon the position of the king above regional power squabbles and individual political ambitions.

As a form of expression, praise poetry has proved itself to be endlessly adaptable to changing circumstances, and it continues to play an important role in South African society: alongside the praises of chiefs in rural areas, we have forms of izibongo performed in mine compounds and at worker rallies, the recitation of praise poets at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President, and praises delivered at the opening of South Africa's first democratic parliament. There appears to be a real and continuing role for izibongo to advise, to criticise and to deliver praise in modern circumstances, particularly as we seek socio-cultural institutions which are appropriate in South Africa to our changing imperatives, responsibilities and identities. The case is clearly a strong one for izibongo to have a central role in any 'tradition' of

South African poetry. Not only does it provide witness to events of magnitude, but - as I hope I have suggested in considering its transmission and translation - the praise poem offers the opportunity for us to consider the challenge of a unique form of social and aesthetic expression.

### Notes

1. This debate is documented by Gérard (1971:230-236).
2. Amongst the published accounts, see for example Thomas Mofolo's Chaka (1931) and Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great (1979). Malaba (1986) has offered an extensive discussion of Shaka as literary theme in South African writing.
3. In his article "Zulu Izibongo: A Survey of Documentary Sources" (1974), Rycroft provides a detailed list of published and recorded sources of Zulu izibongo.
4. Stuart in fact collected approximately 360 izibongo, but because he created composite versions of his texts by comparing a number of different performances, his manuscripts comprise 258 poems.
5. See Arbousset and Daumas's version (Rycroft, 1984), and later Grout (1970:197) and Samuelson (1974:260-266).
6. My discussion of Zulu history in this period draws on Cope (1968), Hamilton (1985) and Guy (1994).
7. Gunner and Gwala refer to the "literature, culture, nation syndrome", in which disproportionate attention is paid to royal praises and the breadth of praising in Zulu

society is underestimated (1994). While my focus in this chapter is on royal praising, and I am - as my title suggests - concerned to relate developments in praising to the emergence of the Zulu nation, I remain cognisant of the need to understand the izibongo of chiefs in the broader context of praising as discursive activity.

8. Clan praises are also important in other African societies. Abner Nyamende, for example, explores the historical and social role of clan praises in Xhosa society, especially under the impact of literacy and Western-style education (1988).
9. See Dhlomo (1993) and Coplan (1987) who locate in praise poetry the roots of the southern African dramatic tradition. Also see Gunner's text of the praise poem performed at the funeral of Albert Luthuli in Stanger in July 1967, in which the inclusion of the audience responses indicates something of its dramatic quality in performance (1984 (vol.2):37-46).
10. This basic division is suggested by Mapanje and White (1983:181). However, in their anthology Oral Poetry from Africa, they have reduced the text of the poem to only 115 lines, and my analysis greatly extends the implications of their division.
11. In his discussion of the development of the stanza, Cope does not link the shift in poetic strategy with the larger realignments taking place in Zulu society. This is my own emphasis.
12. Snead performs a fascinating analysis of the black American soul singer James Brown.
13. Carolyn Hamilton has offered a detailed examination of various 'readings' of the figure of Shaka, from those of James Stuart to recent representations in the SABC television series Shaka Zulu and the theme park "Shakaland". She argues that the figure of Shaka in fact

resists simple co-option:

[T]he power of the image of Shaka lies not, as most previous commentators have suggested, in its openness to manipulation, to invention and to imaginative reworkings, but in their very opposite, the historical limits and constraints attached to possible depictions of Shaka and to Shakan historiography. (1993:xi)

### Chapter Three: Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites

Whereas Shaka had little contact with white settlers, his brother Dingane was bedevilled throughout his rule by conflict with British colonists and later the Boers, and he was finally driven out of his kingdom by the latter in alliance with his brother Mpande. Mpande assumed the Zulu kingship in 1840, and ruled for thirty years over a kingdom which was reduced by colonial encroachment but remained substantially autonomous and self-sufficient. Under Cetshwayo - Mpande's son who took over the leadership in 1872 - the integrity of the Zulu kingdom was destroyed through British military invasion and finally annexation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly after the failure of the 'Bambatha Rebellion' in 1906, the powerful nation which Shaka had created was in tatters and the authority of the monarchy was virtually destroyed. In this context new kinds of Zulu leaders came to the fore who occupied new societal spaces, and new forms of social articulation emerged. This chapter is concerned with one of the most influential of these leaders - the prophet Isaiah Shembe - and the hymns which he composed.

Isaiah Shembe was a Messianic Zulu evangelist working in Natal between 1911 and 1935, a period in which the social, political and economic structures of Zulu society were breaking down as a result of colonial occupation and rapid urbanisation. Shembe founded the Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*), an independent church which sought to revitalise Zulu society through the maintenance and revival of social customs and mores, many of which were rejected by the mission churches. At the same time, by syncretising the belief systems of Zulu tradition (which are directed primarily towards social concerns) with those of Christianity (which are more abstractly theological and future-directed), and by hybridising the Christian hymn with Zulu poetry and song, he created forms which expressed religious and political resistance to colonial oppression. Hymn 45 - given here in English translation - may serve as an example:

1. I shouted day and night  
why did you not hear me?  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi [Deity].
  
2. I was stopped by all the nations  
which are under heaven.  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi.
  
3. You maiden of Nazareth  
may you cry like a rushing stream  
about the disgrace that has befallen you  
in the land of your people.  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi.
  
4. You young men of Nazareth  
you cry all like a rushing stream,  
about the disgrace that has befallen you  
you young men of Shaka  
before the uMsindisi. (Oosthuizen, 1967:162-3)

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe are contained in Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha (the hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites), which was first compiled and published in 1940 by Isaiah Shembe's son Johannes Galilee Shembe from printed versions of the hymns which had circulated among church members during the father's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The hymnal remains in print to this day. The

hymns were composed in "an old mix of Zulu and Xhosa, typical of the deep Zulu spoken by the prophet Isaiah in the early twentieth century" (Muller,1994b:137). G.C. Oosthuizen has translated a number of them in the Appendix to his book The Theology of an African Messiah (1967). These are currently the only translations available in print. A project is under way to publish the entire hymnal in translation, and I am grateful to the editors and translators, Carol Muller, Themba Mbhele, and the late Bongani Mthethwa, for allowing me access to their working copy which has proved to be invaluable.<sup>2</sup>

The translation practices of Oosthuizen and of Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa differ slightly, with Oosthuizen's renderings appearing to be rather more literal in their occasional use of awkward English grammatical and syntactical formulations. Oosthuizen also retains the Zulu praise names for the deity in his translated versions in an apparent attempt to emphasise the hybridity of Nazarite theology, while Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa translate these appellations. My own view is that an appropriate translation strategy for the hymns might combine both approaches: Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa's more readable English translations might make the hymns 'familiar' and hence accessible to non-Zulu and non-Nazarite readers; while Oosthuizen's retention of the Zulu names might valuably insist on the 'difference' of the hymns and hence their resistance to cultural appropriation. Both available translated versions are entirely 'usable', nonetheless, according to the theory and practice of translation as developed in this study, and I have relied for the most part on Oosthuizen's versions only because these have the advantage of being available to readers in published form. Where I have wished to discuss hymns that have not been translated by Oosthuizen, I have quoted the Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa manuscript. My sole intervention has been to regularise the beginning of lines with upper- or lower-case letters in Oosthuizen's translations - a point on which he is rather haphazard - and to modernise his spelling of Zulu and biblical names.

\* \* \*



In addition to forms of Christian hymns, forms of traditional praise poetry were adapted to new concerns in Shembe's Church of the Nazarites. The performance of izimbongi was - and continues to be - central to the religious festivals of the church,<sup>3</sup> and the izibongo of Shembe prove to be enlightening in a consideration of this figure and his work. Elizabeth Gunner, who recorded the praises of Shembe in 1976,<sup>4</sup> points to the importance of the composition of izibongo for new kinds of leadership:

It is perhaps significant that these izibongo which are still performed for Shembe's successors were for the most part composed at a time when the Zulu kingship was weak. Certainly the praises of Solomon kaDinizulu (Isaiah Shembe's royal contemporary) do not bear comparison with the prophet's izibongo either in the richness of their language or the boldness of their vision. Although they are in one sense an important religious statement Shembe's izibongo can also be seen as serving a function sometimes ascribed to epic: they create a sense of national consciousness, pride and purpose at a time of national crisis and weakness. In their nationalism and their continued success as a vehicle of cultural and religious identity the izibongo demonstrate how an oral art form can exploit the past and maintain its relevance to the present. (1982:107)

Shembe is praised by his poets for his evangelical prowess and fervour in terms which echo the praises of Shaka:

Spear which is red even at the handle,  
you attacked with it at Mpukunyoni  
because you attacked by means of the Gospel

and: "Horned viper with the compassion of his forefathers" (Gunner, 1984(vol.2):21-37). Yet instead of celebrating martial might as Shaka's izibongo did, Shembe's praises adapt the military

code to a Christianised milieu, presenting a religious and political battle waged with the new weapons of biblical faith and compassion. Indeed Shembe's izibongo, while being closely modelled on royal izibongo, draw upon a variety of Christian influences, including the use of images such as the "gates of heaven". Gunner claims that as well as being "royal", Shembe's praises are "very clearly the praises of a Zionist prophet and not a Zulu king. There are clear differences where the needs of communion have forced the composers to new modes of expression and points of reference" (1982:101). The hybridised nature of these praises echoes the formal syncretism of Shembe's own hymns, which seek modes of expression appropriate to changing social conditions.

Shembe's izibongo also point to a number of other concerns that are central to the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites. The leader is praised for offering religious salvation and solace ("He is awesome, Our Beautiful Kneeler-and-they-are-satisfied of Ekuphakameni"), for his resistance to the colonial state ("The white man Sergeant Mackay met with no success"), for his rejection of what is regarded as the theological and educational arrogance of the missionaries, and for providing a physical and spiritual home for his Zulu followers:

They brandished their testaments and bibles in unison.

They said it was written "Thus!"

Breaker-away, let us leave and let us head for own Zululand ... .

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites treat many of the most pressing issues of twentieth-century Zulu history in particular, and modern South African history in general: 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. Shembe also stands as an important transitional figure for South African literary history and specifically for this study: his hymns look back to the

Zulu nationalism of Shaka, though they draw this nationalism into a context of colonial subordination; and they look forward, through the doctrine of the Black Christ, to the political concerns of Black Consciousness and Black Theology.

A number of claims have been made for the importance of Shembe as a spiritual and national leader. Bengt Sundkler says, "There is probably no Zulu in modern times who has had such an intense influence over such a large number of people as Shembe" (1948:110), and he refers to Shembe as "the greatest of Zulu prophets" (1976:204). G.C. Oosthuizen concurs with Sundkler in claiming, "No other Zulu [has] had in this century such a lasting influence on the Zulu people in particular [as] Shembe" (1967:7), and Albert S. Gérard refers to Shembe as "the greatest religious leader in South Africa" (1971:185). Intensely approbative claims have also been made for Shembe's hymns. Sundkler refers to them as "some of the most remarkable ... ever published in Zulu" (1948:194). Oosthuizen describes Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha as "one of the most remarkable collections of indigenous hymns that has appeared on the continent of Africa and the most remarkable of its kind in South Africa" (1967:1). Gérard suggests that the first hymn composed by Shembe "should perhaps be considered the earliest original poem composed in Zulu under the impact of the new civilisation" (1971:189), and he compares it with the similar status of Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" in Xhosa literary history. Despite such critical claims made for Shembe, and despite his renown in popular culture in KwaZulu Natal and beyond (almost all Zulu people in the province have some knowledge of Shembe's church,<sup>5</sup> and bumper stickers on minibus taxis proclaim "Shembe is the Way"), little attention has been paid to this figure or his church in academic studies.

What work there is on Shembe has largely been conducted by theologians, such as in Sundkler's Bantu Prophets in South Africa (1948, revised 1961) and Zulu Zion (1976), and in Oosthuizen's The Theology of a South African Messiah: An Analysis of the Hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites (1967). Absolom Vilakazi's MA thesis on Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites, completed in 1951, has been extended and revised in collaboration with two

musicologists and followers of Shembe, Bongani Mthethwa and Mthembeni Mpanza, and published as Shembe: The Revitalisation of African Society (1986). It provides a sociological, doctrinal and musical analysis of ibandla lamaNazaretha. The other major published source on Shembe's life is John Dube's remarkable Zulu biography uShembe (1936), which as Gunner suggests "seems to have been written partly from Shembe himself relating incidents in his life to Dube, partly from information gained from other informants and partly from Dube's own knowledge and observations of his neighbour, Shembe, and the Nazarite Church at their village Ekuphakameni, not too far from his own Ohlange" (1986:180-181). This biography has been out of print for many years, and is in urgent need of both translation and republication. There is also an unpublished MA thesis by Esther Roberts, Shembe: The Man and his Work (1936). As regards literary and cultural study of Shembe, little research has been conducted. Ruth Finnegan makes a brief mention of Shembe in The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry (1978). In his book Four African Literatures, Gérard offers a short discussion of the hymns of Shembe as representing a transitional phase between an oral and a written Zulu literature (1971:184-193), and Elizabeth Gunner has analysed the izibongo and, to a lesser extent, the hymns of Shembe in a section of her doctoral dissertation (1984) and in three articles (1982, 1986 and 1988). The most extensive treatment of the Church of the Nazarites is Carol Muller's doctoral thesis Nazarite Song, Dance, and Dreams: The Sacralisation of Time, Space, and the Female Body in South Africa (1994a). Muller's concern is largely ethnomusicological, but she also draws on current developments in literary theory. She deals specifically with the songs and narratives of Nazarite women (though she does offer fairly extensive discussion of the hymns), and her focus is on more recent practices in the church (her field work began in 1990). Yet her study is extremely valuable for a literary consideration of Shembe. My own concern in this chapter is to direct attention to the hymns of Isaiah Shembe as literary texts of extraordinary power and vision.

My reading of the hymns of the Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe locates itself within attempts to broaden the scope of literary history and study beyond canonised genres and texts. Whereas writers like H.I.E. Dhlomo and Sol. T. Plaatje, who worked within the 'élite' genres of

the novel and the lyric/epic poem, have achieved positions of prominence in South African criticism, there are several figures from the same period utilising popular forms, many of whom reflect similar congruences of orality/literacy, mission education/traditional upbringing, African nationalism/Western universalism, yet who have received little or no critical attention. I hope that my discussion of the work of Isaiah Shembe may suggest something of the wealth of material which is currently ignored by literary study in this country.

The historical matrix in which Shembe's hymns are located is very different from that of the forms dealt with in Chapters One and Two. As I have argued, Bushman groupings have generally not maintained generic distinctions between sacred and profane forms of expression, nor have they reserved specific genres for individuals of elevated social standing. Nineteenth-century Zulu society, though it prized genres like royal *izibongo* over others such as storytelling or personal *izibongo*, did not restrict literary activities to an intelligentsia. By the early twentieth century when Shembe composed his hymns, however, the influence of the Western print tradition, particularly through the work of the missionaries and the colonial administration, had initiated and begun to formalise cultural distinctions based on education and social class. (We may recall the reference in Shembe's *izibongo* to the missionaries' educated exegesis of the Bible.) Hence Shembe's hymns engage in a dialogue, not only with the traditional cultural forms of an indigenous society, but with the 'educated' forms of the occupying power, and some understanding of the concept of the 'popular' as aesthetic principle and cultural space becomes necessary. Karin Barber's theorisation of 'popular' art forms in African societies is useful here, and may provide a conceptual framework for the literary forms discussed in the next three chapters.

Barber points to the problems of attempting to define the 'popular':

There is no definite and bounded corpus of works of popular art that is recognised either within African cultures themselves or by outside observers.

Popular arts is a category that appears to be characterised, above all, by its inclusiveness and its apparently infinite elasticity. It has accommodated not only forms generally recognised as arts - such as theatre, instrumental and vocal music, paintings and sculptures, written fiction - but also such diverse phenomena as decorated bread labels ... portrait photography ... house decoration ... coffins ... jokes ... and wire bicycles ... It is a fugitive category, seemingly ubiquitous and yet always fading as one tries to grasp it. (1987:5-6)

She argues that this 'fugitive' category needs to be distinguished from that of the 'traditional' and that of the 'élite', the former comprising as examples rural, precolonial, predominantly oral forms, including izibongo and the songs/stories of the Bushmen, and the latter usually comprising individually-created, 'high art' forms, generally influenced by or emerging from the culture of the metropole. While the 'popular' is a "shapeless residual category, its borders defined only by juxtaposition with the clearly demarcated traditional and élite categories" (1987:9), Barber claims that its very definition "in terms of absences and deviations from established categories" (1987:11) offers the basis for a theory of popular art forms in Africa. She argues that the popular occupies a shifting space between the élite and the traditional (themselves not stable or self-contained categories), from which it draws in syncretic fashion to create new modes of social and aesthetic expression:

The aesthetic is hard to pin down because it is, precisely, an aesthetic of change, variety and novel conjunctures. The direction in which the existing studies seem to be pointing is towards the concept of cultural brokerage: of arts which thrive on an active exploitation of their unofficial status. These two notions - the unofficial, and cultural brokerage - together seem to me to offer a possible starting-point for the theorisation of the field of popular arts. (1987:12)

Popular art forms generally emerge from contexts of abrupt or violent social disjuncture,

particularly involving the confrontation between an indigenous and a foreign culture. As Barber argues: "What are identified as popular arts are in effect the new unofficial arts of colonialism and post-colonialism, produced by the profound and accelerating social change of these periods" (1987:13). It is clear that the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites, which draw on the cultural resources of traditional Zulu society while finding new models in the structures and beliefs of a colonising Christianity, comprise precisely such a form of popular art. These hymns occupy an unofficial space beyond the mission churches and the institutions of colonial governance where they speak in new ways about the experiences of colonisation, economic dispossession and social decay.

The idea of cultural forms 'talking back' to the colonising power in fugitive and often irreverent ways is an attractive one, particularly in view of the current concerns of colonial and postcolonial studies. What these forms actually say, nevertheless, may be intensely conservative. A full engagement with the popular in literary study requires neither a valorisation of 'the people' nor a dismissal of them for expressing 'false consciousness', but a frank consideration of the structures of belief which these forms articulate, an analysis of their implications, an understanding of the conditions which produce them, and a recognition of the undeniable appeal which these forms hold for large numbers of people.

The texts produced by Isaiah Shembe are, however, not only popular but religious, if the categories may legitimately be distinguished. Despite its associations with colonial occupation and oppression, Christianity has constituted one of the most resilient and adaptable means of social and political expression for black South Africans.<sup>6</sup> Kirby attempts to quantify the remarkable impact of Christianity on the African continent as a whole: "In the brief span of eighty-five years Africa's Christian population has risen from about 10 million, or 9.2 percent of the population, to 237 million, and by the turn of the century, it is expected to reach 350 million, or about 50 percent..." (1994:57). Studying religious texts raises large conceptual and methodological questions, particularly because of their claims to essential truth and power, the

provenance of which lies in 'faith'. Such difficulties are apparent, in a somewhat extreme form, in the case of Shembe, since the 1940 edition of Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha claimed that one of the hymns (the very brief No. 220) had been composed by the prophet after he had risen from the dead (a literalisation, or spiritualisation, of Barthes's 'death of the author?').<sup>7</sup> This claim has prompted both Oosthuizen (1967:8) and Vilakazi and others (1986:71) to remark wryly that greater spiritual depth would be expected of a hymn composed after resurrection!

In considering the problems of studying 'sacred' forms and concepts, Beek and Blakely point to the current methodological orientation of religious studies:

Today's students of religion focus on particular forms of religious expression and try to point out the consonances with other cultural and historical processes, while still trying to preserve the integrity of the religious experience-cum-expression. This is the core of the method and, in fact, closely resembles an answer (possibly apocryphal) that Carl Jung once gave. After a lecture on evil, people asked him whether he believed the devil existed. His answer: "No idea, but he works!" Thus, we study influences **on** religion and influences **by** religion, realising that directly studying religious phenomena is at least very difficult. Religion is best studied in its socio-cultural contexts, to be grasped by being human among the humans ... . (1994:3)

My project in discussing the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites is similarly socio-cultural, for I am concerned not with the 'truth' claims of the hymns, but their sociological and poetic qualities. Such a consideration necessitates a serious engagement with the church movement and especially the founder himself. Shembe is believed by his followers to have had the ability to heal, to read minds, to make rain, and to rise from the dead. With whatever scepticism we might greet such claims, we cannot deny his real charisma, insight, leadership ability, and his power to shape the course of history. In many ways Isaiah Shembe defies neat categories and formulations,



and serves as a salient reminder that history is made by people, whose particularities, contradictions and idiosyncrasies often disrupt the clean narrative lines of historiography. At the same time, as I have observed earlier, Shembe may suggest the difficulties, contradictions and disconcerting conservatisms thrown up by an engagement with the popular.<sup>8</sup>

While it was undoubtedly an act of personal vision, Shembe's founding of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* was also part of a larger religious and historical development: the separatist church movement. As a result of mission activity, there was a rapid exponential growth in the number of black Christians in South Africa around the turn of the century, from about 70 000 in 1870 to 4 697 152 in 1911 when Shembe founded his church (Oosthuizen,1967:2-3). Many of the converts were members not of the mainstream mission churches, however, but of the increasing number of black separatist churches which had broken away from their parent bodies. One of the first indigenous religious groups was formed as early as 1872 in what is now Lesotho under the influence of a Paris-based mission group (Sundkler,1948:38). More important was the 1882 secession led by Nehemiah Tile from the Wesleyan Mission Church to form the Tembu Church with the chief of that grouping, Ngangelizwe, as its head (Sundkler,1948:38). In 1898 a number of Mfengu left the United Free Church of Scotland to set up their own church (Gérard,1971:185). Sundkler argues that the independent church movement was catalysed particularly by the movement of mineworkers to the Witwatersrand, and he points out that by 1895 there were about sixty-five Wesleyan trained preachers in the Reef area, many of whom would later form their own churches (1948:39). Mission activity was, however, less successful in the Natal/Zululand area, probably owing to the strongly centralised nature of the Zulu kingdom and the consequent difficulties experienced by missionaries in finding points of political and ideological entry. The earliest mission activity in Natal was led by Allen Gardiner in 1835. By the mid-1870s he had produced only 450 converts, many of whom had been "imported to Natal to serve as examples" (Etherington,1989:280). The percentage of black converts in Natal remained low, and Oosthuizen claims that when Shembe established his church, over 85 percent of the African population in the region still practised indigenous religion (1967:3).

The reasons for the development of the separatist churches were both political and doctrinal. Black Christians reacted particularly to the emphasis in the white-controlled churches on the authority of the white clergy and the inferior status of black clerics and converts - a response allied at the time to the growth of African nationalism. These black Christians also questioned the missionaries' claims to theological and doctrinal authority, notably on the questions of ancestor worship, the trinity and the practice of polygamy. Lessa and Vogt argue that contact between colonial and indigenous cultures produced a number of "nativistic, revivalist or revitalisation movements - all of which were religiously inspired responses to the stresses of colonisation, acculturation and domination" (1979:414). Sundkler points to the importance of the Zionist churches in this regard: "There was a new realisation of selfhood and worthy identity in these men and women because of their discovery in and with Zion, of the richness and relevance of their own religions and cultural expressions" (1976:318-319).

In a context of social and discursive rupture, forms of worship in the separatist churches may simultaneously be the expression of cultural and political survival by dispossessed and displaced communities. A hymn like Shembe's No. 219 expresses the pain of social and spiritual experience and the longing for solace and restitution at the same time as it serves as a means of empowerment, claiming for black people - the issue is one of dignity and authority - the rights of biblical interpretation and divine inspiration:

1. We have heard it, oh! Babamkhulu  
we could not comply  
oh! Babamkhulu,  
make soft thy word [i.e. be not strict]  
oh! Babamkhulu  
we shall try to do thy Word [will].

## 2. Thousands of generations

stand here

oh! Babamkhulu

they found your word difficult

oh! Babamkhulu

make soft thy word

oh! Babamkhulu.

## 3. The voice of the prisoners

oh! Babamkhulu

may you hear their voice

oh! Babamkhulu

they want one who rests

oh! Babamkhulu,

these prisoners give them rest.

## 4. We are staying in distress

oh! Babamkhulu,

in this world

oh! Babamkhulu

it is all tears

oh! Babamkhulu

in that valley of distress. (Oosthuizen,1967:190-191)

The separatist churches were perceived as threatening to the mainstream white churches, many leaders of which regarded the movement as a dangerous aberration. In the 1928 Yearbook of South African Missions, for example, the Rev. Allen Lea said, "Native denominationalism has run perilously near madness", and he questioned the moral character of converts to the new

churches: "the Separatist, generally speaking, is a church member in disrepute, and the secessionist body a refuge for those running away from discipline - a cave of Adullam" (quoted in Vilakazi et al,1986:2). Dr C.T. Loram concurred with Lea's judgement: "It is certain that the general standard of morality of members of the Separatist Churches is lower than that in European-controlled bodies ..." (Vilakazi et al,1986:2). The irony of such dismissals is heavy, for Shembe's church promoted a strict moral code and work ethic; and despite his specific concern with Zulu salvation, Shembe - unlike many of the missionaries - consistently emphasised non-racism and non-sectarianism, describing God as "uThixo kaAdam" - the God of Adam or all people.

Shembe was born into a polygamous family either in 1867 (Dube,1936) or 1870 (Sundkler,1948:110). The uncertainty about dating in Shembe's life is itself illuminating, suggesting a tension between the cyclical model of African history (which is event-based and does not emphasise dates) and the linear historical model of Western thought and Christianity (which arrays occurrences chronologically), a tension to which I shall return in discussing Shembe's hymns. Little is known about his early life, though he appears to have been a sickly child. However, he grew into a healthy young man, known as an "isoka", a young man popular with young women and with others of his age (he would have been skilled at stick fighting and would have excelled in song and dance).<sup>9</sup> Despite his popularity, Shembe appears to have experienced feelings of maladjustment. He had a number of visions and dreams, which are central to traditional Zulu religion and which play an important role in Nazarite spiritual life, in which he was told to shun sexual immorality. Amongst the most important of these was the image of his own rotting corpse - the metaphor of disease for moral impurity is a powerful one in the Nazarite church - and he was again told to flee "fornication" (ukuhlobonga). He was then ordered to leave his four wives, which Dube suggests caused him such distress that he almost committed suicide (1936:21). But he finally became convinced of his calling when he was apparently burned by divine lightning.

The question of why he felt uneasy about his conduct, which was acceptable in Zulu society, is a vexed one. It is unclear whether he had been exposed to Christianity (there are a number of references both in the biographical and critical literature and in the church itself to his having been "called by Jehovah", but these appear to be 'rereadings' of the experience after conversion), or whether for other (psychological?) reasons he rejected certain Zulu practices (there is evidence of his questioning Zulu custom in his opposing an early marriage which had been arranged for him). What is clear, however, is that Shembe was culturally at odds with his society and "found it difficult and sometimes painful to live in his culture" (Vilakazi et al, 1986:26). Shembe is reported to have been the somatic type of the traditional diviner or "isangoma", and his reputation as a healer was firmly established throughout Natal before his conversion, though some accounts have him working as a healer in what was until recently the Orange Free State.

Whatever his prior contact with Christianity, Shembe was baptised in 1906 into the African Baptist Church - a breakaway from the mainstream Baptist Church - by the Rev. W.M. Leshega, and he was eventually ordained as a cleric in this church. Oosthuizen suggests that Shembe "most probably joined the African Baptist Church because of its indigenous character, its literalism in biblical exposition and the importance attached to baptism" (1967:3). Shembe became disaffected from this church, however, especially over the question of biblical interpretation (chief amongst his concerns was that the Sabbath should be kept on Saturday), and he finally left to start his own Church of the Nazarites in 1911: a church based largely on the vows of the Nazarites in Numbers 6. In about 1913 - Sundkler initially suggests 1916 (1948:111), later 1912 (1976:167) - Shembe visited the mountain Nhlankakazi which was to become the site of the annual January festival within the church. (This festival alternates with the July festival in establishing the major rhythms of the Nazarite worship cycle.) In 1916, or according to some sources 1914, Shembe purchased a piece of land about 38 acres in size in what was then the Inanda Reserve. Here he established his church settlement Ekuphakameni (the elevated/exalted place), about 29 kilometres from Durban. The church grew rapidly in size and influence, and

Shembe appointed a number of pastors including Peter Mnqayi, Amos Mzobe and Johannes Mlangeni to minister to the 10 000 or more who worshipped at Ekuphakameni (Sundkler,1976:171;178). Shembe's reputation as a leader and a healer spread rapidly throughout the region.

Shembe left the Baptist church primarily for doctrinal rather than political reasons,<sup>10</sup> but doctrine, of course, translates almost immediately into social action. His understanding of the Bible, especially the moral strictures of the Old Testament from which he took his term of address for God "Jehovah", suggested a people who were tribal and polygamous, who performed sacrifices, and whose social and spiritual life appeared close to that of traditional Zulu society.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Shembe introduced many aspects of Zulu custom and traditional belief into his church: he recognised and encouraged polygamous marriage, and incorporated into Nazarite worship song, dance and ritual such as the "first fruits" ceremony initiated by Shaka. Shembe's concept of the deity also syncretised Christian and African cosmology, and the terms of address "Mvelinqangi" and "Nkulunkulu" evoke equally the biblical God and the originating figures of Zulu belief. Further, the more common term of address for God amongst Zulu converts, "Nkosi", suggests that God has the attributes of a Zulu king. Shembe also sought to introduce into the church reverence for the spirits of ancestors, which was dismissed by the missionaries, though he tended to give this practice a biblical overlay. In Hymn 154 (Oosthuizen,1967:175-6), for example, the evocation of the Holy Spirit ("Umoya") and the "communion of saints/of Nazareth" is entirely consistent with Zulu belief in the power of the spirits of the dead to influence human affairs. At the same time the hymn points to another important aspect of Nazarite worship. The opening verse<sup>12</sup> invokes the "Father", the "Holy Spirit" and the "saints", but makes no mention of Christ. One of the greatest resistances that missionaries encountered was Zulu rejection of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, since it asserted the equality and indivisibility of the father and son, an idea unacceptable in terms of Zulu morality and social authority. Though Jesus is mentioned in some hymns, Shembe does not emphasise the trinity or the conventional Christian understanding of Christ. We shall return to this question later in discussing Shembe's own status

as "Black Christ", and his understanding of the Messiah in terms of Zulu nationalism.

Unlike Western belief systems, which tend to comprise abstract bodies of thought and to be practised in specially designated places, African religion is part of the tissue of everyday experience, and has a specifically social orientation. Vilakazi and others emphasise that "the Shembe church has as one of its chief sociological aims the regeneration of African society" (1986:80): in a context in which Zulu society had been destroyed by economic dispossession, military defeat and migrant labour, Shembe sought to promote a system of morality and values which would rebuild social structures. His efforts included a revival of Zulu customs which had fallen into disuse, including prohibitions on premarital sex. Vilakazi and others, in fact, suggest that Ekuphakameni was in many ways "a museum of old African customs and practices" (1986:45). The Land Act of 1913 had stripped Africans of ownership rights to land which had been theirs for generations, and taxation sought to force them into the capitalist economy. At the same time, however, the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act sought to establish racially segregated residential areas in towns and cities, and prohibited Africans from entering urban areas except as units of labour. In response to the alienations of migrancy and urbanisation, Shembe promoted economic self-sufficiency in his community at Ekuphakameni, and emphasised the importance of a communal work ethic amongst his followers. The morning prayers of the church include stern exhortations to labour: "Do not be lazy, for laziness is sin. A lazy person is like a dog begging food from people. At the conclusion of this Prayer take your hoe and dig with it. Thus you shall live and not need to go and beg for food from people".

The leadership pattern of the Church of the Nazarites also draws upon the authority structures of Zulu society. I have already noted that Shembe was well known as a healer before he joined the Baptist Church, and have pointed to his similarity with the somatic type of the isangoma. Sundkler argues that within Zionist churches the prophet combines Christian authority with that of the traditional seer (1948:109). This authority is then "steadied" by association with the traditions and rituals of kingship (Sundkler, 1948:109). In Shembe's case,

when he preached, he did not address the congregation directly, but as a king would he spoke through an intermediary. (Sundkler suggests, however, that this may have been partly because he had a very soft voice (1976:163).) He was also concerned to establish his lineage, and the preface to the hymnal refers to his ancestry: "the Prophet Isaiah Shembe of Mayekisa, of Nhliziyo, of Mzazela, of Sokhabuzela of Nyathikazi". He dressed elaborately, and dispensed wisdom, justice and authority through a system of elders and ministers who parallel the amakhosi and indunas of traditional society. Shembe was further concerned to establish his legitimacy as a Zulu leader by associating himself with the royal family. He gave his daughter Zondi to King Solomon kaDinizulu in marriage, and built a house for him at Ekuphakameni. One of the hymns (No. 116), in fact, refers to Solomon's relations with the church:

King Solomon is called  
 He, the son of Dinizulu  
 And the fame of Jehovah  
 is in Ekuphakameni. (Sundkler, 1948:103)

As far as Shembe is concerned, Sundkler's theories of church leadership appear valid, and point to the syncretism of Shembe's leadership style. The famous distinction between Ethiopian and Zionist churches which underlies Sundkler's theories of church leadership is less convincing. He argues that Zionists have "healing, speaking with tongues, purification rites, and taboos as the main expressions of faith" (1948:55), while Ethiopian churches are characterised by their concern that "Africa is for Africans" (1948:56). Sundkler himself places the Church of the Nazarites in the former category, though Shembe's nationalist tendencies could as easily place his church in the latter. Something of the difficulty of Sundkler's scheme is exemplified by the fact that Gérard insists Shembe's church is in fact Ethiopian (1971:185), while Vilakazi and others claim that it fits both categories and reject the scheme completely (1986:153-154). Sundkler himself seems somewhat ambivalent about his division, having modified it in the 1961 revision of Bantu Prophets and having offered an elaborate defence against anticipated attacks for including



Shembe in his later book Zulu Zion (1976:161). My own opinion is that Sundkler's distinction obscures as much as it reveals, and while I have not removed references to Zionism or Ethiopianism in the criticism which I quote, I do not myself utilise the distinction.

The pattern of succession in the church is both that of the chief or king, whose authority passes to his son, and that of the prophet, who nominates his own successor. When Isaiah Shembe died on 2 May 1935, reportedly after standing for about three hours in a cold river baptising people, he was succeeded by his son Johannes Galilee Shembe, who would continue his father's work. When Galilee died in 1976, the succession was disputed by Galilee's brother Amos and his own son Londa. This led to a split in the church, with the majority of the group following Amos, who set up a new settlement at Ebuhleni, while a smaller group remained with Londa. The latter was himself murdered on 7 April 1989, though his group continues to meet at Ekuphakameni. By the mid-seventies the size of the Nazarite following was estimated at about 250 000 (Muller,1994a:3). Whereas in Isaiah Shembe's time the church had been geographically and spiritually centred on Ekuphakameni, the nature of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* changed following the 1979 split and expansion to other regions, and many groups now meet in areas which are only temporarily sanctified for worship and at which there is no residential community. Amos Shembe died very recently, and the leadership of the Ebuhleni group has passed to his son Vimbeni.

\* \* \*

The first twenty-three pages of Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha comprise Morning, Evening and Sabbath Prayers, interspersed with hymns/choruses, doctrine and Shembe's Zulu version of Psalm 23. The rest of the hymnal contains the 242 *izihlabelelo*. Hymns 1 to 219 were composed by Isaiah Shembe, while the remainder are those of his son Galilee.<sup>13</sup> As well as original compositions the hymnal contains three foreign hymns: No. 133 (the "Lord's Prayer" - spoken rather than sung), and Nos 185 and 194 (acknowledged in the hymnal to be "Izihlabelelo

sama Wesile", the "Hymns of the Wesleyans"). In discussing African popular forms Barber suggests that they are in some sense 'fugitive': this is clearly the case with Isaiah Shembe's hymns, certain of which were omitted from the hymnal by his son for fear of attracting the attention of the authorities and threatening the very existence of the church (Vilakazi et al, 1986:139).

While African-language hymns, especially in Xhosa, had been composed in the nineteenth century by several figures including Ntsikana, Tiyo Soga, William Gqoba, Nehemiah Tile and John Knox Bokwe, the separatist churches for the most part took over the hymnals of the parent mission churches, such as the Methodist, Anglican and Lutheran. Though the hymns were translated - often with great linguistic violence to the target language, particularly in the case of Zulu - the tunes were generally European, drawn from Bach, Sankey and others (Sundkler, 1948:193). The most popular of the hymnals was Amagama Okuhlabelela (the American Board Hymnbook) an early version of which appeared in 1897. It contained hymns selected and translated with some sensitivity by Charlotte B. Grout. The composers P.J. Gumede and N. Luthuli also contributed several hymns to the collection. B.W. Vilakazi commented in 1938 that "after these two [Gumede and Luthuli] there is a great break, up to now. The field of hymns seems to be dead. The example set by American Board missionaries was not rivalled by other bodies. Even at this present time it seems impossible to publish hymns originally composed by the Bantu" (1993:75). Vilakazi was aware of the Church of the Nazarites, as his dismissive comments about its use of dance and its incorporation of Zulu ritual suggest (1993:74), but evidently felt Shembe's hymns did not merit discussion. In commenting on the problems which had caused this apparent barrenness in the field of hymn composition, Vilakazi emphasised the possibilities and limitations of the current education system (1993:76). In contrast, Shembe was wary of the colonising power of education and literacy, and he sought to rejuvenate the field of hymns by drawing upon orality as a continuing social force. Shembe also for the most part abandoned the European music of mission church hymnody for rhythmic and choral forms which drew upon African influences.<sup>14</sup>

In his Preface to the hymnal Johannes Galilee Shembe says of the origins of his father's hymns: "The second hymn came in 1913 when he climbed Mount Nhlankakazi for the first time. The first hymn was sung by the children who journeyed with him in 1910, when he first came to Natal. From 1914 until 1919, no hymns were composed. In 1920 he began to write hymns prolifically, and he also began to write prayers for the morning, evening and the Sabbath." The semantic slippage in Galilee's statements - from "came", to "composed" to "write", as the verbs are almost uniformly translated - is illuminating, for the hymns represent complex intersections of orality and literacy. Their formal syncretism is evident in the term "izihlabelelo". This refers to the Psalms of David in the Old Testament - in origin, oral poetry, but for so many centuries solidified in print that their oral ontology has largely been suppressed - and to the songs composed by Zulu mothers for their children as discussed in Chapter Two in relation to personal izibongo. In contrast, a "hymn" is referred to specifically as "iculo" (hymn, chant or song) or "ihubo" (ceremonial, tribal, or regimental song or hymn) (Muller, 1994a:175).

Textually Shembe's compositions are certainly strongly influenced by the Christian hymn: they are - in the print forms which circulated originally during the prophet's life - constructed of short lines arranged in regular, numbered verses; they utilise biblical imagery and phrases, which Oosthuizen generally registers by the equivalent Christian formulation in English; they include praises such as "Hosanna" and "Hallelujah"; they are limited in length; and many of them use a hymnal chorus. The following section from Hymn 58, the opening of which echoes the "Lord's Prayer", may serve as an illustration:

1. Our father which is in heaven  
I am in your face [in front of you!]  
let it be handled with holiness  
that name of yours.

Chorus: Your umoya must come Nkosi

Cause your people to be healed. (Oosthuizen,1967:164)

Yet in many ways the izihlabelelo do not conform to the pattern of the Western hymn, and as the etymology of the term "izihlabelelo" suggests many are more closely aligned to the Psalms as religious discourse, especially those of Shembe's Old Testament namesake Isaiah (Muller,1994a:176). A number of the hymns comprise highly personalised reflections rather than, as in the Western tradition, hymns of praise and worship. They are often accompanied by a note indicating the date and occasion of their composition. Hymn 162 is described as "the Prayer of Shembe" composed on "the mountain of Nhlankakazi, January 22, 1929", and begins as follows:

1. Amen. Amen. Amen!

Amen. Amen. Amen!

The aloe of the veld

it is not as bitter

as your word Simakade

in the hearts of many.

2. Amen. Amen. Amen!

Amen. Amen. Amen!

The cough medicine of the mountains

it is not as bitter

as your word Simakade

in the hearts of many. (Oosthuizen,1967:178-9)

The hymn combines a localised and modernised diction ("aloe", "cough medicine") with the biblical refrain "Amen. Amen. Amen!" in creating a form which expresses the difficulties of faith and evangelism.

Yet the hymn also utilises many of the formal patterns of izibongo, such as parallel constructions, repetition and naming ("Simakade" - "Eternal One"), and while the izihlabelelo reveal Western print influences, their generation was oral, as Sundkler records:

Johannes Galilee Shembe explained to me how Isaiah Shembe, his father, conceived his hymns. He would hear a woman's voice, often a girl's voice, singing new and unexpected words. He would not see her, but as he woke up from a dream or walked along a path in Zululand, meditating, he heard that small voice, that clear voice, which gave him a new hymn. He had to write down the words, while humming and singing the tune which was born **with** the words. (1976:186)

Sundkler claims that Shembe's motive for learning to write, which he did only imperfectly and late in his life, was to transcribe "these irresistible songs that would well up from his unconscious [which] had to be grasped, and translated into words and verses" (1976:186-7). The izihlabelelo of Shembe bring Zulu oral forms into new contexts of meaning, and they reveal the prophet's drawing upon the extensive cultural resources of traditional Zulu society. Unlike Christian hymns, many of the izihlabelelo are not directed towards the deity, but explore social and spiritual problems, the nature of Shembe's calling, or evoke the spirit of sacred places. Of those concerned with God, a number adopt the forms of address of royal izibongo. Amongst the most compelling of these is No. 101 (Oosthuizen, 1967:170), which utilises a series of epithets to celebrate the greatness of Nkosi: the "eagle which has wings"; "rock of the old"; the "fortress"; the "beautiful hen"; and "hen of heaven". Each 'section' of the hymn has something of an ambiguous status, for it is both a Christian verse in the hymnal tradition, and a praise plus extension akin to the Shakan stanza:

1. It is the eagle which has wings,  
lift up your wing  
that we may enter and hide ourselves in you  
rock of the old.

2. No other fortress have we  
other than you  
where we can hide ourselves  
we your poor little ones.

As with royal izibongo, the address to Nkosi here includes advice:

5. Protect it, Nkosi  
that Ekuphakameni,  
like a hen  
loving her children.

Jehovah is implored to protect his threatened community by maintaining the sacred place, Ekuphakameni, established by Shembe. Muller points to the importance of the sacred in contexts of destruction and dispossession:

In the historical context of rupture, domination, and social and cultural diminution, the domain of the sacred must surely constitute the retention of those cultural elements deemed indispensable to the collective identity and cohesion that are threatened with loss. These are what Weiner (1992) calls 'inalienable possessions'. (1994b:136)

Yet the emphasis on the sacred does not imply an attempt at closure by simple gesture towards a transcendental space, for like many of the other hymns, this one defers resolution in a way that is seldom found in Christian hymnals. Like izibongo, which do not move to a point of thematic conclusion and which may end arbitrarily or on a point of contention, Hymn 101 does not

provide in its closing section simple solace, but offers a chastening image of the difficulties of maintaining the sacred community:

6. Jerusalem, Jerusalem  
 how much did I desire  
 to gather your children  
 under my wings  
 but you did not allow me,  
 now I leave you scattered.

The complexity of Shembe's vision in Hymn 101 is evident in his use of images. While with the possible exception of the "fortress" all are commonly found in Zulu personal and royal izibongo, they are also all biblical images,<sup>15</sup> and they consequently have a double valency. Shembe creates, accordingly, a formal and theological syncretism which is embedded in the very constituent images of his texts.

While Shembe undoubtedly exploited the "creative tension in the use of the two forms of communication" (Gunner, 1986:185), he also perceived the orality/literacy encounter in more critical ways, seeking to manipulate the colonial discourses of power, particularly the centrality of the printed word and the Bible, in order to create oppositional forms of expression and response. As suggested in his izibongo, he rejected the arrogance of the mission churches and their emphasis on educated scriptural exegesis, claiming that despite his lack of book learning, he possessed divinely-inspired wisdom. This point is emphasised by Dube in his biography:

If you had educated him in your schools you would have taken pride in him. But that God may demonstrate his wisdom, he sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and the educated. (Quoted by Gunner, 1986:182)

Dube ironically undermines Social-Darwinist perceptions of oral societies as childlike and ignorant by stressing that these qualities indicate a divine wisdom. (We may compare Jeff Guy's research in Lesotho in which a man who cannot read speaks of "this natural sense that God gave me" (1991:405).) Yet Shembe was intensely aware of the power invested in the written word, and though only partially literate himself, fought the state through lawyers' letters over his right to purchase land. He sought also to wrest cultural control from the mission churches, including their hegemony of the written word; hence his emphasis on the printing of the hymns, and the veneration of the hymnal encouraged in the Church of the Nazarites.<sup>16</sup> As Muller argues:

[W]hile [Shembe] did not seek to engage his followers in any kind of armed struggle, the battle over salient signs and symbols was contested in the very structures of music and ritual ... . In the face of domination and subsequent loss, Isaiah created new ritual forms in which the encounter between opposing cultures was memorialised. This was effected through a process of bricolage ... in which opposing cultural ways were made to coexist in dialectical tension with each other, or were amalgamated and ascribed new meanings. (1994a:134)

The hymns are performed in a call-and-response style, with the prophet or group-leader as precentor and the congregation following him/her. While this two-part singing style is common to many of the separatist churches, Shembe's specific innovation was the introduction of dance into the worship of the church. In doing so he gave new meaning to one of the central ritual institutions of Zulu society. Shembe believed that he was instructed in a dream to develop dance forms in his church, and claimed scriptural justification for this from Jeremiah 30:13 and Psalms 150:3 (Vilakazi et al,1986:86). The Church of the Nazarites has both western-type Christian services (*inkhonz*) and religious dance (*ukusina*), though they are not performed at the same time or in the same religious space. Dance has particular prominence in the church, however, and many of the hymns are expressly and explicitly dance forms.<sup>17</sup> Shembe is reported to have taught many of the *izihlabelelo* to his followers by first teaching them the dance rhythm



which 'constituted' the hymn. Examples of dance hymns are No. 112, which includes the verses:

2. We, oh Lord  
Dance for you  
For that power  
Of your kingdom.
  
3. May we be strengthened  
Our feet,  
So that we may dance for you  
Eternal God. (Muller, et al:83)

and No. 158, the opening verse of which is as follows:

1. Behold, the Zulus  
Are dancing for the Eternal One  
Shift a little  
Jehovah is coming. (Muller, et al:113)

The hymn performance and dance are accompanied by a variety of musical instruments, including the Nazarite drum ("ughubu"), which has a central place in worship and which is partly modelled on the drum used in Salvation Army parades, bugles, kudu horns, wood-blocks and an indigenized form of an alpine horn-like trumpet (Muller, 1994a:40-41).<sup>18</sup> The syncretism of Nazarite ritual and belief is graphically illustrated by the dress of the dancers. Shembe himself led the dance in a range of outfits which included, amongst other items, a black robe, pith helmet, kilt, Zulu beadwork, tuxedo and top-hat. The uniform of members of the church has changed over the years, but in Shembe's time it included sun umbrellas and traditional Zulu dress.

The performance of the hymns constituted a ritual of empowerment for Shembe's followers, almost all of whom had been politically and economically marginalised. Benedict Anderson points to the unisonality of group performance as establishing "imagined communities" (1991:145) which bind individuals together in the face of conflict and division. It is particularly the physical act of communion through group singing and dance that establishes the sense of collective identity, and the 'text' can be fully understood and appreciated only in its context of performance and occasion. In the case of Shembe's dance hymns, which are apparently 'simple' in poetic terms, it is the rhythm and the event which constitute the locus of value for the performers.

Sundkler argues that within the Church of the Nazarites rhythm is construed as sacred:

The hymn is not first of all a versified statement about certain religious facts. The hymn is sacred rhythm. And the rhythm is naturally accentuated by the swinging to and fro of their bodies, by loud hand-clapping and by beating the drum. (1948:196)

Coplan has claimed that African performance is 'synaesthetic', in that the different aspects of movement, intonation, dress and so on combine to create a unified effect (1987:9). In *ibandla lamaNazaretha* the effect is to reinforce the concept of rhythm, which has far-reaching implications for Nazarite belief and cosmology. The start of the dance is signalled by the beating of the *ughubu* drum, and the hymn leader will then begin to sing. S/he may begin at any point in the hymn, offering a lead which is taken up by the group of singers. Rhythm takes precedence over textual fidelity to linear structure (beginning - middle - end), and the singing of a four-verse hymn may last up to an hour, with the leader taking the group through the hymn many times, not always in the same verse order, and ending at any point in the hymn. The dance hymns are constructed on the same principle of cyclicity which I discussed in Chapters One and Two in relation to traditional Bushman and African cosmology. Muller argues that Shembe's

"reinsertion of the traditional concept of cyclicity into the articulation of ritual time and space" has political implications in the colonial context of the hymns' generation and performance: "Isaiah's insistence on this trope most powerfully reflected the symbolic contest between colonised and coloniser, whose organisation of time and space was symbolised in the principle of linearity" (1994a:136).

Shembe's hymns, particularly the dance hymns, undoubtedly reflect a concern with cyclicity as formal and ideological principle; his vision is also shaped, however, by the linear teleology of Christianity, which emerges in the powerful vision of nationalism and apocalypse in many of the izihlabelelo. Shembe's nationalism is somewhat ambiguous, for it is at once specifically and unapologetically Zulu and more broadly Africanist. The concern with a Zulu past emerges in the placing of the Church of the Nazarites in a direct line with the Zulu kings. Hence the followers are described as the "children of Senzangakhona and Shaka". Hymn 173, for example, says:

2. Give way that he may enter  
oh, here is Zulu  
the progeny of Dingane  
and Senzangakhona (Oosthuizen,1967:181)

and Hymn 214, perhaps the best example of Shembe's Zulu nationalism, opens:

1. Our uMkhululi -  
we the progeny of Dingane  
we have heard, he has arrived.  
uMkhululi has arrived!  
uMkhululi has now arrived!  
Ye Zulus, we have heard him now. (Oosthuizen,1967:189)

The mobilisation of a Zulu history to bolster a sense of pride and community is intimately bound up with what Vilakazi and others describe as the "sociological purposiveness" (1986:35) of Shembe's doctrine - its concern to rebuild a society destroyed by colonial encroachment and defeat.

The concern of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* with Zulu specificity has led in recent years to church members being courted by Inkatha, though the church itself is officially 'non-political' and comprises members who are aligned to a variety of organisations. Isaiah Shembe's hymns seem to me themselves, however, to call into question any simple co-option of Zulu history in the cause of ethnic separatism, since they place Zulu dispossession in a broader Africanist context. The early history of Shembe's church parallels that of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), forerunner to the ANC, formed in 1912. Shembe's friend and biographer John Dube was a prominent member of the SANNC, and its vision of a nationalism across tribal divisions appears in certain ways to have impinged upon the Church of the Nazarites, though without displacing the church's ethnic specificities. One of the most powerful of Shembe's hymns (No. 17) articulates in popular terms the kind of Africanism celebrated in canonical writers like Plaatje and Dhlomo.<sup>19</sup> Taking its lead from the praises of Shaka ("He who beats but is not beaten, unlike water"), drawing on traditional imagery (such as the doorway of the hut), and including the *imbongi's* advice to the king, the hymn constructs itself around the choral refrain "rise up, rise up/Ye Africans":

1. He who is beaten is not thrown away  
let him not despise himself,  
rise up, rise up  
ye Africans.
2. The form of the doorway

causes you to bend,  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

3. The enemies of Jehovah  
 rise up against you  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

4. Those who are given kingly authority  
 upon the mountain  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

5. They already want to deprive  
 the eternal kingly authority,  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans. (Oosthuizen, 1967:159-60)

In its language of protest and resistance, this hymn anticipates the Black Consciousness (BC) rhetoric of poets like Ingoapele Madingoane, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala and Sipho Sepamla. Shembe also anticipates the use made by BC poets of Christian teleology - Christian teleology modified by the secular implications of Black Theology - in evoking the apocalypse of social revolt and revolutionary change. Hymn 28 may serve as an example. While Shembe's vision of apocalypse emphasises biblical rather than political interpretation - he draws particularly on the "trumpet" imagery of Revelation - the Nazarite association of Jehovah with liberation and upliftment gives the imagery profoundly political reverberations:

4. The first trumpet  
has been sounded  
all the earth  
quaked.  
Where will you run and hide yourself,  
here is the world already being folded.
  
5. Your earth, where will you hide yourself,  
and all those sinners;  
runaway ye strangers  
Jehovah is coming. (Oosthuizen,1967:161)

The twin themes of nationalism and apocalypse find forceful expression, in the Church of the Nazarites, in the doctrine of the Black Messiah. In the book I Am Black a former Christian named Shabala explains that he has returned to his traditional beliefs because of the racial exclusivity of mainstream church theology and doctrine:

Do you not understand that Jesus is not the God of the Black men? I found that out when I came to this Big City of the White people. At home there was one White man, the Preacher, and many Black people, but there was no talk of Black People or White people. The writings only spoke of men ... . Here [in the city] are many White men, and Jesus is their God only. Here there are many houses built for Him ... but I cannot go into the houses of the White man's God. (Williams and May,1936:205)

Such perceptions were amongst the most widespread reasons for the breakaway of the separatist churches. Shabala's concerns are given a more radical echo by Steve Biko in his 1973 argument for a Black Theology:

[Black Theology] seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and to his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting God and not a passive God who accepts a lie to exist unchallenged. It seeks to bring back God to the black man and to the truth and reality of his situation. (1986:31)

The concept of a Black Messiah, who could heal the sick and who later 'rose from the dead', proved attractive in churches like *ibandla lamaNazaretha*. The appeal of such leaders was not simply religious, however, for they filled the historical and symbolic space created by the effective destruction of the Zulu kingship. In the previous chapter I examined the nationalism and mythology which developed around Shaka. With British invasion of the Zulu kingdom, and the failure of the Bambatha rebellion, the mythology of the Zulu kings was deflated, and figures like Shembe answered the need for leaders who stood 'above' and 'beyond' the degradation of contemporary historical circumstances.

Despite the questioning of the concept of the trinity in churches such as that of the Nazarites, Shembe is presented as a Black Christ. In the sermons and hymns of the church, Shembe's life has the force of Christ's life and is used to illustrate biblical messages and religious doctrine. A number of hymns present Shembe in this light. Hymn 60 (Oosthuizen, 1967:164) is one of praise to Jehovah for sending "Isaiah, your Servant/because He is good", and proves illuminating for an examination of Shembe's messianic status. The sending of Shembe is described in terms of African specificities:

2. He [Jehovah] remembered Africa  
because He is righteous,  
He did not forget his people  
because He is righteous.

And it is made clear by reference to the specific practices and taboos of the Church of the Nazarites that they are people chosen by God: shoes not to be worn in sacred places - "Those who put on nothing/on their feet"; shaving or cutting their hair forbidden - "Even those who shave heads.../Even those who shave chins/through breaking of the laws"; wearing, in Shembe's time, traditional dress - "your people/whose hips are naked". The description of "Isaiah, your Servant" as "good" echoes the description in the previous verse of God also as "good", and the association of Shembe with the deity is emphasised by Oosthuizen in his choice - in translation - of capital letters to highlight the pronouns referring to the prophet.

On the evidence of such hymns and on the testimony of followers, a number of critics have argued that Shembe is God or Christ in Nazarite theology. Oosthuizen claims that "Shembe ... is not only Mediator but is Messiah, the manifestation of God" (1967:4), and Gérard states: "The Zulu Messiah is Shembe, and in later years the adherents of the sect even came increasingly to believe that the prophet was God himself" (1971:153). Similarly Muller refers repeatedly to "the Nazarite God, Shembe" or "their God Shembe".<sup>20</sup> Such critical statements and assumptions appear to simplify a more complex symbolic identification, and to remain insufficiently alert to the ambiguities and polyvalencies of religious and poetic language. In Hymn 60 discussed above, Isaiah Shembe is described as the "Servant", who brings the divine message to Africans, and in a sermon Johannes Galilee Shembe referred to his father as "Thunyiwe ka Nkulunkulu" (sent by God). While it is the case that many of the followers of the church do in fact claim Shembe's divinity, his own hymns do not make this identification. Instead, as Sundkler argues, Shembe's status as Saviour should be understood in more subtle fashion, as a 'mask':

Instead of the idea of a Messiah we suggest the biblical, and, indeed, African, concept of the eikon, i.e. the mask, and in this case the mask is the Black Christ. The African prophet turning to God's black people is privileged to wear that mask which they will recognise as of God. (1976:193)



Hence Shembe is not Christ, but wears the 'mask' of Christ. In the hymns he is sent by God to save Zulu people (and, in some hymns, all black people) and deliver them from white bondage. The divine covenant which seals the promise of deliverance is symbolised by the "Ark of the Covenant" - the sacred drum ("umphongolo wesivumelwane") which has so central a role in the performance of the hymns (Vilakazi et al,1986:73).

\* \* \*

Shembe's hymns comprise texts and rituals of empowerment and resistance, therefore, which draw both upon forms of colonial discourse and upon the cultural resources of traditional Zulu society. A constant concern in this study is, however, not only with the 'past significance' of the poems and performances (which I have attempted to establish), but their 'present meaning', for I seek to 'place' the oral forms in a literary history impelled by modern political and aesthetic considerations to which the past voices are encouraged to 'talk back'.

Chapter One ended with a discussion of the place of the songs and stories of the Bushmen in a revised South African poetry anthology. As well as including - alongside Bushman expression - personal izibongo and royal praises such as those of Shaka, Dingane and others, I would argue that such an anthology should include the hymns of Isaiah Shembe. (The only anthology in which they are presently represented is Mapanje and White's Oral Poetry from Africa (1983).) The inclusion of the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites would broaden debates about what constitutes 'poetry', and set up important negotiations between 'traditional', 'élite' and 'popular' genres in South African literary historiography. The hymns could be read, not only against canonical writers such as Dhlomo whom I have mentioned, but against others such as William Plomer (who, like Shembe, had some contact with John Dube) and particularly Roy Campbell. In the 1920s Campbell and Shembe were working within about 30 kilometres of each other, and it may prove illuminating for literary criticism to set Campbell's simultaneous interrogation and

valorisation of colonial mythologies in dialogue with Shembe's attempts to draw an African past into a new context of dispossession and colonisation. At the end of "The Serf", for example, Campbell offers the following image:

I see in the slow progress of his strides  
 Over the toppled clods and falling flowers,  
 The timeless, surly patience of the serf  
 That moves the nearest to the naked earth  
 And ploughs down palaces and thrones and towers. (1981:34)

In contrast to Campbell's silent ploughman, we may set the immensely articulate Isaiah Shembe, who occupies a position not of European serfdom but of African popular religious leadership, and who speaks of political liberation and nationalism in a context in which the "thrones" of Zulu history had themselves been overturned. Such a comparison of Shembe's oral hymns with Campbell's highly-literate verse returns us to the question - considered throughout this thesis - of how to represent oral forms in their published versions. The use of numbered verses and choruses - as in the Western hymnal tradition - certainly suggests in print something of the hymns' performative aspect. Yet it may also be necessary, in anthologising Shembe alongside Campbell, to include accounts of the 'events' of Nazarite worship, such as those provided in this chapter, so as to suggest something of the resonance of the hymns in contexts of dance and occasion.

Shembe's hymns may also contribute to a history of black poetry of resistance running from the songs and stories of the Bushmen and the izibongo of African chiefs and kings, through Christianised figures like Ntsikana and Shembe, to Dhlomo, the Soweto poets, and Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula in the 1980s. Such a history would bring into view new forms and figures, as well as give a broader context to work - like that of the Soweto poets - which has received some critical attention, but which has tended to be read in terms of Western print

paradigms. The closing stanzas of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's "Sounds of a Cowhide Drum", for example, have strong echoes of Shembe's hymns:

O! Hear me, Child!  
 in the Zulu dance  
 shaking their hearts into a frenzy.

O! Hear me, Child!  
 in the night vigils of black Zionists  
 lifting their spirits into ecstasy.

Boom! Boom! Boom!  
 That is the sound of a cowhide drum -  
 the Voice of Mother Africa. (1971:91-92)

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe may remind us, at the same time, of the multivocal nature of our society and history, pointing to the many distinctive voices which have spoken and continue to speak from popular or unofficial positions in South African life.

### Notes

1. Certain of Shembe's hymns had also been published in John Dube's biography of Shembe (1936).
2. Several of the translated hymns from this manuscript appear in an Appendix to Carol Muller's unpublished doctoral dissertation on Nazarite women's songs and narratives (1994a).

3. In her account of attending the 1990 January festival on the Holy Mountain, Nhlangakazi, Carol Muller remarks on the performance of Shembe's izibongo:

One of the male leaders, Mvangeli (evangelist), stood on a rock about half way up. He had long hair, a beard, a flowing green robe, and shepherd's crook, and was calling praises to Shembe in the style of a traditional imbongi ... . (1994a:9)

4. Gunner recorded Isaiah Shembe's praises from a performance by one of his son's izimbongi, Azariah Mthiyane. While the primarily memorial rather than improvisational nature of Zulu izibongo suggests that the text is likely to have been transmitted fairly 'accurately' over the years, and this point is stressed by Mthiyane (see Gunner, 1982), the sacralisation of religious texts in the Church of the Nazarites further discourages their alteration or adaptation. This is particularly the case with the hymns, as Vilakazi and others argue:

Isaiah Shembe did not see himself as a composer but rather pointed out that each hymn was brought to him by different heavenly messengers. A strong belief within the Nazareth Church is that whenever a hymn is sung, the original unseen heavenly messenger who delivered the hymn becomes pleased. He listens rather intently to the singing, and becomes offended if the singers do not sing all the stanzas, or if they do not sing the hymn correctly. We think this belief has gone a long way to preserving these hymns. (1986:140)

5. Many Zulu people perceive the Nazarite Church negatively, however. An apparently apocryphal story of Shembe's death is often told to exemplify his perceived stupidity and hubris. In this account the religious leader meets his death by throwing himself from a cliff or mountain believing that he can fly.

6. P.L.B. Sewpershad's study, African Christian Visionaries: Issues in Black South African Poetry (1994), traces the development of an Africanised Christian vision in black South African poetry.
7. In the second edition of the hymnal, this hymn is attributed to Isaiah Shembe's son, Johannes Galilee Shembe.
8. These difficulties are, of course, not the sole preserve of the popular, though they may appear in somewhat extreme ways in these forms. The associations of Yeats, Pound and Eliot with fascism may prove as disturbing as Shembe's Messianic pretensions. However the status of these poets in the literary canon has led readers and critics either to suppress such awkwardnesses or to dismiss them as irrelevant in view of their artistic achievements.
9. An "isoka" is distinct from an "isifebe" - a profligate who is perceived to be morally reprehensible (Vilakazi et al,1986:23-24).
10. This point was emphasised in a sermon by Johannes Galilee Shembe in 1969, in which he discussed Shembe's doctrinal debates with Leshega, the priest who baptised him (see Sundkler,1976:169).
11. These ideas resurfaced recently in the debate about the place of traditional leaders in a modern South Africa. A report in the Weekly Mail and Guardian included the following observation of a villager from Lilydale: "When we humans appeared on the earth, we found 'ubukhosi' - chieftainship or kingship - in existence. Even in the Bible it is there" (Davis and Koch,1995:8).
12. While the term "stanza" is generally used in literary studies to refer to a group of lines of

poetry, the term "verse" refers to the analogous sense unit in the hymnal tradition. Accordingly, I use the latter throughout this chapter.

13. There has been some debate about precisely where Isaiah Shembe's hymns end and those of Galilee begin, and Oosthuizen provides details of the various claims and counter-claims (1967:8-9). The division I have suggested is, however, now generally accepted.
14. There was some influence upon the field of hymn composition in South African separatist churches by African-American Christians. A number of visits to this country took place in the late nineteenth century, with amongst others Orpheus McAdoo and his Virginia Jubilee Singers performing minstrel and jubilee songs (see Muller, 1994a:38 and Erlmann, 1991).
15. I am grateful to a student, Ms M. Houart, for pointing me to the following biblical references: "wings", "hen" and "eagle" - Matthew 23:27, Luke 13:34, Deuteronomy 32:11, Psalms 36:7 and 17:8, and Ruth 2:12; "fortress" and "rock" - Jeremiah 16:19, Psalms 31:3 and Exodus 33:21-23.
16. Muller says: "It is the hymnal ... which contains the Word of the Nazarite God. This hymnal is either carefully wrapped in a towel or prayer mat or placed in a man's briefcase. In both instances, the encased hymnal is faithfully carried to religious services by all Nazarite members - regardless of whether they are able to read or not." (1994a:173)
17. One of the difficulties of relying on Oosthuizen's Appendix as a textual source, despite its other omissions, is that it does not include any of the dance hymns, perhaps because his study is concerned with the theology of the church and Oosthuizen (mistakenly, in my view) does not feel that these contribute to an understanding of church doctrine or belief.

18. A detailed musical analysis of the hymns is beyond the scope of this chapter and my abilities as critic. See Vilakazi and others (1986) and Muller (1994a) for an in-depth treatment of this aspect of the hymns.

19. See for example the following lines from Dhlomo's "Valley of a Thousand Hills":

A groaning wail from this dark Present breaks:  
 "O native Soul! art dead and ever flown?  
 Art thou tame and lost in slavery?  
 For ages they have tramped, exploited you;  
 Forever you defy, escape, deceive,  
 And laugh at them! Forever blooming out  
 Into new beauties deep and fresh;  
 Forever chanting songs the Past exudes,  
 Of swarthy giant men, wise, kingly, proud! (Chapman, 1981:147)

For critical discussion of Dhlomo's Africanism as anticipating many of the concerns of Soweto poetry see Chapman (1984).

20. Muller's equation of Shembe and the deity remains misleading despite her qualification in a footnote to an article drawn from her thesis: "While Isaiah Shembe never claimed to be God, many of the women told me that because of the miracles Shembe performs, they believe he is their God" (1994b:137).

## Chapter Four: Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial"

Ingoapele Madingoane's africa my beginning, first published by Ravan Press in 1979, comprises a sequence of twenty-one poems - in English - called "black trial", and a short title piece "africa my beginning". "black trial", which will form the focus of this chapter, traces the spiritual, ideological and historical development of its speaker - a communally-defined "blackman" - from a state of self-loathing and passivity to that of self-assertion and social commitment. Shortly after its publication the book was banned by the Publications Control Board for distribution, but not for possession. Reasons given for the banning included the following: "black trial/fifteen" and "africa my beginning" refer to Steve Biko and Hector Peterson (the latter being one of the first victims of the 1976 Soweto violence); the poet invokes ancestral help in the liberation struggle; victory is predicted in Namibia and "Azania" (the name, according to the Publications Control Board, that "terrorists" use for South Africa); and the actions of "communists" (Robert Mugabe and Agostinho Neto) are sanctioned by the poet (Msimang, 1982:204).<sup>1</sup> The effect of the banning was questionable, however, for Madingoane had performed both "black trial" and "africa my beginning" extensively in the townships before the poems were to appear in print, and he continued to recite the poems after the banning of the book. His performances proved so powerful that many township youths in the late 1970s could recite the whole of the "black trial" sequence from memory.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is concerned with the mobilisation of oral forms by the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s. In particular it is concerned with the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression, especially when the challenges of modernity are met by invocations to, and evocations of, a mythologised African past. I offer a reading of Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial" which, in seeking to grant the poem its oral ontology, attempts to 'place' it in a history of black oral poetry and performance stretching back to the /Xam Bushmen and the izibongo of Shaka and Dingane. My concern is not - as with the hymns of Isaiah Shembe - to open up a new area for literary study, but rather to suggest a reorientation through orality of



a fairly well-established field of critical investigation. Studies of Soweto poetry have tended to focus on poets like Mongane Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, Sipho Sepamla and Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali whose work, though it often draws on oral models, is directed towards the page rather than the performance platform. A fuller understanding of oral forms, however, may bring into view younger performance poets like Madingoane and others who, since their poems are less amenable to discussion within conventional print paradigms, have received little critical attention. One is reminded in this regard that Serote's early collections Yakhal'inkomo (1972) and Tsetlo (1974), which subscribe to many of the conventions of the English lyric, are extensively discussed in articles and represented in anthologies. Serote's later oral-influenced narrative poems No Baby Must Weep (1975), Behold Mama, Flowers (1978), A Tough Tale (1987) and Third World Express (1992), in contrast, have not been the subject of significant study.

Whereas the stories and evocations of the /Xam Bushmen, the izibongo of Shaka, and Isaiah Shembe's hymns used oral forms as their primary means of social and aesthetic expression - what Walter J. Ong (1982) refers to as "primary orality" - Soweto poets like Madingoane occupied a world of literacy. (Their linguistic skills nevertheless may have been uneven as a result of Bantu Education.) The spoken or sung word was not their sole form of communication, and they used the oral as a conscious strategy: they occupied positions of 'secondary' or even 'tertiary' orality, deploying performance genres for specific political and social purposes. Since the performance of oral poetry in a context of modernity generally occurs within the ambit of 'secondary' or 'tertiary' orality, some consideration of these terms is necessary. Ong's characterisation of 'secondary orality' - as an oral culture fostered by the electronic media, especially radio, television and cassette recordings - seems problematic in an African or, more broadly, colonial/postcolonial context. Ong claims that within secondary orality the electronic media create not local but worldwide communities of listeners, who become citizens of Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' (1982:136). It is clear that Ong's model does not adequately represent the experiences of 'third-world' societies, which are far less homogeneous than Ong imagines, are often characterised by sharp conflicts over cultural values and interests, and generally lack

developed infrastructures. In such contexts the suppression of the oral has been linked historically to the destruction of indigenous culture by the intruding colonial power. Certainly primary orality continues to exist in such societies even in their present circumstances, and the movement of migrant workers from country to city has ensured continued urban contact with the largely rural world of primary orality. What I would define as 'secondary orality', however, usually involves the mobilisation of indigenous oral forms by literate or semi-literate individuals as an act of political and cultural resistance against the colonising power. Such is the case with poets like Madingoane who - under the aegis of Black Consciousness - sought to reclaim black identity and reassert the importance of black creativities and cultural forms, including forms of oral poetry. Hence, instead of entering the 'global village', such individuals use orality to emphasise the specific, the local and the indigenous. What Ong refers to as 'secondary orality' might more accurately be described as 'tertiary orality' in third-world contexts, when electronic forms create new possibilities for international connection through the spoken or sung word. Even in contexts of 'tertiary orality', however, electronic media may be locally-directed as much as they are concerned with fostering global contacts and identities.

Black Consciousness (BC) emerged as a political ideology in South Africa in the late 1960s. The period following the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 was one of intense repression with, amongst other measures, the banning of both the ANC and PAC under the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1960, the introduction of house arrest and detention without trial in order to silence political opposition, the extension of censorship powers by means of the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, the banning of a number of individuals (including 46 writers) under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1966, and the consolidation and extension of the security police system with the establishment in 1968 of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS).<sup>3</sup> Despite such coercive measures, frustration with the state policy of 'Separate Development' led to the emergence of a new black political movement, Black Consciousness, which took root particularly on black university campuses. In an act which was to have far-reaching political reverberations, Steve Biko in 1969 led a breakaway of black students from the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to found the black South African Students'

Organisation (SASO), which was to become one of the leading Black Consciousness bodies. Ironically, the BC ideology was initially encouraged by the state in the mistaken belief that it was promoting the kind of tribal separatism that apartheid was seeking to enforce.

As Steve Biko argued in 1973, Black Consciousness was based on "the realisation of blacks that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (1986:29). BC stressed the psychological and political liberation of black people - embodied in the slogan "Black man, you're on your own" - and reasserted the communal values of a black humanism. In his influential essay "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity", Biko defined the ideology:

In essence [it] is an attitude of mind and a way of life. It is the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination of the black to rise and attain the envisaged self. (1986:29)

From its initial student base, the Black Consciousness movement broadened in scope and influence, and was to have its most visible effect in the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when black schoolchildren took to the streets in protest over the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. The protest action was to last for more than a year, spilling over from Soweto to townships throughout the country, and spreading from the youth to almost all sectors of the community. Overall, however, the impact of Black Consciousness amongst workers remained limited. Leading BC organisations included SASO, the South African Students'

Movement (which organised school children), the Soweto Students' Representative Council, the Black Communities Programmes, the Black Parents' Association and the Black People's Convention, all of which were declared unlawful by the state on 19 October 1977.

Black Consciousness involved an active process of historical and cultural recuperation, as Allan Boesak asserted:

Black Consciousness may be described as the awareness of black people that their humanity is constituted by their blackness. It means that black people are no longer ashamed that they are black, that they have a black history and a black culture distinct from the history and culture of white people. It means that blacks are determined to be judged no longer by, and to adhere themselves no longer to white values. (1986:41)

In similar vein Frantz Fanon, whose book Black Skin, White Masks (1952) has been dubbed the "Bible of Black Consciousness" (Horn, 1982:166), had described the process of deculturation in the colonial context by which the colonised is forced to accept the superiority of colonial culture: "[T]he settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values" (1970:33-34). Fanon pointed out, however, that the colonised subject's acceptance of these values produces a deep-rooted alienation, exacerbated by the fact that the social and educational expectations aroused by embracing the culture of the metropole are denied by colonial ideology. In the South African apartheid context, this denial is represented in extreme form by the notorious statement of H.F. Verwoerd - then Minister of Native Affairs - to parliament in June 1954: "The natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them ... . There is no place for him [the native] above the level of certain forms of labour."

The strategy of the apartheid state was somewhat more complex than that described by Fanon - his theory derives largely from his experiences in Algeria - since it involved,

simultaneously, the deprecation of black culture as inferior to the Europeanised white culture and the promotion of ethnically static versions of black culture. The psychological and political impasse produced by such a strategy is widely evident in black South African fiction and autobiography of the 1950s and early 1960s, particularly Bloke Modisane's Blame Me on History (1963) and the stories and journalism of Drum magazine. Fanon's ideas are useful, nevertheless, in assisting us to understand the emergence of Black Consciousness as a political movement. He argues that the black subject only overcomes the alienation produced by white subordination when s/he realises that his/her identity has been "woven ... out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" by "the other, the white man" (1993:111). The only way to root out the "inborn complex" is to reclaim the value of black identity:

The crippled veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother, "Resign yourself to your colour the way I got used to my stump; we're both victims."

Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself 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. I am a master and I am advised to accept the humility of a cripple. (1993:140)

The process of self-empowerment in a colonial context involves, for Fanon, a rediscovery of indigenous cultural values and traditions: "Discovering the futility of his alienation, the inferiorised individual, after this phase of deculturation, of extraneousness, comes back to his original positions. This culture, abandoned, sloughed off, rejected, despised, becomes for the inferiorised an object of passionate attachment" (1970:51). The past, "becoming henceforth a constellation of values, becomes identified with the Truth" (1970:52-3). Fanon nonetheless warns of the dangers of valorising a past which - as represented by apartheid endorsements - has often become fossilised:

This falling back on archaic positions having no relation to technical development is paradoxical. The institutions thus valorised no longer correspond to the

elaborate methods of action already mastered. The culture put into capsules, which has vegetated since the foreign domination, is revalorised. It is not reconceived, grasped anew, dynamised from within. It is shouted. And this headlong, unstructured, verbal revalorisation conceals paradoxical attitudes. (1970:52).

The return to indigenous values and beliefs, as described by Fanon, mirrors the concerns of Black Consciousness - and hence the concerns of poets like Madingoane - in asserting the value of black identity and cultural institutions. For the most part, however, Black Consciousness avoided the anachronistic paradox described by Fanon. Black cultural traditions had continued to develop under colonial occupation (mostly outside of official discursive spaces) and were thus not themselves historically 'encapsulated' or static. In addition, Black Consciousness drew on modern political and cultural ideas from elsewhere in the world, particularly on American Black Power rhetoric and the Negritude of north and west Africa, including the work of Fanon himself. A number of important conferences dealt specifically with these topics, such as the SASO Conference on Creativity and Black Development (1972), the Edendale Black Theology Conference (1973), and the Black Renaissance Convention (1974). Several cultural festivals were held for black artists, at which "poetry and drama by local artists rubbed shoulders with speeches by Baldwin and Fanon, poetry by Senghor and Diop, and works by overseas dramatists such as Peter Weiss and Ed Bullins" (Sole,1987b:257). Literary expression, particularly poetry, was seen as crucial to the process of black cultural assertion. The Black Students' Manifesto, for example, committed students "to encourage and promote Black Literature relevant to our struggle" (Ndaba,1986:14), while the Cultural Commission of SASO in 1973 "direct[ed] the theme of poetry and literature to changing the system and liberating the people" (Ndaba,1986:15).

What has come to be known as Soweto poetry first began to appear in the mid-1960s, particularly in the magazine The Classic, named not to claim any 'high art' status, but after the laundry which fronted the shebeen in which the magazine was started in 1963 (McClintock, 1987:609). Soweto poetry received impetus from the enormous success of Oswald Mtshali's

Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, published by Renoster Books in 1971. The oppositional potential of the expression, however, soon attracted state attention, and James Matthews and Gladys Thomas's volume Cry Rage! - printed a year after Mtshali's collection - became the first book of poems to be banned under the Publications and Entertainments Act. A number of cultural groups were formed at this time to promote black poetry and drama, including the Cultural Committee of SASO, the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), the People's Experimental Theatre (PET, declared subversive in 1975), the Mhloti Black Theatre Group, and the Music Drama Arts and Literature Institute (MDALI or Mdali). The lead provided by Mtshali was soon followed by other poets, and collections appeared by Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, Christopher van Wyk and Madingoane. As well as individual volumes, several important anthologies of Soweto poetry have been published, including To Whom it May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Poetry (1973), Black Voices Shout!: An Anthology of Poetry (1974, banned), Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa (1982), The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry: 1891-1981 (1982) and, more recently, One Day in June: Poetry and Prose from Troubled Times (1986).

Michael Chapman, who has written at length on the movement, described Soweto poetry as "the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies in South Africa" (1982:11). Deprived of an extensive knowledge of Western literature by Bantu Education, and rejecting the cultural forms associated with colonial occupation (as much out of necessity, perhaps, as principled opposition), Soweto poets sought poetic models in traditional African forms (particularly izibongo), in jazz and blues music, African-American verse, the rhetoric of the political platform, and even 'plain speech'. The poems were mostly expressed in English, reflecting the BC wariness about using indigenous languages that might deepen the tribal fissures promoted by apartheid. The English was often ungrammatical, however, and the diction drew on Americanisms, expletives, tsotsi-taal and the terminology of Black Power, as the poets sometimes challenged - at other times reflected - the linguistic inadequacies of Bantu Education in forms that, consciously and unconsciously, flouted white norms and standards. As Chapman has argued, Soweto poetry made "its rejection of Western literary and cultural continuities almost a stylistic

and moral imperative" (1982:13).

The launching of Staffrider magazine by Ravan Press in 1978 provided a forum for the many voices that emerged in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. From the start, Staffrider emphasised that its editorial policy was "democratic", and that the magazine sought to establish a "direct line" with the community:

We hope that the work appearing in the magazine will be selected and edited as far as possible by the groups themselves. The magazine is prepared for publication by Ravan Press, but has no editor or editorial board in the usual sense. (Staffrider 1(1) March 1978)<sup>4</sup>

As the beginnings of The Classic in an illegal shebeen suggested, Soweto poetry - like the hymns of Isaiah Shembe - was a popular, fugitive form speaking in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces. The title Staffrider epitomised this, referring as it did to black passengers who hitched dangerous and illegal rides on trains by hanging onto the outside of the doors:

A staffrider is, let's face it, a *skelm* of sorts. Like Hermes or Mercury - the messenger of the gods in classical mythology - he is almost as light-fingered as he is fleet-footed. A skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but ... slightly disreputable. Our censors may not like him, but they should consider putting up with him. A whole new literature is knocking at the door, and if our society is to change without falling apart it needs all the messages it can get - the bad as well as the good.

Like him or not, he is part of the present phase of our common history, riding 'staff' on the fast and dangerous trains of our late seventies. He is part of the idiom of this time. (Staffrider 1(1) March 1978)

The first issue of Staffrider was banned because - it was claimed - some of the poems



"undermined the authority and image of the police".

The poems which in the wake of the events of Soweto 1976 appeared in Staffrider and in individual volumes represented departures in form and ideology from those that had been published previously in The Classic and in early collections such as Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum. Initially Soweto poems were often aimed at a white, liberal readership, and used poetic strategies not unfamiliar to Western-trained readers. Poems such as Mtshali's "Boy on a Swing" or "An Abandoned Bundle", for example, are fairly easily recuperated as lyric poems. However, as Chapman notes:

By the mid-seventies ... the emphasis had shifted with Serote's Black Consciousness voice (predictably less popular with whites) finding its full power in an uncompromising poetry of resistance. This is a mobilising rhetoric utilising epic forms (in a highly contemporary, almost Brechtian sense) and traditional African oral techniques of repetition, parallelism and ideophones. By these means the poet seeks to impart to a black communal audience, often in a context of performance, a message of consciousness-raising and race pride ... . (1982:12)

The poems increasingly registered 'resistance' rather than 'protest', engaging actively in the process of struggle against political and cultural oppression and asserting thereby "their own polemical historicity" (Harlow,1987:37). Chapman identifies the important symbolic and historical shifts which are evident in later Soweto poems:

Whereas early Soweto poetry had taken as its highest ideal that Western one of justice, the later poetry, especially that which has appeared since the events of 1976, has rediscovered the highest of African ideals: heroism. Serote, Mtshali and Gwala, as well as many poets writing in Staffrider magazine, have begun to focus not so much backwards on a bare Soweto existence as forward to a 'pre-Azanian' phase of South African history, one wherein the construct of 'the people', including

the participatory ideals of black community, has increasingly begun to function as an inspirational myth. (1982:22)

Jimmy Kruger, Minister of Police at the time, evidently recognised the shifts which were occurring in Soweto poetry when he warned a 1977 National Party congress of the threat posed by "Black Power poetry" (Emmett, 1982:175).

Critical debates about Soweto poetry in literary and academic institutions centred on the question of appropriate aesthetic models and evaluative paradigms. Several critics responded dismissively to the poems, including A.G. Ulyatt who characterised them as "poetically inept" and "immature", chiefly because they "castigate the prevailing system of government without regard for any of the basic precepts of poetry" (1977:58-60) which comprise - in Ulyatt's definition - "craftsmanship, discipline and art, as well as imagination" (1977:61). Ulyatt's comments, of course, reveal telling assumptions about what constitutes 'good' poetry - notably his commitment to the 'well-wrought urn' of New Criticism - and evince a complete lack of familiarity with African forms. He further reveals his metropolitan orientation when he describes his intellectual position in terms which would not appear to be out of place in the accounts of nineteenth-century colonial travellers: "at the edge of a vast, primitive, fascinating and terrifying continent".

Several critics, as well as the black poets themselves, rejected such claims as reflecting the cultural values of a colonising power. In the Introduction to the collection of 'Soweto' fiction, Forced Landing, Mthobi Mutloatse made the point in graphic terms:

We will have to donder conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to have to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through, we are going to kick, push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves - undergoing self-discovery as a people.

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. (1980:5)

Mafika Gwala was to call, in turn, for "black standards" (1982). Within academic criticism David Maughan Brown sought to locate these debates in larger concerns about "black aesthetics" in the subcontinent and beyond, and discussed the contributions of H.I.E. Dhlomo, Mbulelo V. Mzamane and critics and writers from east and north Africa (1982).

Stephen Watson, however, remained unconvinced about the question of black aesthetics. In his retrospective article "Shock of the Old: What's Become of 'Black' Poetry?" (1987), he claimed:

Today, a coherent 'black aesthetic' remains as remote and unformulated as some mythical 'black value' system. Overwhelmingly, the black poetry of the last two decades consists of a number of half-assimilated European conventions which are frequently patched together in so confused and piecemeal a fashion that one thinks, reading the work, not in terms of a 'renaissance' or 'breakthrough' ... or of 'innovations', but rather with anger and dismay at what has happened in this country that such beginnings should have remained largely unfulfilled. (1987:23)

He attempted accordingly to dismiss debates about Black Consciousness and black aesthetics:

[I]t seems increasingly difficult to see how it could ever have been believed that a poetry that was based largely on the notion that 'black is beautiful' and 'white is ugly' could ever have amounted to much. No literature, here or elsewhere, could long be sustained by such threadbare notions as 'blackness' or 'black experience' and a determination, however understandable, to reject all aspects of white culture, local or otherwise, as the work of the devil. (1987:24)

Watson's purpose is polemical: his sweeping rhetorical statements do not admit to the complexity and weight of debates about Black Consciousness; nor do they support the claims made earlier in his own essay for the significant literary achievements of much Soweto poetry. Further, his assumptions about what constitutes the locus of value in poetry - assumptions evident in his praise of Lionel Abrahams - echo those of Ulyatt (even though Watson relies on Matthew Arnold, rather than on the 'New Critics'): "[Abrahams] believed that poetry was an eternal stickler for the unwelcome ethical truth, confronting the gravest moral issues with all the vigilance that is implicit in the most responsible use of language" (1987:25). Despite the shortcomings of his argument - its polemical inaccuracies and its reliance on aesthetic criteria inappropriate to many forms of traditional and modern poetry, both local and international - Watson is correct in pointing out that the concept and application of 'black aesthetics' needs to be more than simply an oppositional or rhetorical riposte. Even in Maughan Brown's treatment, 'black aesthetics' remains assertion rather than investigation, and his article reveals little awareness of the oral models which have informed almost all African literature.<sup>5</sup> Kelwyn Sole has called for more complex research in this area:

Generally speaking, as the Nigerian critic Izevbaye has pointed out, the call for African critical standards and criteria here and elsewhere in the continent has been more of a rejection of entrenched European attitudes and modes of thinking than of established modes of literary study. Consequently, grandiose assertions of blackness simply beg further questions on the part of the critic: a closer look at style, influence and assumption - and how these have been maintained or changed over time in black South African literature - is now crucial. (1987c:27)

In placing Madingoane's "black trial" in a long history of black South African poetry and performance, and in seeking to grant the poem its status as an oral text which draws on various models of poetry and social expression, I hope to give greater substance to claims about indigenous aesthetic models and critical practices. In so doing I wish to suggest more appropriate

interpretative strategies for the texts.<sup>6</sup>

Despite my references so far to what I regard as insensitive responses to oral-based challenges, several critics have acknowledged Soweto poetry's debt to indigenous oral modes. Talking of the formal syncretism of Mafika Gwala's collection *Jol'iinkomo* (1977), which draws on the rhythms of praise poetry and jive, Cherry Clayton identified the poems' "looser incremental type of structure" (1982:84), analogous to that which I identified in the izibongo of Shaka in Chapter Two. Es'kia Mphahlele described Oswald Mtshali's *Fireflames* as "poetry turned theatre" (1982:90), and Mbulelo V. Mzamane discussed oral influences on Serote's poems (1984). The most extensive treatment of orality in Soweto poetry has been by Michael Chapman. He has stressed connections between the Soweto poet's role as community spokesperson and that of the imbongi, and has drawn attention to the 'breath-unit' which characterises both praise poetry and the oral-based rhythms of American 'projective verse' including 'beat poetry':

... a privileging of the oral impulse - of sound elevated above sight - accords well not only with ancient African conceptions of poetry, but also with those of the modern social revolutionary seeking to restore vitality and to rescue man from the horror of immutability. Increasingly, poets such as Serote, Sepamla, Mtshali, Madingoane and Gwala - in a similar vein to their Afro-American counterparts - have attempted to move beyond the realm of the text and to approach the domain of gesture and act. (1984:223)

Despite the insights offered by these critics, however, perceptions of Soweto poetry have remained largely page-bound, and discussion of this period has tended to focus on the influence of orality on print forms rather than on poetry which was performed at large gatherings, such as Madingoane's "black trial" and "africa my beginning". Poetry has been seen as 'product' rather than 'process', as 'object' rather than 'practice', and very little attention has been paid to the host of oral poets working within the Soweto milieu in the wake of the events of 1976.<sup>7</sup> The only critics to have explored this area are Chapman (1982;1984), Emmett (1982), Sole (1982;1987b)

and McClintock (1987). Besides very brief reviews such as those by Tucker (1982) and Gray (1979), Madingoane's africa my beginning has received attention only from Chapman (1984) and Msimang (1982). (Liz Gunner makes extremely brief mention of Madingoane in her doctoral dissertation (1984).)

While certain poets had recited their poems at communal gatherings in the early 1970s, performance poetry would gain momentum only in the wake of the events of Soweto 1976 and the attendant radicalisation of the black community. Several cultural groups - formed at the time - were concerned with oral performance, amongst the most prominent being Medupe. At its founding in Soweto early in 1977 it had only twenty members, but within six months numbers had risen to 200 (Sole, 1987b:259). In addition to Medupe, which was later banned along with the major Black Consciousness organisations, there were Mpumalanga Arts in Natal, PEYARTA in the Cape, and Bayajula, Khauleza and the Creative Youth Organisation in the Transvaal. Groups like the Dashiki Poets, led by Lefifi Tladi, and the Allahpoets became renowned for their performances of poetry, dance and music. Other experiments with performance genres were conducted during this period. Mothobi Mutloatse began developing what he called "proemdras" - "Prose, Poem and Drama all in one!" (1980:5) - while Dumakude kaNdlovu, founder-member and publicity secretary of Medupe, composed what he called "Read-poetry". The journal Donga said in a profile of Ndlovu:

At the moment his ultimate aim is not to be published, but to read his poetry to the People as much as possible. We in Johannesburg know him well from his readings in Soweto, at Shakespeare House and Diakonia House. "Read-poetry", he says, "is for the People. It gives them a message to take home. It is simpler than written poetry so that even the layman can understand it ... ." (1977).

The turn to performance rather than publication appears to have been prompted by a number of related concerns: the affirmation of African cultural traditions by the ideology of Black Consciousness; a desire to avoid the 'gatekeeping' of white-owned literary magazines and

publishers; and the need for forms appropriate to a political context of intense repression and covert organisation. The use of models such as izibongo, traditional song and music served to revive an African past suppressed by colonial occupation and apartheid, while the collective and participatory nature of oral performance - with audience interjection and encouragement - reinforced the communal values of Black Consciousness. At the same time, oral dissemination circumvented the publishing industry. There were only two black-owned literary magazines in the mid-1970s, New Classic and S'ketsh, both edited by Sipho Sepamla, and only one black-owned publishing house, James Matthews's Blac. Sepamla admitted at the time that many poets would fear police harassment were they to seek publication: "I think there is a lot of fear among writers. I don't think I'm receiving as much material as I should. Simply because people don't trust the post. They reckon the material might fall into the wrong hands and they might be spotted." Tony Emmett provides an account of the Medupe poets' perceptions of this situation:

At much the same time as this comment was made by Sepamla, discussions with members of the Medupe group, based in Soweto, confirmed that many of the younger poets decide[d] on principle not to be published. When some of the group's poems appeared later in the literary magazine Donga, individual numbers were banned, and it was eventually closed down. (1982:177)

The younger poets in fact often regarded established poets like Sepamla and Serote with hostility and mistrust, accusing them of having 'pulled their punches' for the sake of their white publishers (Emmett, 1982:181).<sup>8</sup> The perception of oral poetry as 'authentic witness' within the performance context even led - in some cases - to suspicion of those who published at all (Sole, 1987b:260). Oral dissemination also became a means of avoiding censorship and the confiscation of material, since poems could be memorised, passed on, and performed in a variety of contexts. The emphasis on performance rather than publication at times resulted in black poets' having huge township followings, but remaining virtually unknown to white audiences and readers. This was the case with Madingoane before the publication of africa my beginning.

Poems such as "black trial" were performed to the accompaniment of flutes and drums. Emmett regards the introduction of drum beats as particularly innovative, since he argues that musical accompaniment was not traditionally associated with African poetry (1982:179). As indicated in Chapter Three of this study, however, drums and music were already firmly established in the separatist churches in the early part of this century, and Emmett's conception of African poetry and performance seems somewhat limited and static. Kelwyn Sole points out that for poets like Madingoane and others of the Medupe group, "[l]anguage was increasingly considered as only part of the expressive vocabulary of the performers. Music, dance, comedy, mime, gesture and other visual devices were stressed in various attempts at popularisation and to evoke an immediate display of emotion" (1987b:257). Clad in dashikis or African robes and using rhythmic movement, facial expression, gesture, intonation, alternating pace of delivery, pauses, and the hypnotic beating of the drums, the poets transformed poetry from a printed phenomenon into a performance event.

While video clips and written accounts may recreate something of the 'live' delivery, Madingoane's "black trial" even in print form is clearly 'marked' as an oral text. In tracing the spiritual and political development of the speaker to contemporary 'black awareness' - a journey which involves a return to the ancestral source - Madingoane uses many of the techniques of izibongo. Like praise poetry Madingoane's poem has the looser, incremental structure identified above by Clayton in Gwala's Jol'iinkomo, in which themes and ideas are reiterated and developed in a cyclical construction. "black trial" - as is captured in the arrangement of lines on the page - also uses parallelism by initial linking and repetition in order to build up to powerful rhetorical climaxes:

free my soul  
 let me decide  
 between you and me  
 let me decide  
 between evil and good



let me decide  
 between freedom and slavery  
 let me decide  
 whether men  
 should live in happiness or misery. (1979:6)

The poem draws on the religious imagery and concerns of izibongo, and certain sections of the poem - using space markers in the print form to indicate the pauses of delivery - comprise praises to the landscape and gods of Africa:

strong rocks mountains of africa  
 man came man went  
 heroes came  
 kings ruled  
 but neither ruled you out  
 kings have conquered  
 history said it and took  
 its course man moved man  
 and you moved not an inch  
 you towered high above man's demands. (30)

As well as the forms and rhythms of izibongo, the poem uses the invocations of African prayer in returning to a mythological past:

i pray you all great gods of africa  
 to simmer down my fear  
 and transform it into courage  
  
 give me your heart for a spear

and your spirit for my shield  
 rub my body with animal fats  
 and smooth it with your  
 strong and soothing hands (8)

and:

*ancestors of africa oh hear our cries*  
 rivers and valleys have turned red  
 fields and bushes have gone bare. (24)

Traditional song provides a formal model in other sections of the poem, particularly in the address to a woman ("mosadi") in "black trial/nineteen":

mosadi say mosadi how bright your face looks  
 with those wooden earrings  
 and how warm your breast is  
 for that man in africa who so much  
 loves you mosadi

mosadi hee mosadi what is it that you want  
 when love man beauty  
 and home as well as your roots  
 are in the soil  
 you are now standing on  
 mosadi. (29)

Modern oral refrains are also evident, including those of jazz/blues music as is common in Soweto poetry:

stand by me  
 stand by me as i walk barefooted  
 on the soil that has absorbed  
 the burden of africa and given birth  
 to a nation  
 stand by me when the flame burns  
 burning the wrongs  
 that man blamed on africa  
 stand by me when the nation stands up. (23)

And at key moments Madingoane echoes the performative context in his diction:

blow the horn raise the alarm  
 beat the drum and let them dance. (10)

The loose rhyming-rhythms of Rastafarian dub or 'toasting' (akin to those used more recently by Lesego Rampolokeng) also echo through certain sections of "black trial":

i am scared of flights  
 to the dizzy heights  
 of self delusion  
 so lay me on a cushion. (6)

As these examples suggest, "black trial" draws extensively on performance genres from the past and present, and the photograph printed on the back cover of africa my beginning - in which Madingoane is seen performing his poetry - evidently seeks to emphasise the oral nature of the poem. Both Chapman and Msimang - admittedly with different emphases - have argued, however, that the poem's appearance in print raises ontological and aesthetic difficulties.

Msimang is concerned that performance should not be an excuse for 'poor poetic technique': he appears unaware that orality involves not simply a mode of dissemination, but deliberate textual structures (of the kind identified above) that allow the poem to 'live' and 'function' both in its immediate performance context and more broadly in its society. Msimang's conception of oral performance appears to be closer to 'recitation' - the printed text read aloud:

In spite of what many 'sympathetic' commentators might say, performance cannot complement a poem or impart to it what it lacks. All that the performance does is to dramatise a work of art so as to reinforce its meaning. It brings about the right atmosphere which arouses an emotional response on the part of the audience so that the audience (preferably a communal one) takes active part in the performance. But whatever is highlighted or reinforced must - in the first instance - be inherent in the poem. (1982:212)

Chapman, in turn, registers the formal specificities of African oral genres, but he argues that Madingoane's poem does not retain anything of its oral character in print:

Madingoane's poem does not retain, in printed form, intrinsic evidence of the **instress**, or energising quality of language and rhythm, which seemed apparent at all stages of its oral presentation in community halls. The 'oral' achievement of this poem relied on the author's techniques of delivery (including his intonation and gesticulation), as well as on his dress and on the fact that he was conveying a 'sympathetic' message to a 'sympathetic' audience in a time of hardship. (1984:228)

While performance context, movement and dress are integral to oral poetry, the text of Madingoane's poem - as I have attempted to show - is itself informed by a number of oral genres. Chapman argues further that poets like Madingoane have "compromised" their positions as oral spokespersons by appearing in print, for in so doing they have subscribed "to the demands of a visually-directed, as opposed to an auditory-directed, convention" (1984:228). While Chapman is

correct in pointing to the critical reorientation which reception in print involves, I think he is incorrect in concluding that Madingoane is unable to find a "printed form able to shape the oral expression of the poem" (1984:228).

I have argued that poets like Madingoane occupy positions of 'secondary' orality; and their means of promoting oral forms is not only the microphone but, paradoxically, the typewriter. In considering poetry as vocal expression Charles Olson, leading exponent of American 'projective verse', pointed out in 1950 that one of the most important allies which the poet has in attempting to return to poetry its oral and aural dimensions - the 'breathing' and the 'listening' of its creator - is typography:

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on towards projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (1973:153-4)

The ability to shift margins, to create regular pauses (as I suggested earlier), to break lines or to alter the typeface enables the poet to capture in print something of the text's oral performance - the changes of pace and intonation, the pauses for breath or emphasis, staccato or languorous rhythms, and so on. In this regard Madingoane's "black trial" uses the technology of type to good effect. "black trial/*seventeen*", for example, employs double space-bar gaps 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 the delivery:

and while colour ruled  
 africa had  
 to carry the burden while  
 the world was free  
 but its children crying  
 saying  
     cry cry for the cry that never  
     sounds  
     the so deep rooted cry  
     the cry that moves  
     ancestors' graves and dampens  
     them with bloody tears. (27)

As I suggested in previous chapters, representing oral texts in print requires some editorial sensitivity, and there may be room for improvement in certain sections of Madingoane's poem. In the portion of "black trial/*seventeen*" quoted above, for example, the breath- and sense-units of oral delivery might better be captured by breaking the lines at different points:

and while colour ruled  
 africa  
 had to carry the burden  
 while the world was free  
 but its children crying  
 saying  
     cry cry for the cry  
     that never sounds  
     the so deep rooted cry  
     the cry  
     that moves ancestors' graves

and dampens them  
with bloody tears.

This new division seems more adequately to convey the rhythmic delivery of sense-groupings ("and while colour ruled", "while the world was free") while allowing for declamatory breaks in the rhythm for dramatic effect, registered here by granting "africa" its own line. When the pace and intensity of delivery increase in the indented section, my arrangement of the lines attempts to exploit the rhythmic and symbolic potential of the "cry" constructions more fully than Madingoane's printed version does. (It may, of course, be argued that my version reveals many New Critical assumptions about the arrangement of poetic lines: considerations of emphasis; the imagist line-unit; the 'strong' ending; and so on. Such a charge returns us to the complex question of the extent to which oral-print transfers rely for the creation of 'meaning' on established print conventions.)

"black trial/*nine*" is particularly effective in its use of typography. Each stanza opens with a pair of balanced phrases, separated by space-bar gaps which represent pauses in the delivery. The rest of the stanza then expands upon the thematic implications of the paired images:

dark nights black path  
clear my eyes  
so i may see  
the depth of this dark pit  
where all my days i've lived

dark nights fishers of man  
unpriced slaves  
brothers on auction  
charges suspended  
the whole raw deal. (16)

In these two stanzas Madingoane's use of typescript approaches what scholars of oral literature have referred to as "rhythmography" - the attempt through the use of typographical spaces and groupings to suggest the way many oral lines break into balanced halves at a muted caesura.<sup>9</sup> Hence, whereas Chapman has claimed that Madingoane's poem lacks in print the 'instress' of its oral delivery, I would argue that the text is typographically 'marked' for its oral ontology.

Amongst the central features of "black trial" - in its print form but especially in performance - is its rhythm:

traditional cowhide sounds  
 from thobejane's african drums  
 medupe's meditations might have been  
 enough music and message  
 in the service of all men  
*ancestors of africa. (24)*

Just as Isaiah Shembe had regarded rhythm as having a sacred significance, Madingoane uses repeated patterns of sound - which are emphasised both by the breath-unit of performance and the fluctuations of the drum beats - as a means of consciously reclaiming an African cosmology and a communal identity in the face of economic exploitation and dehumanisation by the apartheid state. In Black Skin, White Masks Fanon talks of the centrality of rhythm for reasserting black identity:

Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race. And that race staggered under the burden of a basic element. What was it? **Rhythm!** Listen to our singer, Léopold Senghor:

It is the thing that is most perceptible and least material. It is the archetype



of the vital element. It is the first condition and the hallmark of Art, as breath is of life: breath, which accelerates or slows, which becomes even or agitated according to the tension in the individual, the degree and nature of his emotion. This is rhythm in its primordial purity, this is rhythm in the masterpieces of Negro art ... . (1993:122-3)<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Chapman has connected the central role of rhythm in Madingoane's "black trial" to the concept of 'rhythm-synthesis' proposed by H.I.E. Dhlomo, who himself echoed Senghor's conception that rhythm was at once an aesthetic, ethical and a cosmological principle:

Underlying such an approach is the vision of an African anthropomorphic universe wherein all relationships - from God to the ancestral spirits, through man to the animals and plants - are mutually co-existent. It is a universe which evinces beauty-in-harmony; it is (to quote Senghor) "a dictionary, a web of metaphors, a vast network of signs" and is characterised by the depth and intensity of affective life. Thus artistic technique, in its attempts to express rhythmic essence, is at the same time felt to be an ethical principle, for it involves the making of an artefact (whether calabash or poem) that is both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Moreover the poet, by chanting his poem, gives audible substance to those life forces which, according to African ontology, are deemed to emanate from God and are Being - for Being is Force, Life is Energy. As far as the poet is concerned, therefore, the ideal (again to quote Senghor) is "total art", in which a world of static appearances gives way to one of dynamic realities; "imitation is superseded by participation, the master-word of Negritude". (Chapman,1984:207-8)

While Madingoane's poem is ethical and cosmological in the way Dhlomo suggests through its emphasis on the participatory 'rhythm' of Negritude, or Black Consciousness, its themes and subject-matter remain explicitly historical and political. The poet describes "black trial" as an 'epic', and certainly the poem may be regarded as an epic in a number of ways. It

fulfils M.H. Abrams's definition of the Western epic, quoted in Chapter Two in relation to the izibongo of Shaka: it is an extended verse narrative, often highly symbolic in mode, focusing on a mythologised speaker ("blackman"), and concerned with the fate of a (black South African) nation. It moves from an expression of individual alienation and self-debasement on the part of the speaker -

black child  
 nature's blunder  
 here i am again  
 lost again  
 dumped here by the creatures of hell  
 and left to rot  
 though worms don't even want me  
 for they have grown proud  
 and don't want to hear a thing  
 about my rotten state (1)<sup>11</sup> -

to an assertion of communal identity and commitment:

i would be glad to be buried like a true african  
 of african definition  
 when i take my soul  
 to its destination  
 when the gong of departure  
 reaches my eardrum  
 and the cloud of death dominates my eye  
 wrap me safely  
 with the hide of an african ox  
 i will be glad

deliver me to the ancestral village  
 cast no flowers on my soil  
 i am an african as for beauty  
 i never had a chance to admire it 'cause  
 africa was not free  
 i will join the masses that went before me  
 and as one we shall fight  
 the ancestral war until justice  
 is done. (32)

As these lines suggest, however, "black trial" is also specifically an African epic which recounts the religious and historical events of a heroic past. Chapman reminds us that africa my beginning was published in the same year as Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, and he investigates questions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in relation to these two epic poems (1984:198-199). Certainly Kunene's discussion of the African epic may prove to be enlightening for a consideration of Madingoane's poem. As I suggested in my discussion of "Shaka" in Chapter Two, royal izibongo were in many ways 'epic' forms, concerned with placing a great leader in the history and mythology of the nation. Kunene argues that, because of this function of izibongo, Zulu society (which in this instance may stand as representative of most African societies on the subcontinent) did not develop a separate tradition of heroic poetry, though it did have a prose narrative genre concerned with "episodic legendary and fantastical epics", using "heightened prose and poetic choruses" (1981:xxxix). Kunene suggests that both izibongo and epic narrative drew impetus from a third storytelling form, "indaba", which offered dramatisations of significant social events. He points out that indaba's "technique of public presentation aim[ed] at disseminating on a wide scale social interpretations of ... historical episodes" (1981:xxxix-xl). These three forms comprise the African epic tradition in which are located the poems of both Madingoane and Kunene. "black trial" seeks consciously to return to the ancestral past to find solace and direction for the present:

i resigned from paradise  
 and went back home to africa  
 in search of my image  
 to dig up the roots  
 and burn incense  
 to strengthen my stand  
 speaking to my ancestors  
 in the ancient language of mankind  
 i heard the spirits talk back to me  
 i felt my soul astir as they led me  
 all the way from a black trial  
 into the land of sunshine and peace. (9)

As part of his return to the source Madingoane evokes the leaders of a heroic past:

beneath you lie *badimo beso* giants  
 shaka africa's warrior  
 martyrs  
 moshoeshoe from the mountain kingdom  
 christians of africa  
 khama the great. (31)

But in invoking the heroes of the past Madingoane's poem remains specifically a Black Consciousness epic of the present day, and the return to traditional customs, beliefs and heroic figures is a tactic in the recuperation of the past described by Fanon as a response to deculturation. Unlike Kunene, whose epic narrative of Shaka's life sometimes comes dangerously close to endorsing ethnic versions of Zulu history, Madingoane avoids the danger of social and political anachronism as pointed out by Fanon: the valorisation of a past incompatible with the technological and ideological changes brought about by colonisation. When in

Madingoane's epic the ancestors respond to the appeal for assistance, for example, they speak in a modern idiom which, amongst other influences, draws on the language of Black Power and the rhythms of jazz:

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

drag it off brother man  
 off your back it ain't yours  
 break this damn sucker's chain  
 drop the burden from your shoulders  
 move on brother go  
*go man go*  
*blackman go. (10)*

We may contrast the following lines from Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great:

Great anthem, by your power break the boundaries of our horizons;  
 Fill the wide expanse of the earth with your legendary songs!  
 Say then: people have power, people tear the garments of the night;  
 By their feet, they scar the grounds with new life.  
 All hail! the celebrants of the feast have come!  
 The Ancestors follow them,  
 Whispering: "A great festival is to be repeated again and again!"

Generation after generation comes here to play.

Here they are: our Forefathers. They rise from the mist. (1979:1)

As this comparison suggests, Madingoane's "black trial" does not - like Kunene's narrative poems (or the Western epic) - remain within the elevated heroic mode: instead, it is heterogeneous in form and register. It veers from symbolic abstraction ("the lagoon of man hate man") to prosaic statement:

how i wish i was the outcome  
of black and white  
'cause maybe both  
would compromise (1)

and from mythology to the rhetoric of the political platform:

though i survived the valley of the dead  
in search of truth to free myself  
with tears rolling down my face  
again i asked what went wrong africa  
so i wept  
*oh africa why africa*  
what went wrong was it the blunder  
of embracing imperialism  
was it the ignorance of our forefathers  
was it the greed of capitalism. (22)

In formal terms the "black trial" sequence includes epigrammatic lyrics akin to Serote's early poems:

ask my shadow  
 what happened

it was there  
 when it occurred (18)

and prose poems reminiscent of Mutloatse's 'proemdras':

i have crossed rivers and trudged the barren plains from the hangman's noose i  
 have stumbled tripped and fallen hard on my back hauled myself up and tried  
 once again to face the world i've never been knocked out but my soul is still  
 scarred from the pains sustained and my fingers still bleed from the cuts received  
 while trying to get a good grip on my evasive roots my roots and mine alone. (12)

While the stylistic unevenness of "black trial" may proceed at least partly from Madingoane's own difficulties with language and genre (there are several awkward linguistic constructions and clumsy formal shifts in the poem), the disruptive and disrupted textuality of the poem appears to have more profound implications. Chapman's comment on Serote may apply equally to Madingoane in this regard:

[He] ... allows his free-verse lines to stumble, halt and descend to near prose, only to burst into rhetorical climax. He seeks in this way to convey the idea of historical process itself, its difficulties emphasised in the broken rhythms and sprawling arrangement of incident, reflection and prophetic utterance: man is shown subject to all the imperfections of life, with his struggle sustained over long periods of time despite the inevitable set-backs. (1984:223)

Such a connection of textual juxtapositions, collocations and ruptures with the historical process suggests a third model of epic for Madingoane's poem, pointed to by both Msimang (1982:204-5) and Chapman (1984:200-201): Brecht's contemporary epic, concerned with the socio-political

present. Brecht emphasised not mythological origins and ancestral rituals, but economic imperatives and historical dialectics - the human subject who acts within and upon society to bring about change. Accordingly the speaker of "black trial", while he burns incense to his ancestors, is an activist who defines his actions - including the act of speaking the poem - in societal rather than essential terms:

brother whatever you do which is not harmful  
 to the community  
 has an artistic message of use to the society  
 and yourself  
 remember  
 africa's pride can be expressed in many ways. (28)

The speaker of Madingoane's poem is both the social being of Brechtian epic and the mythological hero of ancient form, whether it be 'African' or 'Western'. He is also a prophetic figure whose utterances echo those of Isaiah Shembe while they anticipate the visionary poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli in the 1980s. The speaker's diction is often vatic in its symbolism as it moves human action beyond social specificities to a broader human-spiritual plane:

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

Madingoane's poem also captures the apocalyptic elements evident in so much Soweto poetry



produced in the wake of Soweto 1976:

i have tolerated this trial  
 for too long  
 i have wished and prayed  
 until my voice was silent  
 and now i  
 a prisoner  
 stand waiting  
 for the approaching  
 night of judgement to end  
 this black trial. (2)

At other times, a future history is deliberately offered as a sustaining vision - an inspirational symbolism - in times of hardship:

creators of this our oppression  
 will be the last ones to arrive in that one free  
 africa africa of man and wisdom racial harmony  
 ...  
 i'm saying it like i'm already living  
 in that time because i'm feeling it right within me  
 with the weight of africa's mountains  
 towering high. (30)

The prophetic voice of Madingoane's speaker draws extensively, in creating a sustaining mythology, upon the images and concepts of Christianity: "like the original/river of *love thy fellow man/as thou lovest thyself*" (3); "god let it come to an end" (13); "as i stretch out my hand/to raise the fallen" (23); and "my genesis vision" (27). It is clear in the poem, however, that Christianity is

not associated with the authority of the colonial or apartheid state, but has been redefined in terms of African humanism as Black Theology. As in the hymns of Isaiah Shembe, the concept of a Black Christ here becomes a means of spiritual and political resistance to white oppression.

Black resistance is further bolstered in "black trial" by a strong commitment to African nationalism. In keeping with the Black Consciousness emphasis on unity across tribal boundaries and the movement's alliances with black political groupings elsewhere in Africa and beyond, Madingoane's poem does not reveal the tensions between ethnicity and nationalism evident in the hymns of Isaiah Shembe. Instead, Madingoane's orientation is strongly pan-African as the speaker uses images to locate himself organically within Africa as a whole, subsuming his own identity under that of the continent:

i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 i am the blazing desert yonder  
 a tall proud grain amidst the sand  
 egypt my head the Nile my oasis  
 flow on Nile flow on my life-blood  
 i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 i am man  
*ogun's* image  
 made from the soil  
*abibiman.* (19)

The incorporation into the text of Egyptian deities and - in other passages - Swahili words emphasises its pan-African inclusiveness. African unity across linguistic, racial, ethnic, economic and geographical boundaries is, of course, purely a symbolic or rhetorical ploy. Stephen Watson has argued, however, that such gestures are fundamentally ahistorical (1982), while Kelwyn Sole

has criticised Serote's analogous strategy - in his novel To Every Birth its Blood (1981) - for displacing political and economic problems into the realms of mystification and mythology (1991).<sup>12</sup> I would wish to allow the validity of Madingoane's symbolic pan-African vision in the context of the late 1970s. With black resistance inside the country rapidly being crushed in the wake of the Soweto Uprising, hope resided largely in organisation outside of the country, particularly in the assistance and support of African states to the north which provided political and spiritual "life-blood" to black South Africans. In such a context, Madingoane's images of African unity offered a vision of hope and consolation in the face of vicious state repression.

While my reading of Madingoane's mythological identifications seeks to grant them value within their historical moment, my engagement with "black trial" is not meant to be merely adulatory. The poem seems to me to reveal shortcomings, particularly in its presentation of women. As I suggested in the previous chapter, popular forms often reveal intense conservatism, and Madingoane's "black trial" is unable to grant women their status as social agents. The dedication of africa my beginning reads: "I did not know, but I had to know, that we in Africa are black men, born of women who loved oppressed men. This book is dedicated to the women who love us in bondage." The inside cover carries a photograph of a black woman crying over a coffin. As Madingoane's dedication and the photograph suggest, women are perceived as the mothers and mourners of those - men - who are active in society, a view supported by his epic. The destruction of black dignity by apartheid is described by the speaker as "castration" (5), and the growth to political awareness is presented as the attainment of "manhood". Women are thus barred from the public sphere by their gender, and are confined to supporting and nurturing the male activist and the communal family:

call to me that african woman  
 to tend to my wounds  
 with the gentle hands  
 of womanhood  
 i have for so long been deprived of

and to bring back the scene  
of a family complete  
'cause my african woman  
will always remember  
to call me  
*man.* (7)

Women are further restricted from societal action in Madingoane's poem by symbolic identification with Mother Africa: a common trope of Soweto poetry. The speaker asks the ancestors, for example, for a chance "to prove my belief/in me as man and africa my mother" (5). In their symbolic equation with Africa, women become icons beyond society and history. Madingoane himself appears to experience difficulty in maintaining the symbolic polarities which he ascribes to gender difference, for he is forced to change the biological sex of the rape victim halfway through the extended metaphor of "black trial/*twelve*":

man son of africa  
i want you  
back  
back home in africa  
when i lost you  
you were a virgin rich with love  
until they split your loins  
eagle spread and raped you all  
within three centuries  
when they boasted their manhood and  
you abandoned their first child. (20)

Critiques of the Black Consciousness conceptualisation of women have recently become commonplace, and one may risk historical anachronism in mounting against Madingoane the

kind of argument outlined above. It remains unclear as to whether a discourse of feminism was in fact available to him when he produced "black trial" in the late 1970s, for this area of research is poorly documented. Miriam Tlali's novel Amandla, which appeared at about the same time as Madingoane's africa my beginning, reveals a fairly conventional Black Consciousness understanding of social and political issues, and Tlali's sensitisation to gender appears to have occurred only in the early 1980s. Certainly none of the contributors to Michael Chapman's casebook Soweto Poetry (1982) raised any significant questions about the presentation of women in the poetry. The first panel on feminism in literary studies was only introduced to the annual Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) conference as late as 1982. If such scant and selective evidence suggests that developments in South African feminist thought post-date Madingoane's poem, perhaps the problems in his presentation of women concern the poem's 'present meaning': the encounter with a text and a historical epoch many of the assumptions of which run counter to our own.

Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial" remains nevertheless a compelling poem which, in the 1970s, offered a powerful address in its performance in community halls and at political meetings, and which continues to challenge us in our present circumstances. Like many other Black Consciousness texts, "black trial" resists any simple attempts at historical appropriation, stubbornly maintaining its 'difference'. In offering an epic narrative of the growth to black awareness, the poem asserts the validity of black claims to recompense and restitution in the face of overwhelming pressure today towards conditions of reconciliatory amnesia. Instead Madingoane's epic points to the long history of degradation and deprivation which cannot simply be erased by changes in the tiers of government. In the present context, in which we face renewed onslaughts from an aggressive American consumerism, the poem also seems to insist on the historical distinctiveness and value of a modern (South) African identity.

Madingoane's "black trial" has important implications for South African literary historiography. A number of critics, including David Maughan Brown (1982), Lionel Abrahams (1982) and particularly Michael Chapman (1982;1984), have traced literary continuities between

Soweto poetry and the work of earlier black writers such as Peter Abrahams and H.I.E. Dhlomo. As Chapman said in 1982: "While it is doubtful whether many writers today are particularly conversant with the poetry of either Abrahams or Dhlomo ... it is nevertheless tempting to locate in these two writers the origins of a characteristically Soweto style" (1982:14). Such literary-historical connections are enlightening particularly, as we have seen, for understanding poets like Madingoane. Talking of the attempts of both Dhlomo and Senghor to struggle - through language and rhythms - toward new syntheses of past, present and future, Chapman suggests that this was accomplished by Madingoane:

This is an intention realised in Madingoane's "black trial", which avoided enslavement to an outworn idiom (ironically, it seems, because of its author's very lack of formal training). Subscribing (like Dhlomo's epic poem) to the idea of "tradition rooted in the past, living and speaking in the present, visualising and inhaling the future", "black trial" found forms and diction suited to conveying "synthesis amid indeterminacy" ... . It is a principle of organisation which provides a point of reference within the heterogeneity of modern sensibility and which distinguishes the modernity of "black trial" from the other-worldliness of Dhlomo's Valley of a Thousand Hills. (1984:209)

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, however, Madingoane's poem is also located within a broader history of performance poetry and popular expression which can be traced back to the earliest human settlements on the subcontinent. I wish at this point to return to the question of representing South African poetry in a new anthology, which has been a recurrent theme in this study. Extracts from Madingoane's "black trial" appear in most South African poetry collections, but the poem is most interestingly 'located' by Couzens and Patel in The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry: 1891-1981 and by Chapman and Dangor in Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa. In their anthology Couzens and Patel offer an impressive range of poetry written by black South Africans. But their limiting themselves to "poems originally written in English" and their omission of "[p]oems printed in African

languages and oral forms" (1982:2) results in a somewhat skewed literary history, with perhaps the most interesting lines of continuity and influence being cut off by the terms of their project. Chapman and Dangor are more successful in establishing a literary history of black South African poetry which includes oral African language forms, in that they offer a short introductory selection of "traditional" poems in translation. However, their anthology does not, in its section entitled "Pre-Sharpeville: 1890-1960", represent sufficiently the 'popular' voices of South African cultural history (including notably the hymns of Isaiah Shembe), which are in constant dialogue with official culture, and which inform much of the literary production of the Soweto generation and the performance poetry of the 1980s. Including in an anthology of South African poetry not only an extensive selection of historical oral texts, but also more recent popular forms such as hymns, work chants, verse narratives, and songs may restore to South African poetic history a sense of inclusiveness. Such an anthology could move South African literary historiography beyond its canonical (print) concerns, and encourage readings which grant the full complexity of the texts' social orientation and cultural ontology. Madingoane's "black trial" could be represented in such a collection by extracts in which the distinctive formal and ideological concerns of his poem - identified in this chapter - are most clearly evident. These extracts could be prefaced by a short account of the poem's performance in township halls in the late 1970s. While all the editors who have excerpted Madingoane's "black trial" in anthologies have followed the Ravan Press text, representing Madingoane in a new anthology sensitive to oral challenges may require the kind of editorial intervention pointed to earlier - the attempt to find more appropriate print forms to register the text's oral ontology - and may serve to remind us that one of the greatest challenges facing South African literary studies in its attempts to create more wide-reaching literary histories is the development of a coherent theory and practice of oral-print transfers.

### Notes

1. A detailed study needs to be made of the (not always crude) interpretive strategies of the

Publications Control Board and security police in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the judgements made by the security establishment about the dissemination and reception of texts have important implications for the ways in which those in authority perceive texts to be understood and 'used' by readers and audiences. This point is taken up in Chapter Five in relation to the banning of Mzwakhe Mbuli's cassette Change is Pain, but the lack of restriction on distribution of his book Before Dawn.

2. The poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli had a similar status amongst township youth of the 1980s, as did Sandile Dikeni's short poem "Guava Juice", which deals with the making of a petrol bomb.
3. I am indebted to Omer-Cooper (1987) and Davenport (1987) for my account of this period.
4. Discussions with individuals involved with Staffrider in the late 1970s suggest, however, that in practice the white editor(s) played a more active role than this disclaimer suggests.
5. I do not mean, by this statement, to negate the very important developments which have taken place in African literature as a result of the development of written forms, or to deny the fertile contacts which have occurred between African, Western and other forms. My point is simply that, since almost all literature in Africa has historically been oral, an investigation of indigenous literary models must engage fully - and, I would argue, initially - with forms of oral poetry, song and narrative.
6. Sole's comment echoes Olabiyi Yai's call, quoted in the Introduction, for a fuller investigation of indigenous critical models and practices in the study of oral forms.
7. A key difficulty for criticism is, of course, availability of texts since, unlike Madingoane,



many of the poets were never published or recorded. However some of the poems were printed in magazines like Donga and Staffrider, which may provide material for further research.

8. The estrangement between the younger poets and Sipho Sepamla was particularly acute, since Sepamla constantly emphasised the need for artistic autonomy and the refinement of 'poetic technique' - in effect a Leavisian aesthetics slightly modified by Black Consciousness rhetoric. The poets of the Medupe group regarded Sepamla's position as a capitulation to 'white standards'. Serote and Gwala also differed with Sepamla on these issues, being themselves more strongly influenced by Black Consciousness and Marxist analysis.
  
9. These ideas have been developed by Marcel Jousse, particularly in The Oral Style (transl. and republ. 1990). See also Ruth Finnegan's article "Problems in the Processing of 'Oral Texts': Some Reflections on the Researcher's Role in Innovation and Consolidation", in which she discusses developments in the print representation of oral forms:

There have been some interesting developments in the uses of writing for presenting oral forms, now further extended with new technological developments in text-processing and desktop publishing. Writers associated with the journal Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics have used avant-garde approaches to typographical representation to emphasise the representation of performance qualities in oral poetry. Their aim is to present "performable scripts (meant to be read aloud rather than silently), experiments in typography, diagrams, and insert disc recordings" ... building on existing linguistic or musical conventions to indicate such features as timing (pauses, lengthening syllables, etc.); volume intensity or stress in speaking; tonal contours; other actions such as gesture and audience reactions. (1991:17-18)

Stewart Brown's article "'Writin in Light': Orality Thru Typography, Kamau Brathwaite's

Sycorax Video Style" (1995) is enlightening on these questions.

10. While Fanon is often regarded as the antithesis of Senghor - the materialist versus the spiritualist - Fanon's citing of Senghor, here and elsewhere, suggests that the relationship is not one of simple dichotomy.
11. The association of bodily affliction with spiritual and moral decay echoes the hymns and dream-visions of Isaiah Shembe.
12. I return to this question in Chapter Five in considering Kelwyn Sole's criticism of the use of African mythology in the trade union poems of Alfred Qabula.

## Chapter Five: Poetry, Politics and Performance: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula

On 1 April 1990 Mzwakhe Mbuli drove to the KwaThema Stadium to perform his poems at a rally marking the third anniversary of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO). On arrival he was mobbed by fans who, in their enthusiasm, removed his trousers and shoes, leaving him in his shirt and underwear. Despite his lack of attire, Mzwakhe - as he is known - went on to perform his poems for the assembled crowd. This incident, recorded in *Tribute* magazine (Makgabutlane, 1990:20), is one of many testifying to the extraordinary reputation of the man who has been dubbed "the people's poet". Performing at political funerals and mass meetings, Mzwakhe captured the public imagination during the 1980s in a way that few poets in South African history have done, at times addressing audiences of up to 150 000 people. His success is remarkable testimony to the continuing power of oral forms, and their possibilities under pressing social conditions.

The poet grew up in Meadowlands, and as a child travelled the hostels at weekends with his father, a "mbube" (traditional harmonic) singer. At hostel gatherings, he heard praise poets performing for visiting chiefs, and experienced various forms of dance and singing. During the 1970s, while at school, he was involved in musical and dramatic groups which, under the aegis of Black Consciousness, sought to advance black creativity. In 1981 he attended a vigil in Soweto for the death of Father Castro Mayathula, a priest held in great esteem by the community. Spurred on by the spirit of the occasion, he performed for the first time two poems which he had composed - "Sies" and "Ignorant" - accompanied by the humming of the crowd. The performance was so successful that he was called upon to repeat the poems on the following day during the funeral service at the Regina Mundi church.

From that point onwards, Mzwakhe's performances - which are mostly in English, though he does use African languages including Zulu - were to punctuate many political meetings in the Reef townships. Amongst other occasions, he was asked to perform at the Johannesburg launch

of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, the celebration of Bishop Desmond Tutu's Nobel Peace Prize in 1987, and at most of the major political funerals in the years of the State of Emergency. His cassette Change is Pain (1986) was banned, he was detained eight times, and he has survived three assassination attempts. While he was on the run from the security police, his performances at political gatherings gained authority from government attempts to silence him. A journalist described in the following terms Mzwakhe's performance at a celebration - in a Braamfontein church - of Tutu's Nobel Prize:

The voice swelled to a thick heavy resonance to fill the vault of the church, to beat against the far walls, and fall in dark waves over the congregation. This was how prophets are meant to sound. And at the same time Mzwakhe seemed to grow in stature. Gone was the gangling assortment of more or less unrelated limb and, in its place, something more than flesh, something which did all but glow in the dark.  
(Anon.,1987)

As well as Change is Pain, Mzwakhe has produced another three albums, Unbroken Spirit (1989), Resistance and Defence (1992) and Africa (1993), and a book of poems, Before Dawn (1989).

About two years after Mzwakhe's performance at the funeral of Father Castro Mayathula in Soweto, a migrant worker from the Dunlop factory in Durban - unaware of Mzwakhe's experiments with oral poetry in the townships of the Vaal Triangle - perceived the need for a poem to complement the dramatic sequences of a play workers were producing (subsequently called the Dunlop Play). Drawing on his acquaintance with the Xhosa izibongo which he had heard during his childhood in the Transkei, Alfred Qabula crafted the experiences of the shopfloor and the union meeting into a praise poem to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). He performed this poem, together with another poem he had created dealing with the hardships of migrancy called "Migrant's Lament - A Song", at a Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union (SFAWU) meeting at the Ecumenical Centre in Pietermaritzburg in mid-

1983. He admits that initially he was terrified at the prospect of public appearance, but that he was encouraged by the audience's response, which included lively interjections and shouts of assent. He went on to perform these poems as part of the agenda at a Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) AGM at the Currie's Fountain Stadium in 1984. From this point onwards he was to perform at many large worker rallies, including the Durban launch of COSATU, expanding his repertoire of poems in response to the occasions at which he was required to orate. His initial impulse encouraged other workers in the Durban area to learn the skills of performance poetry, and poetic contributions were included on the agendas of many union meetings in the Natal region from 1984 onwards. The poems of Qabula, together with those of Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, were published in a collection, Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle (1986). (More recent poems have appeared in several magazines.) While the poems are originally in Zulu, the collection is also available in English, translated by Ari Sitas in consultation with the poets. In 1989 Qabula published his autobiography, A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief, which included several poems.

Qabula and Mzwakhe emerge from contrasting linguistic, geographical, political and class backgrounds, and despite similar concerns about national themes and the potential of oral delivery, the poems of each poet bear distinctive marks in their treatment of subject-matter and audience targets. Despite key distinctions between the poets, however, criticism in the 1980s tended to treat them as largely indistinguishable, lumping them together as 'worker poets'. Yet the description 'worker poet' obscured more than it revealed. If it implies 'worker consciousness' - a concern with trade-union issues or analysis of political formations from the perspective of working-class mobilisation and economic restructuring - then it is difficult to see how Mzwakhe can be termed a 'worker poet'. He is not involved in union activity, and during the 1980s served organisations that in ideological orientation were 'popular' rather than 'workerist': the United Democratic Front (UDF) and - after its banning - the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), a loose grouping of UDF- and ANC-aligned organisations. Accordingly Mzwakhe's poems are not concerned with the issues of the shop-floor, but instead express a broadly nationalist political resistance. Qabula, in contrast, has for many years been involved in worker or union

organisations. The difficulties of the term 'worker poetry' are further exemplified by the fact that the Staffrider Special Issue on "worker culture" (8(3&4)1989) included - alongside the poems of Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli - the poems of middle-class academics like Keith Gottschalk, Ari Sitas and Peter Horn. While it is understandable that the specific pressures of the State of Emergency required united political opposition, and hence different projects were strategically yoked together under the banner "worker culture", I would argue that criticism beyond the State of Emergency should avoid such homogenising tendencies. Hence I shall distinguish carefully between Qabula and Mzwakhe, trying to suggest new ways of acknowledging the contributions and concerns of each poet.

The publication of Black Mamba Rising in 1986 sparked off heated critical debate, particularly in response to Jeremy Cronin's review of the volume in The Weekly Mail. Cronin argued that whereas poetry was traditionally perceived to be an obscure and elitist pastime, the work of Qabula, Malange and Hlatshwayo "march[es] in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land". "These are poems that call for working-class solidarity, for a collective struggle to end capitalism", he claimed (1987). In replying to Cronin's assertions, Lionel Abrahams defended the "difficulty" of poetry: "When poetry reaches high or deep for us - its main business - a price it often exacts is that of difficulty, for both poet and readers" (1987). In similar vein, Farouk Asvat criticised the "sloganeering" of the Black Mamba Rising poets, arguing that poetry must "capture the complex humanity of people's emotions" (1987). The exchange evoked responses from, amongst others, Alfred Qabula himself, Achmat Dangor and Mafika Gwala, but The Weekly Mail closed the debate.

Qabula was angered by the responses of Abrahams and Asvat to Cronin:

I said: I'm sorry, but I'm not talking to you. I'm not jumping onto your platform. 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, who are living in shacks - I'm talking with them. So you talk to your people, I'll talk with mine.  
(Brown,1991:2)

As Qabula's comment indicates, the debate reflected the broader hostilities and oppositions of South African society during the late 1980s, but it has larger implications for the study of South African literature. It was conducted at the time in simplistic terms. While Cronin grants the poems some recognition as oral poems, he remains fairly firmly within a crude materialist paradigm, assuming an opposition between "elitist" and "mass culture" which does not reflect the complex cultural intersections and hybridisations of South African social and literary life, as pointed to in Chapters Three and Four of this study. Abrahams does not even register the oral status of the poems, and remains strictly within a liberal-humanist, print paradigm: he is committed to the complexly-wrought artefact which he feels embodies the subtleties and ambiguities of human nature. While I do not wish to attribute too much to a newspaper debate - which was, as I have suggested, fuelled by the tensions of the State of Emergency - the furore which developed around this volume, and the failure of so many critics to register the complex ontology of oral poetry, seem to me to be emblematic of the larger lacuna in South African literary history and criticism: the lack of attention to oral forms. In this chapter, I wish to relocate the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula - for the purposes of critical inquiry - into the discursive field of orality, tracing their origins in performance genres of the past and present.

The work of Mzwakhe and Qabula, however, requires from the critic a doubly recuperative exercise: not only as **oral** poetry, but as **poetry**. There was a danger in the critical debates of the 1980s of poetry's being subsumed under the trauma of the political moment - of the collapse of its distinctive textuality into larger debates about politics, culture and social transformation. In reading the rancorous arguments between critics like Cronin and Abrahams, one is often uncertain as to whether the poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula is the real concern, or whether it is simply a focus of interest in larger questions about the (re)structuring of society. Despite the criticisms of Abrahams and Asvat, most contemporary reviews of Mzwakhe and Qabula tended to be ideologically supportive: they focused on the poetry's 'content' or 'message' and - apart from vague references to the influence of the tradition of praise poetry - paid scant

attention to the formal strategies utilised in the achievement of effects. This may have been understandable given political imperatives of the late-1980s which demanded unequivocal statements of opposition to government policies. I would argue, however, that it is necessary for criticism after the State of Emergency to grant the poems their status as aesthetic forms in society - that is, to combine a poetic and sociological analysis - rather than to reduce the poems to functional utterances. Certainly the oral poem, as a form difficult to control and censor, was often required in the 1980s to convey political information which would otherwise have been suppressed by the emergency regulations. In addition, both Qabula and Mzwakhe employ statement-making and political slogans as rhetorical strategies. Their poems, nevertheless, were received by their audiences as **poems**: the poems created a space of performance and reception which, although it overlapped substantially with that of political speeches and discussions, remained distinct in expectation and concern.

In his article "The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Literature in a State of Emergency" (1987), Michael Chapman called into question the primacy of aesthetic transformation, arguing that the context of political crisis in the 1980s was directing attention away from the crafted text to the authority of political experience, including the 'event' of the political funeral (1987:26). His argument was an intentionally provocative attack on what he perceived to be the inability of the intellectual literary imagination - represented for him by J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* and Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs* - to respond adequately to the strife and repression of South African society at the time. Chapman sought to direct critical attention to other forms of cultural expression, including the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula. While his impatience with the specific offerings of Coetzee, Gordimer and Fugard is perhaps understandable, and his attempt to broaden the focus of literary studies to encompass 'popular' forms is laudable, his treatment of oral poetry among other forms of expression dictated by the immediacy of events raises larger conceptual questions. He argued that in the context of the State of Emergency the "authority of experience rather than its transformation into the art-object becomes the real locus of power" (1987:26). Chapman evidently did not intend by this a simplistic elevation of 'context' over 'text', for the second



section of his article actively challenges such crude assertions. The implication appears to remain, however, that it is the political experience of performers like Mzwakhe and Qabula rather than the textual transformation of that experience into poems which is the locus of value/power. Yet as I have argued in this study, in order to accomplish specific rhetorical and social ends oral genres employ complex aesthetic strategies, which are evidently understood by both performers and audiences. My own concern is thus to read poetic form historically, and I would argue that the 'authority' and 'status' of the performer in the community are usually integral to the form and societal function of the expressive act. The shaping of experience in the poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula is aesthetically functional to social efficacy in a highly-charged political context: the historicity of the poems is inseparable from the textuality.

\* \* \*

Alfred Qabula was born on 12 December 1942 at Flagstaff. Growing up in a rural area of what was then the Transkei, Qabula had first-hand experience of the performance of izibongo for local chiefs, as well as the poems performed by members of the community in everyday life, such as the personal izibongo which people collect for themselves, the izibongo of the clan and the poems to cattle, birds and other animals. The fact that poetry was not the sole preserve of specific members of society perhaps accounts for Qabula's initial impulse to perform at union gatherings, and certainly contributed towards his constant assertions that everyone can be a poet. He said in an interview, for example, that he seeks constantly to redress the notion that poetry belongs to "amaintellectuals" (Gunner,1989a:51). As the son of a mineworker, he had direct experience of the harshness of the Bantustan and migrant-labour policies. In fact seventy percent of the men of his area - and hence their families, since the area was agriculturally barren - subsisted through migrant labour (Sitas,1986:2). At the age of eighteen, Qabula was caught up in the Pondoland rebellion, and spent many days hiding from state troops in the forest nearby which he knew well from his childhood. In 1964, he boarded a train for Carletonville, to work for a construction company as a plumber. In the compound in which he lived, he heard and saw rural praise poets performing for visiting leaders, and witnessed the adaptation of izibongo to express

pleasure at events or criticise the conditions of migrancy. In addition, he had heard poets in the Transkei using izibongo to censure Chief Kaiser Matanzima for being illegitimately appointed by the apartheid state as Prime Minister of that 'homeland'. From Carletonville Qabula moved to a construction company in Durban ("La Lucia Homes Construction"), but left to join one of the foremen who had set up his own business at Redhill ("General Plumbers"). Despite his improving his qualifications, he was paid extremely badly, and decided to join Dunlop in 1974, the entrance to which he describes in his autobiography as "an enormous factory gateway to Hell" (1989:52). Throughout his working life, his wife and children have remained in the Transkei.

Qabula argues that he survived the drudgery and noise of his job at Dunlop by creating for himself a world of songs. Sitting on top of his fork-lift, he composed poems about his life and the experiences of his co-workers. In 1981 he joined the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), assisting the union in its campaign to register all Dunlop workers as union members and later being elected as a shop-steward. MAWU's opposition was the Durban Rubber and Industrial Union (DRIU), a union supported by management and recognised by the Industrial Council, but which attracted little support. From 1981 onwards, Qabula was increasingly involved in union organisation, particularly after the launch of COSATU, and he became famous for his poetry performances at worker gatherings. Unions during this period were strategically mobilising cultural forms in order to bolster solidarity; little attention had been given to poetry, though, before Qabula's initiatives. In May 1987, he resigned from Dunlop and helped start the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal, Durban, in association with the Department of Sociology. The project, which was closely allied to COSATU, sought to develop the cultural resources of workers, and Qabula was joined by Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo.

Qabula's biographical narrative is intertwined with the larger historical narrative of the development of the trade union movement in the 1980s, and the development of a radical worker rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> The late 1970s in South Africa saw the growth of new, militant black unions independent of the white-controlled and state-recognised Trade Union Council of South Africa

(TUCSA). Instead of legislated conciliation procedures and ameliorative negotiation strategies, which in any case would have been denied them by the state, the new unions used unofficial work stoppages and direct confrontation to exert pressure on management. In 1979 twelve of these unions came together to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) - the subject of Qabula's best-known poem. By the late 1970s there was even support from industry, especially the motor trade, for the recognition of black unions. The state responded by establishing the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation - popularly known as the Wiehahn Commission - to investigate the possibility of registering African trade unions (up to this point illegal) and scrapping job reservation laws. The Wiehahn Commission recommended in 1979 that African workers be permitted to belong to registered trade unions and participate in the Industrial Council system. It also recommended that job reservation be abolished, and that trade unions be allowed to admit members of all race groups. These recommendations were implemented by the 1979 amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act. Yet the state attempted to control the development of black unions and the attendant potential for radicalising the labour force by forcing them to register themselves: a process which required them to draft constitutions in terms laid down by the Act, submit regular information to the government about themselves, and keep registers of members and accounts which were open to scrutiny by labour inspectors who also had the right to demand the minutes of meetings. Many unions refused to register, to which the state responded by amending the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1981 to extend control of registered unions to unregistered unions (the Act became known as the Industrial Relations Act). Labour action in the period 1980-1982 reached its highest level since 1973-1974 (Davenport, 1987:462 & 539-40), and police intervened by detaining union leaders, and deporting several of them to the homelands. Some racially-defined TUCSA unions merged in the wake of the Wiehahn report, though they maintained racially separate branches, and employers often encouraged membership of such unions. However the largest growth in union membership was in the unregistered unions, which included MAWU - the union Qabula joined in 1981. According to John Pampallis, membership of these unions increased between 1980 and 1987 from 70 000 to 300 000 (1991:270). Following four years of negotiations, the majority of the unregistered unions united into the Congress of South African Trade Unions, at the Durban

launch of which Qabula together with Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo performed "Tears of a Creator". At its founding, COSATU membership was about 500 000 (Pampallis,1991:270). From its inception COSATU indicated its refusal to confine itself only to 'labour' issues, calling for a general strike, for example, on 16 June 1986, the tenth anniversary of the Soweto Uprising. The only opposition to COSATU was from those BC unions affiliated to the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), a new federation called the Azanian Federation of Trade Unions (AZACTU) - both of whom rejected the non-racialism of the COSATU unions - and the Inkatha-aligned United Workers' Union of South Africa (UWUSA), formed in 1986 with funding from the apartheid state. Because of a dramatic drop in membership TUCSA had disbanded in the same year.

It was through his work for FOSATU that Qabula came to perform his poems for the first time in public. He claims that he perceived the need for an izibongo to the union federation, recalling the way in which izimbongi at home had offered poems to their leaders (Gunner,1989a:50).<sup>2</sup> Having decided to create a poem about FOSATU, Qabula set about collecting information from the meetings of FOSATU Locals that he attended: "I took bits and pieces from the reports, and wrote these down into a poem" (Brown,1991:1). This process of composition through collection parallels the practice of the imbongi in traditional society: he would 'collect' the praises of the king or chief into a poem. Qabula's insistence on writing the poem down, however, is at odds with the emphasis in the Xhosa tradition on improvisation, discussed in Chapter Two. Even today, Xhosa iimbongi generally do not memorise their izibongo: instead, often in a trance-like state sometimes induced by marijuana, they improvise on a particular subject, though they may draw upon customary praises. Qabula has spoken at length about the importance of the printed record in 'stabilising' the texts of his poems (1990:4), and his concern that the poems must be the same at each performance is closer to the Zulu tradition, which is far more concerned with memorisation than improvisation. The concern with fidelity to a set text appears also to result from the influence of print in Qabula's school education. Having grown up and attended school in the Transkei, and now being resident in Durban and performing in Zulu, Qabula appears to straddle the Western print, Xhosa and Zulu traditions.

By the time Black Mamba Rising appeared for the first time in 1986, a number of poems by workers had been published in union newspapers and newsletters. The print convention used in these poems was largely that established by some of the earliest recorders of praise poetry, notably W.B. Rubusana and James Stuart: the short lines and stanzaic groupings discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the Stuart/Cope representation of the praises of Shaka. Qabula would certainly have been familiar with these print conventions for praise poetry from his schooling, in view of Bantu Education's strong emphasis on tribal culture and history. Ari Sitas - as editor of Black Mamba Rising - has supported the use of this print convention. Each poem in the volume is followed by information about the place and date of its original oration, so as to remind readers of its ontology as performance 'event'. The poems were translated - as I mentioned at the outset - by Sitas in conjunction with Qabula. The translation strategy apparently seeks to create readable English texts which nevertheless retain a sense of original linguistic and performative status. The English versions, accordingly, utilise many of the distinctive grammatical and syntactical constructions of praising, particularly the parallelism and the repeated epithetical clauses. In addition, the translated texts retain several Zulu terms and expressions (explained in a Glossary at the end), particularly the political slogans declaimed during the performance, as well as the parodic 'Fanokolo' dialogue between management and workers. By means of these strategies the poet and editor have attempted - to good effect - to recreate in the translated form something of the spirit of the original Zulu-language performance. Following its initial success - the first print-run sold out very quickly - Black Mamba Rising appeared in a second (undated) edition, which rectified many of the inaccuracies identified by the poets themselves in the first edition, and provided extended versions of certain of the poems. I have used this second edition for the purposes of this chapter.

In creating "Praise Poem to FOSATU" (8-13), Alfred Qabula adapted the function of izibongo to negotiate relations of political power with FOSATU:

You moving forest of Africa

When I arrived the children

Were all crying  
 These were the workers,  
 Industrial workers  
 Discussing the problems  
 That affect them in the  
 Industries they work for in  
 Africa ... . (8)

His poem expresses praise, but also articulates workers' expectations of the union federation. Many of his poems, in fact, end with advice to labour organisations on how to function effectively or offer implicit criticism of their conduct. The function of poetry to offer constructive criticism was stressed in an interview by the members of the FOSATU Cultural Group, who argued that such criticism could help to build the unity and strength of the worker movement (South African Labour Bulletin Staff,1987:303).

In the performances of "Praise Poem to FOSATU" which I have personally witnessed or which I have seen on video, Qabula draws in his oratorical and dramatic style from the traditional imbongi, while departing from tradition in significant ways. Unlike the traditional imbongi, Qabula does not dress in skins when performing, nor does he carry the customary twin sticks or spears: instead he dresses in a union tee-shirt or an overall, so as to signify his status as worker/union-member.<sup>3</sup> He also does not deliver his poems in the "low-pitched growl" which characterises the performances of rural Xhosa iimbongi (Opland,1983:248), though this is perhaps because he does not need to project his voice to the same extent because of the availability of public address systems. (Certainly modern praise poets generally do not employ the growl to the extent that they used to.) Qabula however does use the traditional rhythm and intonation in performing, "holding a high tone until a stretched and lowered penultimate syllable is uttered" (Opland,1983:248-9). His performance is also similar to that of the imbongi of the chief's court: it is extremely energetic, with facial expression and gesture punctuating the delivery of the lines. The performance expressiveness of modern poets has been somewhat restricted,

though, by the necessity of remaining in front of the microphone which is so often necessary to address extremely large gatherings. The importance of the microphone to the modern imbongi is indicated by the fact that at the Transkei independence celebrations in 1976 the authorities effectively silenced those poets who were critical of Matanzima by denying them access to the dais and thus the public address system (Opland,1983:269).

Qabula's performance, then, represents - in visual and dramatic fashion - the adaptation of the institution of izibongo to a politicised, unionised context. In textual terms "Praise Poem to FOSATU" also approximates to and deviates from the model of traditional izibongo. I argued in relation to the poem "Shaka" that the formal principle of izibongo is that of 'naming': the poems generally comprise a series of epithets or praise names which follow one another in no particular order, describing the physical, moral and political qualities of the chief or king frequently in terms which are less than flattering. These epithets, which are often customary, are usually drawn from the natural world, though in the twentieth century many izimbongi - particularly those working on the mines - have employed industrial imagery. Qabula's poem is also constructed around a number of epithets. These serve as a structural principle, since the repetition of the words "you are the ... " and the direct address "FOSATU" create a unifying rhythm. At the same time, the epithets serve a thematic function, in that they enumerate the qualities of the federation: its strength ("FOSATU you are the lion" (9)), its protection ("You moving forest of Africa" (8) and "You are the hen with wide wings/That protects its chickens" (8)), its potential to undermine the power of management ("you are the mole" (9)), its unbending nature ("You are the metal locomotive that moves on top/Of other metals" (12)) and its wisdom ("you man of old" (12)). In expressing the qualities of FOSATU, Qabula's poem also articulates clearly the expectations that workers at the time had of the federation: that it would secure bargaining power and protection from victimisation when union organisation was beginning to develop momentum and management was attempting to crush it. So the form of izibongo allows Qabula the discursive space to negotiate relations between individual workers and the union federation which represents them.

"Praise Poem to FOSATU" has a far greater degree of coherence, however, than other forms of izibongo, which are generally irregular in structure. This coherence appears to proceed from Qabula's literate education, for he shapes his material carefully in writing before performance. In the poem each praise of FOSATU, which identifies a particular characteristic of the federation, is followed by expansion upon the thematic implications of the epithet. For example, the metaphorical identification "You are the mole that was seen by the bosses' impimpis" (9) introduces four sections which develop the theme of elected leadership versus management lackeys: a satirical sketch depicting a manager talking to a 'sell-out'; a direct address to FOSATU articulating workers' expectations of their elected leaders; a listing of the problems to which FOSATU is the solution (including the problem of "impimpis"); and the suggestion of criticism should the organisation not behave in accordance with workers' demands ("To date your policy and your sons are commendable,/ We don't know what's to happen tomorrow" (11)). In discussing the praises of Shaka, I drew attention to what James A. Snead called the 'cut' which characterises so many black texts and which emphasises their cyclical construction: "an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break ... with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (1984:67). Qabula's izibongo to FOSATU appears to be constructed on precisely the kind of circular principle identified by Snead, and the epithets in the poem serve the function of the 'cut', as they return the listener to the subject of the poem, the union federation. Each section of the poem thus comprises an elaboration on a particular aspect of the federation, the end of which is signalled by a new epithet that 'cuts' back to the starting-point.

The use of dramatic sketches in the poem is immediately striking. Coplan has pointed out that traditional forms of izibongo have a strong dramatic element, which in the absence of a recognisable theatrical tradition in black societies in sub-Saharan Africa offered a basis for the development of black theatre in South Africa in the twentieth century. He talks of the way in which words, movement and gesture formed a "complex of intersense modalities with a unified focus of meaning" (1987:10). While traditional izibongo have a theatrical element, and may include dramatic enactments of confrontations, Qabula was evidently influenced by



developments in drama within the union movement. (He originally composed this poem as part of the Dunlop Play, and acts out the dramatic scenes in performance.) "Praise Poem to FOSATU" contains no less than three sketches which satirise management, especially through the medium of the broken 'Fanakolo' which the bosses use:

Fast ran the impimpis  
 And reported to their bosses and said:  
 "Baas, Baas, thina bukile lomvukuzane buya losayidi  
 Kalofekthri kathina."  
 "Yah, yah; What is the mvukuzane my boy, tell me,  
 What is it?  
 Is it one of FOSATU's unions?  
 You are a good muntu  
 Mina bhilda wena 6 room house  
 Lapha lohomeland kawena.  
 Thatha lo-machine gun, vala logates  
 Skhathi wena buka lo-union  
 Bulala lo-union  
 Skathi lo-union yena ngena lapha fekthri kathina,  
 Amashares phelile  
 Lo-union thatha yonke." (9-10)

The satirising of whites in control has a long history in izibongo, with migrant workers in the early 1900s, for example, dressing in "old European top hats and tailcoats, worn comically askew", and performing sketches imitating mine personnel (Coplan, 1987:11).

While management is ridiculed as the enemy in the poem, FOSATU is accorded the traditional attributes of the hero: it is praised for vanquishing the foe ("The black forest that the employers saw and/Ran away from for safety" (8)) and for its fertility ("FOSATU has given

birth/Its sons are spread all over Africa/Even overseas you find its sons" (8)). It is also described as being inspired by the spirits of the ancestors:

Prayed we did to our Mvelinqangi and the<sup>4</sup>  
 Ancestors have answered us,  
 And sent to us FOSATU! (11)

The poem uses many of the rhetorical techniques identified in the izibongo of Shaka including parallelism by initial linking to increase the dramatic intensity of the delivery and to give emphasis to the statement being made: "Protect us too with those/Sacred wings of yours/.../Protect us too so that we gain wisdom" (8). Qabula also includes the conventional appeal to religious wisdom:

I dreamed I am a Sangoma,  
 You have come to me so that I can tell about you  
 I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi.  
 My bones and my abalozi are telling me this:

Yebo, handsome are your sons  
 Intelligent and healthy ... . (11)

As I argued in Chapter Two, izibongo usually begin with an opening formula - a salute to the chief - and they generally end with a concluding sentence such as "I disappear". In Qabula's performances the shouting of political slogans apparently serves the functions of opening and closing formulae, though the opening slogan does not form part of the text printed in Black Mamba Rising. Other modifications of the form to a trade-union environment include attention to the pragmatics of shopfloor organisation, as in another of the satirical sketches:

"Who is organising at Bakers?"

"Of course Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union."

"But where does it come from?"

"From FOSATU."

"This MAWU where does it spring from?"

"Also from FOSATU."

"Same constitution?"

"Yebo." (9)

The tracing of the relationships of the member unions to FOSATU, of course, corresponds with the imbongi's attempts to establish the chief's lineage.

While izibongo rarely construct explicit narratives - they are generally eulogistic though they may include narrative passages - reports of performances and interviews with poets and audiences indicate that an imbongi is judged particularly by his grasp of history. As I suggested in discussing the izibongo of Shaka, this historical knowledge is central to the poet's function of mediating between ruler and ruled, since such mediation requires an intimate knowledge of lineage and past conduct as well as a detailed understanding of the intersections of personal and public history. Qabula himself constantly emphasises the importance of history: he says that his poetry must "preserve the history of the life of the workers" (1990:4); he argues that print can serve as a historical record of one's life, and hence he has written his autobiography; and he has conducted a project of recording the oral history of migrant workers from his home in the Transkei. In fact, Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" does construct a rough narrative of the development and growth of FOSATU, and many of his other poems rehearse the history of labour organisation in South Africa, perceiving present unions to be in the front ranks of a battle that has continued for most of the century. The continuity of this labour history is reinforced in the image of FOSATU as the "black forest", since this was one of the praises of the Zulu ICU unionist, George Champion, in the 1920s. The history of Natal - where Qabula performs and works - is highly contested, of course, and his adaptation of izibongo to new ends occurs in a context in which Inkatha has mobilised versions of Zulu culture and history in the cause of

regional power. As Qabula's poems explicitly reject the exclusivities of tribalism,<sup>5</sup> and as he actively promotes the cause of a union movement opposed to Inkatha's policies, he has suffered personal harassment and threats to his life. During the 1980s he was unable, for long periods, to sleep in the same place for two consecutive nights.

Qabula's use of history in his work, however, involves not only contextual problems - the conflicting demands of tribal-separatist and worker-nationalist political movements - but textual difficulties: the use of contradictory historical models. As I argued earlier, his work appears to straddle both the oral and literate traditions: despite his constant assertions about the importance of the printed text as historical record, assertions which reveal Western assumptions about chronological narrativisation and dating, his own sense of history is more allusive, metaphorical and anecdotal, revealing the influence of modes of oral transmission. Perhaps the best example of the operation of these distinct historical models is to be found in the fact that the dating is extremely problematic in the various accounts he provides of his life. (Similar discrepancies and contradictions were discussed, in Chapter Three, in the biography and hymns of Isaiah Shembe.) Qabula evidently feels that historical dating is important, yet appears to be frustrated in his attempts at chronology by his own wish to narrate events in a looping, episodic way. My account of his life in this chapter, which conforms largely to the Western academic model of chronological historical narrative, has involved extensive double-checking of dates and places, though there may still be errors.

A consideration of the contradictory historical models which Qabula's work employs becomes part of the more complex critical engagement which is possible in a more open South African society after the unbannings of 2 February 1990. Certainly Qabula's project had value in the shocks and struggles of life in the 1980s, when poems like "Praise Poem to FOSATU" intervened in the public crisis by addressing directly many of the pressing issues of black working life: the necessity for economic restructuring; conditions on the shop-floor; wage negotiations; participation in company decision-making; and strategies of worker organisation. Yet in recuperating the poems for literary-critical debate in less-fraught historical circumstances, one is

confronted with other questions. It is clear that the poems reveal several ideological contradictions and fissures. "Praise Poem to FOSATU", for example, makes extensive use of biblical language and imagery, and while the influence of Christianity has been evident in the oral tradition since at least the mid-nineteenth century, Qabula describes the union federation in terms which jar somewhat with other aspects of the poem. FOSATU is "our Moses" who will lead us to "our Canaan" (12). Then, having withstood the temptations of the flesh (the "beers, whiskeys ... The cakes and the cooldrinks"), the federation becomes the (African?) "Hero" who will throw the enemies "into the Red Sea" and "[s]trangle them" (12). FOSATU's prosperity had earlier been sanctioned by the "Sangoma"; yet underlying Qabula's several concerns with economic restructuring lies not traditional religious-heroic belief, but a Marxist paradigm. Kelwyn Sole raised similar questions in 1987 about incongruous juxtapositions of mental schemas in the poem "Tears of a Creator" (43-49) which Qabula composed and performed with Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo. As he did at the time, he would no doubt perceive the 'contradictions' of "Praise Poem to FOSATU" as ideological limitations or 'false consciousness' (1987a:114). "Tears of a Creator" rehearses the history of trade unionism from the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in the 1920s onwards, but attributes the demise of the union federations preceding COSATU to the "sorcery" of the "bosses" and "rulers". Sole argues that references to witchcraft simply obscure the historical and material causes of union organisational failure, and prevent workers from avoiding the mistakes of the past, ostensibly the point of the history offered by the poets (1987a:114).<sup>6</sup> This study has suggested, however, that the yoking together of disparate political, religious and mythological belief-systems is not confined to the work of Qabula - or that of Mzwakhe which draws upon equally diverse sources - but characterises much of the cultural and social history of this country; subjectivities have been fractured and reformed in the ongoing historical encounter between foreign and indigenous cultures, and black performers have drawn in contexts of deprivation and social rupture upon whatever resources have been to hand. Sole's expectation of rigorous and uncontradictory Marxist analysis seems inappropriate not only in such a historical situation, but in his expectations of the communicative potential of poetry. Instead of analysing Qabula's poems in terms of the coherence of their materialist ideology, I would wish to grant 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.

The importance of Qabula's poems seems to me to reside not only in their capacity to keep in memory the endeavours of worker struggles in the 1980s - an important function - but in their ability to challenge present perceptions, to make available new positions and perspectives. Qabula's poems may serve to redress something of the imbalance in South African historiography, in which the voices of workers are seldom heard. His poems insist on the creativities of workers, their ability to speak articulately of their own history, and the power and commitment of labour organisations. Further, his poems seem to me to call into question several aspects of South African life in the post-election period. Qabula reveals an ability to exploit the potential of performance genres to accomplish a negotiation of political power between workers, who have varying degrees of literacy, and the union federation which must represent them to management and the state. His ability to turn traditional aesthetic forms to modern urbanised demands points to an intellectual and artistic sensibility that resides in both indigenous institutions and modern worker organisations in South Africa: a rooted intelligence that is in danger of being trampled in the current enthusiasm in South Africa to rejoin the international community. The poems also serve as reminders of the harsh conditions of the hostel and the shopfloor while the concerns of workers are increasingly being subordinated to the declared urgencies of economic development. Qabula's poetry gives substance to the demands of workers when even the new Government of National Unity, in responding to labour disputes, has begun to deploy its own version of old-style conspiracy theories when faced with real worker challenges and demands.

In my discussion of Qabula's 'past significance' and 'present meaning', I have focused on "Praise Poem to FOSATU", since this is a compelling poem which in changing circumstances utilised the formal model of izibongo to good effect. The poem also achieved a great deal of renown both in worker and academic circles in the 1980s. Certain of Qabula's poems, however, use poetic models other than izibongo with equal ease. For example, an early poem, "Migrant's

Lament - A Song" (14-15), syncretises the Christian hymn or prayer with the structural repetition of African oral poetry in a way analogous to Isaiah Shembe's compositions. Yet Qabula exploits the audience's expectations of genre by making the Christian form undermine itself. The poem is structured around the refrain, "If I have wronged you Lord forgive me", which introduces an account of the hardships of the migrant worker's life. The refrain becomes increasingly ironic, however, as the poem in building up details of suffering identifies the political structures that cause the hardships. The poem creates its effect through a tension between the expectations of the hymn or prayer - the plea for divine assistance - and the identification of those social agencies responsible for living conditions which can only be changed by political action. The concluding section, in an ironic apology, registers the necessity for union organisation:

Oh Creator forgive me.  
 If I had done wrong to you ...  
 So I joined the union to fight my boss  
 For I realised, there was no other way Lord  
 But to fight with the employer ... . (15)

More recently, Qabula has moved away from the strict form of izibongo to what he calls "amapoems". In two important ways, these represent departures from his previous work. Firstly, they are increasingly narrative poems, drawing both on the folktale and the "indaba" narrative tradition discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the genre of African epic. Secondly, they reflect a concern as much with the broader political struggle as with specifically worker issues. "Africa's Black Buffalo" (1989:110-111), for example, which appeared in Qabula's autobiography, uses the traditional motif of the black buffalo in order to create an allegorical narrative of the broader liberation struggle. The references to guerilla training abroad (being "apprenticed in Algeria") and to imprisonment on Robben Island (being placed in "isolation on the island of Patima") indicate that the buffalo represents the ANC/PAC. In "Dear" (1990) - a poem which comprises an ironic apology to a wife - Qabula uses the figure of a wandering musician to offer a historical narrative of the political changes sweeping through South African political life:

I am known at home, strumming my guitar  
 They heard me in Messina  
 I played at Sasol, Vorster is my witness  
 I played at Carlton Centre, Johannesburg knows  
 I played at Witbank, Le Grange can tell you... .

Although Qabula still creates poems about working life, the increasing concern with broader national issues evinced in poems like "Africa's Black Buffalo" and "Dear" appears at least partly to result from his changed work circumstances. Since 1987 he has been employed, not on the shopfloor, but at the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal, Durban. This project, which was instituted in conjunction with COSATU by the Sociology Department, seeks to develop worker creativity by running training programmes for the Cultural Locals of trade unions, and has been responsible for the production of a number of worker plays and the publication/recording of worker stories and poems. Hence, Qabula's present position is somewhat ambiguous: although he is still involved with trade unions and claims that he remains a worker - he has retained his NUMSA membership - he occupies a middle-class position at an academic institution more concerned in its educational and research activities with broader national initiatives than with issues of worker organisation.

Through his work with the Culture and Working Life Project as well as through his involvement with the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in Natal, Qabula has played an important role in developing the skills of younger poets. Jeff Opland has pointed out that traditionally izimbongi serve no formal apprenticeship, but generally learn the craft of oral composition and delivery through hearing practising poets, memorising their poems and then reciting and adapting them (1983:64-65). The number of younger poets who perform at COSAW meetings or cultural events in the style of Qabula and Mzwakhe suggests that these poets have served as poetic exemplars, helping to keep alive an oral tradition that spans the history of human settlement on the subcontinent.



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It was Mzwakhe Mbuli not Alfred Qabula, however, who was asked to perform at the funeral of slain South African Communist Party (SACP) secretary Chris Hani, and at the recent inauguration of Nelson Mandela as State President.<sup>7</sup> While Qabula's constituency tends to be involved in trade-union activities, Mzwakhe has a far greater national profile. The reasons for his public prominence appear to be twofold. Firstly, he occupies a political space which is broadly 'popular' rather than specifically unionist. In contrast to Qabula whose context was that of labour struggles particularly in Natal, Mzwakhe's was that of national crisis in the 1980s. As well as being called upon to perform for dignitaries such as Desmond Tutu, Mzwakhe received a personal commendation in 1989 from Nelson Mandela, who at the time was incarcerated in the Victor Verster Prison. Mandela emphasised the breadth of Mzwakhe's appeal: "I would like you to know that you are loved and respected far beyond the borders of your home town" (Mbuli,1989). As a result of his repeated detentions and the attempts on his life - he was known to the security police as "die lang man" - Mzwakhe gained enormous political credibility in popular organisations. The second reason why he enjoys a far greater national profile than Qabula appears to be his greater adaptation to 'modernity' in an increasingly technologised South African society. He generally performs his poems to a musical backing which draws on a variety of styles from mbaqanga and isichatamyia to reggae and rap, and his work now appears on Radio Metro's playlist. Reporting on a performance by Mzwakhe in 1987, a journalist described the poet's reception as the "kind of welcome ... usually reserved for pop stars" (Anon.,1987). My own experience of hosting Mzwakhe for a day at the University of Natal, Durban, bears this out: he was mobbed by students seeking his autograph and photograph, and he was constantly accosted by well-wishers in the airport terminal on his arrival and departure. Mzwakhe is also more fluent than Qabula in English, the lingua franca of politics, commerce, industry and technology in South Africa, and hence he has a greater verbal command and range than the oral poet of trade-union intervention.

Mzwakhe's greater facility in a modernised world certainly proceeds in part from his urban upbringing. He was born in Sophiatown in 1959, and grew up in Meadowlands where his parents, like so many others, were forcibly resettled following the destruction of Sophiatown to make way for the white suburb of Triomf. Through his father he became acquainted as a child with forms of poetry, music and dance performed in the hostels. After his father's death in 1975, Mzwakhe involved himself in a series of musical and dramatic groups, including the New World Quartet (which comprised ten members!). He was politically active from an early age, and the New World Quartet performed musical items at meetings of the Soweto Students' Representative Council during the upheavals of 1976. The group then moved into drama and dance, and in the following year produced a play called The Wizard. In 1978 Mzwakhe joined the Teen Outreach International Youth Club based in Naledi: at its Sunday meetings this group used dramatic sketches to introduce a theme which would then be taken up by an invited speaker. Those who addressed the group included the likes of Frank Chikane. By 1979 Mzwakhe was increasingly involved in dramatic productions, and he formed a group called Khuvhangano - the Venda term for "unity" - which prided itself on its rejection of tribalism. Khuvhangano performed a number of times in public, but Mzwakhe reports that he felt the performances were lacking something after two of the members, who had contributed poems to the dramatic sketches, left the group for exile. He thus composed the poems which he was to perform at the funeral of Father Castro Mayathula in Soweto in 1981, and which propelled him into the public sphere. In 1985, he was elected UDF Transvaal media officer, and in the following year helped set up the Cultural Desk which he headed. After the restriction of the UDF under the emergency regulations, Mzwakhe became active in the Mass Democratic Movement. His conduct as head of the Cultural Desk caused some controversy, to which I shall return later in this chapter.

While Mzwakhe's formative school years were strongly influenced by the developments in Black Consciousness discussed in the previous chapter, particularly the Soweto Uprising of 1976, his personal biography resonates within the larger historical narrative of political resistance in the 1980s. In 1978 P.W. Botha was inducted as Prime Minister, after B.J. Vorster had been ousted over his involvement in the Information Scandal. Botha, who was perceived as a

moderate in comparison with his predecessor, immediately set about redefining government policy.<sup>8</sup> He extended the powers of the security establishment, setting up the State Security Council, which was to become a shadow parliament, and dramatically increasing military and police budgets. At the same time, however, he attempted to redefine apartheid policies, not in terms of racial segregation, but in terms of the economic opportunities of 'free enterprise'. The combination of military force and 'free enterprise' formed the basis of the concept of 'total onslaught', according to which securocrats saw South Africa's economic and political prosperity being threatened, not by legitimate grievances from within, but by so-called Communist forces from without. Mzwakhe's poems are shaped by, and respond to, the context of 'total onslaught' politics, in which disparate oppositional groupings, influences and ideologies were drawn together to provide unified resistance to the apartheid state.

Despite having been banned in 1960, the ANC had regained considerable influence in the townships in the late 1970s, particularly as a result of the vacuum left by the banning of the leading Black Consciousness organisations. Increasingly the ANC flag and symbols began to be displayed openly at political gatherings and funerals. The ANC had received about 4 000 recruits after the Soweto Uprising, and stepped up its military campaign in the late 1970s, initially attacking only strategic installations, but then directing its efforts at "officials of apartheid". More effective than the military campaigns of Umkhonto we Sizwe, however, were the efforts of movements inside the country. Chief amongst these was the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), an organisation of students at schools, technical colleges and teacher-training colleges, formed in 1979. Initially BC-oriented, it adopted the Freedom Charter in 1981, and played a leading role in organising the school boycotts which characterised the early and mid-eighties. The early eighties also saw the growth of community/civic, women's and youth associations, which often embarked upon joint campaigns with student organisations. Though generally concerned with localised problems, community associations also mobilised around larger issues, such as the boycott of elections for Black Local Authorities in 1983.

In August 1983 at Mitchell's Plain, near Cape Town, these organisations and others were

united in their opposition to the state under the auspices of the United Democratic Front (UDF), in which Mzwakhe would become a participant. The formation of the UDF was prompted by Allan Boesak's call, at a conference of the Transvaal Anti-South African Indian Council, for unified opposition to the tricameral constitution. Through this constitution P.W. Botha had aimed to gain the support of 'Coloured' and Indian voters by offering them limited political representation. The UDF claimed an affiliated membership of over two million, and by March 1984 included over 600 organisations (Davenport,1987:464). The UDF campaign against the new constitution led to a boycott of the elections by the majority of 'Coloured' and Indian voters. Despite lack of support for its constitutional proposals, the government formed a tricameral parliament, leading the UDF to seek new strategies of resistance. As most UDF affiliates were tacitly aligned with the ANC, they took up the organisation's call in 1985 to make the country 'ungovernable', seeking to dismantle in violent or non-violent ways the mechanisms of local government. In place of official state structures, street and area committees were set up.

The political upheaval of the mid-eighties was exacerbated by the economic crisis in the country. The government responded to the increasing difficulties of dealing with its opposition by declaring a State of Emergency in July 1985, and detaining over 8000 people. The State of Emergency was lifted early in 1986, but was reimposed with greater severity in June of the same year, and continued to be enforced until 2 February 1990. Statistics reveal something of the ruthlessness of state action: approximately 35 000 people were detained during 1986/1987; in October 1986 2 677 children under the age of 17 were being held by police; and The Weekly Mail reports during the period June 1985 - December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons (Bunn and Taylor,1987:13,20,28). Amongst those detained and held in solitary confinement was Mzwakhe Mbuli. His cassette Change is Pain was banned because the Directorate of Publications felt that "its stirring music and dramatic presentation [would] have great influence among revolutionary groups in the RSA and at mass-meetings as well" (Mbuli,1989). (No restriction was placed on his book Before Dawn.) The emergency regulations included severe media restrictions, which prohibited reporting on political unrest in any way that differed from the official version of events issued by the Bureau of

Information. There were also restrictions on political gatherings, and thirty-one organisations were effectively banned, including the UDF, the South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO), the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life that was filled by church leaders like Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane and Dennis Hurley, who increasingly spoke for mass political organisations inside the country. (We may recall the account of Mzwakhe's performance at the celebration of Tutu's Nobel Peace Prize.) The union organisation COSATU became more involved in political issues, particularly after its formal adoption of the Freedom Charter as policy in July 1987. This political involvement was to lead to a state crackdown on the organisation in 1988. The informal alliance which developed at this time between restricted UDF organisations and COSATU came in 1989 to be known as the Mass Democratic Movement. Since it was not formally constituted, it was very difficult to restrict.

The state was assailed from a number of sides in the late 1980s. It had been defeated militarily in Angola in 1988, and had accepted the principles of Resolution 435 in Namibia. It also faced mounting internal pressure, including open defiance by a number of restricted organisations and by the appearances of banned or wanted persons at political meetings or funerals. There were also increasing divisions within the National Party itself between those who favoured negotiations and those who advocated increased security action. Following a palace coup, the moderate faction achieved control, and P.W. Botha was ousted by F.W. de Klerk, who announced the lifting of the State of Emergency, the release of political prisoners, the unbanning of the major oppositional organisations, and the willingness of the government to enter into negotiations about an inclusive settlement.

In the context of extreme repression described above, political organisations such as the UDF and MDM drew support - in pragmatic fashion - from diverse ideological, linguistic, ethnic, economic and religious groupings. Mzwakhe's poems emerge from the hybridisations of these popular political movements, which were characterised by shifting allegiances, strategic alliances

and the mobilisation of support across societal divisions. The poems are themselves extremely syncretic in form, drawing together in the rhythms of performance diverse models and influences, from the izibongo performed by hostel-dwellers for visiting chiefs to British dub and American rap music. While Qabula for the most part remains close to the rural model of izibongo, which he uses in his adaptations to negotiate relationships of power in the modern workplace, Mzwakhe's poetry offers several modes of address to his audience.

He began his career performing without musical backing, except for the humming or singing of the crowd. At funerals in the late 1980s, he generally performed without accompaniment, and when requested still recites his poems at political meetings, funerals or on specific occasions. Generally, he is restricted by the necessity to remain before the microphone, and does not use bodily movement extensively in performance, though his facial expressions enact a 'sense' of the poem, and hand gestures punctuate climactic or dramatic moments. In addition to unaccompanied recitations, Mzwakhe performs at concerts with a musical backing provided by his band. (He is one of the few poets in the country who makes a living from his poetry.) His musical renditions involve a complex complementarity between rhythm, melody and verbal delivery - perhaps a hybrid form of 'poem-song' - and Mzwakhe's physical performance is more demonstrative and lively. In addition, he dresses more consciously in Afro-fashions (fez, dashiki, kaftan, and the like), whereas for his unaccompanied performances he dresses in fairly conventional, Western ways.

Though he is primarily an oral poet, in that his poems are most effective when performed, Mzwakhe received a literate education and has for many years **written** his poems, claiming that they take a long time to complete and often require two to three weeks of revision (Makgabutlane, 1990:27). When he was kept in solitary confinement for 176 days without pen, paper or reading matter, however, he was forced to rely entirely on oral composition and the powers of memory. (We may compare Jeremy Cronin, who also composed poems in prison through the powers of memory.) Mzwakhe argues that the experience of solitary confinement strengthened him, and gave a new dimension to his work (Makgabutlane, 1990:24).

Mzwakhe's only book, Before Dawn, published by the Congress of South African Writers in 1989, contains most of the poems from his first two albums Change is Pain and Unbroken Spirit, almost all of which are in English. In performance, Mzwakhe delivers the lines in a rhythmical fashion, with a marked pause at the end of each line. The print version appears to seek to mark this pause by means of a semi-colon. Here is an example from the poem "Many Years Ago":

Man strode triumphantly;  
 Like a lion in the jungle;  
 Trees bowed down their leaves;  
 In honour of true humanity ... . (1989:17)

The written arrangement seems to me inappropriate. Registering a spoken form in the written medium involves our accomplishing a delicate balance between oral and print conventions: in this case there seems instead to be a conflict between the function of the semicolon as rhythmical and grammatical marker. My own feeling is that the line-break in print is sufficient to register the pause in delivery at the end of each line, and that a note could be included at the beginning of the volume to the effect that this is the convention employed. The lines in the poems are also arranged in stanzas which function both to indicate sense-groupings in the print convention, and to allow readers to recover something of the poems' performed quality by 'marking' the points at which guitar breaks or rhythm sections occur in the musical rendition. Despite my reservations about the use of semicolons, I have remained with the published text for the purposes of this chapter.

Formally, Mzwakhe's poems appear to have little in common with rural izibongo. They generally do not use the principle of 'naming'; neither do they construct elaborate sets of epithets or praise names. Instead they use the rhetorical devices of parallelism and repetition to develop an intensity of delivery appropriate to the energies and angers of the political funeral or

rally. "Change is Pain" (26-27), one of Mzwakhe's best-known poems, for example, uses repeated constructions - a form of jazz call-and-response - to build to a rousing climax:

Change is unknown in my ghetto;  
 Change is an endless bucket system in Alexandra;  
 Change is pain in Africa;  
 Change is throttled by misdirected surrogates of the world;  
 Change to a free non-racial society is certain;  
 Revolutionary change shall set man free from bondage;  
 And the ruins of autocracy shall fall. (27)

The poem offers a call to action in which Mzwakhe may be seen to serve a similar function to the imbongi who rouses people to war. Mzwakhe himself stresses, however, that his poems urge actions in the social world, not necessarily armed combat. In interviews, Mzwakhe also points to the importance of his work in sustaining and comforting those engaged in political activity. This, he feels, is entirely consistent with a call to action, and he points out that the customary movement of many of his poems is from comfort to exhortation. The poem "The Spear Has Fallen" (21-22) exemplifies the trajectory from the expression of pain -

For the heart of Africa is bleeding;  
 Bleeding from the wounds knifed hollow;  
 Brutally knifed alone in the night ... (21) -

to a mobilising rhetoric -

Africa the spear has fallen;  
 Pick it up;  
 And forward to the battle ... . (22)



"The Spear Has Fallen" is modelled on the death oration, or panegyric, of African societies, a form which Mzwakhe employs to great effect at political funerals. Certainly the responses to his performances in the 1980s testify to the power of his poems to sustain and mobilise audiences in contexts of crisis.

As was suggested earlier in this study, praise poetry is characterised not by narrative linking, but by its concatenation of imagery. Mzwakhe draws extensively on images, particularly those of the natural world, for formal and thematic effects, and many of the poems construct themselves around extended similes or metaphors. The poem "Crocodiles" (39-40), for example, though it refers only in the central stanza to "the people" as being "like crocodiles in the river", uses this image as the mainspring of the poem:

The land is the key to social order;  
 The people are like crocodiles in the river;  
 And no one can fight crocodiles inside the river;  
 South Africa why therefore buy time?  
 When crocodiles are against you;  
 Why give chase to lizards?  
 When crocodiles are against you. (39-40)

The other images and observations in the poem (the "blood stained" land; the references to "slavery"; the "dove of peace"; the "boiling pot") proceed from the central image which establishes the conflict between state and people.

Besides the images, other traditional rhetorical devices serve to motivate Mzwakhe's poems. A number of critics have detailed the importance of wordplay in African societies, particularly the emphasis placed on riddles, tongue-twisters, rhymes, proverbs, and witticisms.<sup>9</sup> Certain of Mzwakhe's poems create their effects through the dexterous manipulation of words and sounds for satirical purposes. The best-known of these is "Triple 'M'" (12-13), which creates

from the names of the homeland leaders an anagram - emphasised in the print form by some inventive type-setting - encapsulating perceptions of their misrule:

Now is a MESS:

MHhh...meme...ss MATANZIMA, MANGOPE, MPHEPHU, SEBE;

Mmmess it's a mess;

Yes it is a mmess.

Now lately a MMESH;

Mmm-mesh MATANZIMA, MANGOPE, SEBE, HOLOMISA;

MMESH it's a MESH;

Yes it is a MMESH. (13)

Unlike Qabula, whose performance of oral poems at union meetings appears to have sprung from his own responses rather than in conscious imitation of any literary precedent,<sup>10</sup> Mzwakhe does not emerge from a poetic vacuum, even though many literary critics in South Africa - with the exception of Sole (1987b) - have treated him as if that were the case. Mzwakhe himself acknowledges that he regularly heard poets like Ingoapele Madingoane performing their work, and later shared a platform with them. He was also a regular reader of Staffrider magazine, and was as much influenced by the hybrid urban forms of the Soweto poets as by the izibongo which he heard while travelling the township hostels with his father.

As the Soweto poets did, Mzwakhe works mostly in English so as to reach as wide an audience as possible. (He does, however, perform in other languages, particularly Zulu.) Like the black poets of the seventies, who often used the banal formulation or the familiar trope in defiance of the Western lyric tradition of inventive image-making, Mzwakhe frequently uses what James Matthews called "making plain" as a poetic strategy. At key moments in many of his poems, he will move from the defamiliarising to the familiar, from the metaphor to the slogan, thus establishing a sense of commonality with the audience, a commonality reinforced by the

call-and-response mode. In "The Noble Charter" (50-51), for example, Mzwakhe shifts from images of the Freedom Charter as "the freedom wagon [which] moved with direction" and oppressed black people as "Africa's tarnished children", to conclude with the well-known slogan "the people shall govern".

Several of the older Soweto poets, in Mafika Gwala's words, wished to stretch "the English language so that it would accommodate their African background and ghetto ordeals" (1984:45). Mzwakhe, in contrast, tends towards diction that is elevated and biblical, thus revealing a visionary impulse akin to that of Madingoane and, before him, Isaiah Shembe. Reviewers and critics have referred constantly to the "prophetic" nature of his poems (we may recall the journalist, quoted at the outset, who said of Mzwakhe's performance, "this was how prophets are meant to sound"), and the poems themselves contain numerous references to prophecy. The prophetic note is struck particularly as apocalypse in Mzwakhe's work, which echoes the strongly apocalyptic tone in much of the later Soweto poetry where the use of African and Christian mythology was also directed at the political as opposed to the metaphysical sphere. More interesting, though, is 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. The opening of the poem "Crocodiles", which I discussed earlier, provides a good example:

I am the product of hunger;  
 I am the product of social injustice;  
 I represent the insulted majority;  
 I represent the victims of tyranny;  
 I come from apartheid land. (39)

Something of the amplitude of the pronoun "I" in this context is suggested by the title accorded Mzwakhe as "the people's poet", an appellation which almost certainly derives from the traditional acclamation "imbongi yesizwe", the highest honour bestowed on a praise poet. In this

sense, 'Mzwakhe' in the voice of the poem appears to be a visionary and prophetic 'speaker' somewhat distinct from Mzwakhe Mbuli the person, a view which is supported by Mzwakhe's tendency to refer to 'Mzwakhe' in the third person in interviews. However, Mbuli's poems are less visionary in overall dimension than, say, Madingoane's africa my beginning, for they are strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the political speech or pamphlet.

The emphasis on the declamatory persona in the poems may derive in part from the influence of personal izibongo or 'boasts' which African people create for themselves, but it also suggests the influence of the performance arrogance of rap and dub artists. Elizabeth Tonkin has pointed to the importance of electronic media such as radio and cassette recordings in maintaining and modifying a culture of orality in a modernised African world (1989:46). Mzwakhe is a case in point, for his poems have been shaped by international musical forms such as rap music and Rastafarian 'toasting' or dub. Though he denies that he is a "dub poet", for his repertoire extends beyond mere recitation to a reggae beat, he does acknowledge affinities with the work of British poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah, with whom he has shared platforms.<sup>11</sup> The influence of rap music and Rastafarian 'toasting' is particularly evident in Mzwakhe's diction, for the words seem often to be chosen as much for their rhythm and rhyme as their 'meaning'. Similarly, the line sequence sometimes appears disjointed when the poems are read, though there is coherence in the rhythms of performance. Perhaps more so than in approaching Qabula, it is vital for criticism to attempt to recreate the context of performance in discussing Mzwakhe if the poems are to be allowed to recover something of their oral vibrancy and power. Video recordings of performances are useful in this regard, as are the numerous published accounts of his performances.

Oral poetry often takes the place of newspapers for non-literate people, as Ruth Finnegan has argued (1970:272), and in the State of Emergency in the 1980s the poetry of performance served to convey important information otherwise difficult to disseminate. In a context of extreme state repression, the oral testimony of Mzwakhe, himself a victim of police brutality and in constant fear of his life, gained an authority acknowledged by many who witnessed his

performances. The very reliance of the oral form on the persona of the performer, however, raises its own difficulties, for Mzwakhe achieved great notoriety through his allegedly autocratic behaviour as head of the Cultural Desk, a notoriety which certainly influenced the reception of his work. (He was widely accused of cultural commissarship.) It is perhaps indicative both of his personal talent and charisma, and the reputation which he had already established, that his poetic career survived such difficulties.

How do we 'read' Mzwakhe in the 1990s, though? The poet acknowledges a familiarity with the work of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, and his work reveals an awareness of the discursive and economic oppressions of colonial and postcolonial history. Yet in similar vein to Qabula he does not maintain ideological coherence in his poems on issues of political or economic transformation. Instead they yoke together sources as diverse as the rhetoric of African nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Christianity, Black Consciousness, traditional mythology and Marxist analysis:

Admire me I am the beats from the drums of Tanzania;  
 Arousing the deeper thirst for freedom;  
 When man is hard like Pharaoh at heart;  
 Sucking the blood of blue-collar workers;  
 Condemning their sacred way of living;  
 Factories roaring til Sunday;  
 A labour temple substituted a God Temple;  
 Wages cannot equal labour;  
 Poverty created trenched in the bodies of man;  
 Poverty hauled down the splendours of humankind. ("The Drum Beats":19)

As in the case of Qabula, I would wish to allow Mzwakhe his project in its historical moment, one of harsh exigencies and difficult, sometimes bewildering transition; and in considering his 'present meaning', I would locate his contradictory position in the larger history of hybridisation

and strategic allegiance that has characterised popular political and cultural formations in this country. Certainly the lines from "The Drum Beats", quoted above, could usefully be placed in a tradition of syncretic popular performance which stretches back, through Ingoapele Madingoane, to Isaiah Shembe and, before him, Ntsikana in the early nineteenth century. In all of these cases, diverse experiential, ideological, spiritual and aesthetic influences are drawn together in periods of social dislocation to provide forms of survival and assertion.

The question of what Mzwakhe means now, in changed historical circumstances, is not simply the concern of criticism, however, but has consequences for Mzwakhe's own career. It remains to be seen what role he might find for himself in a society struggling towards civil charters rather than the politics of mobilisation and resistance. While Mzwakhe's 'modernity' may equip him for a new role more effectively than adherence - as in Qabula's case - to older derivations, Mzwakhe's constituency of the 1980s has to a large extent been diverted from mass actions by the pragmatics of party politics; Qabula's union base, in contrast, remains intact. Increasingly, Mzwakhe has defined his audience in worldwide terms, aiming to build for himself an international musical and poetic career. Certainly much of his time is now spent performing overseas with his band, he has an overseas album release, and his work has recently been reviewed in the British music magazine Select. It is unclear, nevertheless, what role Mzwakhe perceives for his current work. He has spoken of the importance of promoting peace and reconciliation, but apart from participating in the national "Peace Song" in which his contribution was edited down to a few lines, and collaborating with the song-writer and producer Chicco on the song "Papa Stop the War", his role in the process of reconstruction lacks a sure sense of purpose. His performances at the Hani funeral and at the presidential inauguration suggested that he might emerge as the imbongi of the ANC, but he has stressed that this is not his mission. Mzwakhe's enormous success suggests that he will continue to move audiences with the powerful resonances of his performance poetry. Yet it remains to be seen whether he stays a voice from the past, keeping alive in memory the experiences of political violence, torture and endurance, or whether he addresses the needs of a society trying to turn revolutionary rhetoric into an evolutionary modernisation of living and life.

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A new anthology of South African poetry could usefully set the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula in the long tradition of oral poetry and performance which - as I have charted - begins with the songs/stories of the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi. Mzwakhe and Qabula - together with more recent oral poets like Lesego Rampolokeng, Madlinyoka Ntanzu, the late Cijimpi Msomi and others - suggest the continuing influence of oral forms in South African literary and social life. Granting the poems in an anthology their oral, performative character and status will require judicious editorial decisions concerning methods of transforming oral expression into conventions of print representation. In addition, the editor will be required to decide on summaries of context: how to recreate for the reader the informing significance of the occasion. Such an anthology should have the purpose of urging South African literary scholars to grant oral forms a central place in research projects and teaching syllabi. It should encourage the development - for which I have argued throughout this study - of critical methodologies appropriate to the specific challenges of African performance genres, so releasing the many voices of our poetry.

### Notes

1. I am indebted for my account of the development of the trade union movement in the 1980s to Davenport (1987) and Pampallis (1991).
2. The adaptation of izibongo for purposes other than praising chiefs was not particularly unusual. Jeff Opland records a Xhosa poem which begins with the salute "A! Polonutolo!", extolling the virtues of the breakfast cereal Pronutro (1983:243).
3. See Kromberg (1991) for more detailed discussion of the importance of dress in the

performance of trade union poetry in what is now KwaZulu Natal.

4. In this case and certain others Sitas's and Qabula's line division seems somewhat arbitrary. A better division might be:

Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi  
And the ancestors have answered us,  
And sent to us FOSATU!

5. Steve Kromberg has argued that cultural forms such as izibongo are in Natal closely linked to ideas of 'Zuluness' (1994:6), and he explores what he perceives to be the tension between nationalism and ethnicity in Natal 'worker' poetry. However, I think his perception that there is a necessary connection between the form of izibongo and the ideology of Zulu separatism is somewhat ahistorical, particularly in view of the important intersections and contacts between forms of praising in different African societies in the subcontinent (especially between Zulu and Xhosa societies). Further, his argument is somewhat thin on textual support from the poems.
6. Behind Sole's discussion of the ideological contradictions in Qabula and Hlatshwayo's poem lies a larger debate about the role of creative and critical writing in South Africa in the 1980s. Sole would probably reject my own granting of Qabula his project within his political moment, arguing instead that criticism is necessary to political organisation even in a context of crisis. For an analogous debate, see Sole's questioning of what he perceives to be Serote's uncritical treatment of "the Movement" in To Every Birth its Blood (1991). Trump (1990) and Visser (1987) raise similar objections. In contrast Njabulo Ndebele, though he has elsewhere argued cogently for complexity and critical engagement in black writing, claims that the containing of criticism was a necessary political strategy to maintain unity:



The necessity of closing ranks meant the suppression of criticism, even if that criticism could strengthen the movement in the long run. In other words, the controls that the state imposed upon everyone, we imposed upon ourselves. Historically it is perhaps understandable that when you are powerless, as an act of survival you want to make sure that you keep your group intact, because any possible disintegration reinforces powerlessness. Your options are limited, and you have to make some tragic choices. In the fight for freedom, you may experience the need to contain freedom within your own organisation. You maintain group cohesion, but at a price. It should be recognised when such a historically determined situation becomes a threat to the very survival of the group. This is not a moral issue, it is a matter of survival. (Brown and Van Dyk, 1991:50)

For a further exploration of debates about the changing role of writing and criticism in light of the unbannings of 2 February 1990 see Brown and Van Dyk (1991).

7. As regards the Hani funeral, something of the contingency of South African political and cultural organisation is suggested by the fact that Mzwakhe was only approached to perform at seven o' clock on the previous evening. He admits that he was still memorising his poem in the car on the way to the stadium (personal communication with Mzwakhe Mbuli).
8. As with my account of the development of trade unionism in this period, I am indebted to Davenport (1987) and Pampallis (1991) for my discussion of developments within political organisations in the 1980s.
9. See, amongst others, Isidore Okpewho for an elaboration of the nature and function of such verbal figures (1992:226-250), and Mapanje and White (1983:31-52) for examples.
10. He claims that there was no one in Natal doing anything similar at the time, though there

was some interest in drama as a form of worker expression.

11. Rustum Kozain has conducted a comparative study between Mzwakhe Mbuli and Linton Kwesi Johnson (1994).

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ORALITY, TEXTUALITY AND HISTORY

ISSUES IN SOUTH AFRICAN ORAL POETRY AND PERFORMANCE

by

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## Abstract

A vigorous oral tradition has existed throughout South African history, and in many ways represents our truly original contribution to world literature. Despite this, oral literature is largely absent from accounts of literary history in this country. While the particular oppressions of South African political life have contributed to the exclusion of oral forms, the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text is a feature of literary studies worldwide, and appears to be related to the critical practices that have been dominant in universities and schools for most of this century. In this study I consider ways of recovering oral forms for literary debate, and offer what I consider to be more appropriate strategies of 'reading'. My aim is to re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen, through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianised oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s.

Recovering oral poetry and performance genres for literary debate requires the development of an appropriate critical methodology. Through a consideration of advances in the study of orality, I aim to suggest ways of reading which grant credence to the specific strategies and performative energies of oral texts while locating the texts in the spaces and constrictions of their societies. A great many oral texts from the past survive only in printed, translated forms, however, and a key aspect of such a critical project is how - while acknowledging the particular difficulties involved - one 'uses' highly mediated and artificially stabilised print versions to suggest something of the dynamic nature of oral performance in South African historical and social life. This thesis also considers how texts address us across historical distances. I argue for maintaining a dialectic between the 'past significance' and 'present meaning' of the poems, songs and stories: for allowing the past to shape our reading while we remain aware that our recuperation of history is inevitably directed by present needs and ideologies.

These ideas are explored through five chapters which consider, respectively, the songs and stories of the nineteenth-century /Xam Bushmen, the izibongo of Shaka, the hymns of the

Messianic Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe, Ingoapele Madingoane's epic 'Soweto' poem "black trial", and the performance poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula in the 1980s.

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## Introduction

A vigorous oral tradition has existed throughout South African history, and in many ways represents our truly original contribution to world literature. Despite this, oral literature is largely absent from accounts of literary history in this country. While the particular oppressions of South African political life have certainly contributed to the exclusion of oral forms - which are largely associated with black societies - the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text is a feature of literary studies worldwide, and appears to be related to the critical practices that have been dominant in universities and schools for most of this century. In this study I shall consider ways of recovering oral forms for literary debate, and shall offer what I consider to be more appropriate strategies of 'reading'. My aim is to re-establish a line of continuity in South African poetry and performance from the songs and stories of the Bushmen,<sup>1</sup> through the praise poems of the African chiefdoms, to the development of Christianised oral forms, the adaptation of the oral tradition in 'Soweto' poetry of the 1970s, and the performance of poems on political platforms in the 1980s. In doing this, I shall be reacting against the established line which is based upon the printed word, and which begins with Thomas Pringle and ends with Douglas Livingstone or Mongane Wally Serote. I shall argue, nonetheless, that orality and literacy intersect continuously in South African literary history.

Recovering oral poetry and performance genres for literary debate requires the development of an appropriate critical methodology. Through a consideration of advances in the study of orality, I aim to suggest ways of reading which grant credence to the specific strategies and performative energies of oral texts while locating the texts in the spaces and constrictions of their societies. A great many oral texts from the past survive only in printed, translated forms, however, and a key aspect of such a critical project is how - while acknowledging the particular difficulties involved - one 'uses' highly mediated and artificially stabilised print versions to suggest something of the dynamic nature of oral performance in South African historical and social life. This thesis also considers the question of how texts address us across historical distances, and argues for readings that resist either a simple antiquarianism (in which the study



of the past is self-justificatory and occurs ostensibly in terms of past concerns) or the contrapuntal relativist position (in which the past is simply 'rewritten' according to modern agendas). I shall argue for maintaining a dialectic between the 'past significance' and 'present meaning' of the poems, songs and stories: for allowing the past to shape our reading while we remain aware that our recuperation of history is inevitably directed by present needs and ideologies.

The retrieval of oral poetry and performance genres for critical debate is an important part of a larger process of human, social and political reconstruction currently taking place in South Africa. Hence, this study has a particular moral purpose, which seeks to avoid what Robert Weimann regards as the self-reflexively 'academic' nature of much contemporary literary criticism:

Criticism ... no longer fulfils the cultural needs and expectations of society: it has become "related to the institutional procedures of education rather than to the education of a social class". In other words, so much academic criticism is written to fulfil professional requirements that it is possible to say that the "primary function of writing literary criticism has ... become certifying college and university teachers of literature". (1977:30-31)

While my study constitutes a thesis for higher-degree purposes and hence is "written to fulfil professional requirements", it attempts to locate itself within the strategies of societal renewal in a post-apartheid South Africa, and to retrieve and (re)read an important part of our suppressed cultural history. In examining the complex functioning of oral forms in their societies, the study wishes to repudiate still wide-spread assertions about the lack of sophistication in the African oral tradition and, accordingly, to affirm the full human creativity of our society. At the same time, it seeks to restore to debates about poetry, both locally and internationally, the necessary dialectic between the oral and the written. The concern to retrieve a cultural history does not, however, imply that the study will simply valorise African cultural forms. Rather, it will attempt

to suggest ways of 'reading' the texts or messages that do not avoid what might seem to many of us today to be conservativisms associated with certain societies or practices (such as the highly authoritarian nature of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka or Dingane, or the moral strictures of many of the African separatist churches). The challenge is to engage creatively with the forms in their own historical and discursive contexts while remaining alert to their possible significance for us today in very different circumstances.

\* \* \*

Oral poetry and performance have been important features of South African society since the development of the first human communities on the subcontinent, from the songs and stories of the Bushmen and Khoikhoi to the praise poems ("izibongo", "lithoko") of African chiefdoms. In addition to prominent 'public' forms of panegyric to the leader, other forms of oral poetry have flourished - and continue to flourish - in African societies: songs to the clan; family songs (especially at weddings and funerals); love lyrics; children's verse; work songs; lullabies; personal izibongo; religious songs; songs to animals; and songs of divination. The influence of missionaries on the oral tradition gave rise to forms which drew on the harmonies and poetics of the Christian hymn, such as Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" or the compositions of the Messianic Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe. With urbanisation following rapidly on colonial occupation, oral forms were adapted to industrialised, politicised contexts. Migrant workers in mine compounds have used forms of praise poetry for most of this century in order to praise or criticise indunas or shift bosses. Sotho miners have developed a new genre of oral poetry called "sefela" which aesthetically encodes their experiences as migrant workers, while Sotho women perform poetic narratives ("seoeleoele") through the medium of song and dance in shebeens and bars (Coplan, 1987:13-14). In the apartheid 'homelands', particularly Transkei, praise poets played an important role in orchestrating resistance to rulers like Chief Kaiser Matanzima and others. A number of poets had also adapted oral forms to the printed page, amongst them H.I.E. Dhlomo, Mazisi Kunene, B.W. Vilakazi and A.C. Jordan, while in the first four decades of this century S.E.K. Mqhayi, possibly the best known twentieth-century oral poet in South Africa, had

successfully combined the African mode of oral performance with the Western technology of print. (He was named "imbongi yesizwe jikelele" - praise poet of the whole nation.) During the political upheaval of the 1970s, Soweto poets like Ingoapele Madingoane experimented with oral performance as a means of disseminating poems while avoiding not only threats of state censorship, but the 'gatekeeping' of white-controlled literary magazines. Oral poetry has also been linked for many years to trade-union activity in South Africa with reports, for example, going back to a traditional imbongi named Hlongwe who in the 1930s in Durban praised the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (Sole,1987a:108). During the 1980s, poets like Alfred Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo utilised the form of izibongo in mobilising support for the union movement, while Mzwakhe Mbuli achieved acclaim for his poetry performances at mass meetings and political funerals (he became known as "the people's poet"). There are even reports of praise poems being recited at university ceremonies, notable examples being a poem by Pumelele M. Pumulwana at the Fort Hare graduation in 1939, and another by Chief S.M. Burns-Ncamashe on the installation of the new chancellor of Rhodes University on 30 March 1977 (Opland,1984:191). Recently, Nelson Mandela was the subject of a poem by Mzwakhe Mbuli and two izibongo on his inauguration as State President. An imbongi also performed at the opening of South Africa's first democratic parliament.

Despite this abundance of forms, many of which still 'live' in the daily experiences of South African people, there is a profound lack of critical debate about oral poetry and performance in South African literary studies. While some research has been conducted on oral literature in African languages (see, for example, the work of H.I.E. Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi, D.P. Kunene, Mazisi Kunene and others), and important collections of oral poems have appeared, the oral tradition has largely been 'written out' of literary history.<sup>2</sup> It is only now being recovered, both through the work of sociologists and anthropologists, and through a revisionist awareness of the processes of exclusion, occlusion and effacement that have occurred in the construction of the cultural history of this country.

In literary studies the customary trajectory of South African poetic history, as represented in critical accounts and anthologies, has largely been that of the Western tradition of print. In their book A Critical Study of South African Poetry in English (1957), for example, G.M. Miller and Howard Sergeant give little attention to black poetry: the only black poets they refer to are H.I.E. Dhlomo, whose work is strongly influenced by his mission-school education, and the 'coloured' writer Peter Abrahams. Though they identify the colonial assumptions which characterise much early white South African poetry, they remain committed finally - in keeping with their times - to a European (literate) aesthetic. They dismiss African forms such as music and Bushman rock art as "primitive" (1957:9); and, though they express their impatience with the morally discursive poetry of a white intellectual élite around the turn of the century, they seek not African alternatives, but what they perceive to be the energising impulses of European modernism and symbolism (1957:11). (This is profoundly ironic, of course, in view of the debt of European modernism to north and west African cultural forms.) Although titled A Book of South African Verse, Guy Butler's influential 1959 anthology tacitly redefines the term "South African verse" to mean "South African verse written originally in English", and on this basis includes only the work of white literate poets. Like Miller and Sergeant before him, Butler labels African culture as "primitive" (1959:xxxi & xxxii). In revising A Book of South African Verse twenty years later in very different historical circumstances, Butler and Mann (1979) reveal - not unsurprisingly - a far greater sensitivity to questions of race and language, and acknowledge explicitly the difficulty of compiling an anthology in a "complex multi-lingual society in the midst of turbulent transition" (1979:14). Accordingly their collection A New Book of South African Verse in English includes the work of certain black writers: those associated with the mission press (like J.J.R. Jolobe), poets drawing on oral forms in printed verse (like Mazisi Kunene), and the Soweto poets. The bulk of the poems in the anthology, however, continue to fall within the Western print tradition. Michael Chapman includes neither praise poetry nor Khoikhoi/Bushman poetry in A Century of South African Poetry (1981), but - like Butler and Mann - includes selections by black poets working in English. His influential study South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective (1984) discusses oral poetry only as it influences the work of the Soweto poets. In The Paperbook of South African English Poetry (1986) he addresses

directly the difficulties of whether to include translations, particularly of poems in African languages. Although he finally rejects such an alternative as comprising little more than tokenism in that insufficient examples exist in English translation to result in fair coverage (1986:18), Chapman does represent Jack Cope's translations of Bushman and Khoikhoi pieces, as well as Alfred Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" which was composed originally in Zulu. He also includes the work of white English poets who have drawn on the African oral tradition, such as Jeremy Cronin and Keith Gottschalk. Voices from Within (1982), which Chapman compiled with Achmat Dangor, includes a section of seven pages on "traditional" poetry in translation, as well as poems by S.E.K. Mqhayi, A.K. Soga, and B.W. Vilakazi. This collection is subtitled "Black Poetry from Southern Africa" and perhaps reflects the danger of 'ghettoising' not only black but oral forms, of setting them apart from other forms of South African verse. Tim Couzens and Essop Patel's anthology The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry 1891-1981 (1982) includes an impressive century of black South African poems, but specifically excludes oral and African-language verse. Malvern van Wyk Smith's historical study of South African literature, Grounds of Contest (1990), ignores oral forms entirely.

Though its largest section is devoted to printed poetry in English, Jack Cope and Uys Krige's influential anthology The Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968) appears to be the earliest general South African anthology to offer a fairly comprehensive selection of African oral poetry. Chapman is correct, I think, that the decision of the editors to "balkanize the volume into different sections for the different language groups is unfortunate" (1986:18). This sentiment is echoed by Stephen Gray who says that the poets "may all have been on the same bus, but white English speakers drove it while blacks had the seats reserved in the back" (1989:xix). Nonetheless, I feel that Cope and Krige's anthology promised to erode the linguistic separations that have been a feature not only of South African political life but of South African literary history. (Their anthology includes in one volume poetry originally in English, and - in translation - poems in Afrikaans, "Bushman", "Hottentot", Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu.) The editors acknowledge the difficulties of transcription and translation in the anthologising of oral texts - their editorial interventions are not always unproblematic, a point to which I shall return - but regard it as

necessary, at least, to represent the oral tradition in South African poetry. In his Penguin Book of South African Verse (1989), Stephen Gray defines his task in relation to that of Cope and Krige. Wishing to emphasise linguistic proximities rather than divisions (1989:xix), he talks of translation as "a major life-sustaining activity within the system" and as "unblocking channels of communication to insist on the reciprocity of human feelings" (1989:xix). He includes as a result a variety of African oral texts, many of which have been translated by poets of some renown. Within southern African literature, Colin Style and O'lan Style's Mambo Book of Zimbabwean Verse in English (1986) is one of the few collections to offer a range of both printed poetry and translated oral poetry. Despite the brief "Note on Translations" which follows their Introduction, however, the editors themselves are unable to offer any coherent theory of the translation process, referring instead to the "idiosyncratic charm" carried over into English by translations which tend towards the literal (1986:xxix). Jeff Opland's recent anthology Words that Circle Words: A Choice of South African Oral Poetry (1992) offers extensive translations of oral poems, which set in dialogue with one another Sotho, Xhosa, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Bushman and Khoikhoi forms. Although serving an important recuperative function, however, the anthology is in danger of effacing the important lines of continuity and influence between oral and printed forms, and of reinforcing perceptions that oral poetry is an area of specialisation on the margins of South African literary studies. The only critical survey which includes oral and African-language forms in the broader literary history of the subcontinent is Michael Chapman's very recent Southern African Literatures (1996). This comprehensive study treats the songs/stories of the Bushmen and Khoikhoi and the izibongo of African societies both as the earliest texts of our literary history and as continuing influences within that history.

\* \* \*

As this brief summary suggests, oral poetry has not been entirely excluded from South African literary history, but occupies a minor place - sometimes designated 'specialist' - outside of the mainstream printed tradition. The suppression and/or marginalisation of the oral proceeds from

two related problems, which are implicit in the anthologies and studies discussed above: the ontological (the linguistic/textual 'status' of the poems as mediated through the processes of transcription and translation) and the paradigmatic (the inability of traditionally literate paradigms in criticism to account adequately for oral poetry). As I suggested at the outset, a study of this nature - which seeks to recover oral poetry and performance for literary debate while remaining largely reliant on printed texts - needs to engage with these problems and offer workable solutions.

As regards the ontological difficulties, the nature or status of many oral texts as they have come to be recorded in print is at best ambiguous. (Of course, the same may be said of the printed versions of Shakespeare's plays, which first appeared only after the playwright's death, relied at least partly for reconstruction on the memories of actors, and have been 'edited' by centuries of scholars.) Except when an actual live performance is witnessed - which is only possible with contemporary, local poets - oral poems survive through a process of mediation. They are generally transferred from an oral to a printed form through the agency of a literate intermediary, who often holds a position of political power over the poet or informant. Such is the case with the bulk of the African praise poetry that survives: it has been transcribed and sometimes translated into another language (usually English) by missionaries, colonial administrators, anthropologists, historians and the like. Similarly, the songs and stories of the nineteenth-century /Xam Bushmen, including their own 'memory' of earlier myths or legends, are available to modern readers largely through the work of W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd, who in the 1870s conducted a series of interviews with a group of Bushman convicts in Cape Town. These texts have more recently been given currency by Stephen Watson's 'versions' from Bleek and Lloyd's manuscript in Return of the Moon (1991). To talk simply of 'transcribing' the poem has a neutrality which ignores the fact that a literate epistemology is necessarily at work in the transference of the poem from the oral to the printed medium, and that the 'transcriber' may lack the cultural understanding or phonetic repertoire to capture the full 'meaning' of the poem, including that of an aesthetic impact: an aesthetic impact as measurable against a set of specific circumstances and audience expectations. The printed form may also give poems a fixity which

obviates their very significance as oral performance: the texts of izibongo - such as those of Shaka or Dingane - varied to a greater or lesser extent with every delivery, and the specific demands of the occasion made each performance a distinct 'event'. A frank, if alarming, admission concerning the process of mediation in the oral-print transfer is found in the Introduction to Cope and Krige's anthology. Acknowledging the problem of variations in the performance of izibongo, the editors say: "No two reciters will deliver the poems in the same order or sequence with the result that any single transcription appears like a jumble of dissociated images and historical tags. In these extracts images and sequences have been reassembled in a more comprehensible order" (1968:20). The influence of Western assumptions of 'aesthetic unity' are clearly evident in this statement. Yet the ontological question is not limited to those texts which are mediated by a second party, for even when we 'know' that the printed record is accurate, as in the case of the oral poets from the 1980s who are literate and have produced books, the status of oral poems on the page is at best uncertain.

The ontology of the poems is further problematised - as I have suggested - by the fact that most are performed originally in languages other than English, and are hence accessible to many people only in translation. Like transcription, translation involves an important process of mediation, as an extreme example quoted by Susan Bassnett-McGuire should indicate. Edward Fitzgerald said of translating Persian poetry in 1851: "It is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them" (1980:3). In her book Translation Studies, Bassnett-McGuire argues that although translation has been an important aspect of literary production and study since at least Graeco-Roman times, and serves to create enriching areas of contact between cultures/historical periods, critics have not investigated with any coherence the theory and practice of translation. At worst literary critics, particularly today, have tended to read and teach translations from the source language as if they were original target-language texts. The seriousness with which translation has been viewed at key historical moments, however, is indicated by the fact that, as an example, Edward Dolet was executed for



heresy in France in 1546 for 'mistranslating' one of Plato's dialogues "in such a way as to imply disbelief in immortality" (Bassnett-McGuire,1980:54).

In attempting to conceptualise translation as a literary activity, Bassnett-McGuire argues that it should not be conceived of in narrowly 'linguistic' terms, but in fact belongs properly to the field of semiotics (1980:13). Hence, she argues that the text must be seen in relation to the signifying systems of its society, both in the source language and the target language. Drawing on developments in literary theory, particularly on Roland Barthes's emphasis on the role of the reader in 'creating' the text, Bassnett-McGuire emphasises the fact that every translation is in fact a 'reading', which involves the processes of decoding and recoding (1980:16). Yet she points to the difficulties experienced in translating from one language to another when there is no equivalent of the literary form within the signifying systems of the target language - a difficulty experienced particularly in translating izibongo into English - or when there is no linguistic/semantic equivalent of a word, phrase or idiom in the target language. The difficulties of translating poetry are exacerbated by the fact that the structures of rhythm and rhyme often differ greatly from one language or language group to another, something which is particularly marked in the case of English and African languages. Further, the question of finding corresponding literary forms in the source language and the target language is of particular concern in the practice of translating oral poetry and performance genres. Ruth Finnegan points out that whereas written poetry is primarily typographically marked, critics who are involved in oral studies identify the poetic status of oral texts not through one absolute criterion, "but [through] a range of stylistic and formal attributes - features like heightened language, metaphorical expression, musical form or accompaniment, structural repetitiveness ... , prosodic features like metre, alliteration, even perhaps parallelism", as well as through the fact that the poem is 'italicised' or 'set apart' from everyday life and language (1977:25-26). But the question of how to represent oral poems in translated, written forms remains vexed. Like most translators, Finnegan herself opts for the print convention of short lines and stanzas, thus seeking to create an equivalence of effect between the source language and target language.<sup>3</sup>

Translation also often involves difficulties when the cosmogonic and ethical assumptions of the source language and target language are disjunctive. Eugene Nida, for example, cites the case of Guaica, a language of southern Venezuela, from which translation into English is problematic, since the language does not follow a dichotomous classification of 'good' and 'bad' but a trichotomous distinction (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980:30). In such a situation the translator appears to face the problem of 'untranslatability'. Yet his/her task is similar in this respect to that of the literary historian: how to make a text from another historical period (or society) available or accessible to us without reducing its 'otherness' or 'strangeness': hence, equivalence in translation, without which meaning is impossible, need not imply 'sameness'. We approach a problem here to which we shall return when discussing the question of historical retrieval: how to maintain a necessary dialectic between the difference of a text which is outside of our immediate cultural experience and its similarity as an artefact which can address us across social or historical distances.

My own procedure in working with printed and translated representations of oral texts is, as far as possible, to trace in some detail the processes by which the texts have come to assume their present form. In doing so I draw attention to their highly mediated status as a means of discouraging attempts - including my own - to treat the texts as stable objects. In discussing the izibongo of Shaka, for example, I examine the records of James Stuart who recorded the praises around the turn of this century. In addition, I examine Stuart's creation of a 'composite text' from different versions of the praises, the translations of Stuart's records by Daniel Malcolm, and finally the editorial interventions of Trevor Cope in bringing the izibongo into print. Having acknowledged these processes of mediation, however, I regard the texts - despite conceptual and ideological difficulties - as 'useful' in making available the political visions, aesthetic understandings, spiritual insights, symbolic identifications, economic imperatives, social pressures and quotidian lived experiences of South African people in history. My view of the processes of transcription and translation, therefore, endorses Bassnett-McGuire's as broadly semiotic. While acknowledging that the transfer of meaning is inevitably contingent on political

circumstances, I emphasise the value of the perceptions that may accompany such transfers from one signifying system to another.

The second difficulty faced by critics in dealing with oral texts is paradigmatic, for the suppression of the oral in favour of the printed text seems to have its basis - at least partly - in the institutional practices of schools, universities and colleges in the Western world. The majority of poetry courses have until fairly recently operated according to the principles of New Criticism, which have favoured the complexity - paradox and ambiguity are prized qualities - of the crafted lyric: the short lyric is, of course, regarded as suitable teaching material for the tutorial or seminar room. The charged (and often unruly) rhythms of oral performance, in contrast, would present distinct teaching problems, or challenges. This suppression of the oral by a literate culture is reflected in the customary trajectory of literary history as formulated in academic institutions: consider, for example, how despite important developments in the United States such as 'projective verse' and 'beat poetry', academics and their students typically identify American poetic history in the print-bound forms of Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot and Robert Lowell rather than in the oral or 'open' expression of Walt Whitman, Charles Olson and Allen Ginsberg, as well as in that of Native Americans and African Americans. In our own case, South African English poetic history is usually arrayed along the print line of Thomas Pringle, Roy Campbell, Ruth Miller, Douglas Livingstone, Mongane Serote. Afrikaans poetic history also reveals a literate emphasis: from Eugene N. Marais and C. Louis Leipoldt to Totius, N.P. van Wyk Louw, Elisabeth Eybers, D.J. Opperman and Antjie Krog. Similarly, in African languages the emphasis is on those poets who were mission-educated and who as a result of the mission presses had a chance of seeing their work in print, or - more recently - those associated with academic institutions and publishers. As these examples suggest, traditional methods of recording literary history have in themselves been directed towards printed texts in the construction of lists of authors, whereas many oral texts cannot be attributed in the conventional sense to an individual 'author' for they employ epithets or phrases which form part of the general cultural currency of the society. It is necessary, then, to develop a new language of literary criticism and response which is able to suggest the complex functioning of oral poems as aspects of social as well as literary life.

The resistance of literary studies to oral challenges is, of course, ironic in view of the debt of almost all poetic forms to oral rhythms and vocalisations, and the vital and continuing existence of oral genres worldwide. The importance of developing a new critical methodology for oral texts, however, resides not only in its possibilities for recuperating marginalised or suppressed forms, but in its implications for reconceptualising the study of poetry as a whole: the field would include 'established' oral texts like Homer and Beowulf (which reveal many of the ontological problems discussed above), the English Romantic poets who speak beyond the confines of the printed page with 'inspiration', the word itself suggesting the breathing of performance, and poets like Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney who in their different ways evoke the tones and rhythms of the modern visionary. In South Africa such a critical methodology - as I have said - should permit the construction of a more inclusive poetic history, in which print and performance poets could be set in dialogue with one another.

My own concern in this study is literary-critical, and I am not involved therefore in actually collecting or recording oral poetry for study through field work. (My research, nonetheless, has involved my attending oral performances to gain insight into contexts and techniques of delivery.) I am aware of Isabel Hofmeyr's insistence that oral scholars must leave their desks in order to visit the communities about which they write, and I support her belief that such research may help restore to literary criticism a sense of individual and collective humanity which can easily be lost by scholars secluded in their studies (1993:181). I would insist, nevertheless, on the value of reinterpreting texts which have already been recorded (including texts from societies which no longer exist, such as those of the /Xam), or of recuperating texts which have disappeared from sight. Literary studies seems to me capable of making a considerable contribution in this area through its specific skills in textual analysis. This is not to deny the importance of interdisciplinarity in oral studies as advocated by Karin Barber (1989:13); my own study draws on research from, amongst other disciplines, anthropology, African language studies, sociology, history, religious studies, ethnomusicology and politics.

As I have suggested, the material which forms the basis of my study has already been recorded, and I accept the problems of mediation through transcription and translation involved in the process. What I wish to do is to draw oral poetry and performance into mainstream debates about South African literature. While certain other critics in South African literary studies have also accepted the challenge offered by oral forms, much of the research remains scattered in spite of the recent worldwide upsurge in publishing on oral literature.<sup>4</sup> Effort has thus involved finding occasional articles in journals or dusting off studies which have not been removed from the library shelves in twenty or more years. A great deal of criticism on oral poetry also remains somewhat superficial, and the challenge for criticism now is to offer interpretations which have a coherent and an astute conceptual basis.

Studies of oral poetry worldwide have, until fairly recently, been either anthropological-classificatory or literary-formalist in approach.<sup>5</sup> Anthropological studies have emphasised the role of the text as a carrier of cultural information and paid little attention to poetic form,<sup>6</sup> while literary studies have tended to remove forms from the time, place and circumstances out of which they have emerged. The ideas of Milman Parry, who in the 1920s and 1930s studied the Homeric tradition and its parallels with modern Slavic epics, and those of his student Albert Lord have dominated discussions of oral poetry in departments of literature. Both Parry and Lord treat oral poetry as a universal genre characterised by common techniques of composition and delivery rather than as emerging in distinct forms in disparate historical circumstances. Certainly Parry's emphasis on the performance poet's ability to improvise directed much-needed attention to the individual-aesthetic shaping of material in contrast to the anthropological reading which had located the poems in the 'collective consciousness' of the tribe. Parry is unable to account, however, for the functioning of poetry within specific societies. Instead, as Ruth Finnegan has argued, criticism of the Parry-Lord school tends to confine itself to the "study of detailed stylistic points and formulaic systems leading to statistical conclusions" (1976:127).

Responding to such readings, a number of critics have recently argued for the necessity of developing models which acknowledge simultaneously the textuality and historicity of oral texts, of combining a sociology with a poetics of oral literature. Karin Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias define the problem as follows: "The issue was how to put textuality back into history, and history back into textuality" (1989:2). The movement away from the dehistoricised readings of the Parry-Lord school was prefigured in the work of Ruth Finnegan.<sup>7</sup> She located the development of Zulu praise poetry, for example, firmly in the aristocratic structures of Zulu society (1978:122). Similarly historicised readings of African oral poetry and performance genres have been offered by, amongst others, Karin Barber, Landeg White and Leroy Vail, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Elizabeth Gunner. Jeff Opland, whose work on Xhosa poetry of the nineteenth century has been very influential, has drawn on the ideas of Parry and Lord, especially on their discussion of the process of composition during performance. Opland is careful, however, to locate the development of poetic forms within the specificities of particular societal moments. The solution proposed by Barber and de Moraes Farias to the problem of combining a poetics with a sociology of oral literature has affinities with the redefinition of literary studies advanced by Terry Eagleton at the end of Literary Theory: An Introduction - a return to the study of rhetoric (1989:3). Hence the crucial questions for criticism become: what does the text seek to accomplish in the spheres of social and political action, and how does it accomplish this (by what rhetorical features/formal strategies)? Such a historicisation of poetic form can avoid the limitations of a universalised generic reading by locating the poems within the concerns of their society while at the same time granting the poems their status as shaped utterances. Consequently, my reading of the izibongo of Shaka treats the textuality of the poem as integral to its social and historical function: I argue that the formal and rhetorical structures used by the praise poet allow the poem to accomplish its complex negotiation of power between ruler and ruled in early nineteenth-century Zulu society. Similarly I argue that, in very different circumstances, Alfred Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" modifies the textual strategies of izibongo in order to address the relations between workers and their union federation in the 1980s.

Yet in writing criticism on performance poetry one immediately confronts the problem of imposing literate paradigms onto oral forms, a problem allied to the fact that we can only return to many oral texts via the mediated - sometimes translated - transcript. Witness even the difficulties of terminology: terms such as 'oracy', 'orature' and 'oraliture' have been proposed to escape the tyranny of a literate epistemology. (Opland uses the Xhosa verb "bonga", which he defines for his own purposes as meaning to "utter poetry about": he thus seeks to avoid the terminological difficulties raised by attempts to find a suitable English verbal equivalent (1983:33).) Ruth Finnegan points out that studies of orality have been carried out almost exclusively by literate academics, particularly those with traditional literary training, and argues that this has led to the development of inappropriate paradigms. She claims that even concepts like 'author' and 'title', which are central to discussions of written texts, are problematic in dealing with oral literature: many oral texts do not have titles, and are not individually or collectively authored, but involve accretions, residues and layering (1978:6-7). Olabiyi Yai raises even more fundamental questions by positing that the very notion of 'text' is a writing-based one since it involves a process of reification which is inappropriate to oral performance (1989:61). Such conceptual problems, Yai argues, point to the fundamental disjuncture between oral (African) production and written (Western) criticism, with no constructive interplay occurring between the two. To overcome this disjuncture between production and criticism, Yai proposes the adoption of indigenous critical practices which are "embedded in the process of production and performance of oral literature" (Barber and de Moraes Farias, 1989:5); and he points as an example to the fruitful collaboration between performance poets and academics in the mounting of oral poetry courses at universities. He is supported in this kind of call by, amongst others, Landeg White (1989:35) and Henry Louis Gates Jr (1984:8). This is an area requiring extensive investigation. My own attempts to move beyond the limitations of literate criticism, which have involved research into the aesthetic strategies and critical practices of the specific societies in relation to their performance genres, remain a small indication of the direction to be followed.

Useful explorations of oral/literate critical practices have been limited also by a history of colonisation in which orality and modes of oral transmission were branded as inferior by the

intruding literate culture. In the orthography of spoken African languages - usually undertaken by missionaries - the written forms, while bequeathing important historical records and documents, often represented gross ruptures with the spoken forms and, in significant ways, were to affect the development of those languages. Further, political, judicial and economic power were invested in the printed word. Relevant to the South African context is an account of the role of writing in the colonisation of Peru:

It is necessary to understand that for centuries the oppressors of the peasants made them regard paper as a god. Paper became a fetish: Arrest orders are paper. By means of paper they crush the Indian in the courts. The peasant sees papers in the offices of the governor, the parish priest, the judge, the notary - wherever there is power; the landowner, too, keeps accounts on paper. All the reckonings you have made, all your logical arguments, they refute by showing you a paper; the paper supersedes logic, it defeats it. (Quoted by Harlow 1987:12)

In South African history, Jean Comaroff records the power and mystique attached to the written word in the nineteenth-century Tswana custom of using printed paper as a bandage in the belief that the magical power of the words could heal wounds (1985:203). Leroy Vail and Landeg White also remind us that, in the Social-Darwinist paradigms of Europe in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, literate societies were perceived to be higher up the evolutionary scale than those characterised by oral transmission (1991:2-3). Residues of this attitude remain. Even Walter J. Ong in his influential book Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (1982) is unable to perceive that oral societies may possess developed senses of history. He claims that they live "very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (1982:46).

Southern Africa, nonetheless, is characterised by complex intersections of orality and literacy. Jeff Opland points out that in the case of Xhosa society, the existence of entirely oral literatures is more or less confined to the pre-colonial era (1984). Almost all oral cultures in



southern Africa have been influenced by their contact with the literate cultures of the colonial settlers. Opland in fact records the history of Xhosa poetry written for publication from 1870 onwards, arguing that poets like Thomas Mqanda "exploit[ed] the new technology of printing and the new medium of publication to reach an audience potentially wider than the imbongi could reach through an oral performance" (1984:179-181). Further, as indicated earlier, oral texts which have survived such as the songs and stories of the /Xam or the izibongo of Shaka and Dingane have undergone significant modifications through the processes of transcription and translation. As regards the twentieth-century poets, many of them can and do write, and the threads of orality and literacy intertwine in their work. Hence the disjunctures between oral poetry and literate criticism described by Yai may be less severe within the South African context and may, in fact, be an oversimplification of the situation in most colonial and postcolonial societies. While Yai's concern about the reification of oral texts in print remains a real one, the intersections of orality and literacy outlined above may give certain oral texts a degree of 'unstable' stability which Yai cannot envisage. His assertion of the necessity, nevertheless, for greater attention to indigenous aesthetic models and critical practices remains crucial.

A further consequence of the fact that studies of orality have been carried out almost entirely by academics with literate training is to be found in the current lack of emphasis on performance in studies of oral poetry. Tonkin points out that there do not exist in literate criticism "satisfactory notations for performance features" (1989:39). Rycroft and Ngcobo (1988) have attempted, nonetheless, to annotate the performances of izibongo recorded by James Stuart, and Sherzer has offered a highly complex system of signs to represent the performance of oral poetry by the Kuna Indians of San Blas, Panama (1990). Recreating the performance of the oral poem remains a key difficulty for a written criticism which would need to account for the repertoire of gestures, the modulations of voice, the pace of delivery, the rhythmic intonations, and the audience participation. No accounts can match the live performance. Even taped versions of the poems - as in the case of certain modern poets - are generally recontextualised: they are often recorded in a studio rather than at a social gathering. The use of reports about oral deliveries of the poems, where these are available, may help us nevertheless to lift the

poems imaginatively off the page by suggesting something of their vibrancy in performance. This is particularly the case with James Stuart's accounts of the performances of izibongo, and the reports by journalists on occasions in the 1980s at which Mzwakhe Mbuli delivered his poems. In addition, the critic or reader may be assisted in recreating the rhythms and energies of oral delivery by the choice of an appropriate print form in representing the oral text: the short line convention of lyric poetry, the extended lines of the epic, the lack of punctuation in the prose poem, the continuous prose of the story, or the alternating voices of the dramatic sketch. Similar effects of returning the written form to an oral conceptualisation may be obtained in the use of typography: line-breaks, spaces, margin indentation, or changes in type-face can suggest pauses, accelerated or arrested rhythms, changes in volume or pace, and the like. In each chapter I consider the appropriateness of the print forms used to represent the oral texts under discussion.

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While considerations of textuality and performative context are central to my project of recuperating oral forms for literary debate, all of the texts to be dealt with in this study are historical oral texts, and a crucial question for criticism is how one 'reads' these texts in changed circumstances. If - as I suggested in my aims - we are to move beyond a simple antiquarianism while at the same time avoiding an arbitrary recreation of the past in terms of present concerns, we require a model of historical retrieval which sets up a dialectic between past and present. This 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.

The first aspect of such a recuperative strategy is the historicisation of literary form. Robert Weimann argues that while the impersonal nature of the New Critical model of poetry resulted in the banishing of the author from "both the texts and contexts of history", it also dissociated the 'structure' or 'form' of literature from its social function (1977:4). He contends, in contrast, that the form of literature is "correlated to its function in society", and that such a consideration may allow us to connect the "genesis" of the text - its shaping and being shaped by

its original social context - with its "reception": the ways in which it is read by modern readers. Hence, we may establish the necessary dialectic between "past significance" and "present meaning" (1979:9). Weimann wishes to return literary history to its evaluative function, yet he points out that this requires a perception of human activity in which "there is an interrelationship between the physical appropriation of the world (as an extension of objectivity) and the unfolding of man's sensuous and aesthetic activities (as a projection of his subjectivities)" (1977:10). This position allows for a radical critique of formalism, in which form had been divorced from social concerns, while at the same time undermining perceptions that a concern with the structures of past literature is simply aestheticist (1977:16-17).

The second interrelated aspect of such a model of retrieval is that of historical process. Weimann points out that all literary histories have a social function, whether they acknowledge this or not. Yet the problem, he argues, is to bring into relation past significance and present meaning so that both contribute to the literary history which the critic constructs. Weimann asserts that the two are in fact "ultimately indivisible", and that the literary historian must face both their contradiction and unity (1977:49-50). Fredric Jameson perhaps more cogently expresses the duality of contradiction and unity within the historical process. He stresses that the relationship between ourselves as readers and temporally distant texts is not a relationship between individual subjects, but the confrontation of two distinct social forms or modes of production (1988:174-5). Accordingly, Jameson argues that we should read historical texts not only in terms of identity, without which comprehension is impossible, but in terms of difference, so that the texts may question our present:

We will no longer tend to see the past as some inert and dead object which we are called upon to resurrect, or to preserve, or to sustain, in our own living freedom; rather, the past itself will become an active agent in the process and will begin to come before us in a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgement on us, and through us on the social formation in which we exist. (1988:175)

Both Jameson and Weimann insist that literary history has a social function and both, with different emphases, insist that it is evaluative. Yet both argue that the evaluation is dialectical, for as we interrogate the past in terms of our own concerns, we allow the past to call into question the social practices of our present-day society.

Using the model outlined above, I shall aim to relate literary form to societal function, finding in this correlation the basis for historical retrieval. While I wish to recover a repressed cultural past - for my thesis has an explicit social and, hence, evaluative purpose - I remain aware that that past must be allowed its difference as well as its identity so that the dialectic between past significance and present meaning may be fully respected and examined. An important aspect of this dialectic is the problem of retrieving the cultural forms of African history in the present context: this history was manipulated for forty years by the apartheid government in order to enforce the racial separations of its divide and rule policies. More recently versions of tribal history have been deployed by conservative separatist organisations like Inkatha (and the white right wing) to support demands for ethnically-defined federal 'states'. While Black Consciousness had begun in the 1960s and 1970s to wrench African history from its apartheid entanglements, I hope that in this study the oral texts of the past - including poems like the izibongo of Shaka which have been 'read' by Inkatha official pronouncement as supporting demands for Zulu separatism - will be heard calling into question reactionary separatist ideologies. At the same time, these oral texts may be seen to make available new perceptions which challenge and confirm us in the processes of political renewal.

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The thesis comprises five chapters. It does not pretend to offer a comprehensive survey of South African oral poetry and performance, but instead to take up some of the forms which have had a profound impact on the social history of the country. As well as treating the better-known kinds of oral poetry such as praise poetry, I have deliberately included forms which have received little

critical attention such as the songs and stories of the Bushmen and the Christianised Zulu hymn: forms which have significantly influenced human life on the subcontinent. I have also sought to draw into critical debates about orality forms like Soweto poetry which utilise the rhythms of oral delivery, but which have been treated by critics largely as printed verse. By including the oral performance poetry of the 1980s, I have tried to indicate that orality remains a living tradition in South African society.

While the focus is largely on poetry and allied forms such as the hymn, I discuss in the first chapter both the songs and the narrative forms of the /Xam Bushmen. This is because Bushman societies have generally not maintained rigid generic distinctions between verse forms and narrative, or between sacred and profane genres. Instead, both the singing of songs and the telling of stories have been integral to the daily life of the band. Furthermore, the songs and stories themselves in their performance appear to blur the conventional distinctions between prose and poetry. Accordingly, I have treated both forms under the general rubric 'oral performance'. The other chapters restrict themselves to specific kinds of poetry or song, since the societies from which the texts emerge attach particular political, social or aesthetic significance to their 'poetic' form.

Chapter One is entitled "The Society of the Text: The Oral Literature of the /Xam", and involves a close reading of the texts recorded by Bleek and Lloyd in relation to the particular history and structures of Bushman society. I consider the songs and stories as treating in symbolic ways many of the most pressing concerns of /Xam life including sexuality, death, distribution of food, human origins, and the relations between peoples. Here, I set the complex mythological, social and historical understandings revealed by the texts in dialogue with literary representations of the Bushmen. The chapter proceeds to consider how the songs and stories of the /Xam 'talk back' to modern understandings, undermining many of the images which have been imposed on the Bushmen and which in the last four centuries have 'legitimised' their brutal treatment in southern Africa. A constant concern in the chapter is a rejection of the notion of Bushman society as a static, anthropological curiosity. While the songs and stories of the

Bushmen, together with those of the Khoikhoi, are probably our earliest forms of South African literature, this chapter also traces recent developments in Bushman history, and charts the emergence in the last three decades of new performance genres.

In contrast to Chapter One which treats the texts of a largely egalitarian and non-stratified society Chapter Two, "Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Shaka kaSenzangakhona", discusses the praise poetry associated with the centralisation of the Zulu monarchy and the development of the Zulu nation. The chapter explores the role of izibongo and the imbongi in negotiating relations of power between ruler and ruled, and investigates the textual strategies used by the form to accomplish these negotiations. Central to the chapter is the question of developing an appropriate language of critical response for praise poetry, and I consider the significance for criticism of placing the izibongo of Shaka and others at the centre of our literary history. Finally, this chapter asks how Zulu praise poetry of this kind speaks to us now, and I consider the implications of the praises of Shaka in relation to claims about the Zulu monarchy and Zulu nationalism in a modern democratic state.

Chapter Three, "Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites", examines the hymns produced in the first part of this century by the Messianic Zulu evangelist, Isaiah Shembe. With the undermining of the power of the Zulu monarchy, new Zulu leaders emerged who occupied new societal spaces, and new forms of social expression were heard. Shembe's hymns are 'popular' forms, which syncretise izibongo with the poetics and rhythms of the Christian hymn in order to articulate religious and political resistance to colonial occupation. They reveal a strong Zulu nationalism, and seek to reinterpret Christianity and the figure of Christ in terms of black beliefs and experiences. I suggest that Shembe's hymns could usefully be read against 'canonical' black writers such as Sol T. Plaatje and H.I.E. Dhlomo, whose work reveals many of the same concerns. I also argue that the hymns anticipate the Black Theology of Soweto poets in the 1970s.

Chapter Four, "Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's 'black trial'", comprises a 'rereading' of Soweto poetry from the perspective of orality. In a close discussion of Madingoane's extended poem, I argue that, while Soweto poetry is extensively influenced by oral forms, it has been largely treated as a print phenomenon, and critical attention has focused on poets like Serote, Mtshali and Gwala, whose work is fairly amenable to recuperation by conventional print paradigms. This has led to the ignoring of younger Black Consciousness poets - like Madingoane - who used oral forms both to recall an African past and as a means of disseminating their messages in ways that circumvented the white publishing industry and state censorship. My discussion considers the dialectics of 'tradition'/'modernity' and 'mythology'/'history' in relation to "black trial". Finally, the chapter treats the poem as a text which insists on its historical 'difference', and which resists any simple attempt at critical appropriation.

In the last chapter, "Poetry, Politics and Performance: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula", I discuss the adaptation of oral forms to a highly politicised, urbanised environment. I point out that during the 1980s critics were for the most part unable to engage constructively with the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula as oral texts, and argue for relocating this poetry in the discursive field of orality. I also distinguish carefully between the concerns of the two poets and the functioning of their work: they have generally been lumped uncomfortably together under the term 'worker poetry'. Yet the poems achieved their resonance in the crisis of the State of Emergency, and the chapter considers to what extent the poems 'live' beyond their historical moment.

I stated at the outset that the concern of this thesis was to draw oral forms into the mainstream of literary studies in this country. Poetic histories are constructed largely in critical studies (like this one) and in anthologies, and accordingly I return, throughout, to the implications of oral forms for a new anthology of South African poetry: an anthology which, without dismissing the real achievements of poems and poets of the printed word, would grant oral forms a central place. Such an anthology may serve to establish new lines of literary and

social continuity in our society, and to affirm the range of human creativity and possibility in this country. In doing so, the anthology would have to address the questions of transcription, translation, critical methodology and historical retrieval, and might wish to adopt the kind of 'solutions' proposed in this Introduction and developed in the course of the study.

### Notes

1. In accordance with the current practice in anthropology and sociology, I use the term "Bushmen" rather than "San" throughout this study .
2. Collections of poems which have appeared include the following: Tswana: Schapera, 1965; Zulu: Cope, 1968; Sotho: Damane and Sanders, 1974; Shona: Hodza and Fortune, 1979; and more recently Opland, 1992, and Gunner and Gwala, 1994. Isabel Hofmeyr has argued that claims about the marginal status of oral literature "often come from English departments" - my own institutional location - and that "[s]een from other vantage points the position looks somewhat different" (1995:134). It is indeed the case that schools and universities teach oral literature in African language classes, and that there has been a certain amount of research on the subject by African scholars. However, the bulk of the teaching and research on the subject restricts itself to morphological explication or structural classification, and (as Hofmeyr herself acknowledges) there is still a great deal of work to be done in orality studies both locally and internationally. Further, there remains almost no recognition of the place of oral literature in poetic or literary histories of South Africa, as a survey of critical studies and anthologies indicates.
3. Finnegan deals with this question at some length in her article "Problems in the Processing of 'Oral Texts': Some Reflections on the Researcher's Role in Innovation and Consolidation" (1991).



4. Three collections of essays on South African oral literature have appeared recently, edited by Groenewald (1990), Kaschula (1993) and Gunner (1994). While these books go some way towards making critical material more readily available, there is still an enormous amount of work to be done in this area. As regards the international upsurge in publishing on oral literature, see particularly the books in the series "Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture".
5. For a comprehensive historical account of developments in thought about orality from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, see Vail and White's essay "The Invention of 'Oral Man'" (1991:1-39).
6. Certain anthropologists have moved beyond such a 'functional' conception of oral texts. See particularly the work of David B. Coplan (1987;1994) and Deborah James (1993).
7. Vail and White argue that only Finnegan's first book, Limba Stories and Storytelling (1967), reveals a coherent attempt to "relate in any detail the literature to the society that values it" (1991:27). However, I would argue that a careful reading of her work reveals her constant concern to historicise the oral forms she discusses.

## Chapter 1: The Society of the Text: The Oral Literature of the /Xam<sup>1</sup>

The ending of Sol. T. Plaatje's Mhudi (1930) - a novel which has received a great deal of attention in South African literary studies - registers the beginning of a modernising colonial history, and forces Plaatje to subvert his own modes of pastoral and romance to accommodate the intrusion of a technologised future. After the rout of the Matabele from what is now the North-west Province, the protagonists Ra-Thaga and Mhudi in their newly-acquired wagon leave the Boer couple Phil Jay and Annetje :

[Ra-Thaga] mused over the hallowed glories of being transported from place to place like White people, in their own wagon.

Gone were the days of their primitive tramping over long distances, with loads on their heads. For them the days of the pack-ox had passed, never to return again. The carcase of a koodoo or any number of blesbok, falling to his musket by the roadside, could be carried home with ease, leaving plenty of room in the vehicle for their luggage. Was it real, or was it just an evanescent dream?  
(1957:224-225)

In an illuminating reading of this concluding scene of the novel, Michael Green talks of "its ambivalent attitude to the modernisation that the colonising technology represents":

[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. Taking into account that the dominant experience of modernity in South Africa was the kind of "neurotic obsessiveness" that Horkheimer and Adorno identify in modern subjectivity - "control, manipulation, exclusion of any deviance from the imperatives of systematic regulation of others and the environment, bureaucratic

management, a subjugation of every issue to the demands of technical, efficient regulation, etc." (Pippin,1991:152) - in other words, apartheid, the apogee of a developing systematising of segregation - entering history, grasping the future, is a near-destructive act for the protagonists of Plaatje's historical vision. (1995:16)

Approximately sixty years before the publication of Plaatje's novel, an oral narrative by a Bushman informant, //Kabbo, had evoked a similarly destructive historical moment, in which the wagon - as well as the gun which is an implicitly coercive presence in //Kabbo's narration - represents precisely such a "systematic regulation of others and the environment". Because he was a prisoner in the wagon, rather than its owner, //Kabbo reveals none of the ambivalence of Plaatje's protagonists towards the colonial project. He had been arrested for stealing a sheep and, in narrating his story to W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd in the 1870s, offered a disturbing account of his arrest - an account which Bleek and Lloyd transcribed and translated into English:

My wife was there; I was there; my son was there; my son's wife was there, while she also carried a little child; my daughter's husband was there; we were like this (in number). Therefore the Kafirs [black policemen] took us, when we were like this, while we were not numerous; ( ) the Kafirs took us, while we were not numerous.

We went to sit in the wagon; the Kafirs took us away, as we sat in the wagon. Our wives also sat in the wagon. They got out of the wagon; they walked upon their feet. The wagon stood still; we got out of the wagon; we lay down, when we had first made a fire. ( ) We roasted lamb's flesh; my son's wife roasted a springbok, which I had killed with my arrow. We smoked; we lay down. The day broke; we made a fire; we smoked early in the morning.

Then we left them, we went away to the Magistrate; while we (who were in the wagon) ran along, we were upon the road, while our wives ( ) walked along upon their feet. We ran, leaving them, while we altogether ran, leaving them.

Then we went to talk with the Magistrate; the Magistrate talked with us. The Kafirs took us away to the jail at night. We went to put our legs into the stocks; another white man laid another (piece of) wood upon our legs. ( ) We slept while our legs were in the stocks. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:295-297)

The power and authority of the colonial state resided in its technology: the wagon in which //Kabbo and the men travel leaves the other members of the band behind, as they cannot keep up; the "jail" imprisons them; the stocks physically restrain them. And through its curious registering of agency and causation ("Therefore the Kafirs took us", as Bleek and Lloyd translate //Kabbo's words) and its omitted reference to the offence for which these Bushmen were imprisoned, the narrative sets the hunter-gatherer's mode of life - symbolised by the "arrow" and the "springbok" - against the aggressive, modernising history represented by police, magistrate and the law.

The oral literature, engravings and paintings of the Bushmen offer, amongst other things, some of the earliest accounts in southern Africa of colonisation from the perspective of the colonised. Yet the history of the Bushmen has been characterised by successive representations of themselves as 'other'. My concern in this chapter is to undermine such alterities by allowing the Bushmen to 'talk back' through their songs and stories. This does not imply a naive elision of my own intervention as critic; rather I shall attempt to maintain a dialectical relation between the 'difference' of their texts and their 'identity'. My intention is to create conditions of interpretation and reception - in the study of literature - in which the texts of the Bushmen may speak to us today, both of an intricate and developed mythology and the harsh intrusions of colonialism. In so doing, I hope to assert the full human creativity and potential of a group dehumanised and destroyed by colonial and, later, apartheid policies, and hence to contribute towards the development of a more inclusive and coherent understanding of southern African literary and historical life.

The songs and stories of the Bushmen, records of which survive in the work of anthropologists and linguists, are probably our earliest forms of literary expression; little critical attention, however, has been paid to the Bushmen in South African literary studies. Despite the efforts to recuperate and understand the texts by Laurens van der Post (1958;1961) and Stephen Watson (1991), these songs and stories have not featured to any extent in literary interpretation. In contrast, a number of studies have been carried out in the discipline of anthropology, including notably those by Megan Biesele (1975a;1975b;1976;1993;1995) and Mathias Guenther (1989), in which the texts are seen to provide evidence of social practices and belief systems. Though such studies are extremely useful to the literary critic - the boundaries between disciplines are becoming increasingly permeable - anthropologists generally offer little discussion of thematic intricacy or the contribution to meaning of generic convention. Rarely do they engage with the texts as rhetorical acts: rhetorical acts which may continue to speak to us across social and historical distances. The research conducted by linguists like Roger Hewitt (1985;1986) is also valuable even though it tends to emphasise context-free structural typologies over the social and symbolic resonance of the communication. As part of my project of recuperating oral poetry and performance for literary study, I wish to explore ways in which we may read the texts of the Bushmen - texts that are available to us in the records - as seminal in any construction of South African literary history. Ntongela Masilela has pointed to the political purpose such a project could attain:

[T]he arrival and construction of South African literature in English on the cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literatures in African languages, which had been in existence for millennia in South Africa. At the moment this literature exists in a state of temporary defeat. It is a literature whose natural evolution has been disrupted and momentarily side-tracked. As the hidden consequences of the present political and social crisis are beginning to indicate, especially on the cultural plane, the relationship between our literature in English and our indigenous literature in the African languages will

have to be re-examined and re-defined in post-revolutionary or post-apartheid South Africa. (1987:50)

My treatment here of the /Xam Bushmen will not endorse colonial and apartheid perceptions of Bushman society either as static or fascinating in its evolutionary anachronism (a 'window on the Pleistocene'). Drawing on current anthropological and historical research, as well as on developments in literary theory and oral studies, I shall locate the oral texts of the /Xam carefully within their historical and discursive contexts.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

Bushman hunter-gatherers have lived south of the Congo-Zambezi line for at least 11 000 years, and possibly as long as 40 000 years (Biesele,1993:xix). Prior to the arrival of the Dutch, there were perhaps 150 000 to 300 000 Bushmen living throughout southern Africa (the evidence of rock paintings and engravings suggests the extent of their range) although only about 50 000 are left today. Of those remaining, only about 3 000 live permanently as hunter-gatherers; most Bushmen now work as herders, farm labourers, game trackers or soldiers. Linguistically and socially the Bushmen are close to the Khoikhoi: in fact, some linguists regard the two languages as forming a single family called "Khoisan", characterised chiefly by its click consonants (Hewitt,1985:650); and ethnographers, historians and anthropologists have often found it difficult to maintain distinctions between the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi.<sup>3</sup>

Bushmen have generally lived - and in some cases continue to live - in small bands consisting of related families, often based around permanent waterholes. These bands may combine for group tasks where necessary, including defence or communal hunts. A band generally keeps to a particular area where its hunting, collecting and water rights are respected by others, though access to water is shared in times of drought. Membership of the band is not fixed, as marriage takes place outside of it, and bands may disintegrate when the older people

die and the children marry into other bands. There is generally no clearly identified leader, though individuals may achieve respect through age, wisdom or skill in a particular area of life.

Historically, Bushmen have lived largely by hunting and collecting, moving frequently - usually within a defined area - as the seasons and migrations of game have dictated. Recent research has indicated, however, that various groupings turned to herding and agriculture when climatic conditions were favourable, and that some were involved in activities such as mining and trading. In The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass (1992) Robert Gordon has argued that the myth of the pristine hunter-gatherer existence, in fact, has served to justify the exploitation, oppression and eradication of the Bushmen. Hunting is an important activity, nonetheless, and is carried out by the men with bows and poisoned arrows, spears, throwing sticks and snares. It does not provide the bulk of the food, but only between ten percent and forty percent depending on conditions with the larger amount being collected by women (Campbell,1980:107). (Meat, especially fat which is highly prized, has an important symbolic significance in Bushman societies.) The life of hunting and gathering leaves a great deal of leisure time for creative activity, much of which is spent in the making of necklaces and beads, in engraving, painting, dancing, singing songs and storytelling. Bushman societies are generally characterised by complex mythological and aesthetic systems which help to mediate relationships between individuals, groups and the environment.

The way of life of the Bushmen was severely disrupted by contact with pastoralists and agriculturalists, particularly white settlers but also African peoples, notably the Tswana and the Xhosa. A number of historians have suggested, though, that conflict between Bushmen and African groupings has been overemphasised, and recent research indicates that tensions arose only when the expansion of agriculture and pastoralism began to threaten traditional hunting grounds (see Campbell,1980:101; and Willcox,1978:81-82). As their way of life became unsustainable, many Bushmen turned to other activities, including farm labour, stock farming (often with stolen livestock), and raiding and trading in bands which drew in African and

Khoikhoi members.<sup>4</sup> On the Eastern Cape frontier in the nineteenth century, Bushmen were used by British troops in their military operations. In a direct continuation of this practice, the South African Defence Force (SADF) during its occupation of Namibia and incursions into Angola in the 1970s and 1980s formed a battalion of Bushman trackers (31 Battalion), which was drawn from Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Angola. An article in the magazine Soldier of Fortune expounded upon the 'instinctive abilities' and 'natural adaptations' of the Bushmen to ground warfare:

Able to survive long periods on minimal food and water, the Bushman has an instinctive, highly developed sense of danger, and has proved to be an astoundingly good "snap" shot ... [but his] forte is tracking ... . If you've never seen a two-legged bloodhound at work, come to South West Africa and watch the Bushman. Actually the Bushman puts the bloodhound to shame. [In addition, Bushmen are] good at estimating mortar projectile strike distances because of their age-old weapon - the bow and arrow. (Quoted in Gordon,1992:2)

Following the implementation of United Nations' Resolution 435 in Namibia and the withdrawal of the SADF, 31 Battalion was disbanded and the demobilised soldiers and their families resettled at Schmidtsdrift near Kimberley, where they live in extreme poverty. The exploitation and abandonment of the Bushmen by the SADF is the most recent chapter in a long history of brutal treatment by the colonial and apartheid states.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial policy towards the Bushmen was largely characterised by extermination, and A.E. Voss (1987) has explored in some detail the representations of the Bushmen in nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing which provided ideological legitimation for the acts of genocide. In 1850, for example, David Livingstone wrote that "the Bushmen of the Desert are perhaps the most degraded specimens of humanity" (Voss,1987:26), and Francis Carey Slater's The Karroo (1924) described the Bushmen in similar terms:



In the far days that are gone there dwelt in the depths of the desert,  
 Scattered and wandering pygmies; hideous, filthy and squat:  
 Fitting kindred of Ishmael - their hands against all men were lifted -  
 Hating all that was human with blind and inveterate hate. (Slater, 1957:205)

A similar attitude was evident in the actions of British troops under Colonel Durnford who, at the time of the Langalibalele rebellion in 1875, reportedly used rock paintings for target practice (McGibbon,1993). Bushmen were systematically driven off their lands, and then hunted down by commandos when - deprived of their hunting areas - they resorted to killing livestock. (A report in the Natal Witness about a Bushman 'hunt' in 1873 described them as "lower than vermin".) Routine punishments for stock theft included torture, flogging or hanging, and death was often preferable to capture. Bushman children who survived the raids of commandos were generally carried back to the farms as labourers. More recent history is no less bleak. In Botswana, in which the largest number live today, Bushmen are labelled "Basarwa" and are discriminated against legally and socially by the Batswana.<sup>6</sup> As Gordon argues in great detail, the position in Namibia is equally dire (1992).

As the attitudes and practices outlined above might suggest, there has been little respect for and hence little attempt to record the utterance - particularly cultural utterance - of the Bushmen. //Kabbo's narrative, which was referred to earlier on, is handed down to us from our most extensive record - in fact our only real source - of traditional Bushman expression: the transcriptions and translations made between 1870 and 1884 by a German linguist, W.H.I. Bleek, and his sister-in-law Lucy C. Lloyd. Bleek had come to South Africa in 1855 to work on a Zulu Grammar for Bishop Colenso. While in Natal he developed an interest in Bushman language and mythology, but it was only when he moved to Cape Town in 1870 to take up an appointment as curator of Sir George Grey's library that he had the opportunity to further his interest. He discovered that there was a group of Bushman convicts, of whom //Kabbo was one, working on

the construction of the new breakwater at Cape Town harbour, and arranged to have several of them passed into his custody. Together with Lloyd, he spent a great deal of time learning the /Xam language, and devising a phonetic script for it. The two transcribed and translated the songs and narratives of their main informants, /A!kunta, //Kabbo, ≠Kasin, Dia!kwain, /Han≠kass'o and !Kweiten ta //ken. With the exception of /A!kunta, the informants were from two families: Dia!kwain, his sister !Kweiten ta //ken and her husband ≠Kasin all came from the Katkop mountains; while //Kabbo and his son-in-law /Han≠kass'o lived near the Strontbergen, about a hundred miles east of Katkop (Hewitt,1986:17). These six represented probably the last surviving generation of /Xam Bushmen, for when Bleek's daughter Dorothea travelled through the Prieska area in 1910/11 she noted: "I found just a handful of old people left here and there, some of them relatives of our former men" (Bleek D,1923:viii). After Bleek's death in 1875, Lloyd continued the work of collection until 1884. The Bleek and Lloyd records, now housed in the J.W. Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town, comprise 12 000 pages of material, collected and painstakingly annotated in 138 notebooks of which 15 contain material gathered by Lloyd from two !Kung informants after Bleek's death.

The status of the narratives and songs recorded by Bleek and Lloyd is somewhat ambiguous since, like so many oral texts which survive only in printed form, they have been highly mediated in the process of their transcription and translation into English. Bleek and Lloyd were in a position of power over their informants, who for most of their time spent with the two remained convicts. While it appears that this power was wielded humanely, as is evident from the decision of two of the informants to remain with Bleek for some time after their prison terms had expired, the narrating context remained one of authority and subservience, and thus very different from that of the non-stratified, hunter-gatherer band which would have provided the customary audience for the stories and songs. The process of the narration was also artificial: the Bushmen's oral songs and stories were written down by Bleek or Lloyd as they were being uttered, with frequent pauses for clarification or explanation, and were generally translated later, sometimes in discussion with the informant. Lloyd's praise of //Kabbo is enlightening in this respect:

He was an excellent narrator, and patiently watched until a sentence had been written down, before proceeding with what he was saying. He much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:x)

In addition we have little way of assessing fidelity to the original Bushman intention in the translations made by Bleek and Lloyd, as there are no /Xam speakers still alive; more fundamentally, we do not know to what extent the two were adequately able to understand and transcribe what they had heard.

Bleek and Lloyd appear to have been scrupulous, nevertheless, in their attempts to record the accounts of their informants. Omissions in the texts were indicated by parentheses, and even when they were at a complete loss as to how to understand phrases, allusions, or even the plain sense, the linguists appear to have remained as close as possible to the actual words spoken or enacted by their Bushman respondents. None of the repetition has been deleted, and the translation strikes the reader as literal in its reliance on some very awkward syntactical structures in English. As the section quoted earlier on from //Kabbo's narrative may illustrate, the result is that for readers trained in the Western print tradition the songs and narratives are often difficult to follow. Certainly the experience of teaching these texts to students has strongly reinforced my sense of the problems of Bleek and Lloyd's English translations. In her recent book which deals with modern Ju/'hoan storytelling - Women Like Meat: The Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju/'hoan (1993) - Megan Biesele perceives the need to make the narratives she has recorded accessible to a non-Bushman audience, and argues that there are ideological problems with the Bleek and Lloyd methodology of seeking absolute fidelity to the source:

Clearly word-for-word translations misrepresent the verbal reality of the

performance by chopping it up into alien linguistic categories. The flow of meaning in the original is made to seem discontinuous, and the effect in general is stilted and quaint, putting further distance between the story as read and the story as it was told. The effect is illustrated to some degree by the Bleek and Lloyd translation of a hundred years ago ... which mirrors the philological emphasis of its time. In contrast, a modern view takes the position that understanding the dramatic content of the communication is hindered by making speakers of the other language sound like bad or laboured English-users. (1993:xii)

While Biesele is correct in pointing to the drawbacks of turning Bushman oral performances into often clumsy and ungrammatical English prose for the sake of 'accuracy' in translation, her own approach may run the risk of simply appropriating the culture for Western literary expectation and consumption. My own position on this question lies between that of Bleek and Lloyd and that of Biesele: I see the need for translations which retain a sense of the 'difference' of the text - and so resist any simple co-option - but which are sufficiently accessible to make 'meaning' possible. In this, my thinking is somewhat akin to that of Mathias Guenther, who in his book Bushman Folktales (1989) has published certain of the Bleek and Lloyd texts, along with stories which he collected from the Nharo in Botswana. In offering translated versions of the /Xam texts, Guenther has removed some of the parentheses, awkward phrasing and explanatory comments so that the texts 'read' more easily, though he adheres where possible to Bleek and Lloyd's formulations. An example of the method I propose, which attempts to make the texts somewhat more familiar without removing their strangeness, could involve the following adaptations. A section from "//Kabbo's Intended Return Home" in Bleek and Lloyd's version reads:

The Flat Bushmen go to each other's huts; that they may smoking sit in front of them. ( ) Therefore, they may obtain stories at them; because they are used to visit; for smoking's people they are. As regards myself (?) I am waiting that the

moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward in the path.\* ( ) For, I verily (?) think that I must only await the moon; that I may tell my Master (*lit. chief*), that I feel that it is the time when I should sit among my fellow men, ( ) who walking meet their like. They are listening to them; for, I do think of visits; (that) I ought to talk with my fellow men; for, I work here, together with women; ( ) and I do not talk with them; for, they merely send me to work. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:301-303)

Drawing on the notes and information provided by Bleek and Lloyd, as well as on more recent anthropological research, I would recast the account in this manner:

The Flats Bushmen go to each other's huts, that they may sit in front of them smoking. They obtain stories there, because they are used to visiting, for they are smoking people. As regards myself, I am waiting that the moon may turn back for me; that I may set my feet forward on the path. For I truly think that I must only wait for the moon, that I may tell my Master that I feel that it is time to sit among my fellow men, who meet their kin while walking, and listen to them. Yes, I do think of visits, that I ought to talk with my fellow men; for here I work together with women, and I do not talk with them, for they merely send me to work.

My version attempts to create a readable English text by regularising syntax and grammar, and removing parentheses and archaic diction. It seeks nevertheless to allow the text its 'strangeness' by retaining something of the distinctive phrasing and register of Bleek and Lloyd's direct translations. The songs and stories discussed in this chapter are drawn largely from Bleek and Lloyd's Specimens of Bushman Folklore (1911), and to a lesser extent from Guenther's Bushman Folktales. (I have specifically used texts from published sections of the Bleek and Lloyd records so as to allow readers easy access to the material which I analyse.) With the exception of //Kabbo's narrative of his arrest referred to earlier, I have recast the language and syntax of all

the songs and stories drawn directly from Bleek and Lloyd along the lines suggested here. In addition, I have made slight modifications to Guenther's versions where I have felt these to be necessary.

Besides the Bleek and Lloyd records in the Jagger library, Specimens of Bushman Folklore - the first major publication of the collected material - and Guenther's Bushman Folktales, the sources for Bushman literature are scattered and often difficult to locate. Other sections of the Bleek and Lloyd collection were published by Dorothea Bleek in The Mantis and his Friends (1923) and in the journal Bantu Studies.<sup>7</sup> Bleek's daughter also recorded a number of Nharo tales, seven of which appeared in The Naron: a Bushman Tribe of the Central Kalahari (1928). In 1874 J.M. Orpen presented a series of Maluti Bushman stories in an article in the Cape Monthly Magazine. A large collection of Bushman narratives was made in the late nineteenth century by Gideon Retief von Wielligh, mostly from /Xam speakers near Calvinia. These were published in four volumes between 1919 and 1921, where they were substantially rewritten to appeal to a popular Afrikaans readership. There have been a few collections of narratives from the !Kung, including a book of German adaptations by Fritz Metzger in 1952, and Portuguese translations of material from Angola collected in the 1950s by Manuel Viegas Guerreiro (1968). At about the same time material was being collected by Lorna Marshall and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, and some of their /Gwi stories appeared in The Harmless People (1959). Other sources include E.W. Thomas's collection of Hei//kum stories in translation (1950), and P. Schoeman's Hunters of the Desert Land (1957). More recently, Bushman oral literature has been recorded by Megan Biesele from the !Kung and !Xo people in her doctoral thesis (1975a) and in individual articles, while her book Women Like Meat (1993) offers versions of Ju/'hoan tales with commentary and analysis. She provides perhaps the best source of contemporary Bushman material, and I have used her "Song Texts by the Master of Tricks: Kalahari San Thumb Piano Music" (1975b) in my discussion of new performance genres.

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As //Kabbo's account of his arrest suggests the /Xam, though they continued to live largely as hunter-gatherers, had come into contact by the 1870s with the colonial state. Guenther argues that "the /Xam of the north-central Cape were enclosed by frontier farms and forced, within the span of a generation, into a life of precarious foraging, combined with marginal herding ... or of oppressive farm labour" (1989:17), and he refers to the account provided by the traveller G.A. Farini:

He describes a rather bustling frontier life in the Northern Cape, consisting of white and coloured ranchers owning tens of thousands of acres and thousands of head of cattle, of traders and hawkers, cattle treks, ox wagons and stage coaches, ferry operators, winkels (trading stores) and, all over the place, toiling or lounging about, Bushman and Baster farm labourers. (Guenther,1989:17)

Dorothea Bleek refers to the informants as "colonial Bushmen" (1923:v-ix), and there is no doubt that to varying degrees they were acculturated: each had a Dutch as well as a /Xam name (//Kabbo, for example, was known as "Jantje Toorn", and his son-in-law /Han+kasso as "Klein Jantje"), and Dia!kwain had worked for a white farmer. The portraits of the narrators in Specimens of Bushman Folklore, in which they are clothed in Western fashion, confirm the impact of the colonial state on their society and sense of identity. The /Xam social order was disintegrating rapidly by the 1870s, and many of the narrators said that they had heard the narratives and songs which they recounted "from their parents" (Bleek D,1923:vi). As Lewis-Williams suggests, however, it is clear from the accounts of the Bleek and Lloyd informants that they still lived in nomadic groups, survived for the most part by hunting and collecting, and defined themselves largely in terms of traditional belief systems and aesthetic forms (1981:28).

A difficulty in discussing the oral literature of the /Xam, obviously, is that with the society having been destroyed by the turn of the century, little information exists about its precise social

institutions or practices. A close reading of the Bleek and Lloyd records and the material published by Dorothea Bleek and others nevertheless provides valuable information and suggests important parallels with more modern Bushman societies such as the !Kung of Botswana. Biesele warns of the danger of essentialising Bushman society by reading oral performances from the late nineteenth century in terms of modern accounts: "Just as the ecological anthropologist cannot answer the question 'What do San hunter-gatherers eat?' without reference to very localised and specific conditions, neither can the student of folklore make many generalisations about their oral traditions" (1976:304-5). Yet sufficient commonalities appear to exist between the !Kung and the /Xam to enable us to draw on more recent anthropological research as part of the exercise of returning to the Bleek and Lloyd records from a contemporary perspective. As I said in the Introduction, my aim is to use such written records in recreating a sense of the 'living' oral performance in a working society, while at the same time remaining alert to the question of how the texts might continue to address us in present circumstances.

Bushman societies are highly verbal in character, and various oral forms are performed by members of the band. As Hewitt argues, the lack of stratification in Bushman society has strongly influenced its literary production:

The band is a highly egalitarian, non-stratified and non-authoritarian social unit and these features have left an unmistakable imprint on [the] rich and exclusively oral literature [of the Bushmen]. In particular the absence of economic differentiation and the positive employment of strategies designed to obstruct the growth of personal power within the community are factors which preclude the emergence of a literary élite comprised of individuals specifically recognised and rewarded for their talents. (1985:651)

Bushman oral literature comprises sacred and profane stories as well as songs which can be part



of communal religious life or which can reflect personal moods/responses to events. Though specific words exist in different Bushman societies for songs and stories respectively, the genres often treat the same events or subject-matter, and can overlap in terms of textual strategies or performance context.

Because the society is not stratified and does not maintain institutionalised generic distinctions which are highly visible and socially significant, my discussion of Bushman oral literature is not confined only to the songs - which can fairly easily be understood as 'poems' - but also extends to the stories. Unlike Zulu izibongo which occupies a specific cultural space and serves a particular political function within the monarchy, for example, the telling of stories and the singing of songs permeate every aspect of Bushman society. To focus only on one form of expression would seem at best arbitrary, or at worst to risk imposing the generic categories of Western criticism onto a literature which has its origins in precolonial Africa. Furthermore, the stories themselves in their performance appear to blur Western distinctions between prose and poetry. While convention - or even common sense - might suggest that narratives involve the unfolding of plot and the development of character in time and circumstance, and that poems are generally concerned with the intense evocation of experience, Bushman narratives appear to mingle such 'prose' and 'poetic' elements and identifications. Certainly the development of plot and character is crucial, yet the narrators - as we learn from modern !Kung society - develop a rhythm of delivery which uses sound patterning, pauses, abrupt breaks, and fluctuations of tone and volume in much the same way as oral poets. In addition, the symbolic intensity of many of the stories suggests that they are closer to Western conceptions of the prayer or lyric than the prose narrative. This symbolic intensity is conveyed in the oral delivery by the lively performance of the narrator: in his/her dramatic bodily movement, facial expression, verbal animation, and climactic or dismissive gesture.

The blurring of the narrative/poem division in the stories suggests that the recuperation of the oral literature of the /Xam for critical debate may involve our recasting the form of the

texts: that is, finding an appropriate convention with which to represent them in print. Bleek and Lloyd themselves were rather ambivalent on the question of generic divisions. While they separated 'poems' or 'songs' from 'narratives' or 'stories' by following the Western print tradition of marking the poems or songs typographically in short lines, they used punctuation in many of the narratives in order to create the effect of lines delivered in a poetic rhythm. (This is not to deny that the somewhat arrested rhythm of the narratives could almost certainly have been exacerbated by Bleek and Lloyd's laborious process of transcription.) The following extract from "The Girl of the Early Race, Who Made Stars" can be seen to point to the potential in the narratives of poetic rhythm accentuated both by parallelisms and the convention of insistently punctuating phrasal and clausal divisions of the full sentence or unit of sense:

The darkness comes out; they (the Stars) wax red, while they had first been white. They feel that ( ) they stand brightly around; that they may sail along; while they feel that it is night. Then, the people go by night; while they feel that the ground is made light. While they feel that the Stars shine a little. Darkness is upon ( ) the ground. The Milky Way gently glows; while it feels that it is wood ashes. Therefore it gently glows. (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:75)

Such sidereal narratives seem to me to have the status of prayers or hymns within a ritualised performance context, a point emphasised by /Han=kass'o's narrative "What the Stars Say, and a Prayer to a Star" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:81-83), approximately half of which comprises a prayer to Canopus.

In his collection Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam (1991), Stephen Watson has engaged with the problem of how adequately to represent the stories of //Kabbo, Dia!kwain and others in print. Inspired by the 'poetic' nature of the /Xam narratives, he has rewritten them - quite substantially - as lyric poems, thus following the procedure of Jack Cope and Uys Krige in The Penguin Book of South African Verse (1968). While I am sympathetic towards Watson's

project, I feel that - like Bieseles's attitude to translation - it risks a simple appropriation of /Xam culture. Watson is aware of the danger, particularly of portraying the Bushmen as inhabitants of "some mythical-poetical Eden", but believes that the advantages of his method outweigh the disadvantages in that the form of poetry "cast[s] into relief features which would almost certainly have been lost in even the best prose translation" (1991:16-20). My own feeling is that we need a form which retains the impetus of the unfolding plot, but which registers the rhythms of poetic delivery. Such a form - like the oral-influenced epic tradition - may need to move beyond the short line of the lyric, or to use lines of very different lengths to evoke the changing pace and pauses of narration. According to this method, I would recast the sidereal narrative quoted from Bleek and Lloyd above in the following way. As suggested earlier, my recasting extends to the translation:

The darkness comes out,  
 the Stars wax red, while they had first been white.  
 They feel that they stand around brightly,  
 that they may sail along,  
 while it is night.  
 Then, the people go by night,  
 while they feel that the ground is made light,  
 while they feel that the Stars shine a little.  
 Darkness is upon the ground.  
 The Milky Way glows gently:  
 it feels that it is wood ashes  
 therefore it glows gently.

In order to register the ambiguous forms of their ontology and to capture in print something of their performative aspect, I have recast along these lines all of the narratives dealt with in this chapter. (These include the narratives published by Guenther, who follows Bleek and Lloyd's

prose convention.) For the songs, I have remained for the most part with Bleek and Lloyd's practice of short, recognisable 'poetry' line divisions.

Storytelling is an important activity in Bushman societies, and many similarities exist between the narrative traditions of the Cape /Xam of the nineteenth century and the !Kung of Botswana today in terms of both thematic concerns and performance styles. There is no set time for storytelling, which may occur during the day or at night, or while visiting friends and relatives in other bands. Storytelling is especially the province of the older people, and is intimately bound up with a sense of social and personal identity, as an old !Kung woman affirmed:

The old person who does not tell stories just does not exist. Our forefathers related for us the doings of the people of long ago and anyone who doesn't know them doesn't have his head on straight. And anyone whose head is on straight knows them. (Quoted in Bieseke, 1976:308)

As the !Kung woman's comment suggests, the bulk of the stories which are performed concern the doings of the Early Race ("the people of long ago"), the mythological ancestors of the Bushmen who are closely associated with animals since, according to Bushman cosmogony, all animals were once people. As well as these stories dealing with origins, there are others dealing with more recent history, hunting and other topics. In terms of style it is difficult to tell a narrative of recent events from one dealing with the Early Race, and no formal distinction is made between stories which are sacred and profane. The /Xam used the broad term "kukummi" to cover all forms of narrative, though the !Kung use the term "n≠wasi" (stories) to refer to historical or hunting narratives and "n≠wasi o n!osimasi" to indicate stories of the Old People. A good storyteller is judged both by his/her knowledge of the doings of the Old People and by general verbal ability (Bieseke, 1976:308).

The stories of the Early Race serve the important function of mediating, discursively, the

major social, political and economic problems facing Bushman society. Biesele says of !Kung narrative cycles about the Old People:

Basic themes ... include some of the problem points of living, such as marriage and sex, the food quest, sharing, family relationships, the division of labour, birth and death, murder, and blood vengeance. Other concerns include the creation of the present world order and the relationship of hunter-gatherers to peoples with more advanced economies. (1976:303)

The Bushmen regard the conduct of members of the Early Race with scorn or amusement, though this does not detract from the importance of the stories, for neither the /Xam nor the !Kung find any disjuncture between the profound and the humorous. (Here we may compare a number of other mythologies, including those of ancient Greece, in which the deities' power over human affairs is in no way diminished by their own often foolish or short-sighted behaviour.) Hewitt points to the cosmological and epistemological importance of the stories of the Early Race:

This fictive early period is thought of as a formative one for the San, where the raw materials of life, both cosmological and social, were constantly interacting, re-arranging themselves, revealing social truths and the natural order of things. It is this area that provides narrators with an opportunity to create out of a mass of motifs, plot structures and character galleries performances of great cultural penetration. In the hands of a reflective performer narrative materials which are commonly used for pure entertainment may become moulded, re-interpreted and elaborated to create performances profoundly embedded within the deepest layers of San philosophical and religious thought. (1985:654-655)

Amongst the most important of the stories dealing with the period of creation are those

involving the trickster god, referred to by the /Xam as /Kaggen and by the !Kung as Kauha. (The trickster god of the Bushmen is akin to Heiseb, the god of the Khoikhoi.) Unlike other narratives of this period which may be narrated as single episodes, the trickster stories are generally performed in cycles in 'tit-for-tat' fashion to the accompaniment of uproarious laughter, since they are often bawdy and scatological (Bieseles, 1976:316-317). They concern the tricks which the god has played upon him, or which he plays upon others - especially his wives. Amongst the Bleek and Lloyd records, numerous narratives are devoted to the single figure of /Kaggen (twenty-one in all), and /Hanǀkass'o, in particular, is concerned to link the narratives into cycles which stress the connections between the trickster's several escapades.

The /Kaggen narratives explore various aspects of his conduct, character and magical powers. /Kaggen is usually associated with the Mantis, although there are many other guises that he may assume. He is generally credited with the creation of several of the animals as well as the moon, and certain of the narratives recount how aspects of the physical world result from his use of his magical powers in escaping his enemies. Though his conduct is often anti-social, /Kaggen always acts ultimately to preserve life. Bieseles has argued that the oral literature of Bushman societies plays an important role in the "systematics of knowledge" (1993:43), and through the antics of /Kaggen the trickster narrative performances treat many of the pressing issues of /Xam life.

In the story "!Gaunu-ts'axau, the Baboons and the Mantis" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:17-37) as narrated by /Hanǀkass'o, for example, /Kaggen sends his son !Gaunu-ts'axau to fetch sticks to throw at the baboons. However, the baboons realise what !Gaunu-ts'axau is up to, and beat him to death with such violence that one of his eyes is dislodged from its socket. They then begin to play a ball game with the eye. Realising that something is amiss, /Kaggen seeks his son, and manages to retrieve the eye by joining in the baboons' game and stealing the 'ball'. He escapes to a body of water, where he leaves the eye with the instruction to reconstitute the full form of his son. On his return to the water he sees his son sitting in the sun on the bank, and joyfully showers

him with gifts which he has made.

Although the plot structure is not highly complex, the story negotiates some of the central concerns of Bushman life, particularly the relationship between the human and the animal realms which emerges compellingly in considering baboons because of their hominid physiology. With the narrative structured around the tensions between people and baboons, no explanation is felt to be required for /Kaggen's wishing to throw sticks at the troop: the antagonism is simply assumed. As omnivorous foragers, baboons often compete for food resources with hunter-gatherers, and may in fact be dangerous adversaries since a full-grown baboon can easily kill a human adult. As is common in accounts of the Early Race, the divide between human and animal is blurred: /Han=kass'o refers to the baboons as "the people who sit on their heels"; he grants them the power of speech; and he presents them as playing a ball game. The conclusion of the narrative, however, re-establishes the division between human and animal, and reasserts the hierarchy of power, as /Kaggen uses his magical abilities to restore his son to life and hence to defeat the baboons.

We can imagine /Han=kass'o utilising the techniques both of fictional narrative and of poetry or song in creating a vivid and dramatic confrontation between /Kaggen and the baboons. In building up the tension of the baboons' decision to kill /Kaggen's son, he has the opportunity to employ dialogue, which would considerably enhance the performative aspect of the story as the narrator could alter the tone and pitch of his voice for each character. Riddle features prominently in this dialogue, as the baboons initially struggle to ascertain what it is /Kaggen wishes to do with the sticks. It is only the fourth baboon to arrive who can solve the riddle:

And he came up to them.

He said: "What does this child say?"

And the other one answered:

"This child says he wants to fetch sticks for his father,

so that his father may take aim  
at the people who sit upon their heels."

Therefore, this baboon exclaimed: "It is ourselves!"

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:19-21)

The story also makes use of a poetic refrain - divided into short lines even by Bleek and Lloyd - to create a sense of patterning in the performance, as each baboon utters the same words when called upon to join the group around the child:

First going

I listen

To the child yonder.

/Kaggen's escape with the eye to the water - an action that serves to regenerate the son - touches upon another central aspect of Bushman life: the religious trance. Men who enter trance states are believed to be able to see and drive out the spirits of the dead (/gawasi) who cause disease and dissension within the community. One of the most common metaphors for trance, which appears regularly in rock art, is the experience of being underwater. Hence, in this narrative, the figure of /Kaggen shadows that of the /Xam shaman who, like the trickster, uses his specific powers to save life and restore social order.

Closely allied to /Kaggen are other trickster figures from the Early Race, including the jackal.<sup>8</sup> Two narratives by Dia!kwain and ≠Kasin deal with the distribution of meat through accounts of the jackal's ability to outwit other animals. In "Jackal and Hyena" (Guenther, 1989:147-149), Dia!kwain offers a humorous story of how the jackal is able to trick the hyena out of a quagga which he has just killed. The hyena asks the jackal to tell his wife of the kill, but the jackal claims that she will not believe him, and offers to guard the kill while the hyena fetches his spouse. In the hyena's absence, the jackal builds a hut of long sticks, on which



he places the quagga meat and near to which he builds a fire. He then asks his own wife, who has joined him, to make a thong ("riem") out of mouse intestines, with which he offers to pull the hyena up to the meat when he returns. With the hyena suspended in mid-air, the jackal cuts through the thong, and the hyena falls to the ground narrowly missing the fire. After much remonstrance, the hyena again attempts the ascent, but with the same result. This time, however, he falls directly into the fire, burning himself badly, and the jackal takes the meat for himself.

Although Bleek and Lloyd do not offer a great deal of information about the performance, we can imagine that Dia!kwain must have narrated the events with great relish in conveying the suspense of the hyena's second attempt to climb up to the meat on the mouse-gut thong. My typographical representation seeks to capture the suspense of performance, as well as to emphasise the alternating 'voices' of jackal and hyena in the oral delivery:

And the hyena said:

"O jackal! When I come up and reach you  
 at your place up there  
 you shall feel pain on your skin!  
 You must give me a riem that is strong enough  
 to go up with.  
 For the children are dying here because of hunger,  
 while you are not pulling me up,  
 so that I may get food for the children.

And the jackal said:

"The riem was strong enough.  
 The reason the riem broke, letting go of you,  
 was because I pulled too hard.  
 I will give you the same riem again  
 and we will see if it will break again."

And the jackal gave the hyena the riem.

And he said:

"You must not do again what you did before.

For this riem I am now giving you is strong,

hold on to it well."

And the jackal said:

"Tie the riem fast to your body

so that I may pull you.

Let me see if I cannot pull you up.

When the riem is on your body,

let's see then."

And the jackal pulled the hyena.

And now he said to his wife:

"When you see that the hyena might be coming up here,

cut through the riem

so that the hyena cannot come up here

but fall into the fire."

(Adapted from Guenther, 1989:148)

The conjunction "and" at the beginning of each new section suggests - in the print version - an urgency of narration which should engage the listeners' attention in the inevitability of the unfolding plot. The compulsion of Dia!kwain's story, however, is found particularly in his evocation of character, as the jackal's cunning is registered by both his ironic speech and duplicitous actions, and counterpoints the stolid stupidity of the hyena.

"Jackal and Hyena" is in part aetiological, since the hyena's fall into the fire accounts for its small hindquarters: "That is why the back part of the hyena is very small,/ because formerly it was burnt in the fire" (Adapted from Guenther,1989:149). The story however also addresses the question of the ownership of a kill, an issue which with the constant danger of lions, hyenas and jackals was pressing for /Xam hunters. Even when ownership had been established, the matter of ensuring the equitable distribution of the meat was vital to the survival of the band. Both /Xam and !Kung societies have specific customs regarding the hunter's rights and duties with respect to his animal; and while "Jackal and Hyena" provides a highly amusing account of the jackal's selfishness, the story points towards real suffering and need in the hyena's plea about the hunger of his children, and acknowledges the importance of such customs in the maintenance of human life.

‡Kasin's story "The Jackals and the Lion" is also concerned with the ownership of a carcass: it is less humorous, though, for this time it is the jackal who loses his meat. As a member of the Early Race who has both human and animal attributes, he hunts eland with a bow and arrow. The lion, however, constantly drives him off his kills. Finally, with the help of a sorceress and his own cunning, he kills the lion, and establishes a period of peace and bounty for his community. Here, instead of indicating simple self-interest as in "Jackal and Hyena", the jackal's trickery works for the common good:

There now seemed to be peace.

For their father walked about and did not talk.

Thus, the place seemed comfortable now,

for peace now seemed to reign.

There were places where the jackal did not talk at them.

For peace now seemed to reign,

for the place had become so,

peace reigned at it:  
 that little children might not fear,  
 for there is peace;  
 that now the little children  
 might fetch water for him  
 so that he might drink,  
 for now they were all satisfied with him.

(Adapted from Guenther, 1989:151)

†Kasin's lyrical evocation of the restorative effects of the jackal's actions is striking and - as Guenther suggests - may have projected his own feelings about the crisis facing /Xam society:

Did he, perhaps, recognise himself, and his people, in the jackals, when they were at the mercy of the lion oppressor who took away their food with gratuitous force and thereby threatened their very survival? The song of praise, to peace, to contented children, to well-being, was for †Kasin, perhaps, a song of hope, or of nostalgic memories of a time before the marauding settlers. (1989:150)

Certainly the understanding of the jackal figure as folk hero in this story finds a modern counterpart amongst the Nharo of the Kalahari, who narrate the actions of a fox-trickster who works as a garden servant for a foolish but brutal Afrikaans farmer (Hewitt, 1985:660). In its longing for peace and restitution, †Kasin's story 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. At the same time, it suggests in analogous ways something of the human value and possibility which was destroyed, and which will need to be recovered if - in present circumstances - we are to try to construct social and political histories which emphasise commonalities rather than divisions.

Myth as modern analogy is evident not only in the narratives concerned with the trickster god, but in those of the Early Period that deal with other topics including the creation of the stars as closely associated with the therianthropic members of the Early Race. These sidereal narratives are symbolically dense, and in fairly elaborate plot structures involve a large cast of characters including the Dawn's Heart Star (Jupiter) and his wife the Lynx. One of the more accessible of these stories is Dia!kwain's brief account, "The Great Star, !Gaunu, which, Singing, Named the Stars" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:79-81), in which the smaller stars are named by the great star, and become forever a sign to the porcupine that dawn is approaching.

One of the earliest and most influential literary recuperations of the Bushman creation narratives has been that of Laurens van der Post, particularly in The Lost World of the Kalahari<sup>9</sup> (1958) and The Heart of the Hunter (1961). The importance of his work lies in his identifying the creativity of the Bushmen, and in his recovering something of their complex mythology. As Masilela has argued, in a context in which the state was formulating and implementing its apartheid policies van der Post articulated a common South African humanity beginning with the people brutalised by both white settlers and African peoples:

The importance of [the work of] van der Post in our cultural history is (for its relevance in the present context is even more fundamental), to have attempted to construct a singular and unified structure of our own culture. The achievement has to be seen in the context of the fact that the state was moving against this very attempt by instituting the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid. What is even more remarkable is that [his] sense of history informed [him] that only by beginning with the First People (the Khoisan people), and by placing them at the centre of [his] enterprise can a historically authentic structure of South African history be constructed. Indeed, the base and fundamental layer of our unified and multi-complex culture, is the still unexamined but incomparably rich culture of the Khoisan people. (1987:58)

Van der Post's account of the Bushmen is extremely lyrical, and often seductive:

His paintings show him clearly to be illuminated with spirit; the lamp may have been antique but the oil is authentic and timeless, and the flame was well and tenderly lit. Indeed, his capacity for love shows up like a fire on a hill at night. He alone of all the races, was so much of its earth and innermost being that he tried constantly to glorify it by adorning its rocks with painting. We other races went through Africa like locusts, devouring and stripping the land for what we could get out of it. (1979:32)

Yet such lyricism is double-edged, for even as it asserts universal human creativities, it appropriates the Bushmen for van der Post's own specific concerns. While his openness about his biographical reasons for seeking out the Bushmen is laudable (this is particularly evident in The Lost World of the Kalahari) and suggests an attempt to acknowledge his own subjectivity, van der Post does not at any stage allow the Bushmen - even the living Kalahari Bushmen - to 'talk back' to him about the particularities of their lives. Instead they are subsumed under a Jungian paradigm, where they represent for van der Post the instinctive child within us which Western society has destroyed, and which our contact with the Bushmen may allow us to recover. While he would no doubt regard his observations as extremely positive, van der Post often comes dangerously close to Social Darwinism in his descriptions of "the Bushman" as "child-man" (1979:13), "the little hunter" (1979:22), "this little man" (1979:28), and in passages like the following:

Even as a child it seemed to me that his [the Bushman's] world was one without secrets between one form of being and another. As I tried to form a picture of what it was really like it came to me that he was back in the moment which our European fairy-tale books described as the time when birds, beasts, plants, trees,

and men shared a common tongue, and the whole world, night and day, resounded like the surf of a coral sea with universal conversation. (1979:21-22)

In the process of asserting the 'common humanity' reflected in the creation tales, van der Post is in danger of transforming 'the Bushman' into the 'other' who precedes society, history and economic need, and who lives in Edenic unity with the natural world.

Apart from the tales concerned with mythological origins, however, many Bushman narratives emerged - and continue to emerge - directly from the events of everyday life, particularly hunting. //Kabbo provides a detailed account of hunting practices, for example, in the text entitled "Habits of the Bat and Porcupine" (Bleek and Lloyd,1911:247-253). Here is an extract:

Mamma told me about it,  
 that I should watch for the porcupine,  
 if I saw the bat;  
 then I would know that the porcupine was coming,  
 for the bat came.  
 And I must not sleep:  
 I must watch for the porcupine,  
 for, when the porcupine approaches, I feel sleepy,  
 I become sleepy, on account of the porcupine;  
 for the porcupine is a thing which is used,  
 when it draws near,  
 to make us sleep against our will,  
 as it wishes that we may not know  
 the time at which it comes;  
 as it wishes that it may come into its hole  
 when we are asleep. (Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd,1911:249)

Formally, his narrative is structured around variations on the refrain "Mamma/Father used to tell me", which probably derives from the fact - mentioned earlier - that many of the narrators claimed they were recounting stories told to them by their parents. In //Kabbo's text, however, the phrase has a greater significance than simple acknowledgement of informational origins. Oral literature is characterised by its use of repetition as a rhetorical device, and through his refrain //Kabbo could have lent rhythm to his delivery, thus creating an anticipatory structure into which his listeners could then have fitted each new section to ensure coherence even had a line or two escaped them. At the same time, the repetition emphasises the principle of circularity on which the narrative is based, and which characterises many African oral poems and stories. In the case of the Bushmen, the emphasis on repeated cycles may proceed from the fact that their lives were to a large extent governed by the cycles of the natural world: the sun, the moon, the seasons, and so on. The repetition of the phrase "Mamma/Father used to say" also helps to establish a sense of communal knowledge and wisdom, which serves to bind the members of the band together.

The narrative contains sound advice, nevertheless, on how to hunt a porcupine (//Kabbo's narratives are generally characterised by their attention to practical detail): ensure that the time of night is right ("the time at which the Milky Way turns back"); stay awake; check the wind direction; and remain quiet. In addition to its practical advice, the account opens up to the realm of the mythological in the suggestion that the movement of the porcupine is associated with the falling of the stars, which echoes Dia!kwain's creation narrative "The Great Star, !Gaunu, which, Singing, Named the Stars":

Father taught me about the stars;  
that I should do thus  
when lying in wait at a porcupine's hole.



I must watch the stars -  
 the place where the stars fall  
 is the one I must watch thoroughly.  
 For this place is really where the porcupine is,  
 where the stars fall.

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:253)

In this narrative, as in most Bushman literature, there is no sense of disjuncture between the mythological and the everyday, so that an ostensibly practical hunting narrative conveys understandings of great lyrical intensity. There is, in fact, no sense of division for the Bushmen between the physical and the spiritual worlds: instead they are perceived to form a continuum.

\* \* \*

While narratives comprise a great deal of the literature performed by the /Xam, !Kung and other groupings, songs are also important forms of social articulation, and may be either part of communal religious life or intensely personal creations. Religious or medicine songs are perceived to be 'given' by god (the !Kung believe Gao!na sends the lesser god //Gauwa with the songs). They are often named after animals - such as the Giraffe, Gemsbok and Eland songs - and are performed at trance dances, at which the women clap and sing while the men dance in order to enter trance. The singers believe that these religious songs have power or "n/um", the same term used to describe the power of trance, though they may be sung light-heartedly during the day when they are perceived to have no "n/um". Healing songs are of less interest to literary scholars than to anthropologists, however, as the words of the songs either have little or no meaning, or the meanings have been forgotten.

Personal or 'mood' songs are more individualised verbal responses to events, and range from apparently simple expressions of longing, such as //Kabbo's song on the loss of his tobacco

pouch and his consequent 'tobacco hunger'

Famine it is,  
 Famine it is,  
 Famine is here.

Famine it is,  
 Famine it is,  
 Famine is here (Bleek and Lloyd,1911:235)

to songs which employ complex textual strategies and reveal highly developed aesthetic and social insights, such as Dia!kwain's "The Broken String". Unlike narratives and religious songs, as evidence from !Kung society suggests, mood songs are often performed without an audience, to the accompaniment of a single-stringed musical bow or a four- or five-stringed instrument known as a "//gwashi".

In her recent study Women Like Meat Biesele has pointed to the centrality of metaphor in Ju/'hoan society, claiming that "[m]etaphor permeates Ju/'hoan expressive life, which in a few words can be characterised as highly oblique, indirect, and allusive" (1993:23). This literary figure was equally important in the aesthetic and social life of the /Xam. While many of the narratives employ metaphor extensively, or can themselves be read as extended metaphors, it is in the mood songs that metaphor, symbol and image come to the fore. Even in his very brief song quoted above, //Kabbo employs metaphorical transformation in registering his craving for tobacco as a "famine". Dia!kwain's song entitled "The Broken String" is constructed around the central metaphor of the broken string, and functions in a way analogous to the Western lyric, which perhaps accounts for its being the Bushman text most frequently included in anthologies of South African poetry.

As the footnote to "The Broken String" indicates, Dia!kwain had heard the song from his father Xaa-ttin, who composed the lament "after the death of his friend, the magician and rain-maker !Nuin/kui-ten, who died from the effects of a shot which he had received when going about in the form of a lion" (Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:236). While the visionary is an important aspect of Bushman society, in which shamanism opens vast psychic spaces and symbolic stores, the emphasis on therianthrope transformation in Bleek and Lloyd's note elides the fact that !Nuin/kui-ten was shot by a white farmer after he had killed an ox. I quote the song here in full, with only slight linguistic modifications to Bleek and Lloyd's translation and the alteration of those of their line divisions which - in my view - seem somewhat arbitrary and, on the page, do not create a convincing sense of the performed song:<sup>10</sup>

### The Broken String

People were those  
 who broke the string for me.  
 Therefore,  
 the place became like this to me,  
 on account of it,  
 because the string  
 was that which broke for me.  
 Therefore,  
 the place does not feel to me,  
 as the place used to feel to me,  
 on account of it.  
 For, the place feels  
 as if it stood open before me,  
 because the string has broken for me.  
 Therefore,

the place does not feel pleasant to me,

On account of it.

(Adapted from Bleek and Lloyd, 1911:237)

With this lament in mind Harold Scheub argues that "[o]ral poetry is a complex interplay of images. It is more than mere accumulation, but that is where it begins, as the solitary image wrenched from its wonted environment is pulled into new contexts" (1987:483-4). "The Broken String" works around a main and a subsidiary image: the string which has broken; and the changed landscape.

The breaking of the string refers obviously to a musical instrument, especially since the subject was himself a singer, composer and rainmaker (the musical bow was used in the rain ceremony), and the song would have been performed to musical accompaniment. Hence the death of the shaman leaves a silence within the band, and within the speaker. The image also suggests the breaking of the string of a hunting bow, one of the most prized possessions of Bushman men, and hence the destruction of something of value. As Hewitt argues, however, the reference to the string resonates with more complex meanings. Another practice of rainmaking involved leading an ox with a leather thong across the area where it was hoped that rain would fall. If the thong broke, which it did with a sound similar to that of a stringed musical instrument, it was perceived to be a particularly bad omen, and signified despair to the band (1985:665). Hence, through the association of images, the song evokes the absolute desolation which the shaman's death signifies. Such an interpretation is supported by Dia!kwain's explanatory comment that the string "was what he used to hear, when !Nuin/kui-ten had called forth the Rain-bull. That was why things were not like they had formerly been" (quoted by Scheub, 1987:482-3).

The symbol of the string, then, registers at once the silencing of the shaman in death, the intensely personal pain felt by the speaker, and the larger breakage within society which the

death would have represented. Similarly, the changed and desolate nature of the place reflects simultaneously the grief of Xaa-ttin, the loss of an important figure in the band, and the fact that nothing can ever be the same for the /Xam again. The song identifies the agents responsible for the change as "People", the farmers whose arrival in the area would change unutterably the course of /Xam history. The power of "The Broken String" lies in the fact that, even as it is a moving personal lament on the death of a great figure, it is a haunting anticipation of the destruction of /Xam society.

Bushman oral literature has continued to develop new forms in response to changing historical circumstances. In the 1960s amongst the Northern Bushmen, for example, many young performers began to use the thumb piano of African societies. One performer in particular gained immense popularity at /"ai/"ai, near Ghanzi, by combining the highly personalised reflections of the mood song with the religious tradition, thus evoking an individualised relationship with the trickster deity which is both tortured and inspirational (see Biesele, 1975b:171). As well as new kinds of mood songs, other innovative forms have emerged. The community associated with the Kuru Development Trust at Ghanzi, for example, performs various dramatic sketches which in hybrid associations mix traditional performance genres with other African and Western influences. The community has also produced remarkable new styles of oil painting.

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As I have tried to indicate in this chapter, the literature of the Bushmen represents an originary mythology firmly located in social circumstance. The later expression also embodies a large and continuing theme in South African literary and political life: the clash of cultures; racial confrontation; and the destruction of indigenous inhabitants by the technology of a stronger colonial power. The texts of the /Xam suggest not the primordial child-man which van der Post describes, nor the idyllic African past evoked in popular media and advertising,<sup>11</sup> but a complex

imaginative response to pressing social and economic needs. At the same time, the literature of the /Xam returns us to certain formal issues within literary studies. While anthologies usually include either prose or poetry, the oral performances of the Bushmen seem to blur such generic distinctions, and compel us to seek new methods of representation for oral texts appropriate to the actual southern African context.

### Notes

1. My title obviously echoes Jonathan Raban's The Society of the Poem (1971). Raban's book and Michael Hamburger's The Truth of Poetry (1972) remain central texts for the study of poetry.
2. The movement towards increasingly historicised readings of oral literature is paralleled by developments in the study of Bushman rock art. The work of David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson, particularly in their seminal study Images of Power: Understanding Bushman Rock Art (1989), undermined contemporary naturalist perceptions of rock art by arguing that the paintings and engravings emerged from the complex mythological systems and psychic spaces of religious trance. Lewis-Williams and Dowson's assertion of the creative abilities and highly developed understandings of rock painters parallels the important work of Parry and Lord in insisting on the value and power of oral literature, in the face of institutional denigration of its worth. However, just as literary scholars have recently sought to root texts more firmly within contexts of generation and reception, so rock art researchers have begun to question whether Lewis-Williams and Dowson's trance theories, though valuable, may not serve to locate the paintings and engravings in a transcendental mythical space, beyond politics, history and economic pressures. Anne Solomon, for example, has recently argued for a more overtly politicised paradigm, which is alert particularly to the gender relations of Bushman societies (1994).

3. See for example Alan Barnard's Hunters and Herders in Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples (1992).
4. See Wright (1971;1994) and Guenther (1994).
5. At the conference "Texts and Images of People, Politics and Power: Representing the Bushman People of South Africa" (Rock Art Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, and the Johannesburg Art Gallery, 4-7 August 1994), members of the Schmidtsdrift community, some of whom were still soldiers, provided harrowing accounts of the methods used by the SADF to force the members of 31 Battalion to move to Schmidtsdrift. A recent newspaper article on the Schmidtsdrift community provides some insight into the conditions of life there (Anon.,1993), though its assertions about the role played by the SADF do not square with accounts from community members themselves.
6. Bessie Head's novel Maru (1971) explores this theme through the discrimination experienced by the protagonist once it is discovered that she is a "Mosarwa". Kenneth Good examines the political and legal position of the Bushmen in Botswana in some detail (1993;1994).
7. See "Customs and Beliefs of the /Xam Bushmen; from Material Collected by Dr W.H.I. Bleek and Miss L.C. Lloyd between 1870 and 1880" (1931-36) and "Special Speech of Animals and Moon Used by the /Xam Bushmen" (1936).
8. The trickster god is sometimes thought of as a member of the Early Race, and at other times to have ascended to the sky to become god. The /Xam generally regard /Kaggen as a supernatural being but, as Hewitt argues, the notion of a deity is less developed amongst the /Xam than amongst the Central and Northern Bushmen (1985:658).

9. For an extended discussion of The Lost World of the Kalahari see Lloyd (1993).
10. Bleek and Lloyd break the first line of the song after the pronoun "who", for example:

People were those who  
Broke for me the string.

This division seems to me to create a rather limp line-ending, and to draw attention away from the opening word "People" and the reinforcement of culpability/agency in "those" which resonates through the rest of the song. Furthermore Bleek and Lloyd's line division does not seem to register the way the singer would pause - as !Kung singers do - at the end of each sense-unit, so generating the rhythm of delivery. Hence my recasting is as follows:

People were those  
who broke the string for me.

At other points in the song I have altered line divisions in this fashion.

11. Barbara Buntman has argued that Bushmen are especially attractive metaphors for advertisers, since they are perceived to offer uncontested, uncontroversial images of a black Africa, they are not seen to be associated with political parties or conflicts, they allow advertisers to present a movement from an idyllic past to a post-apartheid future without the disruptions of history, economics or politics, and they can be used metonymically to represent an unpolarised Africanness which mediates between black and white (1994). See Tomaselli (1992;1993) for representations of the Bushmen in South African film.



## Chapter 2: Poetry, History, Nation: The Praises of Shaka kaSenzangakhona

On 9 April 1837 the American missionary Rev. George Champion visited the court of the Zulu king Dingane. Amongst his records of the meeting is the following observation:

A man stood not far from the great houses full of praise, shouting at the top of his voice and calling Dingan, the elephant's calf, the black one, the conqueror of all the lands &c. We waited a little for the monarch to hear his flattery, and at length the servant whose post is at the gate told us he wanted to see us. (1967:90-91)

In these lines Champion describes one of the most important cultural and political institutions of Zulu society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the praise poetry of the king or chief. Despite his detached and somewhat condescending tone - he dismisses the form as mere "flattery" - Champion provides amongst the earliest first-hand accounts of the performance of Zulu praise poetry in South African history.

Almost all African societies on the subcontinent had (and in many cases still have) one or more poets who performed poems about the rule and lineage of the chief or king and about his relationship with his subjects. The occasions for such performances, as Champion describes, would range from the arrival of visitors to great ceremonies, including declarations of war and celebrations of military victories. This form of poetry is highly complex, and is regarded with great seriousness by both ruler and ruled. It has particular prominence in Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and Sotho societies, and many similarities exist between the praises performed by the different groupings.

In contrast to Bushman bands which are largely egalitarian in their social organisation, traditional Zulu society is highly stratified and patriarchal. Power is centralised in the hands of

the king or chief, and is devolved through local chiefs and headmen to the leading men of individual households. Whereas Bushman societies, in keeping with their more informal social structure, generally do not maintain absolute distinctions between literary genres, Zulu society - being larger, more highly structured and more politically complex - has more clearly defined social and cultural institutions, of which the praise poetry of chiefs is perhaps the most prominent. Hence my focus in this chapter will be on a single literary form with a specific social function and distinctive textual features. This is not to suggest that Zulu people do not perform other kinds of oral literature, including different kinds of praises, work songs, love lyrics, wedding songs, lullabies, children's verse, stories, riddles and prayers.

In discussing the praises of Shaka I shall argue in this chapter for placing praise poetry (Zulu/Xhosa: "izibongo"; Sotho: "lithoko") in a central position in South African literary history. There are a number of reasons for granting praise poetry this status. Firstly, it is regarded as the highest form of literary expression in almost all African societies in the subcontinent, and continues to play an important role in South African political and cultural life. Secondly, alongside the songs and stories of the Bushmen, praise poetry probably constitutes our truly original contribution to world literature. (Despite this, it is poorly represented in survey studies of South African literature and in the syllabi of departments of literary studies.) Thirdly, its influence on black literary production in this country has been pervasive, and the next three chapters consider, amongst other things, how in disparate historical and political contexts the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the poems of Ingoapele Madingoane, Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli all draw on the tradition of izibongo. The necessity for detailed attention to praise poetry as a literary form is illustrated by the difficulties encountered by many South African critics - who have had little knowledge of the cultural institutions or aesthetic models of African societies - in finding appropriate paradigms for Soweto poetry and the performance poetry of the 1980s: forms that bear the influence of oral assumptions.

By placing izibongo at the centre of our literary history, I wish to contribute to breaking

down the linguistic barriers which have characterised literary and cultural analysis in South Africa, and which do not recognise the high degree of linguistic and generic hybridisation in our society. My thesis seeks to draw into the mainstream of literary study - specifically into English departments, which are my institutional home - forms that have received more attention from other disciplines than from that of literature. At the same time - as I stated in the Introduction - the thesis is written not only to fulfil academic requirements, but to serve what I regard as a larger social purpose: the importance of cross-cultural 'translations' of language and experience in a society that has been divided for so long by the ethnic imperatives of colonialism and apartheid.

A great deal of research has been conducted on izibongo by scholars in departments of African languages. In this chapter I draw on the work of such pioneering figures as E.W. Grant, G.P. Lestrade, H.I.E. Dhlomo, B.W. Vilakazi, A.C. Jordan and Mazisi Kunene, while also pointing to certain limitations in their critical approaches. Early articles such as Grant's "The Izibongo of the Zulu Chiefs" (1927), Vilakazi's "The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu" (1938) and Dhlomo's "Nature and Variety of Tribal Drama" (1939) served to direct critical attention to forms of oral creation that had been ignored by scholars, and - especially in the cases of Grant and Vilakazi - to record original performances for posterity. Grant offers some discussion of the imbongi and his mode of recitation, and provides detailed annotations for the izibongo of Senzangakhona, Shaka, Dingane, Mpande, Cetshwayo, Dinizulu and Zibebu. Unfortunately, he offers little discussion of the poetics of the form. In contrast, Dhlomo and Vilakazi pay careful attention to the 'literary' qualities of the oral texts which they discuss, thereby asserting the potential of black creativities usually denied by colonial ideology. Vilakazi, in particular, provides valuable insights into the rhythmical structures of izibongo, especially into what he calls the "breath-group", the verbal units defined by the performer's regular pauses for breath (1993:61-67). Yet both Vilakazi and Dhlomo assume that oral societies are by definition 'primitive', and both implicitly and explicitly equate 'civilisation' with European culture. (Amongst many other examples, Vilakazi refers to "primitive poets" and "primitive Bantu man"

(1993:58,59), while Dhlomo talks of "backward races", and theorises about the art forms of "civilised man" against those of "primitive man" (1993:195,201.) Despite the rancorous debate which these articles provoked between themselves,<sup>1</sup> Dhlomo and Vilakazi remain fairly firmly within Eurocentric poetic paradigms, and are unable to engage fully either with the specific nature of oral poetry or with the complex aesthetic structures of African forms. More recent critical studies of orality in departments of African languages have also struggled to grant performance poems their status as living forms in society. With some exceptions, such studies tend to be either morphological or structural-classificatory, explicating oral literature in terms of grammatical and syntactic forms or setting up generic categories for the texts. These studies grant little attention to the status of the poem as a human document: as an act of rhetoric with the capacity to persuade, to mobilise, or to negotiate relations of power.

Amongst the most influential studies of Zulu izibongo by African language scholars are those by Trevor Cope, and D.K. Rycroft and A.B. Ngcobo. Cope's Izibongo: Zulu Praise-poems (1968) - part of the Oxford University Press series on oral poetry from southern Africa - remains probably the most valuable text on Zulu izibongo. The book makes available recorded versions of a number of praise poems, including the praises of Shaka which I intend to discuss here, and expands upon both the poetic strategies of izibongo and the role of the poet and the form. Cope however experiences some difficulty in connecting the form of izibongo to its function (his otherwise useful chapter entitled "An Appreciation of Zulu Praise-poems" includes separate sections on "The Function of Praise-poems" and "Praise-poems as Poetry: Poetic Qualities"). Cope is also unable to create a dynamic sense of izibongo as utilising particular textual and performative strategies in order to accomplish specific social ends. Instead, he tends to lapse either into literary formalism or social history. In their book The Praises of Dingana: Izibongo zikaDingana (1988), Rycroft and Ngcobo offer a scholarly explication of the records of that king's izibongo, and provide a wealth of information for the critic. Yet the very informational density of their study is in many ways self-defeating, as the poem itself tends to disappear under the weight of historical and grammatical annotation. I shall return to this question later in the chapter.

Studies of izibongo have also been conducted fairly recently by literary scholars. Amongst the most prominent of these is Leroy Vail and Landeg White's Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (1991), in which the authors offer a compelling account of the social functioning of different forms of praise poetry in southern Africa. Yet - like Cope - Vail and White struggle to acknowledge simultaneously the historicity and textuality of the praise poetry which they discuss. Instead, they tend to collapse the poetic nature of their texts into the larger power relations of their societies. In contrast, my concern is to combine a sociology with a poetics of oral literature - as Barber and de Moraes Farias suggest - and I read the textuality of izibongo as integral to its social function. In doing so, I draw especially on the work of Elizabeth Gunner and Jeff Opland who, whatever their differences of approach and purpose, have sought to remain alert to both form and function.

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My reasons for choosing the izibongo of Shaka as a test case are various. The poem is well known, and even though critics have generally been extremely uncertain as to how to 'read' the text, sections have been fairly frequently anthologised. The praises deal with one of the major figures of our history, and there are numerous accounts - both oral and written - of Shaka's life and accomplishments.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the poem itself provides us with a text of great power. We have a compelling account of a great, if ruthless, leader as well as of the growth of a nation.

The text of Shaka's izibongo published by Cope is drawn from the most extensive source for Zulu izibongo from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - the James Stuart archive.<sup>3</sup> Stuart was born in 1868 in Pietermaritzburg, and collected Zulu praise poems between 1888 and 1912 during his years of service as a magistrate in what is now KwaZulu Natal. He had extensive contact with most of the leading oral poets in the region, and meticulously transcribed and

annotated the performances he witnessed. Certain of his informants were old men who could provide first-hand accounts which stretched back to the time of Dingane's reign. Stuart left South Africa in 1922 for London, where he continued to research and publish Zulu oral literature. In all, he collected and transcribed 258 poems during his travels in Natal.<sup>4</sup> His manuscripts are lodged in the Killie Campbell Africana Library archives, while copies of the sound recordings he made are stored in the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Sections of the print archives concerned with the social and political history of the Zulu people have been published in the James Stuart Archive: Volumes 1-4 (Webb and Wright: 1976,1979,1982,1986).

Stuart did not translate the izibongo which he collected, a task undertaken by Daniel Malcolm. Malcolm was born in Durban in 1884, and grew up in Bulwer. He served as Chief Inspector of Bantu Education for 30 years, and on retiring became the first lecturer in Zulu at the University of Natal, a post he held for twenty years. Malcolm died in 1962 before he could publish his translations, and it was only with Cope's intervention that certain of the poems appeared in print. Cope defines his editorial role as being to "select the most representative of the poems (26 out of the 258), polish them (for Malcolm's translations were mostly first drafts in manuscript), and annotate them (for Stuart's and Malcolm's notes were very brief)" (1968:viii). Cope's "polishing" means that the translated izibongo reveal few of the grammatical and syntactical awkwardnesses evident in the Bleek and Lloyd records of Bushman texts. In the process of annotation, he drew particularly on A.T. Bryant's Olden Times in Zululand and Natal (1929).

While "Shaka" - as Stuart titled the poem - has a similarly ambiguous status to that of other oral texts which survive only in printed records through processes of transcription and translation, this particular text reveals several problems more specific to itself. Firstly, what Cope does not mention is that Stuart created his versions of the poems by amalgamating a number of different performances. A working note in Stuart's handwriting on an early version of "Izibongo

zika Tshaka" in the Killie Campbell archives (dated 14.1.21) suggests something of the nature of his editorial intervention, and reveals the Western print assumptions about 'aesthetic unity' and 'conciseness' which underpinned that intervention: "Tshingana, Ndabuko, Mkungo and Mgidhlana's versions collated and made into a single piece. All repetitions struck out. Best and most definitive verses adopted" (File 29a: KCM 23481). For the final version of "Shaka", Stuart drew on at least thirty-three different versions in an apparent effort to establish an 'authentic' text. As Vail and White have argued (1991:58), this project proceeds from the mistaken assumption that the comparison of a range of Shakan izibongo will lead to the recovery of an 'urtext' from which all the versions derive, whereas the performance of izibongo - while drawing on customary praises - is in every instance a distinct textual event. A second fact which Cope does not mention is that his "polishing" is not limited to Malcolm's translations, but extends also to Stuart's Zulu versions. As well as regularising the orthography (a practice he acknowledges), he makes a number of small changes to the poem "Shaka", switching the order of lines in certain sections, and in one case adding four lines, apparently drawn from Stuart's earlier versions. Cope's editorial hand is evident in a comparison of the opening sections of Stuart's and Cope's texts:

Stuart:           UDlungwana woMbelebele!  
                   Odlung' emanxulumeni,  
                   Kwaze kwas' amanxulum esibikelana.  
                   USishaka kasishayeki, kanjengamanzi!  
                   Bazohushay' abakwaNtombazi, nabakwaLanga.  
                   UNodum' ehlezi, kaMenzi!  
                   ILemb' eleqamany' amalemb'e ngokukhalipha;  
                   UShaka ngiyesab' ukuthi nguShaka,  
                   UShaka kuyinkosi yasemShobeni. (File 28:289.KCM 23478)

Cope: UDLungwana kaNdaba!

UDlungwana woMbelebele,  
 Odlung' emanxulumeni,  
 Kwaze kwas' amanxulum' esibikelana.  
 UNodumehlezi kaMenzi,  
 USishaka kasishayeki kanjengamanzi,  
 Ilemb' eleq' amany' amalembé ngokukhalipha;  
 UShaka ngiyesab' ukuthi nguShaka,  
 UShaka kuyinkosi yasemaShobeni. (1968:89)

Cope's version omits the line "Bazohushay' abakwaNtombazi, nabakwaLanga", adds the opening praise "UDlungwana kaNdaba", and alters the order of some of the epithets, so creating a slightly different effect from that of the Stuart version. The third problem with the Stuart/Cope text is that, while Shaka reigned from 1816 to 1828, the izibongo were recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We are uncertain, therefore, as to what extent they correspond with those which would have been performed at Shaka's court itself. Nonetheless, the customary and memorised nature of izibongo suggests that the text we have is likely to be reasonably 'accurate', a sense confirmed by comparisons with the earliest records of the izibongo of Shaka which date from the reign of Dingane and which include examples recorded in the 1850s.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the 'oral' textual problems, "Shaka" - in the form that it has reached us - is a poem of power and intensity, and should be of immense value to literary studies. We may recognise the ambiguities of its ontology, including its artificial solidification in print, but continue to use "Shaka" to explore lines of historical, social and literary communication which otherwise could have remained inaccessible. Such a critical project involves our maintaining a 'dialogue' between the textual event which, in drawing both on historical accounts and interviews with more recent audiences and izimbongi, we may envision as having taken place in Shaka's court, and the rather different text - published by Cope - which prompts/provokes a distinct set of critical expectations and assumptions. Such a dialogue - or dialectic, in view of the difficult 'translations' involved -



should prove enlightening: the critical expectations aroused by the fixed Stuart/Cope text may be permitted to provide a framework of understanding within which to 'identify' the poem, while we bear in mind that its performative status in the Zulu royal court would have insisted on its distinctiveness and hence its resistance to the appropriations of later cultural transmission. Unless we are prepared to acknowledge that despite the 'instabilities' of transmission, translation and reception we can recreate something of a speaking voice, we are in danger of arriving at an impasse: a blocking of communication which is not inevitable but ideological, and is a legacy of the Romantic myth of essential truth that is supposed to emerge from the artist's own individualised mouth/pen. Accordingly, any alterations to the text are seen as departures from the inspired words of the original. Yet as I argued in the Introduction in discussing Bassnett-McGuire's theory of translation, the insights of structuralism and semiotics suggest that rather than concern ourselves with the loss of an inspired original, we might instead perceive the value of transfer from one signifying system to another to serve a purpose in a given context.

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Recuperating "Shaka" for literary debate requires a fairly detailed knowledge of its historical context. The poem emerges from a period in which Zulu power was being consolidated and then forcefully extended under Shaka's reign.<sup>6</sup> The early nineteenth century in the KwaZulu Natal area was characterised by fierce battles between a number of chiefdoms over land and political control. Prior to Shaka's accession to power, the Zulu were a fairly minor grouping, and had been conquered by - amongst others - the Mthethwa under Dingiswayo. The Mthethwa controlled the coastal area, while the other dominant force the Ndwande, under Zwide, controlled the northern areas. Shaka was born in 1787, son to Nandi and the Zulu chief Senzangakhona. During his childhood he was driven together with his mother from the Zulu, and granted refuge by Dingiswayo to whom the Zulu were tributary. Amongst the Mthethwa Shaka achieved great fame as a warrior, and after the death of Senzangakhona in 1816 he was installed by Dingiswayo as chief of the Zulu clan, whose might and influence he rebuilt through prowess in

warfare. Amongst the important innovations that he introduced was the regiment system - an idea adopted and extended from Dingiswayo's armies - by means of which he established a standing army and created a highly militarised ethos in Zulu society. He also developed the short stabbing spear; unlike the long spear which was thrown from some distance and left the warrior effectively unarmed once it had been launched, the short spear was used for close combat and was ideally suited to the attack formation of the 'horns', in which the enemy's flanks were enclosed by attacking regiments while, from the front, the main force of warriors engaged the enemy at close range.

After the death of Dingiswayo at the hands of Zwibe in 1818, Shaka assumed chieftaincy of the Mthethwa, and extended his power and influence by conquering other groups and including the warriors in his armies. The poem "Shaka" catalogues the successes of his military campaigns. By 1824, when Shaka moved his capital from Mkhumbane to Ngoye (also known as Bulawayo), he had built the Zulu chiefdom into a strong, centralised power-base, in which the authority of the king exceeded by far that of prior chiefs. As Jeff Guy argues, the Zulu kingdom was at this stage "the most formidable power in south-east Africa" (1994:xviii). In 1827 Shaka had a second royal kraal built at Dukuza and divided his time between his two capitals, but his increasingly cruel and despotic acts were already causing unhappiness with his rule. In the following year he was assassinated by his brothers Dingane and Mhlangana, and after a dispute over succession in which Mhlangana was killed, Dingane assumed the kingship.

Such is the context to which the poem "Shaka" responds and in which it would have been performed. While the historical circumstances of Shaka's rule are well-known, however, many readers and critics remain uncertain as to how to make sense of its 'literary' self-expression, and praise poetry has consequently received little attention in literary studies. Here is a section of "Shaka":

The beast that lowed at Mthonjaneni,

And all the tribes heard its wailing,  
 It was heard by Dunjwa of the Yengweni kraal,  
 It was heard by Mangcengeza of Khali's kraal.

Fire of the long grass of scorching force,  
 That burned the owls on the Dlebe hill,  
 And eventually those on Madeblana also burned.

He who travelled across to Ndimma and Mgovu,  
 And women who were with child gave birth easily;  
 The newly planted crops they left still short,  
 The seed they left amongst the maize-stalks,  
 The old women were left in the abandoned sites,  
 The old men were left along the tracks,  
 The roots of trees looked up at the sky.

He who reached the top of Bhuzane mountain,  
 He came across a long line of buck,  
 He passed by Mcombo as the cattle were leaving.

(Cope, 1968:90-92)

Most readers and critics will immediately identify the text as a poem recognisable in the short-line convention according to which Stuart, and later Cope, registered the imbongi's rhythmic delivery of the praises. Many today, however, are likely to have difficulty in subjecting the text to 'critical appreciation'. The uncertainties certainly arise from the ontological instabilities of version-poems like "Shaka", but actually proceed from three related problems: a misunderstanding of the nature and function of izibongo; an inability to make sense of its textual strategies; and a difficulty with the density of historical reference and allusion in the poem. I shall consider these problems with reference to "Shaka". Some general discussion of forms of praising is required, however, before I can usefully undertake a detailed analysis of this particular poem.

Royal izibongo cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of izibongo.<sup>7</sup> As in most African societies on the subcontinent, Zulu social life is characterised by the many different forms of praises that people perform, including praises to birds, wild animals and cattle (often as part of a communal ritual of thanks for their milk), personal praises, praises to the clan, praises to the ancestors, and the praise poems of the king or chief, such as those of Shaka. The larger function of praising is to establish cognitive maps within society - of relations between humans and animals, individuals and other individuals, personal identity and communal life, and ruler and ruled.

Personal praises have an important bearing on royal izibongo, and require particular attention. The first literary form associated with the individual in Zulu society is the lullaby ("isihlabelelo"), composed by the mother for the child. This is then followed by a personal praise name ("isithopho") which may be self-composed, or granted by peers or parents. Over a period of time the isithopho is elaborated into the individual's personal izibongo, which may reflect flatteringly or otherwise on the person's physical appearance or moral character. Such personal izibongo are highly intertextual, since they often comprise elements which are self-composed, others which are drawn from the praises of friends, relatives or ancestors, praises which are given by others, or which are simply part of the cultural currency of the society. Izibongo of this kind serve to mediate personal and social identity in that they define the individual in relation to the group or the community. Male praises are performed especially at the solo "ukugiya" dance, at which the warrior dances vigorously and ferociously to the recitation of his praises. H.I.E. Dhlomo identified the significance of personal izibongo in this context:

They were used to excite and delight. They were a fairly faithful and inspired record of your career and character. In youth they told your measure of promise, your inclinations and your dormant but dominant qualities; in advanced age, the story of your achievements and adventures. (1977:48)

While Dhlomo emphasised the role of personal izibongo in a highly-militarised male context, Gunner has pointed to the important role personal izibongo play in Zulu women's lives, and the ways in which - often in bawdy or humorous fashion - they treat many of the problem points of their experience (1989b). The following lines from the izibongo of MaHlabisa, recorded and translated by Gunner, illustrate the form:

She scurries up and down with her skinny little legs, where the old men are.

She outdrinks the Madondo crowd, she knocks it back.

She outdrank the Madondo lot and the Nsindwana people.

Dig! As fiercely as a furnace!

Red bird that ploughs up everything and scratches men for food. (1989b:22)

(Zulu society defines identity not only in personal izibongo but by means of clan praises, known as "izithakazelo", which also serve as a polite form of address.<sup>8</sup>)

Royal izibongo are in many ways an extension, development and formalisation of personal izibongo. Instead of the king collecting his own praise names or accounts of his military/political prowess, however, this would be done by someone else - an "imbongi" (plural "izimbongi") or praise poet. A poem like "Shaka", for example, comprises a set of praise names that has been collected, shaped and memorised by the imbongi, and would have been performed before the king and his subjects in an order that varied from occasion to occasion. Royal izibongo are regarded with greater seriousness by members of the society than are personal izibongo, and they function in more complex and far-reaching ways.

The imbongi is not paid by the chief or king, does not come from a separate caste or class, and is not designated as a poet through heredity: he (the office is reserved for men) has to earn the acclaim of the people (Opland, 1983:64-65). There is no formal apprenticeship for izimbongi:

an aspirant poet learns the craft of oral composition and performance by hearing other izimbongi perform, and then memorising their poems and adapting or extending them. A number of izimbongi may perform for, or be attached to, a chief but generally one or two will emerge through popular acclaim as the official (iz)imbongi. The office of imbongi is signified by the poet's dressing in skins and carrying two sticks, or a knobkierie or shield and spear. A poet who has not earned popular acclaim may generally not wear the skins or carry the spears/sticks/shield. The two principal izimbongi of Shaka were Mshongweni and Mxhamama kaNtendeka (or kaSoshaya) of the Sibisini clan, the latter of whom also served as Shaka's main attendant, and was killed by Shaka's assassins. A third imbongi called Mhayi, who is known to have served Phakathwayo and Dingane, may have also served Shaka (Rycroft and Ngcobo, 1988:17).

Drawing on interviews with more recent izimbongi, Cope argues that "[p]raise composition is consciously an art; there is a conscious striving after literary effect and a conscious effort to attain a richer, a more evocative, a more emotive, and a more memorable use of language". (The memorable and evocative expression in izibongo, of course, exploits the euphonic nature of the Zulu language.) Yet Cope points out that the specialisation in the Zulu tradition of izibongo is especially in the performance, since the praises are largely "a matter of collection and perfection rather than of creation" (1968:25-27). Opland claims that the emphasis on collection and memorisation, in fact, distinguishes the Zulu form of praise poetry, which he describes as "primarily memorial", from the Xhosa form, which is "primarily improvisational" (1983:258). He connects the distinction to the specific social and historical formations of Zulu and Xhosa societies: the Zulu kingdom was largely centralised from Shaka onwards, and achieved a high degree of political and cultural stability and order; Xhosa society, in contrast, had no paramount chief and remained far more dispersed. Accordingly, its cultural institutions did not develop the same degree of uniformity, nor were they as concerned with maintaining social cohesion and national unity.

Despite the breadth and complexity of praising in southern Africa, the role of praise poetry in African societies has been seriously misunderstood by a range of commentators. On witnessing a display of scenes from Zulu life by a group of performers at the St George's Gallery, Hyde Park Corner, London, in 1853, Charles Dickens wrote the following:

The chief has sometimes the condescension to come forth ... . But lest the great man should forget his greatness ... there suddenly rushes in a poet, retained for the purpose, called a Praiser. This literary gentleman wears a leopard's head over his own, and a dress of tigers' tails; he has the appearance of having come express on his hind legs from the Zoological gardens; and he incontinently strikes up the chief's praises, plunging and tearing all the while. There is a frantic wickedness in this brute's manner of worrying the air, and gnashing out: "O what a delightful chief he is! O what a delicious quantity of blood he sheds! O how majestically he laps it up! O how charmingly cruel he is! O how he tears the flesh of his enemies and crunches the bones! O how like the tiger and the leopard and the wolf and the bear he is! O, row row row row, how fond I am of him!" (1853:338-339)

Such misconceptions about the nature and function of izibongo continue to occur up to the present day. Though he does not reveal the extreme colonial arrogance and prejudice of Dickens, Farouk Asvat is similarly unable to conceive that praise poetry might be anything more than the expression of blind adulation. In rejecting the claims made by Jeremy Cronin for the volume of 'worker' poetry Black Mamba Rising, Asvat says:

The examples that Cronin quotes are nothing more than praise poems to selected organisations, like the praise poets of old that sang out to monarchs in blind faith in spite of their injustices. (1987)

A king or chief could only maintain power for a limited period by force, and hence royal

izibongo served as a discursive means of stabilising society and creating social cohesion; this does not imply, however, that the poetry expressed the unquestioning loyalty which Dickens and Asvat describe. The term "praise poem" is something of a misnomer, for it implies that the role of the imbongi is simply laudatory or adulatory. The verb "bonga" (which is the root of "imbongi" and "izibongo") in fact means "to praise" or "to criticise" depending upon the context. The position of imbongi is perceived to be an extremely responsible one and - as suggested earlier - the izibongo of the chief are considered to be the highest form of poetry in African communities. The function of the praise poet is to negotiate relations of political power within the society, and accordingly the imbongi is "licensed" by the poetic form to criticise the king where this is perceived to be necessary. (Landeg White offers an extensive account of the notion of "poetic licence" in forms of official izibongo (1989).) As well as criticism, the imbongi articulates the expectations subjects have of their ruler, and he delivers praise for political and military successes. Opland points out that the imbongi serves not the chief, but the chiefdom, functioning as "a mediator between ruler and ruled" (1984:176-177):

His poetic assessment of the chief is not blindly adulatory. He has the ability to inspire strong emotions and also to sway opinion. If he criticises excesses in the behaviour of the chief, he also exhorts his audiences to mend their errant ways. He is loyal especially to the chiefdom; he is the bard, the tribal poet, and he sees the welfare of the chiefdom as his concern. He incites warriors to courage in battle, or pacifies inflamed emotions. He establishes the moral norm, urging tribesmen to respect their chief, his ancestors, and their own forefathers but decrying whatever threatens the ideal polity. From this central role in society flow others. Since his poetry is concerned with his contemporaries as well as their antecedents, the izibongo of the imbongi incorporates the history of the chiefdom. His poetry can identify the chief he serves, and he functions therefore as a herald; he is a cheerleader, custodian of lore, mediator, prophet, literary virtuoso. His essential role is, however, political, concerned with the well-being of the polity. (1983:68)



Archie Mafeje has compared the role of the imbongi with the role of the newspaper cartoonist in Western society, and Opland suggests links between the "licence" accorded izibongo and the licence afforded politicians of Western parliaments (1983:83). Drawing on the studies of Swazi ceremonies conducted by Max Gluckman, Opland argues that the imbongi's freedom to censure the king constitutes a "ritual of rebellion" which functions to confirm the validity of the kingship by institutionalising criticism (1983:69-71).

The extent of the imbongi's licence to criticise has, however, been the subject of much debate. Certainly, there are many examples of unflattering treatment of rulers in Xhosa and Zulu izibongo. The praises of Mtshiki, son of the early nineteenth-century Gcaleka chief Hintsu, refer to him as follows:

He's a fart who expels wind,  
 whose bum puckered as his guts ballooned,  
 then filled once again as the air erupted.  
 A dandy, a transient with wanderlust,  
 lounge on struts like a man of great beauty. (Opland,1992:182)

His father appears to have enjoyed little more approval from his imbongi. He is criticised for his dallying and lack of preparedness for war: "The late riser has seen nothing,/He will never see the python uncoil". This criticism is followed by a series of elaborate sexual metaphors in which the king's lack of forthright action is presented as sexual licentiousness: "Eee, what is the matter with this man/That his testicles are swollen?/Is it because he ceaselessly picks the young fruit?" (Scheub,1987:477). (As the criticisms of Hintsu and his son quoted above suggest, the imbongi was also licensed to use explicit scatological or sexual language which would otherwise not have been considered socially acceptable. Such sexual references are generally not evident in recorded izibongo, either because the texts have been bowdlerised, or because the izimbongi were

reluctant to use such language in front of those recording their performances.) Criticism was also levelled at Shaka's father, Senzangakhona. In his izibongo he was customarily called "gatepost on which owls perched" in apparent reference to his paying insufficient attention to the danger posed by neighbouring chiefs (Rycroft and Ngcobo, 1988:29).

The poem "Shaka", at least in the print form in which it survives, contains a number of important instances of criticism or advice. Shaka is censured for what appears to have been an unwise and ill-directed military campaign, undertaken through his own impatience -

Powerful limbs, calf of a beast,  
The kicking of this beast puzzled me,  
It kicked the milker and left the one holding it (98) -

and his izibongo reveal great dissatisfaction with the indiscriminate violence of his rule:

King, you are wrong, because you do not discriminate,  
Because even those of your maternal uncle's family you kill,  
Because you killed Bhebhe, son of Ncumela of your maternal uncle's family. (110)

Further, the praise of Shaka near the beginning of his izibongo - "He who armed in the forest, who is like a madman,/The madman who is in full view of the men" (88) - appears to be double-edged. It certainly recalls the famous incident recorded by Thomas Mofolo (1981:50-51) in which, while being sheltered by Dingiswayo, Shaka courageously killed a madman who was terrorising the community; yet the identification of Shaka with the madman suggests his own lack of control (a criticism repeated later in the poem: "He who for lack of control attacked Nkuna" (102)). This reading is supported by the fear with which madness is regarded in Zulu society, and by the emphasis in the praise on Shaka's being a madman "in full view of the men".

What we need to bear in mind, of course, is that such criticisms may have been incorporated and 'interpreted' after the events by Stuart's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century respondents.

In any case the poem, in the form we have it, also suggests that Shaka is misdirected in his present concerns ("Searcher of the south, come and search northwards,/Come and search where there is sun" (104)), and emphasises the leader's need to develop certain skills which he lacks:

Help me Maphitha and Ngqengelele,  
And give him a cow that he may learn to milk into the mouth,  
And give him a sharpened stick that he may dig for himself. (106)

Shaka is further advised by the praise poem not to undertake certain campaigns:

Trickster, abstain from enemies, it is summer,  
The grass is long, it will get the better of you (94)

to amend his conduct:

The people's cattle, Shaka, leave them alone, they are a cause of disaster  
They tie sharp knives on their tails ... (104)

and to turn his attention to other matters: "Return, Trickster, indeed you have finished this matter" (100).

Such criticism is important to note as we attempt to develop a 'theory' and 'practice' of the form-in-society; the 'critical' licence appears, however, to have been somewhat overemphasised by certain critics, particularly Africanist critics eager to defend indigenous

societies against charges of autocracy and archaism. Mbulelo V. Mzamane - it seems to me - valorises the praise poet in describing him as "the conscience of the nation" (1984:147-8), and Mazisi Kunene risks historical anachronism in suggesting that izimbongi acted "as democratic agents to reaffirm the approval or disapproval of the whole nation" (1979:xxv). Vail and White argue that such claims need to be carefully historicised. In support of their argument, they trace developments in Ndebele praise poetry, emphasising that it is not a static form but responds to and articulates changes in social and historical circumstances. They point out that during the period in which the Ndebele nation was being established, there was very little criticism or debate in the praise poetry (1991:98-99). Similarly Groenewald suggests that Ndebele praises of the mid-1980s were not concerned to any significant extent with negotiating relations between ruler and ruled, but instead sought to ensure a position of power for the royal family in a context of Bantustan politics in which its members had been excluded by the 'overlord' - the apartheid government - from political decision-making (1988:69). The criticism and advice which appear in "Shaka" - my warning above about the possibility of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interpolations notwithstanding - are fairly extensive, and suggest that the form did license Zulu royal izimbongi to register disapproval where necessary.

In performing their izibongo to Shaka, Mshongweni, Mxhamama kaNtendeka and Mhayi - as we learn from Grant's more recent accounts - would stalk up and down before the king and the assembled subjects declaiming the praises with great animation and as loudly as possible. Grant describes a performance of the praises of Shaka, probably by the famous Zulu imbongi Gwebisa in 1927, which suggests something of the dramatic nature of this poetic institution:

The old man appeared clad in a leopard-skin, and wearing around his temple a garland of the small bladders of animals. He carried his shield and his long, carved stick. As the recital proceeded the imbongi became worked up to a high pitch of fervour, and was evidently living again in the glories of the past. His voice became loud and strong, his face was uplifted. Shield and stick would be suddenly raised

and shaken in the air. Gestures became more frequent and dramatic. The reciter would leap in the air, or crouch with glaring eyes, while the praises poured from his lips, until he stopped exhausted. (1993:86)

Usually izibongo begin with an opening formula - a salute to the ruler, or the recitation of his clan praises - the primary function of which seems to be to attract the attention of the crowd so as to create silence for the performance; and the poems generally end with a concluding sentence such as "I disappear". In this poem, the initial greeting to Shaka, "Dlungwana son of Ndaba", may serve as an opening formula, and the final line "Finisher off! Black finisher off!" may function as a closing formula, though the opening and closing formulae are often omitted in the print versions of izibongo. The recitation involves the participation of the listeners whose shouts of "Musho!" (Speak/Praise him!) regularly punctuate the poem, giving it something of the nature of a dramatic performance.<sup>9</sup>

The poem "Shaka" evokes the power, majesty and achievements of the king: it establishes the lines of his legitimacy, explores the nature of his rule - suggesting new interpretations of past and present conduct - and evokes pride in the growth of a powerful nation. This we may assume was the point of actual dramatic renditions in Shaka's court, and has been extended and reinforced by Stuart in his stitching together of a number of accounts to create an epic sense of the national leader he describes in an unpublished historical study as "a great subject - not unlike Napoleon" (File 53; KCM 24160). The formal principle of izibongo is that of 'naming', and generally the poems comprise a series of epithets or praise names which follow one another in no particular order, describing the physical, moral and political qualities of the chief or king. (It is significant that little is in fact said of Shaka's moral character, an omission which may stand as covert criticism on the part of his izimbongi.) Many of the epithets are customary: there are the opening praise name "Dlungwana" - meaning "the one who rages" - and the appellation "spear that is red even on the handle" (88), which takes in both Shaka's prowess in battle and his revolutionary introduction of the stabbing spear; and there are the references to Shaka's

ancestry, including his descent from Ndaba (his great-grandfather and the first Zulu king) and his being the "son of Menzi" (Senzangakhona). Other names are drawn from proverbs, such as "Grass that pricks while still growing" (112) which refers to Shaka's greatness being evident at an early age. The epithets may also be taken from the izibongo of other chiefs or kings, and hence serve to establish the legitimacy of the king's rule, as well as to set his conduct in relation to those rulers who have preceded him. There are numerous examples in the poem, including the lines

The young viper grows as it sits,  
Always in a great rage,  
With a shield on its knees (96)

in which Ndaba's praises are used by the imbongi to suggest Shaka's impatience for battle. In addition, Shaka is linked with Senzangakhona in the phrases "Painful stabber" (96), "High star of Mjokwane" and "Brass walking-stick, son of Mjokwane" (110), all of which are the praise names of Shaka's father.

Amongst the most important of the epithets are those drawn from the natural world, in which the material features of early nineteenth-century Zulu life are symbolically transformed in order to reflect on social and political concerns. Certain of the animal images are customary, such as references to Shaka as the lion or the elephant (animals commonly associated with the strength and power of kings or chiefs). Other images, however, reveal his specific attributes. His physical beauty is evoked in the simile "He who is dark as the bile of a goat" (96) - darkness of skin-coloration being regarded as attractive - and the metaphor "Butterfly of Phunga/With colours in circles as if they had been painted on" (98). Shaka's stealth, cunning and accuracy in striking are indicated in the lines:

Hawk that I saw descending from the hills of Mangcengeza,

And from those of Phungashe he disappeared;  
 They said "Hawk, here he is, there he is",  
 Whereas he was silent in the forest like the leopards and lions. (98)

At another point the imbongi stresses both Shaka's speed and the vast number of cattle he has captured in the claim: "Shaka did not raid herds of cattle,/ He raided herds of buck" (98). Other images from the natural world include "South wind of attack" (102) and "He is curved like the ocean" (106), in which the king's power is akin to, and sanctioned by, the natural order. Coplan has argued that the significance of such imagery in izibongo is not simply thematic, but formal:

Structurally the poems are a series of verbal pictures created from the limitless figurative resources of African language. As elaborations upon a mutually resonant set of master metaphors, these images are ordered according to an emotional and aesthetic logic of incremental effect. (1987:12)

Certainly the principle of formal structuring around a concatenation of images is evident in a wide variety of South African texts which are influenced by izibongo, from Soweto poetry and the poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli, to plays like Sizwe Bansi is Dead (1972) and Woza Albert! (1983).

As the elaborate use of epithets may suggest, izibongo are highly metaphorical and allusive in their mode, bringing images which have cultural currency into new contexts of meaning. (Like that of Bushman groupings, traditional Zulu social life employs metaphor extensively, with the metaphor as literary device having particular prominence in izibongo.) Hence, in suggesting Shaka's difficult youth - when he was forced to seek refuge after having been exiled from the Zulu clan - the poem uses the image of snuff:

He who asks for snuff from Macingwane at Ngonyameni,  
 Macingwane, you said you had none,

You were giving yourself trouble ... (102)

As the somewhat ironic understatement of the last line suggests, Shaka on assuming the Zulu chieftainship destroyed Macingwane, allegedly for having refused to take him in as a child. A more complex and compressed metaphorical trope is evident in the imbongi's use of the "ford". Early on in the izibongo, the ford suggests the trickery of chiefs supposedly supportive of Shaka yet who withhold vital information:

The people of Zihlandlo son of Gcwabe and those of Mepho son of Ngwane,  
I criticised them, the evil-doers,  
They did not tell the king the ford,  
They made him cross at the one still dripping with saliva,  
Which was recently vacated by Ntube of the Majolas;  
They made him cross at the one with hippos and crocodiles,  
The hippos and crocodiles gaped with mouths wide-open. (92)

The image is more complex, however, than it may first appear, for the dangerous or slippery ford is also a proverbial image for someone who is untrustworthy: the imbongi here exploits the metaphorical implications of an actual historical event to register concern at the treacherous nature of Zihlandlo and Mepho. The ford image re-emerges in a new guise at the end of the poem to suggest Shaka's absolute control of his kingdom: "Little leopard that goes about preventing other leopards at the fords" (116).

Though "Shaka" - like most izibongo - is largely irregular in structure, the poem in the Stuart/Cope text falls into three broad sections: the first (lines 1-15) comprises the generalised praises of Shaka; the second (lines 16-426) constitutes the bulk of the poem and recounts Shaka's extensive military victories; and the third (lines 427-450) returns to a generalised consideration of the leader.<sup>10</sup> While this tripartite structure may be the result of Stuart's



editorial intervention, in which the Western-heroic tradition of the epic narrative registers Stuart's own sense of royalist Zulu history, the generic parallels with the epic tradition can prove enlightening for print-trained critics and readers in their endeavours to make sense of a poem concerned not only with the stature of a heroic leader but also with the founding of a nation. The definition of the Western epic, as offered by M.H. Abrams, certainly appears closely to match the formal and thematic concerns of "Shaka":

In its strict use by literary critics the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depend the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. The "traditional epics" (also called "primary epics" or "folk epics") were shaped by a literary artist from historical or legendary materials which had developed in the oral traditions of his people during a period of expansion or warfare. (1981:50)

More recently black poets like Mazisi Kunene and Ingoapele Madingoane have exploited the formal and ideological proximities between indigenous forms and the Western epic in composing extended verse narratives (termed by both poets as 'epics') which draw - amongst other influences - on the structures and concerns of izibongo. I return to these questions in Chapter Four of this study when I discuss Madingoane's "black trial".

In exploring the creation of the Zulu kingdom by armed conquest, "Shaka" utilises a number of textual strategies in order to evoke a vivid sense of personal and national achievement. Izibongo generally have little rhyme or metre, though a rhythm is established by the pace of delivery: each line comprises a breath-unit with a pause at the end, and each praise concludes with a final cadence. Cope captures this rhythm successfully, for the most part, by judicious use of punctuation and margin indentation, with commas indicating slight pauses, colons and semicolons indicating non-final cadences, full stops indicating final cadences, and

indentations marking the beginnings of new sections of praises (1968:64-65). In addition to cadence and pause, the imbongi establishes his oral rhythm by the use of repetition and parallelism. Probably the most common rhetorical device in "Shaka" is simple repetition, which in performance can powerfully stir the emotions of an audience. The most compelling example uses the customary metaphor of "devouring" to register the complete defeat of an enemy:

He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more;  
 He who while devouring some devoured others,  
 And as he devoured others he devoured some more. (96)

What Cope refers to as parallelism by initial linking (1968:41-43) is also used to build a dramatic sense of the extent of Shaka's military campaigns, and the momentum of the process of conquest:

He attacked Phungashe of the Buthelezi clan,  
 He attacked Sondabe of Mthanda as he sat in the council,  
 He attacked Macingwane at Ngonyameni,  
 He attacked Mangcengeza of the Mbatha clan,  
 He attacked Dladlama of the Majolas,  
 He attacked Nxaba son of Mbhekane,  
 He attacked Gambushe in Pondoland,  
 He attacked Faku in Pondoland. (96)

This form of parallelism is more widespread than Cope's English translation suggests, for at another point Cope consciously varies the verb form in his translation though Stuart's Zulu text repeats the same verb "wadi" (he ate/devoured). While the Zulu reads

Wadi' uNomahlanjana ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni,  
 Wadi' uMphepha ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni,  
 Wadi' uNombengula ezalwa nguZwidi' eMaphaleni ... (101)

Cope's translation is as follows

He devoured Nomahlanjana son of Zwidi of the Maphelas,  
 He ate up Mphepha son of Zwidi of the Maphelas,  
 He killed Nombengula son of Zwidi of the Maphelas ... (100)

Parallelism by initial linking also serves a structural function in the poem. From lines 56 to 110, the repetition of "He who ..." is used to introduce each new aspect of Shaka's praises, creating a compelling rhythm of delivery and granting this section of the poem a regular structure which assists the audience in making sense of the wealth of information that is offered. Other forms of parallelism in the poem include parallelism by simile ("He who bored an opening amongst the Ponds,/ Even today the opening is still wide open" (108)) and negative-positive parallelism ("They were not contending over anything at the Nyuswa's;/They were contending over castor-oil seeds in deserted sites" (94)). In both instances the function is to emphasise particular aspects of Shaka's conduct.

Like all cultural forms, izibongo are responsive to changes in political and historical circumstances, and the praises of Shaka differ from those of earlier Zulu chiefs. Prior to the emergence of Shaka the Natal/Zululand area had been controlled by a number of lesser chiefs

who interacted with each other in both peaceful and aggressive ways; under Shaka, however, power in the Zulu kingdom was strongly centralised and militarised. Cope argues that as a result

the ideal of inter-tribal balance, in which the values of reciprocity, shrewdness, and diplomacy played the most important part, was replaced by the ideal of dominance, in which the values of forcefulness and fearlessness, martial power and national glory, played the most important part, together with the values of good order, respect for authority, and obedience to discipline, which were necessary to the new system. (1968:22)

He points out that with the rise of the Zulu nation, imagery in izibongo began to change. Chiefs, for example, were no longer compared with small animals, as quick, shrewd or crafty, but with large powerful animals, such as the lion and elephant in the case of Shaka, and direct confrontation came to be prized over diplomacy (1968:31-32). However, the very formal organisation of the praises also changed: whereas the praises of chiefs had earlier been closer to personal izibongo since they were performed for rulers who controlled smaller groupings, the development of a nation-state involved the extension of izibongo to encompass the deeds and victories necessary to national loyalty, and led to the development of what, in the print form, has been termed the "praise stanza".

In tracing the emergence of the stanza, Cope (1968:50-63) draws on Mazisi Kunene's scheme of dividing Zulu poetry into three periods: pre-Shakan (c.1750-1800); Shakan (c.1800-1850); and post-Shakan (c.1850-1900).<sup>11</sup> In the pre-Shakan phase the simplest praises or epithets, akin to those found in personal izibongo which are not generally elaborated, were extended into what Cope refers to as statement plus extension, generally in the form of a couplet or triplet. An example from the praises of Senzangakhona is as follows: "Buffalo that goes overlooking the fords,/He is like Mzingeli of the Mfekana people" (Cope,1968:74). With Shaka's consolidation and extension of political structures, however, more complex discursive forms were

required to negotiate relations of power, and the simple praise plus extension was elaborated into the stanza, comprising statement, extension and development to conclusion. The conclusion generally gives a contrary twist to events recounted in the stanza. There are numerous examples in "Shaka" of this stanza form, through which the imbongi is able to explore the responses of people to their king

The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,  
 Joking as they sat in a sheltered spot,  
 Saying that Shaka would not rule, he would not become chief,  
 Whereas it was the year in which Shaka was about to prosper (90)

or establish a more complex and detailed sense of his conduct

He whose routes they inquired from Dunjwa,  
 Whereas they should have asked Mbozane about them,  
 As for him he was hurrying to Nomagaga,  
 A cock came and prevented him. (92)

In Kunene's scheme the Shakan stanza is followed by the development of the "great stanza", though this does not concern us here.

While the development of the stanza in Zulu izibongo is extremely important, Rycroft and Ngcobo warn of the danger of overlooking the role played by narrative passages in izibongo such as those of Shaka (1988:33-36). The poem is concerned with the development of a nation through military conquest, and it includes a number of passages which do not begin with a statement in the form of a praise name, but which offer self-contained narratives of Shaka's actions. The lines quoted earlier listing Shaka's military conquests may serve as examples, but a further illustration is contained in the following lines which construct such a narrative through

parallelism by initial linking:

He destroyed Zwide amongst the Ndwandwes,  
 He destroyed Nomahlanjana son of Zwide,  
 He destroyed Sikhunyana son of Zwide. (112)

This narrative passage, which occurs towards the end of the poem, points to another formal principle of izibongo: its cyclical construction (akin to the cyclical form of the Bushman songs and stories). The imbongi appears self-consciously to return to events referred to earlier and repeat them for rhetorical effect. In similar vein, the praise names of Shaka - mentioned previously in the poem - are repeated in a dramatic interjection about two-thirds of the way through the performance:

You are a wild animal! A leopard! A lion!  
 You are a horned viper! An elephant!  
 You are big as the great mountains of Mpehlela and Maqhwakazi,  
 You black one,  
 You grew while others loitered.  
 Snatcher of a staff!  
 He attacks, he rages,  
 He puts a shield on his knees. (108)

Stuart's editorial note, quoted earlier, indicates that he sought to remove "repetition" as far as possible in creating his composite text. It remains unclear, however, whether he meant by that comment his desire to edit out the cyclical repetitions of the imbongi in his performance or whether he wished to remove the repetition of whole sections of praises which resulted from collating different 'versions' of Shaka's praises. Whatever Stuart's editorial intention, the cyclical nature of izibongo remains clearly evident in "Shaka", and appears to be bound up with African

ontology which - in contrast to the linear, progressive and teleological colonial-Christian model - emphasises the circularity of religious, social and historical life. James A. Snead, in his article "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture", draws attention to the "cut" in black cultural texts, which he defines as "an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break ... with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (1984:67). Snead argues that black texts are constructed on cycles of repetition, the end of each cycle being marked by an explicit verbal, rhythmic or musical<sup>12</sup> signal that foregrounds the formal principle of circularity. Snead's argument is in many ways problematic: he tends to essentialise "black culture" (is there such a category as "black texts"?); and he risks a crude empiricism in defining the terms of his argument (his premise may be summarised as follows: cultural reservoirs are not inexhaustible therefore black culture is correct to foreground its own circularity). Yet his explanation of the "cut" as a form of textual organisation is enlightening. It appears that Shaka's praise poem is constructed on a cyclical principle, and that at key moments the imbongi 'cuts' back to a prior series through an explicit repetition of elements which have gone before.

The circularity of the historical model leads to a constant recreation and re-evaluation of history, and an imbongi is praised not only for his formal skill, fluency and eloquence, but for his knowledge of the past (Opland,1983:80-81). Just as personal izibongo locate the events of an individual life within the happenings of the community, royal izibongo place public events in a larger frame of reference. Recording history is not the primary function of the izibongo of the chief, but is a vital part of the form's concern to maintain the chieftom, establish the lineage of the ruler, and assess his conduct. The poem "Shaka" is especially concerned with history, as we have seen, since it seeks consciously to bolster national pride.

In his poems the imbongi creates a sense of history as rhetorical presence without annulling what Barber refers to as the "gravitational pull" of the past (1989:20). History in izibongo is constantly re-evaluated and revised, yet the customary and memorial nature of the form prevents the imbongi from arbitrarily recasting past events or their significance. Barber's

comments on Yoruba *oríkì* may apply equally to Zulu *izibongo*: "They represent the 'past in the present', the way the knowledge of the past makes itself felt stubbornly and often contradictorily today. They represent a way not just of looking at the past, but of re-experiencing it and reintegrating it into the present" (1989:14). Scheub argues that it is specifically in their performative aspect that *izibongo* articulate new understandings of history, for the alternating crescendos and cadences of delivery establish a rhythmical 'grid' on which images and symbols are constantly realigned:

Successive historical fragments are swept into this unique metrical organisation that connects events emotionally, in ways they may not be linked in time and reality, so that they are experienced in new relationships. A fresh view of history is generated, as the discrete images are moved by contiguity and new rhythmical affinities into new relationships. The process seems random only if the observer is seeking the chronological sequence of history. But there is in such poetry a new alignment of materials, as the line blends emotion and image, as rhythm gives these an illusion of continuity, allowing the argument of the poem to move into the foreground. This argues for new relationships which taken together form an attitude to history that transcends cause and effect linkages and enables history to move to a new level of cultural insight. (1987:485)

Within an oral society which has no physical means of storing information, the institution of *izibongo* (both personal and public) thus serves the important function of establishing a sense of historical continuity, which permits present conduct to be examined in terms of past events, and past events to be re-examined according to the imperatives of the society of the day.

While the praises served to establish Shaka's greatness and legitimacy, however, the entire purpose was not political and historical. The references to his ancestry ("son of Ndaba", "voracious one of Senzangakhona", "the rival of Phunga and Mageba") could also have served a



religious purpose. As Gunner has argued, too great an emphasis on the political and historical function of izibongo obscures the extent to which the form permeates the spiritual life of the society (1984:36). In traditional Zulu religion the focus is particularly on the spirits of ancestors who are perceived - as intermediary presences - to influence the affairs of the living. Though there is a concept of an originating deity, Nkulunkulu, attempts must be made to control the behaviour of the ancestors through divination and the use of medicines. One way to make contact with an ancestor is to recite his/her praises (usually at a religious ceremony). Hence the izibongo of the chief serve an important function in the religious life of the community, since they invoke and address the ancestors of the leader and his followers. Especially at crisis points, such as when rain is required or war is to be undertaken, the imbongi performs the praises of the ancestors to enlist their assistance - as Shaka's izimbongi Mshongweni and Mxhamama kaNtendeka would have evoked the assistance of Ndaba, Senzangakhona, Phunga and Mageba. At such moments the imbongi performs the role of priest or "vestigial shaman" (Opland, 1983:72).

The density of reference in izibongo, however, whether proceeding from historical or religious imperatives, remains a problem for critics and readers in different historical circumstances. Indeed, the poems can often appear almost impenetrable. Vilakazi has referred to the difficulties of the "emotional shorthand" of izibongo, for "[f]rom a very short passage much history and a lengthy meaning may be revealed" (1993:58), and other scholars have recommended the use of contextual studies in making sense of the form. In the case of "Shaka", the Stuart/Cope text has been artificially stabilised in print, so that the problem of historical references looms larger than it would in the transience of performance. While this stabilisation can offer historical scholars a wealth of material and data, it raises the difficulties of transferring the effect of delivery to the literary reading. The problem is not of course unique to Zulu izibongo, but is general to the socially-specific oral text.

The original audience would have been familiar with the events and figures referred to by the poet, but interviews and research suggest that listeners would not necessarily have taken

cognisance of all the details: they would have concentrated rather on the poem's overall trajectory and the dramatic nature of the performance. Opland says of the analogous case of Pondo personal praises:

It seems that in such a situation the **sound** of the izibongo is what encourages the dancers, rather than the words themselves. As Monica Wilson remarked, "Praises are gabbled so that many, even of a Pondo audience, do not catch half of what is said, and the allusions are not understood by many. Geza insisted that 'the words do not always refer to the deeds the person is praised for, but are a collection of praises referring to remote or distant events'" (Hunter, 1936/1961:372). The recitation of biographical or autobiographical poems frequently forms part of some other noisy activity, such as dancing or fighting; they are uttered in an excitable manner, in a rush, and the words are often lost in the surrounding noise. (1983:39-40)

Similarly Coplan claims of royal izibongo: "On occasion choreography supersedes poetry, for the fewer the words, the better the poet is able to represent history in action" (1987:13). While historical information and explication are both valuable and necessary in recuperating izibongo for literary study (I have drawn in my reading of "Shaka" on the historical information provided by Cope and Mapanje and White), we should beware of turning criticism into a pedestrian exercise of tracking down references. As I suggested earlier, the limitation of Rycroft and Ngcobo's project seems to be that the poem - as a text which seeks to persuade, to exhort, to address the needs of a human community - collapses under the weight of their annotation and explication.

Vail and White point to the similar problems of the Oxford University Press series on oral poetry from southern Africa:

The information ... provided is invaluable and is a necessary preliminary to interpretation. But by reducing the texts to a set of complex historical 'allusions', the different editors in the series have missed the opportunity of demonstrating that history as metaphor is not simply history as code. It is history as drama, evaluation and judgement: history with the metaphysics included. The metaphors, elaborated into patterns of interpretation, are not simply vehicles for the events themselves. They are the means of comprehending those events in terms of permanent or changing systems of values, a means of being equal to events and hence of transcending them. (1991:73)

The presentation of izibongo in print does indeed seem to require both editorial sensitivity and an appropriate analytical procedure, for the annotations necessary to appreciate the significance of the praises of Shaka or Dingane are no more extensive than those required for us to appreciate the point of a Shakespeare text. An editor seeking to include izibongo such as those of Shaka in a more wide-reaching anthology of South African poetry might, nonetheless, decide to represent the poem by an excerpt from one of the sections with fewer historical references, or to 'contract' the poem - as Mapanje and White have done (1983:25-28) - so obviating the need for detailed footnoting. While the obscurity of many of the references in "Shaka" is a problem, the poem remains a powerful human document which offers a 'living' sense of a historical moment of immense significance, and an appreciation of its force does not depend on exhaustive archival research. Our ability as literary critics lies in our responsiveness to the rhetorical power of images and metaphors, to the eloquence of the symbolic transformations of people and events. As a necessary supplement to the detailed explications of the historian, the cultural annotations of the anthropologist, and the morphological investigations of the linguist, we can perhaps investigate not only power **and** the praise poem (as the politically orientated title of Vail and White's book has it), but recognise the power of the praise poem as, in the domain of literature, the making of meaning - personal or public - is governed by the expressive act.

\* \* \*

The title of this chapter - "Poetry, History, Nation" - is intended to reverberate against present circumstances, for the question of how we read "Shaka" at this juncture in our national history extends beyond the problem of its referential specificities. Placing a poem like "Shaka" at the centre of literary study in this country makes available articulations of South African history by those who participated in and shaped that history, and points to the complex discursive dynamics of Zulu political and aesthetic life. Yet the problem arises that Zulu history and social formations - particularly the kingship and the aristocracy ("amakhosi") - have recently been mobilised by conservative organisations like Inkatha in the cause of political power based on ethnic-separatist tactics. To add to the difficulty of conservative tactics utilised in highly contested modern politics, the Zulu kingship was for many years encouraged by the apartheid state as supporting the retribalising policies of 'Bantu Education', ironic testimony to which lies in the fact that many Zulu speakers in KwaZulu Natal can recite the izibongo of Shaka from memory because they were taught them at school as a bulwark against the aspirations of modernising ideals.

"Shaka" may however 'talk back' to such conservative co-options.<sup>13</sup> Through the imbongi's advice to and criticism of Shaka, the poem undermines perceptions of African societies as characterised by power relations of unprecedented tyranny and cruelty. Further, in its articulations of the majesty and authority of Shaka, the poem perhaps calls into question Inkatha's manipulation of the Zulu monarchy for the ends of regional power. Certainly izimbongi have often stood at the forefront of resistance to attempts by the apartheid state to recreate tribal divisions through the 'homeland' policy, in which chiefs were used as apartheid administrators in a perversion of their historical role. In the former Transkei, for example, praise poets suffered security police harassment for their open criticism of Bantustan rulers like Kaiser Matanzima. Recently an open letter to King Goodwill Zwelithini from a Zulu journalist used many of the formal techniques of izibongo to warn and advise the king that, under the sway of

Inkatha, he could be in danger of betraying the history of his nation, lineage and office:

Your majesty, your people have a right to see you carry yourself in a manner that makes us proud of the throne. Could you live with the knowledge that you were the king who presided over the demise of what was so painstakingly built by Shaka?

Mageba, history tells us that kings have cast aside their lieutenants before. Now is the time for you to act decisively in the interests of your subjects and make a break with your prime minister.

It is he who poses the greatest threat to the survival of Zulu institutions and is tarnishing the image of Zulu people in the eyes of fellow South Africans.

It is your prime minister, Ngonyama, who should take ultimate responsibility for the blood that has for the past decade stained the beautiful hills that make your kingdom so dear to its inhabitants. (Makhanya, 1994)

"Shaka" raises difficult questions about the place of the Zulu monarchy in a modern, democratic state: it articulates a history which cannot simply be suppressed because of present agendas, but insists upon the position of the king above regional power squabbles and individual political ambitions.

As a form of expression, praise poetry has proved itself to be endlessly adaptable to changing circumstances, and it continues to play an important role in South African society: alongside the praises of chiefs in rural areas, we have forms of izibongo performed in mine compounds and at worker rallies, the recitation of praise poets at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President, and praises delivered at the opening of South Africa's first democratic parliament. There appears to be a real and continuing role for izibongo to advise, to criticise and to deliver praise in modern circumstances, particularly as we seek socio-cultural institutions which are appropriate in South Africa to our changing imperatives, responsibilities and identities. The case is clearly a strong one for izibongo to have a central role in any 'tradition' of

South African poetry. Not only does it provide witness to events of magnitude, but - as I hope I have suggested in considering its transmission and translation - the praise poem offers the opportunity for us to consider the challenge of a unique form of social and aesthetic expression.

### Notes

1. This debate is documented by Gérard (1971:230-236).
2. Amongst the published accounts, see for example Thomas Mofolo's Chaka (1931) and Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great (1979). Malaba (1986) has offered an extensive discussion of Shaka as literary theme in South African writing.
3. In his article "Zulu Izibongo: A Survey of Documentary Sources" (1974), Rycroft provides a detailed list of published and recorded sources of Zulu izibongo.
4. Stuart in fact collected approximately 360 izibongo, but because he created composite versions of his texts by comparing a number of different performances, his manuscripts comprise 258 poems.
5. See Arbousset and Daumas's version (Rycroft, 1984), and later Grout (1970:197) and Samuelson (1974:260-266).
6. My discussion of Zulu history in this period draws on Cope (1968), Hamilton (1985) and Guy (1994).
7. Gunner and Gwala refer to the "literature, culture, nation syndrome", in which disproportionate attention is paid to royal praises and the breadth of praising in Zulu

society is underestimated (1994). While my focus in this chapter is on royal praising, and I am - as my title suggests - concerned to relate developments in praising to the emergence of the Zulu nation, I remain cognisant of the need to understand the izibongo of chiefs in the broader context of praising as discursive activity.

8. Clan praises are also important in other African societies. Abner Nyamende, for example, explores the historical and social role of clan praises in Xhosa society, especially under the impact of literacy and Western-style education (1988).
9. See Dhlomo (1993) and Coplan (1987) who locate in praise poetry the roots of the southern African dramatic tradition. Also see Gunner's text of the praise poem performed at the funeral of Albert Luthuli in Stanger in July 1967, in which the inclusion of the audience responses indicates something of its dramatic quality in performance (1984 (vol.2):37-46).
10. This basic division is suggested by Mapanje and White (1983:181). However, in their anthology Oral Poetry from Africa, they have reduced the text of the poem to only 115 lines, and my analysis greatly extends the implications of their division.
11. In his discussion of the development of the stanza, Cope does not link the shift in poetic strategy with the larger realignments taking place in Zulu society. This is my own emphasis.
12. Snead performs a fascinating analysis of the black American soul singer James Brown.
13. Carolyn Hamilton has offered a detailed examination of various 'readings' of the figure of Shaka, from those of James Stuart to recent representations in the SABC television series Shaka Zulu and the theme park "Shakaland". She argues that the figure of Shaka in fact

resists simple co-option:

[T]he power of the image of Shaka lies not, as most previous commentators have suggested, in its openness to manipulation, to invention and to imaginative reworkings, but in their very opposite, the historical limits and constraints attached to possible depictions of Shaka and to Shakan historiography. (1993:xi)



### Chapter Three: Orality and Christianity: The Hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites

Whereas Shaka had little contact with white settlers, his brother Dingane was bedevilled throughout his rule by conflict with British colonists and later the Boers, and he was finally driven out of his kingdom by the latter in alliance with his brother Mpande. Mpande assumed the Zulu kingship in 1840, and ruled for thirty years over a kingdom which was reduced by colonial encroachment but remained substantially autonomous and self-sufficient. Under Cetshwayo - Mpande's son who took over the leadership in 1872 - the integrity of the Zulu kingdom was destroyed through British military invasion and finally annexation. By the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly after the failure of the 'Bambatha Rebellion' in 1906, the powerful nation which Shaka had created was in tatters and the authority of the monarchy was virtually destroyed. In this context new kinds of Zulu leaders came to the fore who occupied new societal spaces, and new forms of social articulation emerged. This chapter is concerned with one of the most influential of these leaders - the prophet Isaiah Shembe - and the hymns which he composed.

Isaiah Shembe was a Messianic Zulu evangelist working in Natal between 1911 and 1935, a period in which the social, political and economic structures of Zulu society were breaking down as a result of colonial occupation and rapid urbanisation. Shembe founded the Church of the Nazarites (*ibandla lamaNazaretha*), an independent church which sought to revitalise Zulu society through the maintenance and revival of social customs and mores, many of which were rejected by the mission churches. At the same time, by syncretising the belief systems of Zulu tradition (which are directed primarily towards social concerns) with those of Christianity (which are more abstractly theological and future-directed), and by hybridising the Christian hymn with Zulu poetry and song, he created forms which expressed religious and political resistance to colonial oppression. Hymn 45 - given here in English translation - may serve as an example:

1. I shouted day and night  
why did you not hear me?  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi [Deity].
  
2. I was stopped by all the nations  
which are under heaven.  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi.
  
3. You maiden of Nazareth  
may you cry like a rushing stream  
about the disgrace that has befallen you  
in the land of your people.  
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible  
before the uMsindisi.
  
4. You young men of Nazareth  
you cry all like a rushing stream,  
about the disgrace that has befallen you  
you young men of Shaka  
before the uMsindisi. (Oosthuizen, 1967:162-3)

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe are contained in Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha (the hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites), which was first compiled and published in 1940 by Isaiah Shembe's son Johannes Galilee Shembe from printed versions of the hymns which had circulated among church members during the father's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> The hymnal remains in print to this day. The

hymns were composed in "an old mix of Zulu and Xhosa, typical of the deep Zulu spoken by the prophet Isaiah in the early twentieth century" (Muller,1994b:137). G.C. Oosthuizen has translated a number of them in the Appendix to his book The Theology of an African Messiah (1967). These are currently the only translations available in print. A project is under way to publish the entire hymnal in translation, and I am grateful to the editors and translators, Carol Muller, Themba Mbhele, and the late Bongani Mthethwa, for allowing me access to their working copy which has proved to be invaluable.<sup>2</sup>

The translation practices of Oosthuizen and of Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa differ slightly, with Oosthuizen's renderings appearing to be rather more literal in their occasional use of awkward English grammatical and syntactical formulations. Oosthuizen also retains the Zulu praise names for the deity in his translated versions in an apparent attempt to emphasise the hybridity of Nazarite theology, while Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa translate these appellations. My own view is that an appropriate translation strategy for the hymns might combine both approaches: Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa's more readable English translations might make the hymns 'familiar' and hence accessible to non-Zulu and non-Nazarite readers; while Oosthuizen's retention of the Zulu names might valuably insist on the 'difference' of the hymns and hence their resistance to cultural appropriation. Both available translated versions are entirely 'usable', nonetheless, according to the theory and practice of translation as developed in this study, and I have relied for the most part on Oosthuizen's versions only because these have the advantage of being available to readers in published form. Where I have wished to discuss hymns that have not been translated by Oosthuizen, I have quoted the Muller, Mbhele and Mthethwa manuscript. My sole intervention has been to regularise the beginning of lines with upper- or lower-case letters in Oosthuizen's translations - a point on which he is rather haphazard - and to modernise his spelling of Zulu and biblical names.

\* \* \*

In addition to forms of Christian hymns, forms of traditional praise poetry were adapted to new concerns in Shembe's Church of the Nazarites. The performance of izimbongi was - and continues to be - central to the religious festivals of the church,<sup>3</sup> and the izibongo of Shembe prove to be enlightening in a consideration of this figure and his work. Elizabeth Gunner, who recorded the praises of Shembe in 1976,<sup>4</sup> points to the importance of the composition of izibongo for new kinds of leadership:

It is perhaps significant that these izibongo which are still performed for Shembe's successors were for the most part composed at a time when the Zulu kingship was weak. Certainly the praises of Solomon kaDinizulu (Isaiah Shembe's royal contemporary) do not bear comparison with the prophet's izibongo either in the richness of their language or the boldness of their vision. Although they are in one sense an important religious statement Shembe's izibongo can also be seen as serving a function sometimes ascribed to epic: they create a sense of national consciousness, pride and purpose at a time of national crisis and weakness. In their nationalism and their continued success as a vehicle of cultural and religious identity the izibongo demonstrate how an oral art form can exploit the past and maintain its relevance to the present. (1982:107)

Shembe is praised by his poets for his evangelical prowess and fervour in terms which echo the praises of Shaka:

Spear which is red even at the handle,  
you attacked with it at Mpukunyoni  
because you attacked by means of the Gospel

and: "Horned viper with the compassion of his forefathers" (Gunner, 1984(vol.2):21-37). Yet instead of celebrating martial might as Shaka's izibongo did, Shembe's praises adapt the military

code to a Christianised milieu, presenting a religious and political battle waged with the new weapons of biblical faith and compassion. Indeed Shembe's izibongo, while being closely modelled on royal izibongo, draw upon a variety of Christian influences, including the use of images such as the "gates of heaven". Gunner claims that as well as being "royal", Shembe's praises are "very clearly the praises of a Zionist prophet and not a Zulu king. There are clear differences where the needs of communion have forced the composers to new modes of expression and points of reference" (1982:101). The hybridised nature of these praises echoes the formal syncretism of Shembe's own hymns, which seek modes of expression appropriate to changing social conditions.

Shembe's izibongo also point to a number of other concerns that are central to the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites. The leader is praised for offering religious salvation and solace ("He is awesome, Our Beautiful Kneeler-and-they-are-satisfied of Ekuphakameni"), for his resistance to the colonial state ("The white man Sergeant Mackay met with no success"), for his rejection of what is regarded as the theological and educational arrogance of the missionaries, and for providing a physical and spiritual home for his Zulu followers:

They brandished their testaments and bibles in unison.

They said it was written "Thus!"

Breaker-away, let us leave and let us head for own Zululand ... .

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites treat many of the most pressing issues of twentieth-century Zulu history in particular, and modern South African history in general: 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. Shembe also stands as an important transitional figure for South African literary history and specifically for this study: his hymns look back to the

Zulu nationalism of Shaka, though they draw this nationalism into a context of colonial subordination; and they look forward, through the doctrine of the Black Christ, to the political concerns of Black Consciousness and Black Theology.

A number of claims have been made for the importance of Shembe as a spiritual and national leader. Bengt Sundkler says, "There is probably no Zulu in modern times who has had such an intense influence over such a large number of people as Shembe" (1948:110), and he refers to Shembe as "the greatest of Zulu prophets" (1976:204). G.C. Oosthuizen concurs with Sundkler in claiming, "No other Zulu [has] had in this century such a lasting influence on the Zulu people in particular [as] Shembe" (1967:7), and Albert S. Gérard refers to Shembe as "the greatest religious leader in South Africa" (1971:185). Intensely approbative claims have also been made for Shembe's hymns. Sundkler refers to them as "some of the most remarkable ... ever published in Zulu" (1948:194). Oosthuizen describes Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha as "one of the most remarkable collections of indigenous hymns that has appeared on the continent of Africa and the most remarkable of its kind in South Africa" (1967:1). Gérard suggests that the first hymn composed by Shembe "should perhaps be considered the earliest original poem composed in Zulu under the impact of the new civilisation" (1971:189), and he compares it with the similar status of Ntsikana's "Great Hymn" in Xhosa literary history. Despite such critical claims made for Shembe, and despite his renown in popular culture in KwaZulu Natal and beyond (almost all Zulu people in the province have some knowledge of Shembe's church,<sup>5</sup> and bumper stickers on minibus taxis proclaim "Shembe is the Way"), little attention has been paid to this figure or his church in academic studies.

What work there is on Shembe has largely been conducted by theologians, such as in Sundkler's Bantu Prophets in South Africa (1948, revised 1961) and Zulu Zion (1976), and in Oosthuizen's The Theology of a South African Messiah: An Analysis of the Hymnal of the Church of the Nazarites (1967). Absolom Vilakazi's MA thesis on Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites, completed in 1951, has been extended and revised in collaboration with two

musicologists and followers of Shembe, Bongani Mthethwa and Mthembeni Mpanza, and published as Shembe: The Revitalisation of African Society (1986). It provides a sociological, doctrinal and musical analysis of ibandla lamaNazaretha. The other major published source on Shembe's life is John Dube's remarkable Zulu biography uShembe (1936), which as Gunner suggests "seems to have been written partly from Shembe himself relating incidents in his life to Dube, partly from information gained from other informants and partly from Dube's own knowledge and observations of his neighbour, Shembe, and the Nazarite Church at their village Ekuphakameni, not too far from his own Ohlange" (1986:180-181). This biography has been out of print for many years, and is in urgent need of both translation and republication. There is also an unpublished MA thesis by Esther Roberts, Shembe: The Man and his Work (1936). As regards literary and cultural study of Shembe, little research has been conducted. Ruth Finnegan makes a brief mention of Shembe in The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry (1978). In his book Four African Literatures, Gérard offers a short discussion of the hymns of Shembe as representing a transitional phase between an oral and a written Zulu literature (1971:184-193), and Elizabeth Gunner has analysed the izibongo and, to a lesser extent, the hymns of Shembe in a section of her doctoral dissertation (1984) and in three articles (1982, 1986 and 1988). The most extensive treatment of the Church of the Nazarites is Carol Muller's doctoral thesis Nazarite Song, Dance, and Dreams: The Sacralisation of Time, Space, and the Female Body in South Africa (1994a). Muller's concern is largely ethnomusicological, but she also draws on current developments in literary theory. She deals specifically with the songs and narratives of Nazarite women (though she does offer fairly extensive discussion of the hymns), and her focus is on more recent practices in the church (her field work began in 1990). Yet her study is extremely valuable for a literary consideration of Shembe. My own concern in this chapter is to direct attention to the hymns of Isaiah Shembe as literary texts of extraordinary power and vision.

My reading of the hymns of the Zulu evangelist Isaiah Shembe locates itself within attempts to broaden the scope of literary history and study beyond canonised genres and texts. Whereas writers like H.I.E. Dhlomo and Sol. T. Plaatje, who worked within the 'élite' genres of

the novel and the lyric/epic poem, have achieved positions of prominence in South African criticism, there are several figures from the same period utilising popular forms, many of whom reflect similar congruences of orality/literacy, mission education/traditional upbringing, African nationalism/Western universalism, yet who have received little or no critical attention. I hope that my discussion of the work of Isaiah Shembe may suggest something of the wealth of material which is currently ignored by literary study in this country.

The historical matrix in which Shembe's hymns are located is very different from that of the forms dealt with in Chapters One and Two. As I have argued, Bushman groupings have generally not maintained generic distinctions between sacred and profane forms of expression, nor have they reserved specific genres for individuals of elevated social standing. Nineteenth-century Zulu society, though it prized genres like royal izibongo over others such as storytelling or personal izibongo, did not restrict literary activities to an intelligentsia. By the early twentieth century when Shembe composed his hymns, however, the influence of the Western print tradition, particularly through the work of the missionaries and the colonial administration, had initiated and begun to formalise cultural distinctions based on education and social class. (We may recall the reference in Shembe's izibongo to the missionaries' educated exegesis of the Bible.) Hence Shembe's hymns engage in a dialogue, not only with the traditional cultural forms of an indigenous society, but with the 'educated' forms of the occupying power, and some understanding of the concept of the 'popular' as aesthetic principle and cultural space becomes necessary. Karin Barber's theorisation of 'popular' art forms in African societies is useful here, and may provide a conceptual framework for the literary forms discussed in the next three chapters.

Barber points to the problems of attempting to define the 'popular':

There is no definite and bounded corpus of works of popular art that is recognised either within African cultures themselves or by outside observers.



Popular arts is a category that appears to be characterised, above all, by its inclusiveness and its apparently infinite elasticity. It has accommodated not only forms generally recognised as arts - such as theatre, instrumental and vocal music, paintings and sculptures, written fiction - but also such diverse phenomena as decorated bread labels ... portrait photography ... house decoration ... coffins ... jokes ... and wire bicycles ... It is a fugitive category, seemingly ubiquitous and yet always fading as one tries to grasp it. (1987:5-6)

She argues that this 'fugitive' category needs to be distinguished from that of the 'traditional' and that of the 'élite', the former comprising as examples rural, precolonial, predominantly oral forms, including izibongo and the songs/stories of the Bushmen, and the latter usually comprising individually-created, 'high art' forms, generally influenced by or emerging from the culture of the metropole. While the 'popular' is a "shapeless residual category, its borders defined only by juxtaposition with the clearly demarcated traditional and élite categories" (1987:9), Barber claims that its very definition "in terms of absences and deviations from established categories" (1987:11) offers the basis for a theory of popular art forms in Africa. She argues that the popular occupies a shifting space between the élite and the traditional (themselves not stable or self-contained categories), from which it draws in syncretic fashion to create new modes of social and aesthetic expression:

The aesthetic is hard to pin down because it is, precisely, an aesthetic of change, variety and novel conjunctures. The direction in which the existing studies seem to be pointing is towards the concept of cultural brokerage: of arts which thrive on an active exploitation of their unofficial status. These two notions - the unofficial, and cultural brokerage - together seem to me to offer a possible starting-point for the theorisation of the field of popular arts. (1987:12)

Popular art forms generally emerge from contexts of abrupt or violent social disjuncture,

particularly involving the confrontation between an indigenous and a foreign culture. As Barber argues: "What are identified as popular arts are in effect the new unofficial arts of colonialism and post-colonialism, produced by the profound and accelerating social change of these periods" (1987:13). It is clear that the hymns of Isaiah Shembe and the Church of the Nazarites, which draw on the cultural resources of traditional Zulu society while finding new models in the structures and beliefs of a colonising Christianity, comprise precisely such a form of popular art. These hymns occupy an unofficial space beyond the mission churches and the institutions of colonial governance where they speak in new ways about the experiences of colonisation, economic dispossession and social decay.

The idea of cultural forms 'talking back' to the colonising power in fugitive and often irreverent ways is an attractive one, particularly in view of the current concerns of colonial and postcolonial studies. What these forms actually say, nevertheless, may be intensely conservative. A full engagement with the popular in literary study requires neither a valorisation of 'the people' nor a dismissal of them for expressing 'false consciousness', but a frank consideration of the structures of belief which these forms articulate, an analysis of their implications, an understanding of the conditions which produce them, and a recognition of the undeniable appeal which these forms hold for large numbers of people.

The texts produced by Isaiah Shembe are, however, not only popular but religious, if the categories may legitimately be distinguished. Despite its associations with colonial occupation and oppression, Christianity has constituted one of the most resilient and adaptable means of social and political expression for black South Africans.<sup>6</sup> Kirby attempts to quantify the remarkable impact of Christianity on the African continent as a whole: "In the brief span of eighty-five years Africa's Christian population has risen from about 10 million, or 9.2 percent of the population, to 237 million, and by the turn of the century, it is expected to reach 350 million, or about 50 percent..." (1994:57). Studying religious texts raises large conceptual and methodological questions, particularly because of their claims to essential truth and power, the

provenance of which lies in 'faith'. Such difficulties are apparent, in a somewhat extreme form, in the case of Shembe, since the 1940 edition of Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha claimed that one of the hymns (the very brief No. 220) had been composed by the prophet after he had risen from the dead (a literalisation, or spiritualisation, of Barthes's 'death of the author?').<sup>7</sup> This claim has prompted both Oosthuizen (1967:8) and Vilakazi and others (1986:71) to remark wryly that greater spiritual depth would be expected of a hymn composed after resurrection!

In considering the problems of studying 'sacred' forms and concepts, Beek and Blakely point to the current methodological orientation of religious studies:

Today's students of religion focus on particular forms of religious expression and try to point out the consonances with other cultural and historical processes, while still trying to preserve the integrity of the religious experience-cum-expression. This is the core of the method and, in fact, closely resembles an answer (possibly apocryphal) that Carl Jung once gave. After a lecture on evil, people asked him whether he believed the devil existed. His answer: "No idea, but he works!" Thus, we study influences **on** religion and influences **by** religion, realising that directly studying religious phenomena is at least very difficult. Religion is best studied in its socio-cultural contexts, to be grasped by being human among the humans ... . (1994:3)

My project in discussing the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites is similarly socio-cultural, for I am concerned not with the 'truth' claims of the hymns, but their sociological and poetic qualities. Such a consideration necessitates a serious engagement with the church movement and especially the founder himself. Shembe is believed by his followers to have had the ability to heal, to read minds, to make rain, and to rise from the dead. With whatever scepticism we might greet such claims, we cannot deny his real charisma, insight, leadership ability, and his power to shape the course of history. In many ways Isaiah Shembe defies neat categories and formulations,

and serves as a salient reminder that history is made by people, whose particularities, contradictions and idiosyncrasies often disrupt the clean narrative lines of historiography. At the same time, as I have observed earlier, Shembe may suggest the difficulties, contradictions and disconcerting conservatisms thrown up by an engagement with the popular.<sup>8</sup>

While it was undoubtedly an act of personal vision, Shembe's founding of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* was also part of a larger religious and historical development: the separatist church movement. As a result of mission activity, there was a rapid exponential growth in the number of black Christians in South Africa around the turn of the century, from about 70 000 in 1870 to 4 697 152 in 1911 when Shembe founded his church (Oosthuizen,1967:2-3). Many of the converts were members not of the mainstream mission churches, however, but of the increasing number of black separatist churches which had broken away from their parent bodies. One of the first indigenous religious groups was formed as early as 1872 in what is now Lesotho under the influence of a Paris-based mission group (Sundkler,1948:38). More important was the 1882 secession led by Nehemiah Tile from the Wesleyan Mission Church to form the Tembu Church with the chief of that grouping, Ngangelizwe, as its head (Sundkler,1948:38). In 1898 a number of Mfengu left the United Free Church of Scotland to set up their own church (Gérard,1971:185). Sundkler argues that the independent church movement was catalysed particularly by the movement of mineworkers to the Witwatersrand, and he points out that by 1895 there were about sixty-five Wesleyan trained preachers in the Reef area, many of whom would later form their own churches (1948:39). Mission activity was, however, less successful in the Natal/Zululand area, probably owing to the strongly centralised nature of the Zulu kingdom and the consequent difficulties experienced by missionaries in finding points of political and ideological entry. The earliest mission activity in Natal was led by Allen Gardiner in 1835. By the mid-1870s he had produced only 450 converts, many of whom had been "imported to Natal to serve as examples" (Etherington,1989:280). The percentage of black converts in Natal remained low, and Oosthuizen claims that when Shembe established his church, over 85 percent of the African population in the region still practised indigenous religion (1967:3).

The reasons for the development of the separatist churches were both political and doctrinal. Black Christians reacted particularly to the emphasis in the white-controlled churches on the authority of the white clergy and the inferior status of black clerics and converts - a response allied at the time to the growth of African nationalism. These black Christians also questioned the missionaries' claims to theological and doctrinal authority, notably on the questions of ancestor worship, the trinity and the practice of polygamy. Lessa and Vogt argue that contact between colonial and indigenous cultures produced a number of "nativistic, revivalist or revitalisation movements - all of which were religiously inspired responses to the stresses of colonisation, acculturation and domination" (1979:414). Sundkler points to the importance of the Zionist churches in this regard: "There was a new realisation of selfhood and worthy identity in these men and women because of their discovery in and with Zion, of the richness and relevance of their own religions and cultural expressions" (1976:318-319).

In a context of social and discursive rupture, forms of worship in the separatist churches may simultaneously be the expression of cultural and political survival by dispossessed and displaced communities. A hymn like Shembe's No. 219 expresses the pain of social and spiritual experience and the longing for solace and restitution at the same time as it serves as a means of empowerment, claiming for black people - the issue is one of dignity and authority - the rights of biblical interpretation and divine inspiration:

1. We have heard it, oh! Babamkhulu  
we could not comply  
oh! Babamkhulu,  
make soft thy word [i.e. be not strict]  
oh! Babamkhulu  
we shall try to do thy Word [will].

## 2. Thousands of generations

stand here

oh! Babamkhulu

they found your word difficult

oh! Babamkhulu

make soft thy word

oh! Babamkhulu.

## 3. The voice of the prisoners

oh! Babamkhulu

may you hear their voice

oh! Babamkhulu

they want one who rests

oh! Babamkhulu,

these prisoners give them rest.

## 4. We are staying in distress

oh! Babamkhulu,

in this world

oh! Babamkhulu

it is all tears

oh! Babamkhulu

in that valley of distress. (Oosthuizen,1967:190-191)

The separatist churches were perceived as threatening to the mainstream white churches, many leaders of which regarded the movement as a dangerous aberration. In the 1928 Yearbook of South African Missions, for example, the Rev. Allen Lea said, "Native denominationalism has run perilously near madness", and he questioned the moral character of converts to the new

churches: "the Separatist, generally speaking, is a church member in disrepute, and the secessionist body a refuge for those running away from discipline - a cave of Adullam" (quoted in Vilakazi et al,1986:2). Dr C.T. Loram concurred with Lea's judgement: "It is certain that the general standard of morality of members of the Separatist Churches is lower than that in European-controlled bodies ..." (Vilakazi et al,1986:2). The irony of such dismissals is heavy, for Shembe's church promoted a strict moral code and work ethic; and despite his specific concern with Zulu salvation, Shembe - unlike many of the missionaries - consistently emphasised non-racism and non-sectarianism, describing God as "uThixo kaAdam" - the God of Adam or all people.

Shembe was born into a polygamous family either in 1867 (Dube,1936) or 1870 (Sundkler,1948:110). The uncertainty about dating in Shembe's life is itself illuminating, suggesting a tension between the cyclical model of African history (which is event-based and does not emphasise dates) and the linear historical model of Western thought and Christianity (which arrays occurrences chronologically), a tension to which I shall return in discussing Shembe's hymns. Little is known about his early life, though he appears to have been a sickly child. However, he grew into a healthy young man, known as an "isoka", a young man popular with young women and with others of his age (he would have been skilled at stick fighting and would have excelled in song and dance).<sup>9</sup> Despite his popularity, Shembe appears to have experienced feelings of maladjustment. He had a number of visions and dreams, which are central to traditional Zulu religion and which play an important role in Nazarite spiritual life, in which he was told to shun sexual immorality. Amongst the most important of these was the image of his own rotting corpse - the metaphor of disease for moral impurity is a powerful one in the Nazarite church - and he was again told to flee "fornication" (ukuhlobonga). He was then ordered to leave his four wives, which Dube suggests caused him such distress that he almost committed suicide (1936:21). But he finally became convinced of his calling when he was apparently burned by divine lightning.

The question of why he felt uneasy about his conduct, which was acceptable in Zulu society, is a vexed one. It is unclear whether he had been exposed to Christianity (there are a number of references both in the biographical and critical literature and in the church itself to his having been "called by Jehovah", but these appear to be 'rereadings' of the experience after conversion), or whether for other (psychological?) reasons he rejected certain Zulu practices (there is evidence of his questioning Zulu custom in his opposing an early marriage which had been arranged for him). What is clear, however, is that Shembe was culturally at odds with his society and "found it difficult and sometimes painful to live in his culture" (Vilakazi et al, 1986:26). Shembe is reported to have been the somatic type of the traditional diviner or "isangoma", and his reputation as a healer was firmly established throughout Natal before his conversion, though some accounts have him working as a healer in what was until recently the Orange Free State.

Whatever his prior contact with Christianity, Shembe was baptised in 1906 into the African Baptist Church - a breakaway from the mainstream Baptist Church - by the Rev. W.M. Leshega, and he was eventually ordained as a cleric in this church. Oosthuizen suggests that Shembe "most probably joined the African Baptist Church because of its indigenous character, its literalism in biblical exposition and the importance attached to baptism" (1967:3). Shembe became disaffected from this church, however, especially over the question of biblical interpretation (chief amongst his concerns was that the Sabbath should be kept on Saturday), and he finally left to start his own Church of the Nazarites in 1911: a church based largely on the vows of the Nazarites in Numbers 6. In about 1913 - Sundkler initially suggests 1916 (1948:111), later 1912 (1976:167) - Shembe visited the mountain Nhlankakazi which was to become the site of the annual January festival within the church. (This festival alternates with the July festival in establishing the major rhythms of the Nazarite worship cycle.) In 1916, or according to some sources 1914, Shembe purchased a piece of land about 38 acres in size in what was then the Inanda Reserve. Here he established his church settlement Ekuphakameni (the elevated/exalted place), about 29 kilometres from Durban. The church grew rapidly in size and influence, and



Shembe appointed a number of pastors including Peter Mnqayi, Amos Mzobe and Johannes Mlangeni to minister to the 10 000 or more who worshipped at Ekuphakameni (Sundkler, 1976:171;178). Shembe's reputation as a leader and a healer spread rapidly throughout the region.

Shembe left the Baptist church primarily for doctrinal rather than political reasons,<sup>10</sup> but doctrine, of course, translates almost immediately into social action. His understanding of the Bible, especially the moral strictures of the Old Testament from which he took his term of address for God "Jehovah", suggested a people who were tribal and polygamous, who performed sacrifices, and whose social and spiritual life appeared close to that of traditional Zulu society.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, Shembe introduced many aspects of Zulu custom and traditional belief into his church: he recognised and encouraged polygamous marriage, and incorporated into Nazarite worship song, dance and ritual such as the "first fruits" ceremony initiated by Shaka. Shembe's concept of the deity also syncretised Christian and African cosmology, and the terms of address "Mvelinqangi" and "Nkulunkulu" evoke equally the biblical God and the originating figures of Zulu belief. Further, the more common term of address for God amongst Zulu converts, "Nkosi", suggests that God has the attributes of a Zulu king. Shembe also sought to introduce into the church reverence for the spirits of ancestors, which was dismissed by the missionaries, though he tended to give this practice a biblical overlay. In Hymn 154 (Oosthuizen, 1967:175-6), for example, the evocation of the Holy Spirit ("Umoya") and the "communion of saints/of Nazareth" is entirely consistent with Zulu belief in the power of the spirits of the dead to influence human affairs. At the same time the hymn points to another important aspect of Nazarite worship. The opening verse<sup>12</sup> invokes the "Father", the "Holy Spirit" and the "saints", but makes no mention of Christ. One of the greatest resistances that missionaries encountered was Zulu rejection of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, since it asserted the equality and indivisibility of the father and son, an idea unacceptable in terms of Zulu morality and social authority. Though Jesus is mentioned in some hymns, Shembe does not emphasise the trinity or the conventional Christian understanding of Christ. We shall return to this question later in discussing Shembe's own status

as "Black Christ", and his understanding of the Messiah in terms of Zulu nationalism.

Unlike Western belief systems, which tend to comprise abstract bodies of thought and to be practised in specially designated places, African religion is part of the tissue of everyday experience, and has a specifically social orientation. Vilakazi and others emphasise that "the Shembe church has as one of its chief sociological aims the regeneration of African society" (1986:80): in a context in which Zulu society had been destroyed by economic dispossession, military defeat and migrant labour, Shembe sought to promote a system of morality and values which would rebuild social structures. His efforts included a revival of Zulu customs which had fallen into disuse, including prohibitions on premarital sex. Vilakazi and others, in fact, suggest that Ekuphakameni was in many ways "a museum of old African customs and practices" (1986:45). The Land Act of 1913 had stripped Africans of ownership rights to land which had been theirs for generations, and taxation sought to force them into the capitalist economy. At the same time, however, the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act sought to establish racially segregated residential areas in towns and cities, and prohibited Africans from entering urban areas except as units of labour. In response to the alienations of migrancy and urbanisation, Shembe promoted economic self-sufficiency in his community at Ekuphakameni, and emphasised the importance of a communal work ethic amongst his followers. The morning prayers of the church include stern exhortations to labour: "Do not be lazy, for laziness is sin. A lazy person is like a dog begging food from people. At the conclusion of this Prayer take your hoe and dig with it. Thus you shall live and not need to go and beg for food from people".

The leadership pattern of the Church of the Nazarites also draws upon the authority structures of Zulu society. I have already noted that Shembe was well known as a healer before he joined the Baptist Church, and have pointed to his similarity with the somatic type of the isangoma. Sundkler argues that within Zionist churches the prophet combines Christian authority with that of the traditional seer (1948:109). This authority is then "steadied" by association with the traditions and rituals of kingship (Sundkler, 1948:109). In Shembe's case,

when he preached, he did not address the congregation directly, but as a king would he spoke through an intermediary. (Sundkler suggests, however, that this may have been partly because he had a very soft voice (1976:163).) He was also concerned to establish his lineage, and the preface to the hymnal refers to his ancestry: "the Prophet Isaiah Shembe of Mayekisa, of Nhliziyo, of Mzazela, of Sokhabuzela of Nyathikazi". He dressed elaborately, and dispensed wisdom, justice and authority through a system of elders and ministers who parallel the amakhosi and indunas of traditional society. Shembe was further concerned to establish his legitimacy as a Zulu leader by associating himself with the royal family. He gave his daughter Zondi to King Solomon kaDinizulu in marriage, and built a house for him at Ekuphakameni. One of the hymns (No. 116), in fact, refers to Solomon's relations with the church:

King Solomon is called  
 He, the son of Dinizulu  
 And the fame of Jehovah  
 is in Ekuphakameni. (Sundkler,1948:103)

As far as Shembe is concerned, Sundkler's theories of church leadership appear valid, and point to the syncretism of Shembe's leadership style. The famous distinction between Ethiopian and Zionist churches which underlies Sundkler's theories of church leadership is less convincing. He argues that Zionists have "healing, speaking with tongues, purification rites, and taboos as the main expressions of faith" (1948:55), while Ethiopian churches are characterised by their concern that "Africa is for Africans" (1948:56). Sundkler himself places the Church of the Nazarites in the former category, though Shembe's nationalist tendencies could as easily place his church in the latter. Something of the difficulty of Sundkler's scheme is exemplified by the fact that Gérard insists Shembe's church is in fact Ethiopian (1971:185), while Vilakazi and others claim that it fits both categories and reject the scheme completely (1986:153-154). Sundkler himself seems somewhat ambivalent about his division, having modified it in the 1961 revision of Bantu Prophets and having offered an elaborate defence against anticipated attacks for including

Shembe in his later book Zulu Zion (1976:161). My own opinion is that Sundkler's distinction obscures as much as it reveals, and while I have not removed references to Zionism or Ethiopianism in the criticism which I quote, I do not myself utilise the distinction.

The pattern of succession in the church is both that of the chief or king, whose authority passes to his son, and that of the prophet, who nominates his own successor. When Isaiah Shembe died on 2 May 1935, reportedly after standing for about three hours in a cold river baptising people, he was succeeded by his son Johannes Galilee Shembe, who would continue his father's work. When Galilee died in 1976, the succession was disputed by Galilee's brother Amos and his own son Londa. This led to a split in the church, with the majority of the group following Amos, who set up a new settlement at Ebuhleni, while a smaller group remained with Londa. The latter was himself murdered on 7 April 1989, though his group continues to meet at Ekuphakameni. By the mid-seventies the size of the Nazarite following was estimated at about 250 000 (Muller,1994a:3). Whereas in Isaiah Shembe's time the church had been geographically and spiritually centred on Ekuphakameni, the nature of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* changed following the 1979 split and expansion to other regions, and many groups now meet in areas which are only temporarily sanctified for worship and at which there is no residential community. Amos Shembe died very recently, and the leadership of the Ebuhleni group has passed to his son Vimbeni.

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The first twenty-three pages of Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha comprise Morning, Evening and Sabbath Prayers, interspersed with hymns/choruses, doctrine and Shembe's Zulu version of Psalm 23. The rest of the hymnal contains the 242 *izihlabelelo*. Hymns 1 to 219 were composed by Isaiah Shembe, while the remainder are those of his son Galilee.<sup>13</sup> As well as original compositions the hymnal contains three foreign hymns: No. 133 (the "Lord's Prayer" - spoken rather than sung), and Nos 185 and 194 (acknowledged in the hymnal to be "Izihlabelelo

sama Wesile", the "Hymns of the Wesleyans"). In discussing African popular forms Barber suggests that they are in some sense 'fugitive': this is clearly the case with Isaiah Shembe's hymns, certain of which were omitted from the hymnal by his son for fear of attracting the attention of the authorities and threatening the very existence of the church (Vilakazi et al, 1986:139).

While African-language hymns, especially in Xhosa, had been composed in the nineteenth century by several figures including Ntsikana, Tiyo Soga, William Gqoba, Nehemiah Tile and John Knox Bokwe, the separatist churches for the most part took over the hymnals of the parent mission churches, such as the Methodist, Anglican and Lutheran. Though the hymns were translated - often with great linguistic violence to the target language, particularly in the case of Zulu - the tunes were generally European, drawn from Bach, Sankey and others (Sundkler, 1948:193). The most popular of the hymnals was Amagama Okuhlabelela (the American Board Hymnbook) an early version of which appeared in 1897. It contained hymns selected and translated with some sensitivity by Charlotte B. Grout. The composers P.J. Gumede and N. Luthuli also contributed several hymns to the collection. B.W. Vilakazi commented in 1938 that "after these two [Gumede and Luthuli] there is a great break, up to now. The field of hymns seems to be dead. The example set by American Board missionaries was not rivalled by other bodies. Even at this present time it seems impossible to publish hymns originally composed by the Bantu" (1993:75). Vilakazi was aware of the Church of the Nazarites, as his dismissive comments about its use of dance and its incorporation of Zulu ritual suggest (1993:74), but evidently felt Shembe's hymns did not merit discussion. In commenting on the problems which had caused this apparent barrenness in the field of hymn composition, Vilakazi emphasised the possibilities and limitations of the current education system (1993:76). In contrast, Shembe was wary of the colonising power of education and literacy, and he sought to rejuvenate the field of hymns by drawing upon orality as a continuing social force. Shembe also for the most part abandoned the European music of mission church hymnody for rhythmic and choral forms which drew upon African influences.<sup>14</sup>

In his Preface to the hymnal Johannes Galilee Shembe says of the origins of his father's hymns: "The second hymn came in 1913 when he climbed Mount Nhlankakazi for the first time. The first hymn was sung by the children who journeyed with him in 1910, when he first came to Natal. From 1914 until 1919, no hymns were composed. In 1920 he began to write hymns prolifically, and he also began to write prayers for the morning, evening and the Sabbath." The semantic slippage in Galilee's statements - from "came", to "composed" to "write", as the verbs are almost uniformly translated - is illuminating, for the hymns represent complex intersections of orality and literacy. Their formal syncretism is evident in the term "izihlabelelo". This refers to the Psalms of David in the Old Testament - in origin, oral poetry, but for so many centuries solidified in print that their oral ontology has largely been suppressed - and to the songs composed by Zulu mothers for their children as discussed in Chapter Two in relation to personal izibongo. In contrast, a "hymn" is referred to specifically as "iculo" (hymn, chant or song) or "ihubo" (ceremonial, tribal, or regimental song or hymn) (Muller, 1994a:175).

Textually Shembe's compositions are certainly strongly influenced by the Christian hymn: they are - in the print forms which circulated originally during the prophet's life - constructed of short lines arranged in regular, numbered verses; they utilise biblical imagery and phrases, which Oosthuizen generally registers by the equivalent Christian formulation in English; they include praises such as "Hosanna" and "Hallelujah"; they are limited in length; and many of them use a hymnal chorus. The following section from Hymn 58, the opening of which echoes the "Lord's Prayer", may serve as an illustration:

1. Our father which is in heaven  
I am in your face [in front of you!]  
let it be handled with holiness  
that name of yours.

Chorus: Your umoya must come Nkosi

Cause your people to be healed. (Oosthuizen,1967:164)

Yet in many ways the izihlabelelo do not conform to the pattern of the Western hymn, and as the etymology of the term "izihlabelelo" suggests many are more closely aligned to the Psalms as religious discourse, especially those of Shembe's Old Testament namesake Isaiah (Muller,1994a:176). A number of the hymns comprise highly personalised reflections rather than, as in the Western tradition, hymns of praise and worship. They are often accompanied by a note indicating the date and occasion of their composition. Hymn 162 is described as "the Prayer of Shembe" composed on "the mountain of Nhlankakazi, January 22, 1929", and begins as follows:

1. Amen. Amen. Amen!

Amen. Amen. Amen!

The aloe of the veld

it is not as bitter

as your word Simakade

in the hearts of many.

2. Amen. Amen. Amen!

Amen. Amen. Amen!

The cough medicine of the mountains

it is not as bitter

as your word Simakade

in the hearts of many. (Oosthuizen,1967:178-9)

The hymn combines a localised and modernised diction ("aloe", "cough medicine") with the biblical refrain "Amen. Amen. Amen!" in creating a form which expresses the difficulties of faith and evangelism.

Yet the hymn also utilises many of the formal patterns of izibongo, such as parallel constructions, repetition and naming ("Simakade" - "Eternal One"), and while the izihlabelelo reveal Western print influences, their generation was oral, as Sundkler records:

Johannes Galilee Shembe explained to me how Isaiah Shembe, his father, conceived his hymns. He would hear a woman's voice, often a girl's voice, singing new and unexpected words. He would not see her, but as he woke up from a dream or walked along a path in Zululand, meditating, he heard that small voice, that clear voice, which gave him a new hymn. He had to write down the words, while humming and singing the tune which was born **with** the words. (1976:186)

Sundkler claims that Shembe's motive for learning to write, which he did only imperfectly and late in his life, was to transcribe "these irresistible songs that would well up from his unconscious [which] had to be grasped, and translated into words and verses" (1976:186-7). The izihlabelelo of Shembe bring Zulu oral forms into new contexts of meaning, and they reveal the prophet's drawing upon the extensive cultural resources of traditional Zulu society. Unlike Christian hymns, many of the izihlabelelo are not directed towards the deity, but explore social and spiritual problems, the nature of Shembe's calling, or evoke the spirit of sacred places. Of those concerned with God, a number adopt the forms of address of royal izibongo. Amongst the most compelling of these is No. 101 (Oosthuizen, 1967:170), which utilises a series of epithets to celebrate the greatness of Nkosi: the "eagle which has wings"; "rock of the old"; the "fortress"; the "beautiful hen"; and "hen of heaven". Each 'section' of the hymn has something of an ambiguous status, for it is both a Christian verse in the hymnal tradition, and a praise plus extension akin to the Shakan stanza:

1. It is the eagle which has wings,  
lift up your wing  
that we may enter and hide ourselves in you  
rock of the old.



2. No other fortress have we  
other than you  
where we can hide ourselves  
we your poor little ones.

As with royal izibongo, the address to Nkosi here includes advice:

5. Protect it, Nkosi  
that Ekuphakameni,  
like a hen  
loving her children.

Jehovah is implored to protect his threatened community by maintaining the sacred place, Ekuphakameni, established by Shembe. Muller points to the importance of the sacred in contexts of destruction and dispossession:

In the historical context of rupture, domination, and social and cultural diminution, the domain of the sacred must surely constitute the retention of those cultural elements deemed indispensable to the collective identity and cohesion that are threatened with loss. These are what Weiner (1992) calls 'inalienable possessions'. (1994b:136)

Yet the emphasis on the sacred does not imply an attempt at closure by simple gesture towards a transcendental space, for like many of the other hymns, this one defers resolution in a way that is seldom found in Christian hymnals. Like izibongo, which do not move to a point of thematic conclusion and which may end arbitrarily or on a point of contention, Hymn 101 does not

provide in its closing section simple solace, but offers a chastening image of the difficulties of maintaining the sacred community:

6. Jerusalem, Jerusalem  
 how much did I desire  
 to gather your children  
 under my wings  
 but you did not allow me,  
 now I leave you scattered.

The complexity of Shembe's vision in Hymn 101 is evident in his use of images. While with the possible exception of the "fortress" all are commonly found in Zulu personal and royal izibongo, they are also all biblical images,<sup>15</sup> and they consequently have a double valency. Shembe creates, accordingly, a formal and theological syncretism which is embedded in the very constituent images of his texts.

While Shembe undoubtedly exploited the "creative tension in the use of the two forms of communication" (Gunner, 1986:185), he also perceived the orality/literacy encounter in more critical ways, seeking to manipulate the colonial discourses of power, particularly the centrality of the printed word and the Bible, in order to create oppositional forms of expression and response. As suggested in his izibongo, he rejected the arrogance of the mission churches and their emphasis on educated scriptural exegesis, claiming that despite his lack of book learning, he possessed divinely-inspired wisdom. This point is emphasised by Dube in his biography:

If you had educated him in your schools you would have taken pride in him. But that God may demonstrate his wisdom, he sent Shembe, a child, so that he may speak like the wise and the educated. (Quoted by Gunner, 1986:182)

Dube ironically undermines Social-Darwinist perceptions of oral societies as childlike and ignorant by stressing that these qualities indicate a divine wisdom. (We may compare Jeff Guy's research in Lesotho in which a man who cannot read speaks of "this natural sense that God gave me" (1991:405).) Yet Shembe was intensely aware of the power invested in the written word, and though only partially literate himself, fought the state through lawyers' letters over his right to purchase land. He sought also to wrest cultural control from the mission churches, including their hegemony of the written word; hence his emphasis on the printing of the hymns, and the veneration of the hymnal encouraged in the Church of the Nazarites.<sup>16</sup> As Muller argues:

[W]hile [Shembe] did not seek to engage his followers in any kind of armed struggle, the battle over salient signs and symbols was contested in the very structures of music and ritual ... . In the face of domination and subsequent loss, Isaiah created new ritual forms in which the encounter between opposing cultures was memorialised. This was effected through a process of bricolage ... in which opposing cultural ways were made to coexist in dialectical tension with each other, or were amalgamated and ascribed new meanings. (1994a:134)

The hymns are performed in a call-and-response style, with the prophet or group-leader as precentor and the congregation following him/her. While this two-part singing style is common to many of the separatist churches, Shembe's specific innovation was the introduction of dance into the worship of the church. In doing so he gave new meaning to one of the central ritual institutions of Zulu society. Shembe believed that he was instructed in a dream to develop dance forms in his church, and claimed scriptural justification for this from Jeremiah 30:13 and Psalms 150:3 (Vilakazi et al,1986:86). The Church of the Nazarites has both western-type Christian services (*inkhonz*) and religious dance (*ukusina*), though they are not performed at the same time or in the same religious space. Dance has particular prominence in the church, however, and many of the hymns are expressly and explicitly dance forms.<sup>17</sup> Shembe is reported to have taught many of the *izihlabelelo* to his followers by first teaching them the dance rhythm

which 'constituted' the hymn. Examples of dance hymns are No. 112, which includes the verses:

2. We, oh Lord  
Dance for you  
For that power  
Of your kingdom.
  
3. May we be strengthened  
Our feet,  
So that we may dance for you  
Eternal God. (Muller, et al:83)

and No. 158, the opening verse of which is as follows:

1. Behold, the Zulus  
Are dancing for the Eternal One  
Shift a little  
Jehovah is coming. (Muller, et al:113)

The hymn performance and dance are accompanied by a variety of musical instruments, including the Nazarite drum ("ughubu"), which has a central place in worship and which is partly modelled on the drum used in Salvation Army parades, bugles, kudu horns, wood-blocks and an indigenized form of an alpine horn-like trumpet (Muller, 1994a:40-41).<sup>18</sup> The syncretism of Nazarite ritual and belief is graphically illustrated by the dress of the dancers. Shembe himself led the dance in a range of outfits which included, amongst other items, a black robe, pith helmet, kilt, Zulu beadwork, tuxedo and top-hat. The uniform of members of the church has changed over the years, but in Shembe's time it included sun umbrellas and traditional Zulu dress.

The performance of the hymns constituted a ritual of empowerment for Shembe's followers, almost all of whom had been politically and economically marginalised. Benedict Anderson points to the unisonality of group performance as establishing "imagined communities" (1991:145) which bind individuals together in the face of conflict and division. It is particularly the physical act of communion through group singing and dance that establishes the sense of collective identity, and the 'text' can be fully understood and appreciated only in its context of performance and occasion. In the case of Shembe's dance hymns, which are apparently 'simple' in poetic terms, it is the rhythm and the event which constitute the locus of value for the performers.

Sundkler argues that within the Church of the Nazarites rhythm is construed as sacred:

The hymn is not first of all a versified statement about certain religious facts. The hymn is sacred rhythm. And the rhythm is naturally accentuated by the swinging to and fro of their bodies, by loud hand-clapping and by beating the drum. (1948:196)

Coplan has claimed that African performance is 'synaesthetic', in that the different aspects of movement, intonation, dress and so on combine to create a unified effect (1987:9). In *ibandla lamaNazaretha* the effect is to reinforce the concept of rhythm, which has far-reaching implications for Nazarite belief and cosmology. The start of the dance is signalled by the beating of the *ughubu* drum, and the hymn leader will then begin to sing. S/he may begin at any point in the hymn, offering a lead which is taken up by the group of singers. Rhythm takes precedence over textual fidelity to linear structure (beginning - middle - end), and the singing of a four-verse hymn may last up to an hour, with the leader taking the group through the hymn many times, not always in the same verse order, and ending at any point in the hymn. The dance hymns are constructed on the same principle of cyclicity which I discussed in Chapters One and Two in relation to traditional Bushman and African cosmology. Muller argues that Shembe's

"reinsertion of the traditional concept of cyclicity into the articulation of ritual time and space" has political implications in the colonial context of the hymns' generation and performance: "Isaiah's insistence on this trope most powerfully reflected the symbolic contest between colonised and coloniser, whose organisation of time and space was symbolised in the principle of linearity" (1994a:136).

Shembe's hymns, particularly the dance hymns, undoubtedly reflect a concern with cyclicity as formal and ideological principle; his vision is also shaped, however, by the linear teleology of Christianity, which emerges in the powerful vision of nationalism and apocalypse in many of the izihlabelelo. Shembe's nationalism is somewhat ambiguous, for it is at once specifically and unapologetically Zulu and more broadly Africanist. The concern with a Zulu past emerges in the placing of the Church of the Nazarites in a direct line with the Zulu kings. Hence the followers are described as the "children of Senzangakhona and Shaka". Hymn 173, for example, says:

2. Give way that he may enter  
oh, here is Zulu  
the progeny of Dingane  
and Senzangakhona (Oosthuizen,1967:181)

and Hymn 214, perhaps the best example of Shembe's Zulu nationalism, opens:

1. Our uMkhululi -  
we the progeny of Dingane  
we have heard, he has arrived.  
uMkhululi has arrived!  
uMkhululi has now arrived!  
Ye Zulus, we have heard him now. (Oosthuizen,1967:189)

The mobilisation of a Zulu history to bolster a sense of pride and community is intimately bound up with what Vilakazi and others describe as the "sociological purposiveness" (1986:35) of Shembe's doctrine - its concern to rebuild a society destroyed by colonial encroachment and defeat.

The concern of *ibandla lamaNazaretha* with Zulu specificity has led in recent years to church members being courted by Inkatha, though the church itself is officially 'non-political' and comprises members who are aligned to a variety of organisations. Isaiah Shembe's hymns seem to me themselves, however, to call into question any simple co-option of Zulu history in the cause of ethnic separatism, since they place Zulu dispossession in a broader Africanist context. The early history of Shembe's church parallels that of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), forerunner to the ANC, formed in 1912. Shembe's friend and biographer John Dube was a prominent member of the SANNC, and its vision of a nationalism across tribal divisions appears in certain ways to have impinged upon the Church of the Nazarites, though without displacing the church's ethnic specificities. One of the most powerful of Shembe's hymns (No. 17) articulates in popular terms the kind of Africanism celebrated in canonical writers like Plaatje and Dhlomo.<sup>19</sup> Taking its lead from the praises of Shaka ("He who beats but is not beaten, unlike water"), drawing on traditional imagery (such as the doorway of the hut), and including the *imbongi's* advice to the king, the hymn constructs itself around the choral refrain "rise up, rise up/Ye Africans":

1. He who is beaten is not thrown away  
let him not despise himself,  
rise up, rise up  
ye Africans.
2. The form of the doorway

causes you to bend,  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

3. The enemies of Jehovah  
 rise up against you  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

4. Those who are given kingly authority  
 upon the mountain  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans.

5. They already want to deprive  
 the eternal kingly authority,  
 rise up, rise up  
 ye Africans. (Oosthuizen, 1967:159-60)

In its language of protest and resistance, this hymn anticipates the Black Consciousness (BC) rhetoric of poets like Ingoapele Madingoane, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala and Sipho Sepamla. Shembe also anticipates the use made by BC poets of Christian teleology - Christian teleology modified by the secular implications of Black Theology - in evoking the apocalypse of social revolt and revolutionary change. Hymn 28 may serve as an example. While Shembe's vision of apocalypse emphasises biblical rather than political interpretation - he draws particularly on the "trumpet" imagery of Revelation - the Nazarite association of Jehovah with liberation and upliftment gives the imagery profoundly political reverberations:



4. The first trumpet  
has been sounded  
all the earth  
quaked.  
Where will you run and hide yourself,  
here is the world already being folded.
5. Your earth, where will you hide yourself,  
and all those sinners;  
runaway ye strangers  
Jehovah is coming. (Oosthuizen,1967:161)

The twin themes of nationalism and apocalypse find forceful expression, in the Church of the Nazarites, in the doctrine of the Black Messiah. In the book I Am Black a former Christian named Shabala explains that he has returned to his traditional beliefs because of the racial exclusivity of mainstream church theology and doctrine:

Do you not understand that Jesus is not the God of the Black men? I found that out when I came to this Big City of the White people. At home there was one White man, the Preacher, and many Black people, but there was no talk of Black People or White people. The writings only spoke of men ... . Here [in the city] are many White men, and Jesus is their God only. Here there are many houses built for Him ... but I cannot go into the houses of the White man's God. (Williams and May,1936:205)

Such perceptions were amongst the most widespread reasons for the breakaway of the separatist churches. Shabala's concerns are given a more radical echo by Steve Biko in his 1973 argument for a Black Theology:

[Black Theology] seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the black man and to his daily problems. It wants to describe Christ as a fighting God and not a passive God who accepts a lie to exist unchallenged. It seeks to bring back God to the black man and to the truth and reality of his situation. (1986:31)

The concept of a Black Messiah, who could heal the sick and who later 'rose from the dead', proved attractive in churches like *ibandla lamaNazaretha*. The appeal of such leaders was not simply religious, however, for they filled the historical and symbolic space created by the effective destruction of the Zulu kingship. In the previous chapter I examined the nationalism and mythology which developed around Shaka. With British invasion of the Zulu kingdom, and the failure of the Bambatha rebellion, the mythology of the Zulu kings was deflated, and figures like Shembe answered the need for leaders who stood 'above' and 'beyond' the degradation of contemporary historical circumstances.

Despite the questioning of the concept of the trinity in churches such as that of the Nazarites, Shembe is presented as a Black Christ. In the sermons and hymns of the church, Shembe's life has the force of Christ's life and is used to illustrate biblical messages and religious doctrine. A number of hymns present Shembe in this light. Hymn 60 (Oosthuizen, 1967:164) is one of praise to Jehovah for sending "Isaiah, your Servant/because He is good", and proves illuminating for an examination of Shembe's messianic status. The sending of Shembe is described in terms of African specificities:

2. He [Jehovah] remembered Africa  
because He is righteous,  
He did not forget his people  
because He is righteous.

And it is made clear by reference to the specific practices and taboos of the Church of the Nazarites that they are people chosen by God: shoes not to be worn in sacred places - "Those who put on nothing/on their feet"; shaving or cutting their hair forbidden - "Even those who shave heads.../Even those who shave chins/through breaking of the laws"; wearing, in Shembe's time, traditional dress - "your people/whose hips are naked". The description of "Isaiah, your Servant" as "good" echoes the description in the previous verse of God also as "good", and the association of Shembe with the deity is emphasised by Oosthuizen in his choice - in translation - of capital letters to highlight the pronouns referring to the prophet.

On the evidence of such hymns and on the testimony of followers, a number of critics have argued that Shembe is God or Christ in Nazarite theology. Oosthuizen claims that "Shembe ... is not only Mediator but is Messiah, the manifestation of God" (1967:4), and Gérard states: "The Zulu Messiah is Shembe, and in later years the adherents of the sect even came increasingly to believe that the prophet was God himself" (1971:153). Similarly Muller refers repeatedly to "the Nazarite God, Shembe" or "their God Shembe".<sup>20</sup> Such critical statements and assumptions appear to simplify a more complex symbolic identification, and to remain insufficiently alert to the ambiguities and polyvalencies of religious and poetic language. In Hymn 60 discussed above, Isaiah Shembe is described as the "Servant", who brings the divine message to Africans, and in a sermon Johannes Galilee Shembe referred to his father as "Thunyiwe ka Nkulunkulu" (sent by God). While it is the case that many of the followers of the church do in fact claim Shembe's divinity, his own hymns do not make this identification. Instead, as Sundkler argues, Shembe's status as Saviour should be understood in more subtle fashion, as a 'mask':

Instead of the idea of a Messiah we suggest the biblical, and, indeed, African, concept of the eikon, i.e. the mask, and in this case the mask is the Black Christ. The African prophet turning to God's black people is privileged to wear that mask which they will recognise as of God. (1976:193)

Hence Shembe is not Christ, but wears the 'mask' of Christ. In the hymns he is sent by God to save Zulu people (and, in some hymns, all black people) and deliver them from white bondage. The divine covenant which seals the promise of deliverance is symbolised by the "Ark of the Covenant" - the sacred drum ("umphongolo wesivumelwane") which has so central a role in the performance of the hymns (Vilakazi et al,1986:73).

\* \* \*

Shembe's hymns comprise texts and rituals of empowerment and resistance, therefore, which draw both upon forms of colonial discourse and upon the cultural resources of traditional Zulu society. A constant concern in this study is, however, not only with the 'past significance' of the poems and performances (which I have attempted to establish), but their 'present meaning', for I seek to 'place' the oral forms in a literary history impelled by modern political and aesthetic considerations to which the past voices are encouraged to 'talk back'.

Chapter One ended with a discussion of the place of the songs and stories of the Bushmen in a revised South African poetry anthology. As well as including - alongside Bushman expression - personal izibongo and royal praises such as those of Shaka, Dingane and others, I would argue that such an anthology should include the hymns of Isaiah Shembe. (The only anthology in which they are presently represented is Mapanje and White's Oral Poetry from Africa (1983).) The inclusion of the hymns of the Church of the Nazarites would broaden debates about what constitutes 'poetry', and set up important negotiations between 'traditional', 'élite' and 'popular' genres in South African literary historiography. The hymns could be read, not only against canonical writers such as Dhlomo whom I have mentioned, but against others such as William Plomer (who, like Shembe, had some contact with John Dube) and particularly Roy Campbell. In the 1920s Campbell and Shembe were working within about 30 kilometres of each other, and it may prove illuminating for literary criticism to set Campbell's simultaneous interrogation and

valorisation of colonial mythologies in dialogue with Shembe's attempts to draw an African past into a new context of dispossession and colonisation. At the end of "The Serf", for example, Campbell offers the following image:

I see in the slow progress of his strides  
 Over the toppled clods and falling flowers,  
 The timeless, surly patience of the serf  
 That moves the nearest to the naked earth  
 And ploughs down palaces and thrones and towers. (1981:34)

In contrast to Campbell's silent ploughman, we may set the immensely articulate Isaiah Shembe, who occupies a position not of European serfdom but of African popular religious leadership, and who speaks of political liberation and nationalism in a context in which the "thrones" of Zulu history had themselves been overturned. Such a comparison of Shembe's oral hymns with Campbell's highly-literate verse returns us to the question - considered throughout this thesis - of how to represent oral forms in their published versions. The use of numbered verses and choruses - as in the Western hymnal tradition - certainly suggests in print something of the hymns' performative aspect. Yet it may also be necessary, in anthologising Shembe alongside Campbell, to include accounts of the 'events' of Nazarite worship, such as those provided in this chapter, so as to suggest something of the resonance of the hymns in contexts of dance and occasion.

Shembe's hymns may also contribute to a history of black poetry of resistance running from the songs and stories of the Bushmen and the izibongo of African chiefs and kings, through Christianised figures like Ntsikana and Shembe, to Dhlomo, the Soweto poets, and Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula in the 1980s. Such a history would bring into view new forms and figures, as well as give a broader context to work - like that of the Soweto poets - which has received some critical attention, but which has tended to be read in terms of Western print

paradigms. The closing stanzas of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's "Sounds of a Cowhide Drum", for example, have strong echoes of Shembe's hymns:

O! Hear me, Child!  
 in the Zulu dance  
 shaking their hearts into a frenzy.

O! Hear me, Child!  
 in the night vigils of black Zionists  
 lifting their spirits into ecstasy.

Boom! Boom! Boom!  
 That is the sound of a cowhide drum -  
 the Voice of Mother Africa. (1971:91-92)

The hymns of Isaiah Shembe may remind us, at the same time, of the multivocal nature of our society and history, pointing to the many distinctive voices which have spoken and continue to speak from popular or unofficial positions in South African life.

### Notes

1. Certain of Shembe's hymns had also been published in John Dube's biography of Shembe (1936).
2. Several of the translated hymns from this manuscript appear in an Appendix to Carol Muller's unpublished doctoral dissertation on Nazarite women's songs and narratives (1994a).

3. In her account of attending the 1990 January festival on the Holy Mountain, Nhlankakazi, Carol Muller remarks on the performance of Shembe's izibongo:

One of the male leaders, Mvangeli (evangelist), stood on a rock about half way up. He had long hair, a beard, a flowing green robe, and shepherd's crook, and was calling praises to Shembe in the style of a traditional imbongi ... . (1994a:9)

4. Gunner recorded Isaiah Shembe's praises from a performance by one of his son's izimbongi, Azariah Mthiyane. While the primarily memorial rather than improvisational nature of Zulu izibongo suggests that the text is likely to have been transmitted fairly 'accurately' over the years, and this point is stressed by Mthiyane (see Gunner, 1982), the sacralisation of religious texts in the Church of the Nazarites further discourages their alteration or adaptation. This is particularly the case with the hymns, as Vilakazi and others argue:

Isaiah Shembe did not see himself as a composer but rather pointed out that each hymn was brought to him by different heavenly messengers. A strong belief within the Nazareth Church is that whenever a hymn is sung, the original unseen heavenly messenger who delivered the hymn becomes pleased. He listens rather intently to the singing, and becomes offended if the singers do not sing all the stanzas, or if they do not sing the hymn correctly. We think this belief has gone a long way to preserving these hymns. (1986:140)

5. Many Zulu people perceive the Nazarite Church negatively, however. An apparently apocryphal story of Shembe's death is often told to exemplify his perceived stupidity and hubris. In this account the religious leader meets his death by throwing himself from a cliff or mountain believing that he can fly.

6. P.L.B. Sewpershad's study, African Christian Visionaries: Issues in Black South African Poetry (1994), traces the development of an Africanised Christian vision in black South African poetry.
7. In the second edition of the hymnal, this hymn is attributed to Isaiah Shembe's son, Johannes Galilee Shembe.
8. These difficulties are, of course, not the sole preserve of the popular, though they may appear in somewhat extreme ways in these forms. The associations of Yeats, Pound and Eliot with fascism may prove as disturbing as Shembe's Messianic pretensions. However the status of these poets in the literary canon has led readers and critics either to suppress such awkwardnesses or to dismiss them as irrelevant in view of their artistic achievements.
9. An "isoka" is distinct from an "isifebe" - a profligate who is perceived to be morally reprehensible (Vilakazi et al,1986:23-24).
10. This point was emphasised in a sermon by Johannes Galilee Shembe in 1969, in which he discussed Shembe's doctrinal debates with Leshega, the priest who baptised him (see Sundkler,1976:169).
11. These ideas resurfaced recently in the debate about the place of traditional leaders in a modern South Africa. A report in the Weekly Mail and Guardian included the following observation of a villager from Lilydale: "When we humans appeared on the earth, we found 'ubukhosi' - chieftainship or kingship - in existence. Even in the Bible it is there" (Davis and Koch,1995:8).
12. While the term "stanza" is generally used in literary studies to refer to a group of lines of



poetry, the term "verse" refers to the analogous sense unit in the hymnal tradition. Accordingly, I use the latter throughout this chapter.

13. There has been some debate about precisely where Isaiah Shembe's hymns end and those of Galilee begin, and Oosthuizen provides details of the various claims and counter-claims (1967:8-9). The division I have suggested is, however, now generally accepted.
14. There was some influence upon the field of hymn composition in South African separatist churches by African-American Christians. A number of visits to this country took place in the late nineteenth century, with amongst others Orpheus McAdoo and his Virginia Jubilee Singers performing minstrel and jubilee songs (see Muller, 1994a:38 and Erlmann, 1991).
15. I am grateful to a student, Ms M. Houart, for pointing me to the following biblical references: "wings", "hen" and "eagle" - Matthew 23:27, Luke 13:34, Deuteronomy 32:11, Psalms 36:7 and 17:8, and Ruth 2:12; "fortress" and "rock" - Jeremiah 16:19, Psalms 31:3 and Exodus 33:21-23.
16. Muller says: "It is the hymnal ... which contains the Word of the Nazarite God. This hymnal is either carefully wrapped in a towel or prayer mat or placed in a man's briefcase. In both instances, the encased hymnal is faithfully carried to religious services by all Nazarite members - regardless of whether they are able to read or not." (1994a:173)
17. One of the difficulties of relying on Oosthuizen's Appendix as a textual source, despite its other omissions, is that it does not include any of the dance hymns, perhaps because his study is concerned with the theology of the church and Oosthuizen (mistakenly, in my view) does not feel that these contribute to an understanding of church doctrine or belief.

18. A detailed musical analysis of the hymns is beyond the scope of this chapter and my abilities as critic. See Vilakazi and others (1986) and Muller (1994a) for an in-depth treatment of this aspect of the hymns.

19. See for example the following lines from Dhlomo's "Valley of a Thousand Hills":

A groaning wail from this dark Present breaks:  
 "O native Soul! art dead and ever flown?  
 Art thou tame and lost in slavery?  
 For ages they have tramped, exploited you;  
 Forever you defy, escape, deceive,  
 And laugh at them! Forever blooming out  
 Into new beauties deep and fresh;  
 Forever chanting songs the Past exudes,  
 Of swarthy giant men, wise, kingly, proud! (Chapman, 1981:147)

For critical discussion of Dhlomo's Africanism as anticipating many of the concerns of Soweto poetry see Chapman (1984).

20. Muller's equation of Shembe and the deity remains misleading despite her qualification in a footnote to an article drawn from her thesis: "While Isaiah Shembe never claimed to be God, many of the women told me that because of the miracles Shembe performs, they believe he is their God" (1994b:137).

## Chapter Four: Black Consciousness, Tradition and Modernity: Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial"

Ingoapele Madingoane's africa my beginning, first published by Ravan Press in 1979, comprises a sequence of twenty-one poems - in English - called "black trial", and a short title piece "africa my beginning". "black trial", which will form the focus of this chapter, traces the spiritual, ideological and historical development of its speaker - a communally-defined "blackman" - from a state of self-loathing and passivity to that of self-assertion and social commitment. Shortly after its publication the book was banned by the Publications Control Board for distribution, but not for possession. Reasons given for the banning included the following: "black trial/fifteen" and "africa my beginning" refer to Steve Biko and Hector Peterson (the latter being one of the first victims of the 1976 Soweto violence); the poet invokes ancestral help in the liberation struggle; victory is predicted in Namibia and "Azania" (the name, according to the Publications Control Board, that "terrorists" use for South Africa); and the actions of "communists" (Robert Mugabe and Agostinho Neto) are sanctioned by the poet (Msimang, 1982:204).<sup>1</sup> The effect of the banning was questionable, however, for Madingoane had performed both "black trial" and "africa my beginning" extensively in the townships before the poems were to appear in print, and he continued to recite the poems after the banning of the book. His performances proved so powerful that many township youths in the late 1970s could recite the whole of the "black trial" sequence from memory.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is concerned with the mobilisation of oral forms by the Black Consciousness movement in the 1970s. In particular it is concerned with the possibilities of performance poetry in a context of political oppression, especially when the challenges of modernity are met by invocations to, and evocations of, a mythologised African past. I offer a reading of Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial" which, in seeking to grant the poem its oral ontology, attempts to 'place' it in a history of black oral poetry and performance stretching back to the /Xam Bushmen and the izibongo of Shaka and Dingane. My concern is not - as with the hymns of Isaiah Shembe - to open up a new area for literary study, but rather to suggest a reorientation through orality of

a fairly well-established field of critical investigation. Studies of Soweto poetry have tended to focus on poets like Mongane Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, Sipho Sepamla and Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali whose work, though it often draws on oral models, is directed towards the page rather than the performance platform. A fuller understanding of oral forms, however, may bring into view younger performance poets like Madingoane and others who, since their poems are less amenable to discussion within conventional print paradigms, have received little critical attention. One is reminded in this regard that Serote's early collections Yakhal'inkomo (1972) and Tsetlo (1974), which subscribe to many of the conventions of the English lyric, are extensively discussed in articles and represented in anthologies. Serote's later oral-influenced narrative poems No Baby Must Weep (1975), Behold Mama, Flowers (1978), A Tough Tale (1987) and Third World Express (1992), in contrast, have not been the subject of significant study.

Whereas the stories and evocations of the /Xam Bushmen, the izibongo of Shaka, and Isaiah Shembe's hymns used oral forms as their primary means of social and aesthetic expression - what Walter J. Ong (1982) refers to as "primary orality" - Soweto poets like Madingoane occupied a world of literacy. (Their linguistic skills nevertheless may have been uneven as a result of Bantu Education.) The spoken or sung word was not their sole form of communication, and they used the oral as a conscious strategy: they occupied positions of 'secondary' or even 'tertiary' orality, deploying performance genres for specific political and social purposes. Since the performance of oral poetry in a context of modernity generally occurs within the ambit of 'secondary' or 'tertiary' orality, some consideration of these terms is necessary. Ong's characterisation of 'secondary orality' - as an oral culture fostered by the electronic media, especially radio, television and cassette recordings - seems problematic in an African or, more broadly, colonial/postcolonial context. Ong claims that within secondary orality the electronic media create not local but worldwide communities of listeners, who become citizens of Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' (1982:136). It is clear that Ong's model does not adequately represent the experiences of 'third-world' societies, which are far less homogeneous than Ong imagines, are often characterised by sharp conflicts over cultural values and interests, and generally lack

developed infrastructures. In such contexts the suppression of the oral has been linked historically to the destruction of indigenous culture by the intruding colonial power. Certainly primary orality continues to exist in such societies even in their present circumstances, and the movement of migrant workers from country to city has ensured continued urban contact with the largely rural world of primary orality. What I would define as 'secondary orality', however, usually involves the mobilisation of indigenous oral forms by literate or semi-literate individuals as an act of political and cultural resistance against the colonising power. Such is the case with poets like Madingoane who - under the aegis of Black Consciousness - sought to reclaim black identity and reassert the importance of black creativities and cultural forms, including forms of oral poetry. Hence, instead of entering the 'global village', such individuals use orality to emphasise the specific, the local and the indigenous. What Ong refers to as 'secondary orality' might more accurately be described as 'tertiary orality' in third-world contexts, when electronic forms create new possibilities for international connection through the spoken or sung word. Even in contexts of 'tertiary orality', however, electronic media may be locally-directed as much as they are concerned with fostering global contacts and identities.

Black Consciousness (BC) emerged as a political ideology in South Africa in the late 1960s. The period following the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 was one of intense repression with, amongst other measures, the banning of both the ANC and PAC under the Unlawful Organisations Act of 1960, the introduction of house arrest and detention without trial in order to silence political opposition, the extension of censorship powers by means of the Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, the banning of a number of individuals (including 46 writers) under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1966, and the consolidation and extension of the security police system with the establishment in 1968 of the Bureau of State Security (BOSS).<sup>3</sup> Despite such coercive measures, frustration with the state policy of 'Separate Development' led to the emergence of a new black political movement, Black Consciousness, which took root particularly on black university campuses. In an act which was to have far-reaching political reverberations, Steve Biko in 1969 led a breakaway of black students from the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to found the black South African Students'

Organisation (SASO), which was to become one of the leading Black Consciousness bodies. Ironically, the BC ideology was initially encouraged by the state in the mistaken belief that it was promoting the kind of tribal separatism that apartheid was seeking to enforce.

As Steve Biko argued in 1973, Black Consciousness was based on "the realisation of blacks that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (1986:29). BC stressed the psychological and political liberation of black people - embodied in the slogan "Black man, you're on your own" - and reasserted the communal values of a black humanism. In his influential essay "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity", Biko defined the ideology:

In essence [it] is an attitude of mind and a way of life. It is the most positive call to emanate from the black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. The philosophy of Black Consciousness, therefore, expresses group pride and the determination of the black to rise and attain the envisaged self. (1986:29)

From its initial student base, the Black Consciousness movement broadened in scope and influence, and was to have its most visible effect in the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when black schoolchildren took to the streets in protest over the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. The protest action was to last for more than a year, spilling over from Soweto to townships throughout the country, and spreading from the youth to almost all sectors of the community. Overall, however, the impact of Black Consciousness amongst workers remained limited. Leading BC organisations included SASO, the South African Students'

Movement (which organised school children), the Soweto Students' Representative Council, the Black Communities Programmes, the Black Parents' Association and the Black People's Convention, all of which were declared unlawful by the state on 19 October 1977.

Black Consciousness involved an active process of historical and cultural recuperation, as Allan Boesak asserted:

Black Consciousness may be described as the awareness of black people that their humanity is constituted by their blackness. It means that black people are no longer ashamed that they are black, that they have a black history and a black culture distinct from the history and culture of white people. It means that blacks are determined to be judged no longer by, and to adhere themselves no longer to white values. (1986:41)

In similar vein Frantz Fanon, whose book Black Skin, White Masks (1952) has been dubbed the "Bible of Black Consciousness" (Horn, 1982:166), had described the process of deculturation in the colonial context by which the colonised is forced to accept the superiority of colonial culture: "[T]he settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man's values" (1970:33-34). Fanon pointed out, however, that the colonised subject's acceptance of these values produces a deep-rooted alienation, exacerbated by the fact that the social and educational expectations aroused by embracing the culture of the metropole are denied by colonial ideology. In the South African apartheid context, this denial is represented in extreme form by the notorious statement of H.F. Verwoerd - then Minister of Native Affairs - to parliament in June 1954: "The natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them ... . There is no place for him [the native] above the level of certain forms of labour."

The strategy of the apartheid state was somewhat more complex than that described by Fanon - his theory derives largely from his experiences in Algeria - since it involved,

simultaneously, the deprecation of black culture as inferior to the Europeanised white culture and the promotion of ethnically static versions of black culture. The psychological and political impasse produced by such a strategy is widely evident in black South African fiction and autobiography of the 1950s and early 1960s, particularly Bloke Modisane's Blame Me on History (1963) and the stories and journalism of Drum magazine. Fanon's ideas are useful, nevertheless, in assisting us to understand the emergence of Black Consciousness as a political movement. He argues that the black subject only overcomes the alienation produced by white subordination when s/he realises that his/her identity has been "woven ... out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" by "the other, the white man" (1993:111). The only way to root out the "inborn complex" is to reclaim the value of black identity:

The crippled veteran of the Pacific war says to my brother, "Resign yourself to your colour the way I got used to my stump; we're both victims."

Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation. I feel in myself 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. I am a master and I am advised to accept the humility of a cripple. (1993:140)

The process of self-empowerment in a colonial context involves, for Fanon, a rediscovery of indigenous cultural values and traditions: "Discovering the futility of his alienation, the inferiorised individual, after this phase of deculturation, of extraneousness, comes back to his original positions. This culture, abandoned, sloughed off, rejected, despised, becomes for the inferiorised an object of passionate attachment" (1970:51). The past, "becoming henceforth a constellation of values, becomes identified with the Truth" (1970:52-3). Fanon nonetheless warns of the dangers of valorising a past which - as represented by apartheid endorsements - has often become fossilised:

This falling back on archaic positions having no relation to technical development is paradoxical. The institutions thus valorised no longer correspond to the



elaborate methods of action already mastered. The culture put into capsules, which has vegetated since the foreign domination, is revalorised. It is not reconceived, grasped anew, dynamised from within. It is shouted. And this headlong, unstructured, verbal revalorisation conceals paradoxical attitudes. (1970:52).

The return to indigenous values and beliefs, as described by Fanon, mirrors the concerns of Black Consciousness - and hence the concerns of poets like Madingoane - in asserting the value of black identity and cultural institutions. For the most part, however, Black Consciousness avoided the anachronistic paradox described by Fanon. Black cultural traditions had continued to develop under colonial occupation (mostly outside of official discursive spaces) and were thus not themselves historically 'encapsulated' or static. In addition, Black Consciousness drew on modern political and cultural ideas from elsewhere in the world, particularly on American Black Power rhetoric and the Negritude of north and west Africa, including the work of Fanon himself. A number of important conferences dealt specifically with these topics, such as the SASO Conference on Creativity and Black Development (1972), the Edendale Black Theology Conference (1973), and the Black Renaissance Convention (1974). Several cultural festivals were held for black artists, at which "poetry and drama by local artists rubbed shoulders with speeches by Baldwin and Fanon, poetry by Senghor and Diop, and works by overseas dramatists such as Peter Weiss and Ed Bullins" (Sole,1987b:257). Literary expression, particularly poetry, was seen as crucial to the process of black cultural assertion. The Black Students' Manifesto, for example, committed students "to encourage and promote Black Literature relevant to our struggle" (Ndaba,1986:14), while the Cultural Commission of SASO in 1973 "direct[ed] the theme of poetry and literature to changing the system and liberating the people" (Ndaba,1986:15).

What has come to be known as Soweto poetry first began to appear in the mid-1960s, particularly in the magazine The Classic, named not to claim any 'high art' status, but after the laundry which fronted the shebeen in which the magazine was started in 1963 (McClintock, 1987:609). Soweto poetry received impetus from the enormous success of Oswald Mtshali's

Sounds of a Cowhide Drum, published by Renoster Books in 1971. The oppositional potential of the expression, however, soon attracted state attention, and James Matthews and Gladys Thomas's volume Cry Rage! - printed a year after Mtshali's collection - became the first book of poems to be banned under the Publications and Entertainments Act. A number of cultural groups were formed at this time to promote black poetry and drama, including the Cultural Committee of SASO, the Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), the People's Experimental Theatre (PET, declared subversive in 1975), the Mhloti Black Theatre Group, and the Music Drama Arts and Literature Institute (MDALI or Mdali). The lead provided by Mtshali was soon followed by other poets, and collections appeared by Serote, Sepamla, Gwala, Christopher van Wyk and Madingoane. As well as individual volumes, several important anthologies of Soweto poetry have been published, including To Whom it May Concern: An Anthology of Black South African Poetry (1973), Black Voices Shout!: An Anthology of Poetry (1974, banned), Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa (1982), The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry: 1891-1981 (1982) and, more recently, One Day in June: Poetry and Prose from Troubled Times (1986).

Michael Chapman, who has written at length on the movement, described Soweto poetry as "the single most important socio-literary phenomenon of the seventies in South Africa" (1982:11). Deprived of an extensive knowledge of Western literature by Bantu Education, and rejecting the cultural forms associated with colonial occupation (as much out of necessity, perhaps, as principled opposition), Soweto poets sought poetic models in traditional African forms (particularly izibongo), in jazz and blues music, African-American verse, the rhetoric of the political platform, and even 'plain speech'. The poems were mostly expressed in English, reflecting the BC wariness about using indigenous languages that might deepen the tribal fissures promoted by apartheid. The English was often ungrammatical, however, and the diction drew on Americanisms, expletives, tsotsi-taal and the terminology of Black Power, as the poets sometimes challenged - at other times reflected - the linguistic inadequacies of Bantu Education in forms that, consciously and unconsciously, flouted white norms and standards. As Chapman has argued, Soweto poetry made "its rejection of Western literary and cultural continuities almost a stylistic

and moral imperative" (1982:13).

The launching of Staffrider magazine by Ravan Press in 1978 provided a forum for the many voices that emerged in the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising. From the start, Staffrider emphasised that its editorial policy was "democratic", and that the magazine sought to establish a "direct line" with the community:

We hope that the work appearing in the magazine will be selected and edited as far as possible by the groups themselves. The magazine is prepared for publication by Ravan Press, but has no editor or editorial board in the usual sense. (Staffrider 1(1) March 1978)<sup>4</sup>

As the beginnings of The Classic in an illegal shebeen suggested, Soweto poetry - like the hymns of Isaiah Shembe - was a popular, fugitive form speaking in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces. The title Staffrider epitomised this, referring as it did to black passengers who hitched dangerous and illegal rides on trains by hanging onto the outside of the doors:

A staffrider is, let's face it, a *skelm* of sorts. Like Hermes or Mercury - the messenger of the gods in classical mythology - he is almost as light-fingered as he is fleet-footed. A skilful entertainer, a bringer of messages, a useful person but ... slightly disreputable. Our censors may not like him, but they should consider putting up with him. A whole new literature is knocking at the door, and if our society is to change without falling apart it needs all the messages it can get - the bad as well as the good.

Like him or not, he is part of the present phase of our common history, riding 'staff' on the fast and dangerous trains of our late seventies. He is part of the idiom of this time. (Staffrider 1(1) March 1978)

The first issue of Staffrider was banned because - it was claimed - some of the poems

"undermined the authority and image of the police".

The poems which in the wake of the events of Soweto 1976 appeared in Staffrider and in individual volumes represented departures in form and ideology from those that had been published previously in The Classic and in early collections such as Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum. Initially Soweto poems were often aimed at a white, liberal readership, and used poetic strategies not unfamiliar to Western-trained readers. Poems such as Mtshali's "Boy on a Swing" or "An Abandoned Bundle", for example, are fairly easily recuperated as lyric poems. However, as Chapman notes:

By the mid-seventies ... the emphasis had shifted with Serote's Black Consciousness voice (predictably less popular with whites) finding its full power in an uncompromising poetry of resistance. This is a mobilising rhetoric utilising epic forms (in a highly contemporary, almost Brechtian sense) and traditional African oral techniques of repetition, parallelism and ideophones. By these means the poet seeks to impart to a black communal audience, often in a context of performance, a message of consciousness-raising and race pride ... . (1982:12)

The poems increasingly registered 'resistance' rather than 'protest', engaging actively in the process of struggle against political and cultural oppression and asserting thereby "their own polemical historicity" (Harlow,1987:37). Chapman identifies the important symbolic and historical shifts which are evident in later Soweto poems:

Whereas early Soweto poetry had taken as its highest ideal that Western one of justice, the later poetry, especially that which has appeared since the events of 1976, has rediscovered the highest of African ideals: heroism. Serote, Mtshali and Gwala, as well as many poets writing in Staffrider magazine, have begun to focus not so much backwards on a bare Soweto existence as forward to a 'pre-Azanian' phase of South African history, one wherein the construct of 'the people', including

the participatory ideals of black community, has increasingly begun to function as an inspirational myth. (1982:22)

Jimmy Kruger, Minister of Police at the time, evidently recognised the shifts which were occurring in Soweto poetry when he warned a 1977 National Party congress of the threat posed by "Black Power poetry" (Emmett, 1982:175).

Critical debates about Soweto poetry in literary and academic institutions centred on the question of appropriate aesthetic models and evaluative paradigms. Several critics responded dismissively to the poems, including A.G. Ulyatt who characterised them as "poetically inept" and "immature", chiefly because they "castigate the prevailing system of government without regard for any of the basic precepts of poetry" (1977:58-60) which comprise - in Ulyatt's definition - "craftsmanship, discipline and art, as well as imagination" (1977:61). Ulyatt's comments, of course, reveal telling assumptions about what constitutes 'good' poetry - notably his commitment to the 'well-wrought urn' of New Criticism - and evince a complete lack of familiarity with African forms. He further reveals his metropolitan orientation when he describes his intellectual position in terms which would not appear to be out of place in the accounts of nineteenth-century colonial travellers: "at the edge of a vast, primitive, fascinating and terrifying continent".

Several critics, as well as the black poets themselves, rejected such claims as reflecting the cultural values of a colonising power. In the Introduction to the collection of 'Soweto' fiction, Forced Landing, Mthobi Mutloatse made the point in graphic terms:

We will have to donder conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to have to pee, spit and shit on literary convention before we are through, we are going to kick, push and drag literature into the form we prefer. We are going to experiment and probe and not give a damn what the critics have to say. Because we are in search of our true selves - undergoing self-discovery as a people.

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. (1980:5)

Mafika Gwala was to call, in turn, for "black standards" (1982). Within academic criticism David Maughan Brown sought to locate these debates in larger concerns about "black aesthetics" in the subcontinent and beyond, and discussed the contributions of H.I.E. Dhlomo, Mbulelo V. Mzamane and critics and writers from east and north Africa (1982).

Stephen Watson, however, remained unconvinced about the question of black aesthetics. In his retrospective article "Shock of the Old: What's Become of 'Black' Poetry?" (1987), he claimed:

Today, a coherent 'black aesthetic' remains as remote and unformulated as some mythical 'black value' system. Overwhelmingly, the black poetry of the last two decades consists of a number of half-assimilated European conventions which are frequently patched together in so confused and piecemeal a fashion that one thinks, reading the work, not in terms of a 'renaissance' or 'breakthrough' ... or of 'innovations', but rather with anger and dismay at what has happened in this country that such beginnings should have remained largely unfulfilled. (1987:23)

He attempted accordingly to dismiss debates about Black Consciousness and black aesthetics:

[I]t seems increasingly difficult to see how it could ever have been believed that a poetry that was based largely on the notion that 'black is beautiful' and 'white is ugly' could ever have amounted to much. No literature, here or elsewhere, could long be sustained by such threadbare notions as 'blackness' or 'black experience' and a determination, however understandable, to reject all aspects of white culture, local or otherwise, as the work of the devil. (1987:24)

Watson's purpose is polemical: his sweeping rhetorical statements do not admit to the complexity and weight of debates about Black Consciousness; nor do they support the claims made earlier in his own essay for the significant literary achievements of much Soweto poetry. Further, his assumptions about what constitutes the locus of value in poetry - assumptions evident in his praise of Lionel Abrahams - echo those of Ulyatt (even though Watson relies on Matthew Arnold, rather than on the 'New Critics'): "[Abrahams] believed that poetry was an eternal stickler for the unwelcome ethical truth, confronting the gravest moral issues with all the vigilance that is implicit in the most responsible use of language" (1987:25). Despite the shortcomings of his argument - its polemical inaccuracies and its reliance on aesthetic criteria inappropriate to many forms of traditional and modern poetry, both local and international - Watson is correct in pointing out that the concept and application of 'black aesthetics' needs to be more than simply an oppositional or rhetorical riposte. Even in Maughan Brown's treatment, 'black aesthetics' remains assertion rather than investigation, and his article reveals little awareness of the oral models which have informed almost all African literature.<sup>5</sup> Kelwyn Sole has called for more complex research in this area:

Generally speaking, as the Nigerian critic Izevbaye has pointed out, the call for African critical standards and criteria here and elsewhere in the continent has been more of a rejection of entrenched European attitudes and modes of thinking than of established modes of literary study. Consequently, grandiose assertions of blackness simply beg further questions on the part of the critic: a closer look at style, influence and assumption - and how these have been maintained or changed over time in black South African literature - is now crucial. (1987c:27)

In placing Madingoane's "black trial" in a long history of black South African poetry and performance, and in seeking to grant the poem its status as an oral text which draws on various models of poetry and social expression, I hope to give greater substance to claims about indigenous aesthetic models and critical practices. In so doing I wish to suggest more appropriate

interpretative strategies for the texts.<sup>6</sup>

Despite my references so far to what I regard as insensitive responses to oral-based challenges, several critics have acknowledged Soweto poetry's debt to indigenous oral modes. Talking of the formal syncretism of Mafika Gwala's collection *Jol'iinkomo* (1977), which draws on the rhythms of praise poetry and jive, Cherry Clayton identified the poems' "looser incremental type of structure" (1982:84), analogous to that which I identified in the izibongo of Shaka in Chapter Two. Es'kia Mphahlele described Oswald Mtshali's *Fireflames* as "poetry turned theatre" (1982:90), and Mbulelo V. Mzamane discussed oral influences on Serote's poems (1984). The most extensive treatment of orality in Soweto poetry has been by Michael Chapman. He has stressed connections between the Soweto poet's role as community spokesperson and that of the imbongi, and has drawn attention to the 'breath-unit' which characterises both praise poetry and the oral-based rhythms of American 'projective verse' including 'beat poetry':

... a privileging of the oral impulse - of sound elevated above sight - accords well not only with ancient African conceptions of poetry, but also with those of the modern social revolutionary seeking to restore vitality and to rescue man from the horror of immutability. Increasingly, poets such as Serote, Sepamla, Mtshali, Madingoane and Gwala - in a similar vein to their Afro-American counterparts - have attempted to move beyond the realm of the text and to approach the domain of gesture and act. (1984:223)

Despite the insights offered by these critics, however, perceptions of Soweto poetry have remained largely page-bound, and discussion of this period has tended to focus on the influence of orality on print forms rather than on poetry which was performed at large gatherings, such as Madingoane's "black trial" and "africa my beginning". Poetry has been seen as 'product' rather than 'process', as 'object' rather than 'practice', and very little attention has been paid to the host of oral poets working within the Soweto milieu in the wake of the events of 1976.<sup>7</sup> The only critics to have explored this area are Chapman (1982;1984), Emmett (1982), Sole (1982;1987b)



and McClintock (1987). Besides very brief reviews such as those by Tucker (1982) and Gray (1979), Madingoane's africa my beginning has received attention only from Chapman (1984) and Msimang (1982). (Liz Gunner makes extremely brief mention of Madingoane in her doctoral dissertation (1984).)

While certain poets had recited their poems at communal gatherings in the early 1970s, performance poetry would gain momentum only in the wake of the events of Soweto 1976 and the attendant radicalisation of the black community. Several cultural groups - formed at the time - were concerned with oral performance, amongst the most prominent being Medupe. At its founding in Soweto early in 1977 it had only twenty members, but within six months numbers had risen to 200 (Sole, 1987b:259). In addition to Medupe, which was later banned along with the major Black Consciousness organisations, there were Mpumalanga Arts in Natal, PEYARTA in the Cape, and Bayajula, Khauleza and the Creative Youth Organisation in the Transvaal. Groups like the Dashiki Poets, led by Lefifi Tladi, and the Allahpoets became renowned for their performances of poetry, dance and music. Other experiments with performance genres were conducted during this period. Mothobi Mutloatse began developing what he called "proemdras" - "Prose, Poem and Drama all in one!" (1980:5) - while Dumakude kaNdlovu, founder-member and publicity secretary of Medupe, composed what he called "Read-poetry". The journal Donga said in a profile of Ndlovu:

At the moment his ultimate aim is not to be published, but to read his poetry to the People as much as possible. We in Johannesburg know him well from his readings in Soweto, at Shakespeare House and Diakonia House. "Read-poetry", he says, "is for the People. It gives them a message to take home. It is simpler than written poetry so that even the layman can understand it ... ." (1977).

The turn to performance rather than publication appears to have been prompted by a number of related concerns: the affirmation of African cultural traditions by the ideology of Black Consciousness; a desire to avoid the 'gatekeeping' of white-owned literary magazines and

publishers; and the need for forms appropriate to a political context of intense repression and covert organisation. The use of models such as izibongo, traditional song and music served to revive an African past suppressed by colonial occupation and apartheid, while the collective and participatory nature of oral performance - with audience interjection and encouragement - reinforced the communal values of Black Consciousness. At the same time, oral dissemination circumvented the publishing industry. There were only two black-owned literary magazines in the mid-1970s, New Classic and S'ketsh, both edited by Sipho Sepamla, and only one black-owned publishing house, James Matthews's Blac. Sepamla admitted at the time that many poets would fear police harassment were they to seek publication: "I think there is a lot of fear among writers. I don't think I'm receiving as much material as I should. Simply because people don't trust the post. They reckon the material might fall into the wrong hands and they might be spotted." Tony Emmett provides an account of the Medupe poets' perceptions of this situation:

At much the same time as this comment was made by Sepamla, discussions with members of the Medupe group, based in Soweto, confirmed that many of the younger poets decide[d] on principle not to be published. When some of the group's poems appeared later in the literary magazine Donga, individual numbers were banned, and it was eventually closed down. (1982:177)

The younger poets in fact often regarded established poets like Sepamla and Serote with hostility and mistrust, accusing them of having 'pulled their punches' for the sake of their white publishers (Emmett,1982:181).<sup>8</sup> The perception of oral poetry as 'authentic witness' within the performance context even led - in some cases - to suspicion of those who published at all (Sole,1987b:260). Oral dissemination also became a means of avoiding censorship and the confiscation of material, since poems could be memorised, passed on, and performed in a variety of contexts. The emphasis on performance rather than publication at times resulted in black poets' having huge township followings, but remaining virtually unknown to white audiences and readers. This was the case with Madingoane before the publication of africa my beginning.

Poems such as "black trial" were performed to the accompaniment of flutes and drums. Emmett regards the introduction of drum beats as particularly innovative, since he argues that musical accompaniment was not traditionally associated with African poetry (1982:179). As indicated in Chapter Three of this study, however, drums and music were already firmly established in the separatist churches in the early part of this century, and Emmett's conception of African poetry and performance seems somewhat limited and static. Kelwyn Sole points out that for poets like Madingoane and others of the Medupe group, "[l]anguage was increasingly considered as only part of the expressive vocabulary of the performers. Music, dance, comedy, mime, gesture and other visual devices were stressed in various attempts at popularisation and to evoke an immediate display of emotion" (1987b:257). Clad in dashikis or African robes and using rhythmic movement, facial expression, gesture, intonation, alternating pace of delivery, pauses, and the hypnotic beating of the drums, the poets transformed poetry from a printed phenomenon into a performance event.

While video clips and written accounts may recreate something of the 'live' delivery, Madingoane's "black trial" even in print form is clearly 'marked' as an oral text. In tracing the spiritual and political development of the speaker to contemporary 'black awareness' - a journey which involves a return to the ancestral source - Madingoane uses many of the techniques of izibongo. Like praise poetry Madingoane's poem has the looser, incremental structure identified above by Clayton in Gwala's Jol'iinkomo, in which themes and ideas are reiterated and developed in a cyclical construction. "black trial" - as is captured in the arrangement of lines on the page - also uses parallelism by initial linking and repetition in order to build up to powerful rhetorical climaxes:

free my soul  
 let me decide  
 between you and me  
 let me decide  
 between evil and good

let me decide  
 between freedom and slavery  
 let me decide  
 whether men  
 should live in happiness or misery. (1979:6)

The poem draws on the religious imagery and concerns of izibongo, and certain sections of the poem - using space markers in the print form to indicate the pauses of delivery - comprise praises to the landscape and gods of Africa:

strong rocks mountains of africa  
 man came man went  
 heroes came  
 kings ruled  
 but neither ruled you out  
 kings have conquered  
 history said it and took  
 its course man moved man  
 and you moved not an inch  
 you towered high above man's demands. (30)

As well as the forms and rhythms of izibongo, the poem uses the invocations of African prayer in returning to a mythological past:

i pray you all great gods of africa  
 to simmer down my fear  
 and transform it into courage  
  
 give me your heart for a spear

and your spirit for my shield  
 rub my body with animal fats  
 and smooth it with your  
 strong and soothing hands (8)

and:

*ancestors of africa oh hear our cries*  
 rivers and valleys have turned red  
 fields and bushes have gone bare. (24)

Traditional song provides a formal model in other sections of the poem, particularly in the address to a woman ("mosadi") in "black trial/nineteen":

mosadi say mosadi how bright your face looks  
 with those wooden earrings  
 and how warm your breast is  
 for that man in africa who so much  
 loves you mosadi

mosadi hee mosadi what is it that you want  
 when love man beauty  
 and home as well as your roots  
 are in the soil  
 you are now standing on  
 mosadi. (29)

Modern oral refrains are also evident, including those of jazz/blues music as is common in Soweto poetry:

stand by me  
 stand by me as i walk barefooted  
 on the soil that has absorbed  
 the burden of africa and given birth  
 to a nation  
 stand by me when the flame burns  
 burning the wrongs  
 that man blamed on africa  
 stand by me when the nation stands up. (23)

And at key moments Madingoane echoes the performative context in his diction:

blow the horn raise the alarm  
 beat the drum and let them dance. (10)

The loose rhyming-rhythms of Rastafarian dub or 'toasting' (akin to those used more recently by Lesego Rampolokeng) also echo through certain sections of "black trial":

i am scared of flights  
 to the dizzy heights  
 of self delusion  
 so lay me on a cushion. (6)

As these examples suggest, "black trial" draws extensively on performance genres from the past and present, and the photograph printed on the back cover of africa my beginning - in which Madingoane is seen performing his poetry - evidently seeks to emphasise the oral nature of the poem. Both Chapman and Msimang - admittedly with different emphases - have argued, however, that the poem's appearance in print raises ontological and aesthetic difficulties.

Msimang is concerned that performance should not be an excuse for 'poor poetic technique': he appears unaware that orality involves not simply a mode of dissemination, but deliberate textual structures (of the kind identified above) that allow the poem to 'live' and 'function' both in its immediate performance context and more broadly in its society. Msimang's conception of oral performance appears to be closer to 'recitation' - the printed text read aloud:

In spite of what many 'sympathetic' commentators might say, performance cannot complement a poem or impart to it what it lacks. All that the performance does is to dramatise a work of art so as to reinforce its meaning. It brings about the right atmosphere which arouses an emotional response on the part of the audience so that the audience (preferably a communal one) takes active part in the performance. But whatever is highlighted or reinforced must - in the first instance - be inherent in the poem. (1982:212)

Chapman, in turn, registers the formal specificities of African oral genres, but he argues that Madingoane's poem does not retain anything of its oral character in print:

Madingoane's poem does not retain, in printed form, intrinsic evidence of the **instress**, or energising quality of language and rhythm, which seemed apparent at all stages of its oral presentation in community halls. The 'oral' achievement of this poem relied on the author's techniques of delivery (including his intonation and gesticulation), as well as on his dress and on the fact that he was conveying a 'sympathetic' message to a 'sympathetic' audience in a time of hardship. (1984:228)

While performance context, movement and dress are integral to oral poetry, the text of Madingoane's poem - as I have attempted to show - is itself informed by a number of oral genres. Chapman argues further that poets like Madingoane have "compromised" their positions as oral spokespersons by appearing in print, for in so doing they have subscribed "to the demands of a visually-directed, as opposed to an auditory-directed, convention" (1984:228). While Chapman is

correct in pointing to the critical reorientation which reception in print involves, I think he is incorrect in concluding that Madingoane is unable to find a "printed form able to shape the oral expression of the poem" (1984:228).

I have argued that poets like Madingoane occupy positions of 'secondary' orality; and their means of promoting oral forms is not only the microphone but, paradoxically, the typewriter. In considering poetry as vocal expression Charles Olson, leading exponent of American 'projective verse', pointed out in 1950 that one of the most important allies which the poet has in attempting to return to poetry its oral and aural dimensions - the 'breathing' and the 'listening' of its creator - is typography:

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on towards projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (1973:153-4)

The ability to shift margins, to create regular pauses (as I suggested earlier), to break lines or to alter the typeface enables the poet to capture in print something of the text's oral performance - the changes of pace and intonation, the pauses for breath or emphasis, staccato or languorous rhythms, and so on. In this regard Madingoane's "black trial" uses the technology of type to good effect. "black trial/*seventeen*", for example, employs double space-bar gaps 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 the delivery:



and while colour ruled  
 africa had  
 to carry the burden while  
 the world was free  
 but its children crying  
 saying  
     cry cry for the cry that never  
     sounds  
     the so deep rooted cry  
     the cry that moves  
     ancestors' graves and dampens  
     them with bloody tears. (27)

As I suggested in previous chapters, representing oral texts in print requires some editorial sensitivity, and there may be room for improvement in certain sections of Madingoane's poem. In the portion of "black trial/*seventeen*" quoted above, for example, the breath- and sense-units of oral delivery might better be captured by breaking the lines at different points:

and while colour ruled  
 africa  
 had to carry the burden  
 while the world was free  
 but its children crying  
 saying  
     cry cry for the cry  
     that never sounds  
     the so deep rooted cry  
     the cry  
     that moves ancestors' graves

and dampens them  
with bloody tears.

This new division seems more adequately to convey the rhythmic delivery of sense-groupings ("and while colour ruled", "while the world was free") while allowing for declamatory breaks in the rhythm for dramatic effect, registered here by granting "africa" its own line. When the pace and intensity of delivery increase in the indented section, my arrangement of the lines attempts to exploit the rhythmic and symbolic potential of the "cry" constructions more fully than Madingoane's printed version does. (It may, of course, be argued that my version reveals many New Critical assumptions about the arrangement of poetic lines: considerations of emphasis; the imagist line-unit; the 'strong' ending; and so on. Such a charge returns us to the complex question of the extent to which oral-print transfers rely for the creation of 'meaning' on established print conventions.)

"black trial/*nine*" is particularly effective in its use of typography. Each stanza opens with a pair of balanced phrases, separated by space-bar gaps which represent pauses in the delivery. The rest of the stanza then expands upon the thematic implications of the paired images:

dark nights black path  
clear my eyes  
so i may see  
the depth of this dark pit  
where all my days i've lived

dark nights fishers of man  
unpriced slaves  
brothers on auction  
charges suspended  
the whole raw deal. (16)

In these two stanzas Madingoane's use of typescript approaches what scholars of oral literature have referred to as "rhythmography" - the attempt through the use of typographical spaces and groupings to suggest the way many oral lines break into balanced halves at a muted caesura.<sup>9</sup> Hence, whereas Chapman has claimed that Madingoane's poem lacks in print the 'instress' of its oral delivery, I would argue that the text is typographically 'marked' for its oral ontology.

Amongst the central features of "black trial" - in its print form but especially in performance - is its rhythm:

traditional cowhide sounds  
 from thobejane's african drums  
 medupe's meditations might have been  
 enough music and message  
 in the service of all men  
*ancestors of africa. (24)*

Just as Isaiah Shembe had regarded rhythm as having a sacred significance, Madingoane uses repeated patterns of sound - which are emphasised both by the breath-unit of performance and the fluctuations of the drum beats - as a means of consciously reclaiming an African cosmology and a communal identity in the face of economic exploitation and dehumanisation by the apartheid state. In Black Skin, White Masks Fanon talks of the centrality of rhythm for reasserting black identity:

Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race. And that race staggered under the burden of a basic element. What was it? **Rhythm!** Listen to our singer, Léopold Senghor:

It is the thing that is most perceptible and least material. It is the archetype

of the vital element. It is the first condition and the hallmark of Art, as breath is of life: breath, which accelerates or slows, which becomes even or agitated according to the tension in the individual, the degree and nature of his emotion. This is rhythm in its primordial purity, this is rhythm in the masterpieces of Negro art ... . (1993:122-3)<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Chapman has connected the central role of rhythm in Madingoane's "black trial" to the concept of 'rhythm-synthesis' proposed by H.I.E. Dhlomo, who himself echoed Senghor's conception that rhythm was at once an aesthetic, ethical and a cosmological principle:

Underlying such an approach is the vision of an African anthropomorphic universe wherein all relationships - from God to the ancestral spirits, through man to the animals and plants - are mutually co-existent. It is a universe which evinces beauty-in-harmony; it is (to quote Senghor) "a dictionary, a web of metaphors, a vast network of signs" and is characterised by the depth and intensity of affective life. Thus artistic technique, in its attempts to express rhythmic essence, is at the same time felt to be an ethical principle, for it involves the making of an artefact (whether calabash or poem) that is both useful and aesthetically pleasing. Moreover the poet, by chanting his poem, gives audible substance to those life forces which, according to African ontology, are deemed to emanate from God and are Being - for Being is Force, Life is Energy. As far as the poet is concerned, therefore, the ideal (again to quote Senghor) is "total art", in which a world of static appearances gives way to one of dynamic realities; "imitation is superseded by participation, the master-word of Negritude". (Chapman,1984:207-8)

While Madingoane's poem is ethical and cosmological in the way Dhlomo suggests through its emphasis on the participatory 'rhythm' of Negritude, or Black Consciousness, its themes and subject-matter remain explicitly historical and political. The poet describes "black trial" as an 'epic', and certainly the poem may be regarded as an epic in a number of ways. It

fulfils M.H. Abrams's definition of the Western epic, quoted in Chapter Two in relation to the izibongo of Shaka: it is an extended verse narrative, often highly symbolic in mode, focusing on a mythologised speaker ("blackman"), and concerned with the fate of a (black South African) nation. It moves from an expression of individual alienation and self-debasement on the part of the speaker -

black child  
 nature's blunder  
 here i am again  
 lost again  
 dumped here by the creatures of hell  
 and left to rot  
 though worms don't even want me  
 for they have grown proud  
 and don't want to hear a thing  
 about my rotten state (1)<sup>11</sup> -

to an assertion of communal identity and commitment:

i would be glad to be buried like a true african  
 of african definition  
 when i take my soul  
 to its destination  
 when the gong of departure  
 reaches my eardrum  
 and the cloud of death dominates my eye  
 wrap me safely  
 with the hide of an african ox  
 i will be glad

deliver me to the ancestral village  
 cast no flowers on my soil  
 i am an african as for beauty  
 i never had a chance to admire it 'cause  
 africa was not free  
 i will join the masses that went before me  
 and as one we shall fight  
 the ancestral war until justice  
 is done. (32)

As these lines suggest, however, "black trial" is also specifically an African epic which recounts the religious and historical events of a heroic past. Chapman reminds us that africa my beginning was published in the same year as Mazisi Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great, and he investigates questions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in relation to these two epic poems (1984:198-199). Certainly Kunene's discussion of the African epic may prove to be enlightening for a consideration of Madingoane's poem. As I suggested in my discussion of "Shaka" in Chapter Two, royal izibongo were in many ways 'epic' forms, concerned with placing a great leader in the history and mythology of the nation. Kunene argues that, because of this function of izibongo, Zulu society (which in this instance may stand as representative of most African societies on the subcontinent) did not develop a separate tradition of heroic poetry, though it did have a prose narrative genre concerned with "episodic legendary and fantastical epics", using "heightened prose and poetic choruses" (1981:xxxix). Kunene suggests that both izibongo and epic narrative drew impetus from a third storytelling form, "indaba", which offered dramatisations of significant social events. He points out that indaba's "technique of public presentation aim[ed] at disseminating on a wide scale social interpretations of ... historical episodes" (1981:xxxix-xl). These three forms comprise the African epic tradition in which are located the poems of both Madingoane and Kunene. "black trial" seeks consciously to return to the ancestral past to find solace and direction for the present:

i resigned from paradise  
 and went back home to africa  
 in search of my image  
 to dig up the roots  
 and burn incense  
 to strengthen my stand  
 speaking to my ancestors  
 in the ancient language of mankind  
 i heard the spirits talk back to me  
 i felt my soul astir as they led me  
 all the way from a black trial  
 into the land of sunshine and peace. (9)

As part of his return to the source Madingoane evokes the leaders of a heroic past:

beneath you lie *badimo beso* giants  
 shaka africa's warrior  
 martyrs  
 moshoeshoe from the mountain kingdom  
 christians of africa  
 khama the great. (31)

But in invoking the heroes of the past Madingoane's poem remains specifically a Black Consciousness epic of the present day, and the return to traditional customs, beliefs and heroic figures is a tactic in the recuperation of the past described by Fanon as a response to deculturation. Unlike Kunene, whose epic narrative of Shaka's life sometimes comes dangerously close to endorsing ethnic versions of Zulu history, Madingoane avoids the danger of social and political anachronism as pointed out by Fanon: the valorisation of a past incompatible with the technological and ideological changes brought about by colonisation. When in

Madingoane's epic the ancestors respond to the appeal for assistance, for example, they speak in a modern idiom which, amongst other influences, draws on the language of Black Power and the rhythms of jazz:

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

drag it off brother man  
 off your back it ain't yours  
 break this damn sucker's chain  
 drop the burden from your shoulders  
 move on brother go  
*go man go*  
*blackman go. (10)*

We may contrast the following lines from Kunene's Emperor Shaka the Great:

Great anthem, by your power break the boundaries of our horizons;  
 Fill the wide expanse of the earth with your legendary songs!  
 Say then: people have power, people tear the garments of the night;  
 By their feet, they scar the grounds with new life.  
 All hail! the celebrants of the feast have come!  
 The Ancestors follow them,  
 Whispering: "A great festival is to be repeated again and again!"



Generation after generation comes here to play.

Here they are: our Forefathers. They rise from the mist. (1979:1)

As this comparison suggests, Madingoane's "black trial" does not - like Kunene's narrative poems (or the Western epic) - remain within the elevated heroic mode: instead, it is heterogeneous in form and register. It veers from symbolic abstraction ("the lagoon of man hate man") to prosaic statement:

how i wish i was the outcome  
of black and white  
'cause maybe both  
would compromise (1)

and from mythology to the rhetoric of the political platform:

though i survived the valley of the dead  
in search of truth to free myself  
with tears rolling down my face  
again i asked what went wrong africa  
so i wept  
*oh africa why africa*  
what went wrong was it the blunder  
of embracing imperialism  
was it the ignorance of our forefathers  
was it the greed of capitalism. (22)

In formal terms the "black trial" sequence includes epigrammatic lyrics akin to Serote's early poems:

ask my shadow  
 what happened

it was there  
 when it occurred (18)

and prose poems reminiscent of Mutloatse's 'proemdras':

i have crossed rivers and trudged the barren plains from the hangman's noose i  
 have stumbled tripped and fallen hard on my back hauled myself up and tried  
 once again to face the world i've never been knocked out but my soul is still  
 scarred from the pains sustained and my fingers still bleed from the cuts received  
 while trying to get a good grip on my evasive roots my roots and mine alone. (12)

While the stylistic unevenness of "black trial" may proceed at least partly from Madingoane's own difficulties with language and genre (there are several awkward linguistic constructions and clumsy formal shifts in the poem), the disruptive and disrupted textuality of the poem appears to have more profound implications. Chapman's comment on Serote may apply equally to Madingoane in this regard:

[He] ... allows his free-verse lines to stumble, halt and descend to near prose, only to burst into rhetorical climax. He seeks in this way to convey the idea of historical process itself, its difficulties emphasised in the broken rhythms and sprawling arrangement of incident, reflection and prophetic utterance: man is shown subject to all the imperfections of life, with his struggle sustained over long periods of time despite the inevitable set-backs. (1984:223)

Such a connection of textual juxtapositions, collocations and ruptures with the historical process suggests a third model of epic for Madingoane's poem, pointed to by both Msimang (1982:204-5) and Chapman (1984:200-201): Brecht's contemporary epic, concerned with the socio-political

present. Brecht emphasised not mythological origins and ancestral rituals, but economic imperatives and historical dialectics - the human subject who acts within and upon society to bring about change. Accordingly the speaker of "black trial", while he burns incense to his ancestors, is an activist who defines his actions - including the act of speaking the poem - in societal rather than essential terms:

brother whatever you do which is not harmful  
 to the community  
 has an artistic message of use to the society  
 and yourself  
 remember  
 africa's pride can be expressed in many ways. (28)

The speaker of Madingoane's poem is both the social being of Brechtian epic and the mythological hero of ancient form, whether it be 'African' or 'Western'. He is also a prophetic figure whose utterances echo those of Isaiah Shembe while they anticipate the visionary poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli in the 1980s. The speaker's diction is often vatic in its symbolism as it moves human action beyond social specificities to a broader human-spiritual plane:

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

Madingoane's poem also captures the apocalyptic elements evident in so much Soweto poetry

produced in the wake of Soweto 1976:

i have tolerated this trial  
 for too long  
 i have wished and prayed  
 until my voice was silent  
 and now i  
 a prisoner  
 stand waiting  
 for the approaching  
 night of judgement to end  
 this black trial. (2)

At other times, a future history is deliberately offered as a sustaining vision - an inspirational symbolism - in times of hardship:

creators of this our oppression  
 will be the last ones to arrive in that one free  
 africa africa of man and wisdom racial harmony  
 ...  
 i'm saying it like i'm already living  
 in that time because i'm feeling it right within me  
 with the weight of africa's mountains  
 towering high. (30)

The prophetic voice of Madingoane's speaker draws extensively, in creating a sustaining mythology, upon the images and concepts of Christianity: "like the original/river of *love thy fellow man/as thou lovest thyself*" (3); "*god let it come to an end*" (13); "as i stretch out my hand/to raise the fallen" (23); and "my genesis vision" (27). It is clear in the poem, however, that Christianity is

not associated with the authority of the colonial or apartheid state, but has been redefined in terms of African humanism as Black Theology. As in the hymns of Isaiah Shembe, the concept of a Black Christ here becomes a means of spiritual and political resistance to white oppression.

Black resistance is further bolstered in "black trial" by a strong commitment to African nationalism. In keeping with the Black Consciousness emphasis on unity across tribal boundaries and the movement's alliances with black political groupings elsewhere in Africa and beyond, Madingoane's poem does not reveal the tensions between ethnicity and nationalism evident in the hymns of Isaiah Shembe. Instead, Madingoane's orientation is strongly pan-African as the speaker uses images to locate himself organically within Africa as a whole, subsuming his own identity under that of the continent:

i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 i am the blazing desert yonder  
 a tall proud grain amidst the sand  
 egypt my head the nile my oasis  
 flow on nile flow on my life-blood  
 i talk about me  
 i am africa  
 i am man  
*ogun's* image  
 made from the soil  
*abibiman.* (19)

The incorporation into the text of Egyptian deities and - in other passages - Swahili words emphasises its pan-African inclusiveness. African unity across linguistic, racial, ethnic, economic and geographical boundaries is, of course, purely a symbolic or rhetorical ploy. Stephen Watson has argued, however, that such gestures are fundamentally ahistorical (1982), while Kelwyn Sole

has criticised Serote's analogous strategy - in his novel To Every Birth its Blood (1981) - for displacing political and economic problems into the realms of mystification and mythology (1991).<sup>12</sup> I would wish to allow the validity of Madingoane's symbolic pan-African vision in the context of the late 1970s. With black resistance inside the country rapidly being crushed in the wake of the Soweto Uprising, hope resided largely in organisation outside of the country, particularly in the assistance and support of African states to the north which provided political and spiritual "life-blood" to black South Africans. In such a context, Madingoane's images of African unity offered a vision of hope and consolation in the face of vicious state repression.

While my reading of Madingoane's mythological identifications seeks to grant them value within their historical moment, my engagement with "black trial" is not meant to be merely adulatory. The poem seems to me to reveal shortcomings, particularly in its presentation of women. As I suggested in the previous chapter, popular forms often reveal intense conservatism, and Madingoane's "black trial" is unable to grant women their status as social agents. The dedication of africa my beginning reads: "I did not know, but I had to know, that we in Africa are black men, born of women who loved oppressed men. This book is dedicated to the women who love us in bondage." The inside cover carries a photograph of a black woman crying over a coffin. As Madingoane's dedication and the photograph suggest, women are perceived as the mothers and mourners of those - men - who are active in society, a view supported by his epic. The destruction of black dignity by apartheid is described by the speaker as "castration" (5), and the growth to political awareness is presented as the attainment of "manhood". Women are thus barred from the public sphere by their gender, and are confined to supporting and nurturing the male activist and the communal family:

call to me that african woman  
 to tend to my wounds  
 with the gentle hands  
 of womanhood  
 i have for so long been deprived of

and to bring back the scene  
of a family complete  
'cause my african woman  
will always remember  
to call me  
*man.* (7)

Women are further restricted from societal action in Madingoane's poem by symbolic identification with Mother Africa: a common trope of Soweto poetry. The speaker asks the ancestors, for example, for a chance "to prove my belief/in me as man and africa my mother" (5). In their symbolic equation with Africa, women become icons beyond society and history. Madingoane himself appears to experience difficulty in maintaining the symbolic polarities which he ascribes to gender difference, for he is forced to change the biological sex of the rape victim halfway through the extended metaphor of "black trial/*twelve*":

man son of africa  
i want you  
back  
back home in africa  
when i lost you  
you were a virgin rich with love  
until they split your loins  
eagle spread and raped you all  
within three centuries  
when they boasted their manhood and  
you abandoned their first child. (20)

Critiques of the Black Consciousness conceptualisation of women have recently become commonplace, and one may risk historical anachronism in mounting against Madingoane the

kind of argument outlined above. It remains unclear as to whether a discourse of feminism was in fact available to him when he produced "black trial" in the late 1970s, for this area of research is poorly documented. Miriam Tlali's novel Amandla, which appeared at about the same time as Madingoane's africa my beginning, reveals a fairly conventional Black Consciousness understanding of social and political issues, and Tlali's sensitisation to gender appears to have occurred only in the early 1980s. Certainly none of the contributors to Michael Chapman's casebook Soweto Poetry (1982) raised any significant questions about the presentation of women in the poetry. The first panel on feminism in literary studies was only introduced to the annual Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) conference as late as 1982. If such scant and selective evidence suggests that developments in South African feminist thought post-date Madingoane's poem, perhaps the problems in his presentation of women concern the poem's 'present meaning': the encounter with a text and a historical epoch many of the assumptions of which run counter to our own.

Ingoapele Madingoane's "black trial" remains nevertheless a compelling poem which, in the 1970s, offered a powerful address in its performance in community halls and at political meetings, and which continues to challenge us in our present circumstances. Like many other Black Consciousness texts, "black trial" resists any simple attempts at historical appropriation, stubbornly maintaining its 'difference'. In offering an epic narrative of the growth to black awareness, the poem asserts the validity of black claims to recompense and restitution in the face of overwhelming pressure today towards conditions of reconciliatory amnesia. Instead Madingoane's epic points to the long history of degradation and deprivation which cannot simply be erased by changes in the tiers of government. In the present context, in which we face renewed onslaughts from an aggressive American consumerism, the poem also seems to insist on the historical distinctiveness and value of a modern (South) African identity.

Madingoane's "black trial" has important implications for South African literary historiography. A number of critics, including David Maughan Brown (1982), Lionel Abrahams (1982) and particularly Michael Chapman (1982;1984), have traced literary continuities between



Soweto poetry and the work of earlier black writers such as Peter Abrahams and H.I.E. Dhlomo. As Chapman said in 1982: "While it is doubtful whether many writers today are particularly conversant with the poetry of either Abrahams or Dhlomo ... it is nevertheless tempting to locate in these two writers the origins of a characteristically Soweto style" (1982:14). Such literary-historical connections are enlightening particularly, as we have seen, for understanding poets like Madingoane. Talking of the attempts of both Dhlomo and Senghor to struggle - through language and rhythms - toward new syntheses of past, present and future, Chapman suggests that this was accomplished by Madingoane:

This is an intention realised in Madingoane's "black trial", which avoided enslavement to an outworn idiom (ironically, it seems, because of its author's very lack of formal training). Subscribing (like Dhlomo's epic poem) to the idea of "tradition rooted in the past, living and speaking in the present, visualising and inhaling the future", "black trial" found forms and diction suited to conveying "synthesis amid indeterminacy" ... . It is a principle of organisation which provides a point of reference within the heterogeneity of modern sensibility and which distinguishes the modernity of "black trial" from the other-worldliness of Dhlomo's Valley of a Thousand Hills. (1984:209)

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, however, Madingoane's poem is also located within a broader history of performance poetry and popular expression which can be traced back to the earliest human settlements on the subcontinent. I wish at this point to return to the question of representing South African poetry in a new anthology, which has been a recurrent theme in this study. Extracts from Madingoane's "black trial" appear in most South African poetry collections, but the poem is most interestingly 'located' by Couzens and Patel in The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry: 1891-1981 and by Chapman and Dangor in Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa. In their anthology Couzens and Patel offer an impressive range of poetry written by black South Africans. But their limiting themselves to "poems originally written in English" and their omission of "[p]oems printed in African

languages and oral forms" (1982:2) results in a somewhat skewed literary history, with perhaps the most interesting lines of continuity and influence being cut off by the terms of their project. Chapman and Dangor are more successful in establishing a literary history of black South African poetry which includes oral African language forms, in that they offer a short introductory selection of "traditional" poems in translation. However, their anthology does not, in its section entitled "Pre-Sharpeville: 1890-1960", represent sufficiently the 'popular' voices of South African cultural history (including notably the hymns of Isaiah Shembe), which are in constant dialogue with official culture, and which inform much of the literary production of the Soweto generation and the performance poetry of the 1980s. Including in an anthology of South African poetry not only an extensive selection of historical oral texts, but also more recent popular forms such as hymns, work chants, verse narratives, and songs may restore to South African poetic history a sense of inclusiveness. Such an anthology could move South African literary historiography beyond its canonical (print) concerns, and encourage readings which grant the full complexity of the texts' social orientation and cultural ontology. Madingoane's "black trial" could be represented in such a collection by extracts in which the distinctive formal and ideological concerns of his poem - identified in this chapter - are most clearly evident. These extracts could be prefaced by a short account of the poem's performance in township halls in the late 1970s. While all the editors who have excerpted Madingoane's "black trial" in anthologies have followed the Ravan Press text, representing Madingoane in a new anthology sensitive to oral challenges may require the kind of editorial intervention pointed to earlier - the attempt to find more appropriate print forms to register the text's oral ontology - and may serve to remind us that one of the greatest challenges facing South African literary studies in its attempts to create more wide-reaching literary histories is the development of a coherent theory and practice of oral-print transfers.

### Notes

1. A detailed study needs to be made of the (not always crude) interpretive strategies of the

Publications Control Board and security police in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the judgements made by the security establishment about the dissemination and reception of texts have important implications for the ways in which those in authority perceive texts to be understood and 'used' by readers and audiences. This point is taken up in Chapter Five in relation to the banning of Mzwakhe Mbuli's cassette Change is Pain, but the lack of restriction on distribution of his book Before Dawn.

2. The poems of Mzwakhe Mbuli had a similar status amongst township youth of the 1980s, as did Sandile Dikeni's short poem "Guava Juice", which deals with the making of a petrol bomb.
3. I am indebted to Omer-Cooper (1987) and Davenport (1987) for my account of this period.
4. Discussions with individuals involved with Staffrider in the late 1970s suggest, however, that in practice the white editor(s) played a more active role than this disclaimer suggests.
5. I do not mean, by this statement, to negate the very important developments which have taken place in African literature as a result of the development of written forms, or to deny the fertile contacts which have occurred between African, Western and other forms. My point is simply that, since almost all literature in Africa has historically been oral, an investigation of indigenous literary models must engage fully - and, I would argue, initially - with forms of oral poetry, song and narrative.
6. Sole's comment echoes Olabiyi Yai's call, quoted in the Introduction, for a fuller investigation of indigenous critical models and practices in the study of oral forms.
7. A key difficulty for criticism is, of course, availability of texts since, unlike Madingoane,

many of the poets were never published or recorded. However some of the poems were printed in magazines like Donga and Staffrider, which may provide material for further research.

8. The estrangement between the younger poets and Sipho Sepamla was particularly acute, since Sepamla constantly emphasised the need for artistic autonomy and the refinement of 'poetic technique' - in effect a Leavisian aesthetics slightly modified by Black Consciousness rhetoric. The poets of the Medupe group regarded Sepamla's position as a capitulation to 'white standards'. Serote and Gwala also differed with Sepamla on these issues, being themselves more strongly influenced by Black Consciousness and Marxist analysis.
  
9. These ideas have been developed by Marcel Jousse, particularly in The Oral Style (transl. and republ. 1990). See also Ruth Finnegan's article "Problems in the Processing of 'Oral Texts': Some Reflections on the Researcher's Role in Innovation and Consolidation", in which she discusses developments in the print representation of oral forms:

There have been some interesting developments in the uses of writing for presenting oral forms, now further extended with new technological developments in text-processing and desktop publishing. Writers associated with the journal Alcheringa/Ethnopoetics have used avant-garde approaches to typographical representation to emphasise the representation of performance qualities in oral poetry. Their aim is to present "performable scripts (meant to be read aloud rather than silently), experiments in typography, diagrams, and insert disc recordings" ... building on existing linguistic or musical conventions to indicate such features as timing (pauses, lengthening syllables, etc.); volume intensity or stress in speaking; tonal contours; other actions such as gesture and audience reactions. (1991:17-18)

Stewart Brown's article "'Writin in Light': Orality Thru Typography, Kamau Brathwaite's

Sycorax Video Style" (1995) is enlightening on these questions.

10. While Fanon is often regarded as the antithesis of Senghor - the materialist versus the spiritualist - Fanon's citing of Senghor, here and elsewhere, suggests that the relationship is not one of simple dichotomy.
11. The association of bodily affliction with spiritual and moral decay echoes the hymns and dream-visions of Isaiah Shembe.
12. I return to this question in Chapter Five in considering Kelwyn Sole's criticism of the use of African mythology in the trade union poems of Alfred Qabula.

## Chapter Five: Poetry, Politics and Performance: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula

On 1 April 1990 Mzwakhe Mbuli drove to the KwaThema Stadium to perform his poems at a rally marking the third anniversary of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO). On arrival he was mobbed by fans who, in their enthusiasm, removed his trousers and shoes, leaving him in his shirt and underwear. Despite his lack of attire, Mzwakhe - as he is known - went on to perform his poems for the assembled crowd. This incident, recorded in *Tribute* magazine (Makgabutlane, 1990:20), is one of many testifying to the extraordinary reputation of the man who has been dubbed "the people's poet". Performing at political funerals and mass meetings, Mzwakhe captured the public imagination during the 1980s in a way that few poets in South African history have done, at times addressing audiences of up to 150 000 people. His success is remarkable testimony to the continuing power of oral forms, and their possibilities under pressing social conditions.

The poet grew up in Meadowlands, and as a child travelled the hostels at weekends with his father, a "mbube" (traditional harmonic) singer. At hostel gatherings, he heard praise poets performing for visiting chiefs, and experienced various forms of dance and singing. During the 1970s, while at school, he was involved in musical and dramatic groups which, under the aegis of Black Consciousness, sought to advance black creativity. In 1981 he attended a vigil in Soweto for the death of Father Castro Mayathula, a priest held in great esteem by the community. Spurred on by the spirit of the occasion, he performed for the first time two poems which he had composed - "Sies" and "Ignorant" - accompanied by the humming of the crowd. The performance was so successful that he was called upon to repeat the poems on the following day during the funeral service at the Regina Mundi church.

From that point onwards, Mzwakhe's performances - which are mostly in English, though he does use African languages including Zulu - were to punctuate many political meetings in the Reef townships. Amongst other occasions, he was asked to perform at the Johannesburg launch

of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, the celebration of Bishop Desmond Tutu's Nobel Peace Prize in 1987, and at most of the major political funerals in the years of the State of Emergency. His cassette Change is Pain (1986) was banned, he was detained eight times, and he has survived three assassination attempts. While he was on the run from the security police, his performances at political gatherings gained authority from government attempts to silence him. A journalist described in the following terms Mzwakhe's performance at a celebration - in a Braamfontein church - of Tutu's Nobel Prize:

The voice swelled to a thick heavy resonance to fill the vault of the church, to beat against the far walls, and fall in dark waves over the congregation. This was how prophets are meant to sound. And at the same time Mzwakhe seemed to grow in stature. Gone was the gangling assortment of more or less unrelated limb and, in its place, something more than flesh, something which did all but glow in the dark.  
(Anon.,1987)

As well as Change is Pain, Mzwakhe has produced another three albums, Unbroken Spirit (1989), Resistance and Defence (1992) and Africa (1993), and a book of poems, Before Dawn (1989).

About two years after Mzwakhe's performance at the funeral of Father Castro Mayathula in Soweto, a migrant worker from the Dunlop factory in Durban - unaware of Mzwakhe's experiments with oral poetry in the townships of the Vaal Triangle - perceived the need for a poem to complement the dramatic sequences of a play workers were producing (subsequently called the Dunlop Play). Drawing on his acquaintance with the Xhosa izibongo which he had heard during his childhood in the Transkei, Alfred Qabula crafted the experiences of the shopfloor and the union meeting into a praise poem to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). He performed this poem, together with another poem he had created dealing with the hardships of migrancy called "Migrant's Lament - A Song", at a Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union (SFAWU) meeting at the Ecumenical Centre in Pietermaritzburg in mid-

1983. He admits that initially he was terrified at the prospect of public appearance, but that he was encouraged by the audience's response, which included lively interjections and shouts of assent. He went on to perform these poems as part of the agenda at a Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU) AGM at the Currie's Fountain Stadium in 1984. From this point onwards he was to perform at many large worker rallies, including the Durban launch of COSATU, expanding his repertoire of poems in response to the occasions at which he was required to orate. His initial impulse encouraged other workers in the Durban area to learn the skills of performance poetry, and poetic contributions were included on the agendas of many union meetings in the Natal region from 1984 onwards. The poems of Qabula, together with those of Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, were published in a collection, Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle (1986). (More recent poems have appeared in several magazines.) While the poems are originally in Zulu, the collection is also available in English, translated by Ari Sitas in consultation with the poets. In 1989 Qabula published his autobiography, A Working Life: Cruel Beyond Belief, which included several poems.

Qabula and Mzwakhe emerge from contrasting linguistic, geographical, political and class backgrounds, and despite similar concerns about national themes and the potential of oral delivery, the poems of each poet bear distinctive marks in their treatment of subject-matter and audience targets. Despite key distinctions between the poets, however, criticism in the 1980s tended to treat them as largely indistinguishable, lumping them together as 'worker poets'. Yet the description 'worker poet' obscured more than it revealed. If it implies 'worker consciousness' - a concern with trade-union issues or analysis of political formations from the perspective of working-class mobilisation and economic restructuring - then it is difficult to see how Mzwakhe can be termed a 'worker poet'. He is not involved in union activity, and during the 1980s served organisations that in ideological orientation were 'popular' rather than 'workerist': the United Democratic Front (UDF) and - after its banning - the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), a loose grouping of UDF- and ANC-aligned organisations. Accordingly Mzwakhe's poems are not concerned with the issues of the shop-floor, but instead express a broadly nationalist political resistance. Qabula, in contrast, has for many years been involved in worker or union



organisations. The difficulties of the term 'worker poetry' are further exemplified by the fact that the Staffrider Special Issue on "worker culture" (8(3&4)1989) included - alongside the poems of Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli - the poems of middle-class academics like Keith Gottschalk, Ari Sitas and Peter Horn. While it is understandable that the specific pressures of the State of Emergency required united political opposition, and hence different projects were strategically yoked together under the banner "worker culture", I would argue that criticism beyond the State of Emergency should avoid such homogenising tendencies. Hence I shall distinguish carefully between Qabula and Mzwakhe, trying to suggest new ways of acknowledging the contributions and concerns of each poet.

The publication of Black Mamba Rising in 1986 sparked off heated critical debate, particularly in response to Jeremy Cronin's review of the volume in The Weekly Mail. Cronin argued that whereas poetry was traditionally perceived to be an obscure and elitist pastime, the work of Qabula, Malange and Hlatshwayo "march[es] in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land". "These are poems that call for working-class solidarity, for a collective struggle to end capitalism", he claimed (1987). In replying to Cronin's assertions, Lionel Abrahams defended the "difficulty" of poetry: "When poetry reaches high or deep for us - its main business - a price it often exacts is that of difficulty, for both poet and readers" (1987). In similar vein, Farouk Asvat criticised the "sloganeering" of the Black Mamba Rising poets, arguing that poetry must "capture the complex humanity of people's emotions" (1987). The exchange evoked responses from, amongst others, Alfred Qabula himself, Achmat Dangor and Mafika Gwala, but The Weekly Mail closed the debate.

Qabula was angered by the responses of Abrahams and Asvat to Cronin:

I said: I'm sorry, but I'm not talking to you. I'm not jumping onto your platform. 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, who are living in shacks - I'm talking with them. So you talk to your people, I'll talk with mine.  
(Brown,1991:2)

As Qabula's comment indicates, the debate reflected the broader hostilities and oppositions of South African society during the late 1980s, but it has larger implications for the study of South African literature. It was conducted at the time in simplistic terms. While Cronin grants the poems some recognition as oral poems, he remains fairly firmly within a crude materialist paradigm, assuming an opposition between "elitist" and "mass culture" which does not reflect the complex cultural intersections and hybridisations of South African social and literary life, as pointed to in Chapters Three and Four of this study. Abrahams does not even register the oral status of the poems, and remains strictly within a liberal-humanist, print paradigm: he is committed to the complexly-wrought artefact which he feels embodies the subtleties and ambiguities of human nature. While I do not wish to attribute too much to a newspaper debate - which was, as I have suggested, fuelled by the tensions of the State of Emergency - the furore which developed around this volume, and the failure of so many critics to register the complex ontology of oral poetry, seem to me to be emblematic of the larger lacuna in South African literary history and criticism: the lack of attention to oral forms. In this chapter, I wish to relocate the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula - for the purposes of critical inquiry - into the discursive field of orality, tracing their origins in performance genres of the past and present.

The work of Mzwakhe and Qabula, however, requires from the critic a doubly recuperative exercise: not only as **oral** poetry, but as **poetry**. There was a danger in the critical debates of the 1980s of poetry's being subsumed under the trauma of the political moment - of the collapse of its distinctive textuality into larger debates about politics, culture and social transformation. In reading the rancorous arguments between critics like Cronin and Abrahams, one is often uncertain as to whether the poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula is the real concern, or whether it is simply a focus of interest in larger questions about the (re)structuring of society. Despite the criticisms of Abrahams and Asvat, most contemporary reviews of Mzwakhe and Qabula tended to be ideologically supportive: they focused on the poetry's 'content' or 'message' and - apart from vague references to the influence of the tradition of praise poetry - paid scant

attention to the formal strategies utilised in the achievement of effects. This may have been understandable given political imperatives of the late-1980s which demanded unequivocal statements of opposition to government policies. I would argue, however, that it is necessary for criticism after the State of Emergency to grant the poems their status as aesthetic forms in society - that is, to combine a poetic and sociological analysis - rather than to reduce the poems to functional utterances. Certainly the oral poem, as a form difficult to control and censor, was often required in the 1980s to convey political information which would otherwise have been suppressed by the emergency regulations. In addition, both Qabula and Mzwakhe employ statement-making and political slogans as rhetorical strategies. Their poems, nevertheless, were received by their audiences as **poems**: the poems created a space of performance and reception which, although it overlapped substantially with that of political speeches and discussions, remained distinct in expectation and concern.

In his article "The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Literature in a State of Emergency" (1987), Michael Chapman called into question the primacy of aesthetic transformation, arguing that the context of political crisis in the 1980s was directing attention away from the crafted text to the authority of political experience, including the 'event' of the political funeral (1987:26). His argument was an intentionally provocative attack on what he perceived to be the inability of the intellectual literary imagination - represented for him by J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Nadine Gordimer's *A Sport of Nature* and Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs* - to respond adequately to the strife and repression of South African society at the time. Chapman sought to direct critical attention to other forms of cultural expression, including the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula. While his impatience with the specific offerings of Coetzee, Gordimer and Fugard is perhaps understandable, and his attempt to broaden the focus of literary studies to encompass 'popular' forms is laudable, his treatment of oral poetry among other forms of expression dictated by the immediacy of events raises larger conceptual questions. He argued that in the context of the State of Emergency the "authority of experience rather than its transformation into the art-object becomes the real locus of power" (1987:26). Chapman evidently did not intend by this a simplistic elevation of 'context' over 'text', for the second

section of his article actively challenges such crude assertions. The implication appears to remain, however, that it is the political experience of performers like Mzwakhe and Qabula rather than the textual transformation of that experience into poems which is the locus of value/power. Yet as I have argued in this study, in order to accomplish specific rhetorical and social ends oral genres employ complex aesthetic strategies, which are evidently understood by both performers and audiences. My own concern is thus to read poetic form historically, and I would argue that the 'authority' and 'status' of the performer in the community are usually integral to the form and societal function of the expressive act. The shaping of experience in the poetry of Mzwakhe and Qabula is aesthetically functional to social efficacy in a highly-charged political context: the historicity of the poems is inseparable from the textuality.

\* \* \*

Alfred Qabula was born on 12 December 1942 at Flagstaff. Growing up in a rural area of what was then the Transkei, Qabula had first-hand experience of the performance of izibongo for local chiefs, as well as the poems performed by members of the community in everyday life, such as the personal izibongo which people collect for themselves, the izibongo of the clan and the poems to cattle, birds and other animals. The fact that poetry was not the sole preserve of specific members of society perhaps accounts for Qabula's initial impulse to perform at union gatherings, and certainly contributed towards his constant assertions that everyone can be a poet. He said in an interview, for example, that he seeks constantly to redress the notion that poetry belongs to "amaintellectuals" (Gunner,1989a:51). As the son of a mineworker, he had direct experience of the harshness of the Bantustan and migrant-labour policies. In fact seventy percent of the men of his area - and hence their families, since the area was agriculturally barren - subsisted through migrant labour (Sitas,1986:2). At the age of eighteen, Qabula was caught up in the Pondoland rebellion, and spent many days hiding from state troops in the forest nearby which he knew well from his childhood. In 1964, he boarded a train for Carletonville, to work for a construction company as a plumber. In the compound in which he lived, he heard and saw rural praise poets performing for visiting leaders, and witnessed the adaptation of izibongo to express

pleasure at events or criticise the conditions of migrancy. In addition, he had heard poets in the Transkei using izibongo to censure Chief Kaiser Matanzima for being illegitimately appointed by the apartheid state as Prime Minister of that 'homeland'. From Carletonville Qabula moved to a construction company in Durban ("La Lucia Homes Construction"), but left to join one of the foremen who had set up his own business at Redhill ("General Plumbers"). Despite his improving his qualifications, he was paid extremely badly, and decided to join Dunlop in 1974, the entrance to which he describes in his autobiography as "an enormous factory gateway to Hell" (1989:52). Throughout his working life, his wife and children have remained in the Transkei.

Qabula argues that he survived the drudgery and noise of his job at Dunlop by creating for himself a world of songs. Sitting on top of his fork-lift, he composed poems about his life and the experiences of his co-workers. In 1981 he joined the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), assisting the union in its campaign to register all Dunlop workers as union members and later being elected as a shop-steward. MAWU's opposition was the Durban Rubber and Industrial Union (DRIU), a union supported by management and recognised by the Industrial Council, but which attracted little support. From 1981 onwards, Qabula was increasingly involved in union organisation, particularly after the launch of COSATU, and he became famous for his poetry performances at worker gatherings. Unions during this period were strategically mobilising cultural forms in order to bolster solidarity; little attention had been given to poetry, though, before Qabula's initiatives. In May 1987, he resigned from Dunlop and helped start the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal, Durban, in association with the Department of Sociology. The project, which was closely allied to COSATU, sought to develop the cultural resources of workers, and Qabula was joined by Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo.

Qabula's biographical narrative is intertwined with the larger historical narrative of the development of the trade union movement in the 1980s, and the development of a radical worker rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> The late 1970s in South Africa saw the growth of new, militant black unions independent of the white-controlled and state-recognised Trade Union Council of South Africa

(TUCSA). Instead of legislated conciliation procedures and ameliorative negotiation strategies, which in any case would have been denied them by the state, the new unions used unofficial work stoppages and direct confrontation to exert pressure on management. In 1979 twelve of these unions came together to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) - the subject of Qabula's best-known poem. By the late 1970s there was even support from industry, especially the motor trade, for the recognition of black unions. The state responded by establishing the Commission of Inquiry into Labour Legislation - popularly known as the Wiehahn Commission - to investigate the possibility of registering African trade unions (up to this point illegal) and scrapping job reservation laws. The Wiehahn Commission recommended in 1979 that African workers be permitted to belong to registered trade unions and participate in the Industrial Council system. It also recommended that job reservation be abolished, and that trade unions be allowed to admit members of all race groups. These recommendations were implemented by the 1979 amendment to the Industrial Conciliation Act. Yet the state attempted to control the development of black unions and the attendant potential for radicalising the labour force by forcing them to register themselves: a process which required them to draft constitutions in terms laid down by the Act, submit regular information to the government about themselves, and keep registers of members and accounts which were open to scrutiny by labour inspectors who also had the right to demand the minutes of meetings. Many unions refused to register, to which the state responded by amending the Industrial Conciliation Act in 1981 to extend control of registered unions to unregistered unions (the Act became known as the Industrial Relations Act). Labour action in the period 1980-1982 reached its highest level since 1973-1974 (Davenport, 1987:462 & 539-40), and police intervened by detaining union leaders, and deporting several of them to the homelands. Some racially-defined TUCSA unions merged in the wake of the Wiehahn report, though they maintained racially separate branches, and employers often encouraged membership of such unions. However the largest growth in union membership was in the unregistered unions, which included MAWU - the union Qabula joined in 1981. According to John Pampallis, membership of these unions increased between 1980 and 1987 from 70 000 to 300 000 (1991:270). Following four years of negotiations, the majority of the unregistered unions united into the Congress of South African Trade Unions, at the Durban

launch of which Qabula together with Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo performed "Tears of a Creator". At its founding, COSATU membership was about 500 000 (Pampallis,1991:270). From its inception COSATU indicated its refusal to confine itself only to 'labour' issues, calling for a general strike, for example, on 16 June 1986, the tenth anniversary of the Soweto Uprising. The only opposition to COSATU was from those BC unions affiliated to the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA), a new federation called the Azanian Federation of Trade Unions (AZACTU) - both of whom rejected the non-racialism of the COSATU unions - and the Inkatha-aligned United Workers' Union of South Africa (UWUSA), formed in 1986 with funding from the apartheid state. Because of a dramatic drop in membership TUCSA had disbanded in the same year.

It was through his work for FOSATU that Qabula came to perform his poems for the first time in public. He claims that he perceived the need for an izibongo to the union federation, recalling the way in which izimbongi at home had offered poems to their leaders (Gunner,1989a:50).<sup>2</sup> Having decided to create a poem about FOSATU, Qabula set about collecting information from the meetings of FOSATU Locals that he attended: "I took bits and pieces from the reports, and wrote these down into a poem" (Brown,1991:1). This process of composition through collection parallels the practice of the imbongi in traditional society: he would 'collect' the praises of the king or chief into a poem. Qabula's insistence on writing the poem down, however, is at odds with the emphasis in the Xhosa tradition on improvisation, discussed in Chapter Two. Even today, Xhosa iimbongi generally do not memorise their izibongo: instead, often in a trance-like state sometimes induced by marijuana, they improvise on a particular subject, though they may draw upon customary praises. Qabula has spoken at length about the importance of the printed record in 'stabilising' the texts of his poems (1990:4), and his concern that the poems must be the same at each performance is closer to the Zulu tradition, which is far more concerned with memorisation than improvisation. The concern with fidelity to a set text appears also to result from the influence of print in Qabula's school education. Having grown up and attended school in the Transkei, and now being resident in Durban and performing in Zulu, Qabula appears to straddle the Western print, Xhosa and Zulu traditions.

By the time Black Mamba Rising appeared for the first time in 1986, a number of poems by workers had been published in union newspapers and newsletters. The print convention used in these poems was largely that established by some of the earliest recorders of praise poetry, notably W.B. Rubusana and James Stuart: the short lines and stanzaic groupings discussed in Chapter Two in relation to the Stuart/Cope representation of the praises of Shaka. Qabula would certainly have been familiar with these print conventions for praise poetry from his schooling, in view of Bantu Education's strong emphasis on tribal culture and history. Ari Sitas - as editor of Black Mamba Rising - has supported the use of this print convention. Each poem in the volume is followed by information about the place and date of its original oration, so as to remind readers of its ontology as performance 'event'. The poems were translated - as I mentioned at the outset - by Sitas in conjunction with Qabula. The translation strategy apparently seeks to create readable English texts which nevertheless retain a sense of original linguistic and performative status. The English versions, accordingly, utilise many of the distinctive grammatical and syntactical constructions of praising, particularly the parallelism and the repeated epithetical clauses. In addition, the translated texts retain several Zulu terms and expressions (explained in a Glossary at the end), particularly the political slogans declaimed during the performance, as well as the parodic 'Fanokolo' dialogue between management and workers. By means of these strategies the poet and editor have attempted - to good effect - to recreate in the translated form something of the spirit of the original Zulu-language performance. Following its initial success - the first print-run sold out very quickly - Black Mamba Rising appeared in a second (undated) edition, which rectified many of the inaccuracies identified by the poets themselves in the first edition, and provided extended versions of certain of the poems. I have used this second edition for the purposes of this chapter.

In creating "Praise Poem to FOSATU" (8-13), Alfred Qabula adapted the function of izibongo to negotiate relations of political power with FOSATU:

You moving forest of Africa

When I arrived the children



Were all crying  
 These were the workers,  
 Industrial workers  
 Discussing the problems  
 That affect them in the  
 Industries they work for in  
 Africa ... . (8)

His poem expresses praise, but also articulates workers' expectations of the union federation. Many of his poems, in fact, end with advice to labour organisations on how to function effectively or offer implicit criticism of their conduct. The function of poetry to offer constructive criticism was stressed in an interview by the members of the FOSATU Cultural Group, who argued that such criticism could help to build the unity and strength of the worker movement (South African Labour Bulletin Staff,1987:303).

In the performances of "Praise Poem to FOSATU" which I have personally witnessed or which I have seen on video, Qabula draws in his oratorical and dramatic style from the traditional imbongi, while departing from tradition in significant ways. Unlike the traditional imbongi, Qabula does not dress in skins when performing, nor does he carry the customary twin sticks or spears: instead he dresses in a union tee-shirt or an overall, so as to signify his status as worker/union-member.<sup>3</sup> He also does not deliver his poems in the "low-pitched growl" which characterises the performances of rural Xhosa iimbongi (Opland,1983:248), though this is perhaps because he does not need to project his voice to the same extent because of the availability of public address systems. (Certainly modern praise poets generally do not employ the growl to the extent that they used to.) Qabula however does use the traditional rhythm and intonation in performing, "holding a high tone until a stretched and lowered penultimate syllable is uttered" (Opland,1983:248-9). His performance is also similar to that of the imbongi of the chief's court: it is extremely energetic, with facial expression and gesture punctuating the delivery of the lines. The performance expressiveness of modern poets has been somewhat restricted,

though, by the necessity of remaining in front of the microphone which is so often necessary to address extremely large gatherings. The importance of the microphone to the modern imbongi is indicated by the fact that at the Transkei independence celebrations in 1976 the authorities effectively silenced those poets who were critical of Matanzima by denying them access to the dais and thus the public address system (Opland,1983:269).

Qabula's performance, then, represents - in visual and dramatic fashion - the adaptation of the institution of izibongo to a politicised, unionised context. In textual terms "Praise Poem to FOSATU" also approximates to and deviates from the model of traditional izibongo. I argued in relation to the poem "Shaka" that the formal principle of izibongo is that of 'naming': the poems generally comprise a series of epithets or praise names which follow one another in no particular order, describing the physical, moral and political qualities of the chief or king frequently in terms which are less than flattering. These epithets, which are often customary, are usually drawn from the natural world, though in the twentieth century many izimbongi - particularly those working on the mines - have employed industrial imagery. Qabula's poem is also constructed around a number of epithets. These serve as a structural principle, since the repetition of the words "you are the ... " and the direct address "FOSATU" create a unifying rhythm. At the same time, the epithets serve a thematic function, in that they enumerate the qualities of the federation: its strength ("FOSATU you are the lion" (9)), its protection ("You moving forest of Africa" (8) and "You are the hen with wide wings/That protects its chickens" (8)), its potential to undermine the power of management ("you are the mole" (9)), its unbending nature ("You are the metal locomotive that moves on top/Of other metals" (12)) and its wisdom ("you man of old" (12)). In expressing the qualities of FOSATU, Qabula's poem also articulates clearly the expectations that workers at the time had of the federation: that it would secure bargaining power and protection from victimisation when union organisation was beginning to develop momentum and management was attempting to crush it. So the form of izibongo allows Qabula the discursive space to negotiate relations between individual workers and the union federation which represents them.

"Praise Poem to FOSATU" has a far greater degree of coherence, however, than other forms of izibongo, which are generally irregular in structure. This coherence appears to proceed from Qabula's literate education, for he shapes his material carefully in writing before performance. In the poem each praise of FOSATU, which identifies a particular characteristic of the federation, is followed by expansion upon the thematic implications of the epithet. For example, the metaphorical identification "You are the mole that was seen by the bosses' impimpis" (9) introduces four sections which develop the theme of elected leadership versus management lackeys: a satirical sketch depicting a manager talking to a 'sell-out'; a direct address to FOSATU articulating workers' expectations of their elected leaders; a listing of the problems to which FOSATU is the solution (including the problem of "impimpis"); and the suggestion of criticism should the organisation not behave in accordance with workers' demands ("To date your policy and your sons are commendable,/ We don't know what's to happen tomorrow" (11)). In discussing the praises of Shaka, I drew attention to what James A. Snead called the 'cut' which characterises so many black texts and which emphasises their cyclical construction: "an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break ... with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (1984:67). Qabula's izibongo to FOSATU appears to be constructed on precisely the kind of circular principle identified by Snead, and the epithets in the poem serve the function of the 'cut', as they return the listener to the subject of the poem, the union federation. Each section of the poem thus comprises an elaboration on a particular aspect of the federation, the end of which is signalled by a new epithet that 'cuts' back to the starting-point.

The use of dramatic sketches in the poem is immediately striking. Coplan has pointed out that traditional forms of izibongo have a strong dramatic element, which in the absence of a recognisable theatrical tradition in black societies in sub-Saharan Africa offered a basis for the development of black theatre in South Africa in the twentieth century. He talks of the way in which words, movement and gesture formed a "complex of intersense modalities with a unified focus of meaning" (1987:10). While traditional izibongo have a theatrical element, and may include dramatic enactments of confrontations, Qabula was evidently influenced by

developments in drama within the union movement. (He originally composed this poem as part of the Dunlop Play, and acts out the dramatic scenes in performance.) "Praise Poem to FOSATU" contains no less than three sketches which satirise management, especially through the medium of the broken 'Fanakolo' which the bosses use:

Fast ran the impimpis  
 And reported to their bosses and said:  
 "Baas, Baas, thina bukile lomvukuzane buya losayidi  
 Kalofekthri kathina."  
 "Yah, yah; What is the mvukuzane my boy, tell me,  
 What is it?  
 Is it one of FOSATU's unions?  
 You are a good muntu  
 Mina bhilda wena 6 room house  
 Lapha lohomeland kawena.  
 Thatha lo-machine gun, vala logates  
 Skhathi wena buka lo-union  
 Bulala lo-union  
 Skathi lo-union yena ngena lapha fekthri kathina,  
 Amashares phelile  
 Lo-union thatha yonke." (9-10)

The satirising of whites in control has a long history in izibongo, with migrant workers in the early 1900s, for example, dressing in "old European top hats and tailcoats, worn comically askew", and performing sketches imitating mine personnel (Coplan, 1987:11).

While management is ridiculed as the enemy in the poem, FOSATU is accorded the traditional attributes of the hero: it is praised for vanquishing the foe ("The black forest that the employers saw and/Ran away from for safety" (8)) and for its fertility ("FOSATU has given

birth/Its sons are spread all over Africa/Even overseas you find its sons" (8)). It is also described as being inspired by the spirits of the ancestors:

Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi and the<sup>4</sup>  
 Ancestors have answered us,  
 And sent to us FOSATU! (11)

The poem uses many of the rhetorical techniques identified in the izibongo of Shaka including parallelism by initial linking to increase the dramatic intensity of the delivery and to give emphasis to the statement being made: "Protect us too with those/Sacred wings of yours/.../Protect us too so that we gain wisdom" (8). Qabula also includes the conventional appeal to religious wisdom:

I dreamed I am a Sangoma,  
 You have come to me so that I can tell about you  
 I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi.  
 My bones and my abalozi are telling me this:

Yebo, handsome are your sons  
 Intelligent and healthy ... . (11)

As I argued in Chapter Two, izibongo usually begin with an opening formula - a salute to the chief - and they generally end with a concluding sentence such as "I disappear". In Qabula's performances the shouting of political slogans apparently serves the functions of opening and closing formulae, though the opening slogan does not form part of the text printed in Black Mamba Rising. Other modifications of the form to a trade-union environment include attention to the pragmatics of shopfloor organisation, as in another of the satirical sketches:

"Who is organising at Bakers?"

"Of course Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union."

"But where does it come from?"

"From FOSATU."

"This MAWU where does it spring from?"

"Also from FOSATU."

"Same constitution?"

"Yebo." (9)

The tracing of the relationships of the member unions to FOSATU, of course, corresponds with the imbongi's attempts to establish the chief's lineage.

While izibongo rarely construct explicit narratives - they are generally eulogistic though they may include narrative passages - reports of performances and interviews with poets and audiences indicate that an imbongi is judged particularly by his grasp of history. As I suggested in discussing the izibongo of Shaka, this historical knowledge is central to the poet's function of mediating between ruler and ruled, since such mediation requires an intimate knowledge of lineage and past conduct as well as a detailed understanding of the intersections of personal and public history. Qabula himself constantly emphasises the importance of history: he says that his poetry must "preserve the history of the life of the workers" (1990:4); he argues that print can serve as a historical record of one's life, and hence he has written his autobiography; and he has conducted a project of recording the oral history of migrant workers from his home in the Transkei. In fact, Qabula's "Praise Poem to FOSATU" does construct a rough narrative of the development and growth of FOSATU, and many of his other poems rehearse the history of labour organisation in South Africa, perceiving present unions to be in the front ranks of a battle that has continued for most of the century. The continuity of this labour history is reinforced in the image of FOSATU as the "black forest", since this was one of the praises of the Zulu ICU unionist, George Champion, in the 1920s. The history of Natal - where Qabula performs and works - is highly contested, of course, and his adaptation of izibongo to new ends occurs in a context in which Inkatha has mobilised versions of Zulu culture and history in the cause of

regional power. As Qabula's poems explicitly reject the exclusivities of tribalism,<sup>5</sup> and as he actively promotes the cause of a union movement opposed to Inkatha's policies, he has suffered personal harassment and threats to his life. During the 1980s he was unable, for long periods, to sleep in the same place for two consecutive nights.

Qabula's use of history in his work, however, involves not only contextual problems - the conflicting demands of tribal-separatist and worker-nationalist political movements - but textual difficulties: the use of contradictory historical models. As I argued earlier, his work appears to straddle both the oral and literate traditions: despite his constant assertions about the importance of the printed text as historical record, assertions which reveal Western assumptions about chronological narrativisation and dating, his own sense of history is more allusive, metaphorical and anecdotal, revealing the influence of modes of oral transmission. Perhaps the best example of the operation of these distinct historical models is to be found in the fact that the dating is extremely problematic in the various accounts he provides of his life. (Similar discrepancies and contradictions were discussed, in Chapter Three, in the biography and hymns of Isaiah Shembe.) Qabula evidently feels that historical dating is important, yet appears to be frustrated in his attempts at chronology by his own wish to narrate events in a looping, episodic way. My account of his life in this chapter, which conforms largely to the Western academic model of chronological historical narrative, has involved extensive double-checking of dates and places, though there may still be errors.

A consideration of the contradictory historical models which Qabula's work employs becomes part of the more complex critical engagement which is possible in a more open South African society after the unbannings of 2 February 1990. Certainly Qabula's project had value in the shocks and struggles of life in the 1980s, when poems like "Praise Poem to FOSATU" intervened in the public crisis by addressing directly many of the pressing issues of black working life: the necessity for economic restructuring; conditions on the shop-floor; wage negotiations; participation in company decision-making; and strategies of worker organisation. Yet in recuperating the poems for literary-critical debate in less-fraught historical circumstances, one is

confronted with other questions. It is clear that the poems reveal several ideological contradictions and fissures. "Praise Poem to FOSATU", for example, makes extensive use of biblical language and imagery, and while the influence of Christianity has been evident in the oral tradition since at least the mid-nineteenth century, Qabula describes the union federation in terms which jar somewhat with other aspects of the poem. FOSATU is "our Moses" who will lead us to "our Canaan" (12). Then, having withstood the temptations of the flesh (the "beers, whiskeys ... The cakes and the cooldrinks"), the federation becomes the (African?) "Hero" who will throw the enemies "into the Red Sea" and "[s]trangle them" (12). FOSATU's prosperity had earlier been sanctioned by the "Sangoma"; yet underlying Qabula's several concerns with economic restructuring lies not traditional religious-heroic belief, but a Marxist paradigm. Kelwyn Sole raised similar questions in 1987 about incongruous juxtapositions of mental schemas in the poem "Tears of a Creator" (43-49) which Qabula composed and performed with Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo. As he did at the time, he would no doubt perceive the 'contradictions' of "Praise Poem to FOSATU" as ideological limitations or 'false consciousness' (1987a:114). "Tears of a Creator" rehearses the history of trade unionism from the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) in the 1920s onwards, but attributes the demise of the union federations preceding COSATU to the "sorcery" of the "bosses" and "rulers". Sole argues that references to witchcraft simply obscure the historical and material causes of union organisational failure, and prevent workers from avoiding the mistakes of the past, ostensibly the point of the history offered by the poets (1987a:114).<sup>6</sup> This study has suggested, however, that the yoking together of disparate political, religious and mythological belief-systems is not confined to the work of Qabula - or that of Mzwakhe which draws upon equally diverse sources - but characterises much of the cultural and social history of this country; subjectivities have been fractured and reformed in the ongoing historical encounter between foreign and indigenous cultures, and black performers have drawn in contexts of deprivation and social rupture upon whatever resources have been to hand. Sole's expectation of rigorous and uncontradictory Marxist analysis seems inappropriate not only in such a historical situation, but in his expectations of the communicative potential of poetry. Instead of analysing Qabula's poems in terms of the coherence of their materialist ideology, I would wish to grant 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.

The importance of Qabula's poems seems to me to reside not only in their capacity to keep in memory the endeavours of worker struggles in the 1980s - an important function - but in their ability to challenge present perceptions, to make available new positions and perspectives. Qabula's poems may serve to redress something of the imbalance in South African historiography, in which the voices of workers are seldom heard. His poems insist on the creativities of workers, their ability to speak articulately of their own history, and the power and commitment of labour organisations. Further, his poems seem to me to call into question several aspects of South African life in the post-election period. Qabula reveals an ability to exploit the potential of performance genres to accomplish a negotiation of political power between workers, who have varying degrees of literacy, and the union federation which must represent them to management and the state. His ability to turn traditional aesthetic forms to modern urbanised demands points to an intellectual and artistic sensibility that resides in both indigenous institutions and modern worker organisations in South Africa: a rooted intelligence that is in danger of being trampled in the current enthusiasm in South Africa to rejoin the international community. The poems also serve as reminders of the harsh conditions of the hostel and the shopfloor while the concerns of workers are increasingly being subordinated to the declared urgencies of economic development. Qabula's poetry gives substance to the demands of workers when even the new Government of National Unity, in responding to labour disputes, has begun to deploy its own version of old-style conspiracy theories when faced with real worker challenges and demands.

In my discussion of Qabula's 'past significance' and 'present meaning', I have focused on "Praise Poem to FOSATU", since this is a compelling poem which in changing circumstances utilised the formal model of izibongo to good effect. The poem also achieved a great deal of renown both in worker and academic circles in the 1980s. Certain of Qabula's poems, however, use poetic models other than izibongo with equal ease. For example, an early poem, "Migrant's

Lament - A Song" (14-15), syncretises the Christian hymn or prayer with the structural repetition of African oral poetry in a way analogous to Isaiah Shembe's compositions. Yet Qabula exploits the audience's expectations of genre by making the Christian form undermine itself. The poem is structured around the refrain, "If I have wronged you Lord forgive me", which introduces an account of the hardships of the migrant worker's life. The refrain becomes increasingly ironic, however, as the poem in building up details of suffering identifies the political structures that cause the hardships. The poem creates its effect through a tension between the expectations of the hymn or prayer - the plea for divine assistance - and the identification of those social agencies responsible for living conditions which can only be changed by political action. The concluding section, in an ironic apology, registers the necessity for union organisation:

Oh Creator forgive me.  
 If I had done wrong to you ...  
 So I joined the union to fight my boss  
 For I realised, there was no other way Lord  
 But to fight with the employer ... . (15)

More recently, Qabula has moved away from the strict form of izibongo to what he calls "amapoems". In two important ways, these represent departures from his previous work. Firstly, they are increasingly narrative poems, drawing both on the folktale and the "indaba" narrative tradition discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the genre of African epic. Secondly, they reflect a concern as much with the broader political struggle as with specifically worker issues. "Africa's Black Buffalo" (1989:110-111), for example, which appeared in Qabula's autobiography, uses the traditional motif of the black buffalo in order to create an allegorical narrative of the broader liberation struggle. The references to guerilla training abroad (being "apprenticed in Algeria") and to imprisonment on Robben Island (being placed in "isolation on the island of Patima") indicate that the buffalo represents the ANC/PAC. In "Dear" (1990) - a poem which comprises an ironic apology to a wife - Qabula uses the figure of a wandering musician to offer a historical narrative of the political changes sweeping through South African political life:

I am known at home, strumming my guitar  
 They heard me in Messina  
 I played at Sasol, Vorster is my witness  
 I played at Carlton Centre, Johannesburg knows  
 I played at Witbank, Le Grange can tell you... .

Although Qabula still creates poems about working life, the increasing concern with broader national issues evinced in poems like "Africa's Black Buffalo" and "Dear" appears at least partly to result from his changed work circumstances. Since 1987 he has been employed, not on the shopfloor, but at the Culture and Working Life Project at the University of Natal, Durban. This project, which was instituted in conjunction with COSATU by the Sociology Department, seeks to develop worker creativity by running training programmes for the Cultural Locals of trade unions, and has been responsible for the production of a number of worker plays and the publication/recording of worker stories and poems. Hence, Qabula's present position is somewhat ambiguous: although he is still involved with trade unions and claims that he remains a worker - he has retained his NUMSA membership - he occupies a middle-class position at an academic institution more concerned in its educational and research activities with broader national initiatives than with issues of worker organisation.

Through his work with the Culture and Working Life Project as well as through his involvement with the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in Natal, Qabula has played an important role in developing the skills of younger poets. Jeff Opland has pointed out that traditionally izimbongi serve no formal apprenticeship, but generally learn the craft of oral composition and delivery through hearing practising poets, memorising their poems and then reciting and adapting them (1983:64-65). The number of younger poets who perform at COSAW meetings or cultural events in the style of Qabula and Mzwakhe suggests that these poets have served as poetic exemplars, helping to keep alive an oral tradition that spans the history of human settlement on the subcontinent.

\* \* \*

It was Mzwakhe Mbuli not Alfred Qabula, however, who was asked to perform at the funeral of slain South African Communist Party (SACP) secretary Chris Hani, and at the recent inauguration of Nelson Mandela as State President.<sup>7</sup> While Qabula's constituency tends to be involved in trade-union activities, Mzwakhe has a far greater national profile. The reasons for his public prominence appear to be twofold. Firstly, he occupies a political space which is broadly 'popular' rather than specifically unionist. In contrast to Qabula whose context was that of labour struggles particularly in Natal, Mzwakhe's was that of national crisis in the 1980s. As well as being called upon to perform for dignitaries such as Desmond Tutu, Mzwakhe received a personal commendation in 1989 from Nelson Mandela, who at the time was incarcerated in the Victor Verster Prison. Mandela emphasised the breadth of Mzwakhe's appeal: "I would like you to know that you are loved and respected far beyond the borders of your home town" (Mbuli,1989). As a result of his repeated detentions and the attempts on his life - he was known to the security police as "die lang man" - Mzwakhe gained enormous political credibility in popular organisations. The second reason why he enjoys a far greater national profile than Qabula appears to be his greater adaptation to 'modernity' in an increasingly technologised South African society. He generally performs his poems to a musical backing which draws on a variety of styles from mbaqanga and isichatamyia to reggae and rap, and his work now appears on Radio Metro's playlist. Reporting on a performance by Mzwakhe in 1987, a journalist described the poet's reception as the "kind of welcome ... usually reserved for pop stars" (Anon.,1987). My own experience of hosting Mzwakhe for a day at the University of Natal, Durban, bears this out: he was mobbed by students seeking his autograph and photograph, and he was constantly accosted by well-wishers in the airport terminal on his arrival and departure. Mzwakhe is also more fluent than Qabula in English, the lingua franca of politics, commerce, industry and technology in South Africa, and hence he has a greater verbal command and range than the oral poet of trade-union intervention.

Mzwakhe's greater facility in a modernised world certainly proceeds in part from his urban upbringing. He was born in Sophiatown in 1959, and grew up in Meadowlands where his parents, like so many others, were forcibly resettled following the destruction of Sophiatown to make way for the white suburb of Triomf. Through his father he became acquainted as a child with forms of poetry, music and dance performed in the hostels. After his father's death in 1975, Mzwakhe involved himself in a series of musical and dramatic groups, including the New World Quartet (which comprised ten members!). He was politically active from an early age, and the New World Quartet performed musical items at meetings of the Soweto Students' Representative Council during the upheavals of 1976. The group then moved into drama and dance, and in the following year produced a play called The Wizard. In 1978 Mzwakhe joined the Teen Outreach International Youth Club based in Naledi: at its Sunday meetings this group used dramatic sketches to introduce a theme which would then be taken up by an invited speaker. Those who addressed the group included the likes of Frank Chikane. By 1979 Mzwakhe was increasingly involved in dramatic productions, and he formed a group called Khuvhangano - the Venda term for "unity" - which prided itself on its rejection of tribalism. Khuvhangano performed a number of times in public, but Mzwakhe reports that he felt the performances were lacking something after two of the members, who had contributed poems to the dramatic sketches, left the group for exile. He thus composed the poems which he was to perform at the funeral of Father Castro Mayathula in Soweto in 1981, and which propelled him into the public sphere. In 1985, he was elected UDF Transvaal media officer, and in the following year helped set up the Cultural Desk which he headed. After the restriction of the UDF under the emergency regulations, Mzwakhe became active in the Mass Democratic Movement. His conduct as head of the Cultural Desk caused some controversy, to which I shall return later in this chapter.

While Mzwakhe's formative school years were strongly influenced by the developments in Black Consciousness discussed in the previous chapter, particularly the Soweto Uprising of 1976, his personal biography resonates within the larger historical narrative of political resistance in the 1980s. In 1978 P.W. Botha was inducted as Prime Minister, after B.J. Vorster had been ousted over his involvement in the Information Scandal. Botha, who was perceived as a

moderate in comparison with his predecessor, immediately set about redefining government policy.<sup>8</sup> He extended the powers of the security establishment, setting up the State Security Council, which was to become a shadow parliament, and dramatically increasing military and police budgets. At the same time, however, he attempted to redefine apartheid policies, not in terms of racial segregation, but in terms of the economic opportunities of 'free enterprise'. The combination of military force and 'free enterprise' formed the basis of the concept of 'total onslaught', according to which securocrats saw South Africa's economic and political prosperity being threatened, not by legitimate grievances from within, but by so-called Communist forces from without. Mzwakhe's poems are shaped by, and respond to, the context of 'total onslaught' politics, in which disparate oppositional groupings, influences and ideologies were drawn together to provide unified resistance to the apartheid state.

Despite having been banned in 1960, the ANC had regained considerable influence in the townships in the late 1970s, particularly as a result of the vacuum left by the banning of the leading Black Consciousness organisations. Increasingly the ANC flag and symbols began to be displayed openly at political gatherings and funerals. The ANC had received about 4 000 recruits after the Soweto Uprising, and stepped up its military campaign in the late 1970s, initially attacking only strategic installations, but then directing its efforts at "officials of apartheid". More effective than the military campaigns of Umkhonto we Sizwe, however, were the efforts of movements inside the country. Chief amongst these was the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), an organisation of students at schools, technical colleges and teacher-training colleges, formed in 1979. Initially BC-oriented, it adopted the Freedom Charter in 1981, and played a leading role in organising the school boycotts which characterised the early and mid-eighties. The early eighties also saw the growth of community/civic, women's and youth associations, which often embarked upon joint campaigns with student organisations. Though generally concerned with localised problems, community associations also mobilised around larger issues, such as the boycott of elections for Black Local Authorities in 1983.

In August 1983 at Mitchell's Plain, near Cape Town, these organisations and others were

united in their opposition to the state under the auspices of the United Democratic Front (UDF), in which Mzwakhe would become a participant. The formation of the UDF was prompted by Allan Boesak's call, at a conference of the Transvaal Anti-South African Indian Council, for unified opposition to the tricameral constitution. Through this constitution P.W. Botha had aimed to gain the support of 'Coloured' and Indian voters by offering them limited political representation. The UDF claimed an affiliated membership of over two million, and by March 1984 included over 600 organisations (Davenport,1987:464). The UDF campaign against the new constitution led to a boycott of the elections by the majority of 'Coloured' and Indian voters. Despite lack of support for its constitutional proposals, the government formed a tricameral parliament, leading the UDF to seek new strategies of resistance. As most UDF affiliates were tacitly aligned with the ANC, they took up the organisation's call in 1985 to make the country 'ungovernable', seeking to dismantle in violent or non-violent ways the mechanisms of local government. In place of official state structures, street and area committees were set up.

The political upheaval of the mid-eighties was exacerbated by the economic crisis in the country. The government responded to the increasing difficulties of dealing with its opposition by declaring a State of Emergency in July 1985, and detaining over 8000 people. The State of Emergency was lifted early in 1986, but was reimposed with greater severity in June of the same year, and continued to be enforced until 2 February 1990. Statistics reveal something of the ruthlessness of state action: approximately 35 000 people were detained during 1986/1987; in October 1986 2 677 children under the age of 17 were being held by police; and The Weekly Mail reports during the period June 1985 - December 1986 reveal that 813 books, objects and publications were banned, 371 for political reasons (Bunn and Taylor,1987:13,20,28). Amongst those detained and held in solitary confinement was Mzwakhe Mbuli. His cassette Change is Pain was banned because the Directorate of Publications felt that "its stirring music and dramatic presentation [would] have great influence among revolutionary groups in the RSA and at mass-meetings as well" (Mbuli,1989). (No restriction was placed on his book Before Dawn.) The emergency regulations included severe media restrictions, which prohibited reporting on political unrest in any way that differed from the official version of events issued by the Bureau of

Information. There were also restrictions on political gatherings, and thirty-one organisations were effectively banned, including the UDF, the South African National Students' Congress (SANSCO), the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC), the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). The banning and detention of political leaders left a vacuum in black public life that was filled by church leaders like Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, Frank Chikane and Dennis Hurley, who increasingly spoke for mass political organisations inside the country. (We may recall the account of Mzwakhe's performance at the celebration of Tutu's Nobel Peace Prize.) The union organisation COSATU became more involved in political issues, particularly after its formal adoption of the Freedom Charter as policy in July 1987. This political involvement was to lead to a state crackdown on the organisation in 1988. The informal alliance which developed at this time between restricted UDF organisations and COSATU came in 1989 to be known as the Mass Democratic Movement. Since it was not formally constituted, it was very difficult to restrict.

The state was assailed from a number of sides in the late 1980s. It had been defeated militarily in Angola in 1988, and had accepted the principles of Resolution 435 in Namibia. It also faced mounting internal pressure, including open defiance by a number of restricted organisations and by the appearances of banned or wanted persons at political meetings or funerals. There were also increasing divisions within the National Party itself between those who favoured negotiations and those who advocated increased security action. Following a palace coup, the moderate faction achieved control, and P.W. Botha was ousted by F.W. de Klerk, who announced the lifting of the State of Emergency, the release of political prisoners, the unbanning of the major oppositional organisations, and the willingness of the government to enter into negotiations about an inclusive settlement.

In the context of extreme repression described above, political organisations such as the UDF and MDM drew support - in pragmatic fashion - from diverse ideological, linguistic, ethnic, economic and religious groupings. Mzwakhe's poems emerge from the hybridisations of these popular political movements, which were characterised by shifting allegiances, strategic alliances



and the mobilisation of support across societal divisions. The poems are themselves extremely syncretic in form, drawing together in the rhythms of performance diverse models and influences, from the izibongo performed by hostel-dwellers for visiting chiefs to British dub and American rap music. While Qabula for the most part remains close to the rural model of izibongo, which he uses in his adaptations to negotiate relationships of power in the modern workplace, Mzwakhe's poetry offers several modes of address to his audience.

He began his career performing without musical backing, except for the humming or singing of the crowd. At funerals in the late 1980s, he generally performed without accompaniment, and when requested still recites his poems at political meetings, funerals or on specific occasions. Generally, he is restricted by the necessity to remain before the microphone, and does not use bodily movement extensively in performance, though his facial expressions enact a 'sense' of the poem, and hand gestures punctuate climactic or dramatic moments. In addition to unaccompanied recitations, Mzwakhe performs at concerts with a musical backing provided by his band. (He is one of the few poets in the country who makes a living from his poetry.) His musical renditions involve a complex complementarity between rhythm, melody and verbal delivery - perhaps a hybrid form of 'poem-song' - and Mzwakhe's physical performance is more demonstrative and lively. In addition, he dresses more consciously in Afro-fashions (fez, dashiki, kaftan, and the like), whereas for his unaccompanied performances he dresses in fairly conventional, Western ways.

Though he is primarily an oral poet, in that his poems are most effective when performed, Mzwakhe received a literate education and has for many years **written** his poems, claiming that they take a long time to complete and often require two to three weeks of revision (Makgabutlane, 1990:27). When he was kept in solitary confinement for 176 days without pen, paper or reading matter, however, he was forced to rely entirely on oral composition and the powers of memory. (We may compare Jeremy Cronin, who also composed poems in prison through the powers of memory.) Mzwakhe argues that the experience of solitary confinement strengthened him, and gave a new dimension to his work (Makgabutlane, 1990:24).

Mzwakhe's only book, Before Dawn, published by the Congress of South African Writers in 1989, contains most of the poems from his first two albums Change is Pain and Unbroken Spirit, almost all of which are in English. In performance, Mzwakhe delivers the lines in a rhythmical fashion, with a marked pause at the end of each line. The print version appears to seek to mark this pause by means of a semi-colon. Here is an example from the poem "Many Years Ago":

Man strode triumphantly;  
 Like a lion in the jungle;  
 Trees bowed down their leaves;  
 In honour of true humanity ... . (1989:17)

The written arrangement seems to me inappropriate. Registering a spoken form in the written medium involves our accomplishing a delicate balance between oral and print conventions: in this case there seems instead to be a conflict between the function of the semicolon as rhythmical and grammatical marker. My own feeling is that the line-break in print is sufficient to register the pause in delivery at the end of each line, and that a note could be included at the beginning of the volume to the effect that this is the convention employed. The lines in the poems are also arranged in stanzas which function both to indicate sense-groupings in the print convention, and to allow readers to recover something of the poems' performed quality by 'marking' the points at which guitar breaks or rhythm sections occur in the musical rendition. Despite my reservations about the use of semicolons, I have remained with the published text for the purposes of this chapter.

Formally, Mzwakhe's poems appear to have little in common with rural izibongo. They generally do not use the principle of 'naming'; neither do they construct elaborate sets of epithets or praise names. Instead they use the rhetorical devices of parallelism and repetition to develop an intensity of delivery appropriate to the energies and angers of the political funeral or

rally. "Change is Pain" (26-27), one of Mzwakhe's best-known poems, for example, uses repeated constructions - a form of jazz call-and-response - to build to a rousing climax:

Change is unknown in my ghetto;  
 Change is an endless bucket system in Alexandra;  
 Change is pain in Africa;  
 Change is throttled by misdirected surrogates of the world;  
 Change to a free non-racial society is certain;  
 Revolutionary change shall set man free from bondage;  
 And the ruins of autocracy shall fall. (27)

The poem offers a call to action in which Mzwakhe may be seen to serve a similar function to the imbongi who rouses people to war. Mzwakhe himself stresses, however, that his poems urge actions in the social world, not necessarily armed combat. In interviews, Mzwakhe also points to the importance of his work in sustaining and comforting those engaged in political activity. This, he feels, is entirely consistent with a call to action, and he points out that the customary movement of many of his poems is from comfort to exhortation. The poem "The Spear Has Fallen" (21-22) exemplifies the trajectory from the expression of pain -

For the heart of Africa is bleeding;  
 Bleeding from the wounds knifed hollow;  
 Brutally knifed alone in the night ... (21) -

to a mobilising rhetoric -

Africa the spear has fallen;  
 Pick it up;  
 And forward to the battle ... . (22)

"The Spear Has Fallen" is modelled on the death oration, or panegyric, of African societies, a form which Mzwakhe employs to great effect at political funerals. Certainly the responses to his performances in the 1980s testify to the power of his poems to sustain and mobilise audiences in contexts of crisis.

As was suggested earlier in this study, praise poetry is characterised not by narrative linking, but by its concatenation of imagery. Mzwakhe draws extensively on images, particularly those of the natural world, for formal and thematic effects, and many of the poems construct themselves around extended similes or metaphors. The poem "Crocodiles" (39-40), for example, though it refers only in the central stanza to "the people" as being "like crocodiles in the river", uses this image as the mainspring of the poem:

The land is the key to social order;  
 The people are like crocodiles in the river;  
 And no one can fight crocodiles inside the river;  
 South Africa why therefore buy time?  
 When crocodiles are against you;  
 Why give chase to lizards?  
 When crocodiles are against you. (39-40)

The other images and observations in the poem (the "blood stained" land; the references to "slavery"; the "dove of peace"; the "boiling pot") proceed from the central image which establishes the conflict between state and people.

Besides the images, other traditional rhetorical devices serve to motivate Mzwakhe's poems. A number of critics have detailed the importance of wordplay in African societies, particularly the emphasis placed on riddles, tongue-twisters, rhymes, proverbs, and witticisms.<sup>9</sup> Certain of Mzwakhe's poems create their effects through the dexterous manipulation of words and sounds for satirical purposes. The best-known of these is "Triple 'M'" (12-13), which creates

from the names of the homeland leaders an anagram - emphasised in the print form by some inventive type-setting - encapsulating perceptions of their misrule:

Now is a MESS:

MHhh...meme...ss MATANZIMA, MANGOPE, MPHEPHU, SEBE;

Mmmess it's a mess;

Yes it is a mmess.

Now lately a MMESH;

Mmm-mesh MATANZIMA, MANGOPE, SEBE, HOLOMISA;

MMESH it's a MESH;

Yes it is a MMESH. (13)

Unlike Qabula, whose performance of oral poems at union meetings appears to have sprung from his own responses rather than in conscious imitation of any literary precedent,<sup>10</sup> Mzwakhe does not emerge from a poetic vacuum, even though many literary critics in South Africa - with the exception of Sole (1987b) - have treated him as if that were the case. Mzwakhe himself acknowledges that he regularly heard poets like Ingoapele Madingoane performing their work, and later shared a platform with them. He was also a regular reader of Staffrider magazine, and was as much influenced by the hybrid urban forms of the Soweto poets as by the izibongo which he heard while travelling the township hostels with his father.

As the Soweto poets did, Mzwakhe works mostly in English so as to reach as wide an audience as possible. (He does, however, perform in other languages, particularly Zulu.) Like the black poets of the seventies, who often used the banal formulation or the familiar trope in defiance of the Western lyric tradition of inventive image-making, Mzwakhe frequently uses what James Matthews called "making plain" as a poetic strategy. At key moments in many of his poems, he will move from the defamiliarising to the familiar, from the metaphor to the slogan, thus establishing a sense of commonality with the audience, a commonality reinforced by the

call-and-response mode. In "The Noble Charter" (50-51), for example, Mzwakhe shifts from images of the Freedom Charter as "the freedom wagon [which] moved with direction" and oppressed black people as "Africa's tarnished children", to conclude with the well-known slogan "the people shall govern".

Several of the older Soweto poets, in Mafika Gwala's words, wished to stretch "the English language so that it would accommodate their African background and ghetto ordeals" (1984:45). Mzwakhe, in contrast, tends towards diction that is elevated and biblical, thus revealing a visionary impulse akin to that of Madingoane and, before him, Isaiah Shembe. Reviewers and critics have referred constantly to the "prophetic" nature of his poems (we may recall the journalist, quoted at the outset, who said of Mzwakhe's performance, "this was how prophets are meant to sound"), and the poems themselves contain numerous references to prophecy. The prophetic note is struck particularly as apocalypse in Mzwakhe's work, which echoes the strongly apocalyptic tone in much of the later Soweto poetry where the use of African and Christian mythology was also directed at the political as opposed to the metaphysical sphere. More interesting, though, is 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. The opening of the poem "Crocodiles", which I discussed earlier, provides a good example:

I am the product of hunger;  
 I am the product of social injustice;  
 I represent the insulted majority;  
 I represent the victims of tyranny;  
 I come from apartheid land. (39)

Something of the amplitude of the pronoun "I" in this context is suggested by the title accorded Mzwakhe as "the people's poet", an appellation which almost certainly derives from the traditional acclamation "imbongi yesizwe", the highest honour bestowed on a praise poet. In this

sense, 'Mzwakhe' in the voice of the poem appears to be a visionary and prophetic 'speaker' somewhat distinct from Mzwakhe Mbuli the person, a view which is supported by Mzwakhe's tendency to refer to 'Mzwakhe' in the third person in interviews. However, Mbuli's poems are less visionary in overall dimension than, say, Madingoane's africa my beginning, for they are strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the political speech or pamphlet.

The emphasis on the declamatory persona in the poems may derive in part from the influence of personal izibongo or 'boasts' which African people create for themselves, but it also suggests the influence of the performance arrogance of rap and dub artists. Elizabeth Tonkin has pointed to the importance of electronic media such as radio and cassette recordings in maintaining and modifying a culture of orality in a modernised African world (1989:46). Mzwakhe is a case in point, for his poems have been shaped by international musical forms such as rap music and Rastafarian 'toasting' or dub. Though he denies that he is a "dub poet", for his repertoire extends beyond mere recitation to a reggae beat, he does acknowledge affinities with the work of British poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah, with whom he has shared platforms.<sup>11</sup> The influence of rap music and Rastafarian 'toasting' is particularly evident in Mzwakhe's diction, for the words seem often to be chosen as much for their rhythm and rhyme as their 'meaning'. Similarly, the line sequence sometimes appears disjointed when the poems are read, though there is coherence in the rhythms of performance. Perhaps more so than in approaching Qabula, it is vital for criticism to attempt to recreate the context of performance in discussing Mzwakhe if the poems are to be allowed to recover something of their oral vibrancy and power. Video recordings of performances are useful in this regard, as are the numerous published accounts of his performances.

Oral poetry often takes the place of newspapers for non-literate people, as Ruth Finnegan has argued (1970:272), and in the State of Emergency in the 1980s the poetry of performance served to convey important information otherwise difficult to disseminate. In a context of extreme state repression, the oral testimony of Mzwakhe, himself a victim of police brutality and in constant fear of his life, gained an authority acknowledged by many who witnessed his

performances. The very reliance of the oral form on the persona of the performer, however, raises its own difficulties, for Mzwakhe achieved great notoriety through his allegedly autocratic behaviour as head of the Cultural Desk, a notoriety which certainly influenced the reception of his work. (He was widely accused of cultural commissarship.) It is perhaps indicative both of his personal talent and charisma, and the reputation which he had already established, that his poetic career survived such difficulties.

How do we 'read' Mzwakhe in the 1990s, though? The poet acknowledges a familiarity with the work of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, and his work reveals an awareness of the discursive and economic oppressions of colonial and postcolonial history. Yet in similar vein to Qabula he does not maintain ideological coherence in his poems on issues of political or economic transformation. Instead they yoke together sources as diverse as the rhetoric of African nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Christianity, Black Consciousness, traditional mythology and Marxist analysis:

Admire me I am the beats from the drums of Tanzania;  
 Arousing the deeper thirst for freedom;  
 When man is hard like Pharaoh at heart;  
 Sucking the blood of blue-collar workers;  
 Condemning their sacred way of living;  
 Factories roaring til Sunday;  
 A labour temple substituted a God Temple;  
 Wages cannot equal labour;  
 Poverty created trenched in the bodies of man;  
 Poverty hauled down the splendours of humankind. ("The Drum Beats":19)

As in the case of Qabula, I would wish to allow Mzwakhe his project in its historical moment, one of harsh exigencies and difficult, sometimes bewildering transition; and in considering his 'present meaning', I would locate his contradictory position in the larger history of hybridisation



and strategic allegiance that has characterised popular political and cultural formations in this country. Certainly the lines from "The Drum Beats", quoted above, could usefully be placed in a tradition of syncretic popular performance which stretches back, through Ingoapele Madingoane, to Isaiah Shembe and, before him, Ntsikana in the early nineteenth century. In all of these cases, diverse experiential, ideological, spiritual and aesthetic influences are drawn together in periods of social dislocation to provide forms of survival and assertion.

The question of what Mzwakhe means now, in changed historical circumstances, is not simply the concern of criticism, however, but has consequences for Mzwakhe's own career. It remains to be seen what role he might find for himself in a society struggling towards civil charters rather than the politics of mobilisation and resistance. While Mzwakhe's 'modernity' may equip him for a new role more effectively than adherence - as in Qabula's case - to older derivations, Mzwakhe's constituency of the 1980s has to a large extent been diverted from mass actions by the pragmatics of party politics; Qabula's union base, in contrast, remains intact. Increasingly, Mzwakhe has defined his audience in worldwide terms, aiming to build for himself an international musical and poetic career. Certainly much of his time is now spent performing overseas with his band, he has an overseas album release, and his work has recently been reviewed in the British music magazine Select. It is unclear, nevertheless, what role Mzwakhe perceives for his current work. He has spoken of the importance of promoting peace and reconciliation, but apart from participating in the national "Peace Song" in which his contribution was edited down to a few lines, and collaborating with the song-writer and producer Chicco on the song "Papa Stop the War", his role in the process of reconstruction lacks a sure sense of purpose. His performances at the Hani funeral and at the presidential inauguration suggested that he might emerge as the imbongi of the ANC, but he has stressed that this is not his mission. Mzwakhe's enormous success suggests that he will continue to move audiences with the powerful resonances of his performance poetry. Yet it remains to be seen whether he stays a voice from the past, keeping alive in memory the experiences of political violence, torture and endurance, or whether he addresses the needs of a society trying to turn revolutionary rhetoric into an evolutionary modernisation of living and life.

\* \* \*

A new anthology of South African poetry could usefully set the poems of Mzwakhe and Qabula in the long tradition of oral poetry and performance which - as I have charted - begins with the songs/stories of the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi. Mzwakhe and Qabula - together with more recent oral poets like Lesego Rampolokeng, Madlinyoka Ntanzu, the late Cijimpi Msomi and others - suggest the continuing influence of oral forms in South African literary and social life. Granting the poems in an anthology their oral, performative character and status will require judicious editorial decisions concerning methods of transforming oral expression into conventions of print representation. In addition, the editor will be required to decide on summaries of context: how to recreate for the reader the informing significance of the occasion. Such an anthology should have the purpose of urging South African literary scholars to grant oral forms a central place in research projects and teaching syllabi. It should encourage the development - for which I have argued throughout this study - of critical methodologies appropriate to the specific challenges of African performance genres, so releasing the many voices of our poetry.

### Notes

1. I am indebted for my account of the development of the trade union movement in the 1980s to Davenport (1987) and Pampallis (1991).
2. The adaptation of izibongo for purposes other than praising chiefs was not particularly unusual. Jeff Opland records a Xhosa poem which begins with the salute "A! Polonutolo!", extolling the virtues of the breakfast cereal Pronutro (1983:243).
3. See Kromberg (1991) for more detailed discussion of the importance of dress in the

performance of trade union poetry in what is now KwaZulu Natal.

4. In this case and certain others Sitas's and Qabula's line division seems somewhat arbitrary. A better division might be:

Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi  
And the ancestors have answered us,  
And sent to us FOSATU!

5. Steve Kromberg has argued that cultural forms such as izibongo are in Natal closely linked to ideas of 'Zuluness' (1994:6), and he explores what he perceives to be the tension between nationalism and ethnicity in Natal 'worker' poetry. However, I think his perception that there is a necessary connection between the form of izibongo and the ideology of Zulu separatism is somewhat ahistorical, particularly in view of the important intersections and contacts between forms of praising in different African societies in the subcontinent (especially between Zulu and Xhosa societies). Further, his argument is somewhat thin on textual support from the poems.
6. Behind Sole's discussion of the ideological contradictions in Qabula and Hlatshwayo's poem lies a larger debate about the role of creative and critical writing in South Africa in the 1980s. Sole would probably reject my own granting of Qabula his project within his political moment, arguing instead that criticism is necessary to political organisation even in a context of crisis. For an analogous debate, see Sole's questioning of what he perceives to be Serote's uncritical treatment of "the Movement" in *To Every Birth its Blood* (1991). Trump (1990) and Visser (1987) raise similar objections. In contrast Njabulo Ndebele, though he has elsewhere argued cogently for complexity and critical engagement in black writing, claims that the containing of criticism was a necessary political strategy to maintain unity:

The necessity of closing ranks meant the suppression of criticism, even if that criticism could strengthen the movement in the long run. In other words, the controls that the state imposed upon everyone, we imposed upon ourselves. Historically it is perhaps understandable that when you are powerless, as an act of survival you want to make sure that you keep your group intact, because any possible disintegration reinforces powerlessness. Your options are limited, and you have to make some tragic choices. In the fight for freedom, you may experience the need to contain freedom within your own organisation. You maintain group cohesion, but at a price. It should be recognised when such a historically determined situation becomes a threat to the very survival of the group. This is not a moral issue, it is a matter of survival. (Brown and Van Dyk, 1991:50)

For a further exploration of debates about the changing role of writing and criticism in light of the unbannings of 2 February 1990 see Brown and Van Dyk (1991).

7. As regards the Hani funeral, something of the contingency of South African political and cultural organisation is suggested by the fact that Mzwakhe was only approached to perform at seven o' clock on the previous evening. He admits that he was still memorising his poem in the car on the way to the stadium (personal communication with Mzwakhe Mbuli).
8. As with my account of the development of trade unionism in this period, I am indebted to Davenport (1987) and Pampallis (1991) for my discussion of developments within political organisations in the 1980s.
9. See, amongst others, Isidore Okpewho for an elaboration of the nature and function of such verbal figures (1992:226-250), and Mapanje and White (1983:31-52) for examples.
10. He claims that there was no one in Natal doing anything similar at the time, though there

was some interest in drama as a form of worker expression.

11. Rustum Kozain has conducted a comparative study between Mzwakhe Mbuli and Linton Kwesi Johnson (1994).

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