

**Guns, Spears and Pens: The Role of the *Echo* Poems  
in the political conflict in the Natal Midlands**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the entire thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other university for a similar or any other degree.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to examine the role of the poems in *Echo* (a supplement to the *Natal Witness*) that were published between 1986 and 1994. I will be exploring these poems in the light of the political conflict that was taking place between Inkatha, on the one hand, and the United Democratic Front/Congress of South African Trade Unions (UDF/COSATU), and later on the African National Congress (ANC), on the other.

The introductory chapter will deal with the scope of my research. It will outline what it is that I will be researching and the direction of my research. I will also begin to introduce some of the key theoretical assumptions around *izibongo* (praise poetry) and some of its key definitions as a dominant tradition that influenced some of the *Echo* poets.

Chapter Two will deal with the history of the *Echo Poetry Corner* itself. It looks at its early beginnings, who conceived the idea and why, and what the editorial policy of this page was. It will also shed some light on how complex issues, such as the originality and authenticity of the poems, were dealt with.

The third chapter deals with the background to the political conflict in the Natal Midlands and in Pietermaritzburg in particular. It will be an analysis of violence, its origins and its interpretations, and will show how violence affected the people and the poets around Pietermaritzburg.

In Chapter Four I will begin to critically analyse the poems, looking at various themes that were expressed in the poems. I will also define the role that these poems played in the political conflict, looking at whether they engaged with the reality of the time or tried to escape it.

In conclusion, Chapter Five deals with my findings on the role that the *Echo* poems played during the political conflict. It will also address the issue of the role of the poet or poetry in a violent society. The positive role of poetry during war will also be dealt with.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This research is mainly concerned with an analysis of *Echo* poems that were published between 1986 and 1994. I will look at the *Echo* poems in two phases. The first phase is that of the poems that were published between 1986 and 1989. This was at the height of repression, during the State of Emergency and the political violence that was taking place in the Natal midlands and Pietermaritzburg and its surrounding areas. The second phase of the conflict began in early 1990 and continued until 1994 when the first democratic elections were held.

#### 1.1 AIM AND SCOPE OF RESEARCH

Whilst this thesis is not a comprehensive study of *izibongo* / oral poetry, it will be my argument that most of the poets who contributed to the *Echo Poetry Corner* were largely influenced by the oral tradition of *izibongo* / praise poetry; hence, I am going to introduce some of the dominant assumptions about *izibongo* and its key definitions, and also introduce some of the key figures of oral praise poetry who might have influenced some of the *Echo* poets.

This thesis will also seek to look at the history of the *Echo* newspaper itself and its early beginnings, as well as at the history of the *Echo Poetry Corner*, when and why it was introduced, what its

editorial policy was, how the editors dealt with the complex issues of originality and authenticity, and how issues of plagiarism were avoided. In this research, I will also be looking at the main themes that dominated the poems and seem to have been the main pre-occupation of most of the poets. I will answer the question of whether the poets were engaging with their reality or whether they were trying to escape it. The main question that should be answered by this study is what the role of a poet is in a violent society.

This research also aims to look at the origins of this violence, as well as its impact and various interpretations of it. It is also the aim of this study to look at what it was like to write poetry under such conditions of violence and such a state of war. To be more specific, I will examine how violence impacted on the poets and the communities that they came from.

## **1.2 SOME DOMINANT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT *IZIBONGO* / ORAL PRAISE POETRY**

The central focus of this thesis is to look at the *Echo* poems, but I will use *izibongo* as a touchstone because of the fact that most of the poets were influenced by this genre, especially in terms of the stylistic features of their poems and their thematic concerns. It is, therefore, important to look at *izibongo* and deal with various interpretations of them. Ruth Finnegan notes that various questionable assumptions have been made about oral tradition. There is a perception that oral tradition has been passed down, word for word, from generation to generation, and is reproduced verbatim from memory throughout the centuries. Another perception is that oral literature arises

communally, from people as a whole, so that there can be no question of individual authorship or originality (Finnegan 14).

However, it is not the aim of this study to go into the details of literate and oral cultures, except to mention that both cultures have influenced each other in many ways, and to stress that oral culture is not just going to disappear. Hence, I want to agree with Gunner when she says that “there should be a three - way dialectic between, print, performance and the more self-contained orality of the old culture” (Barber 55). I think this is very important when one looks at South African poetry, since most critics do not consider oral culture important in their analyses of poetry. They should, however, consider both cultures, the literate as well as the oral. Mzamane points this out as well when he says:

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

*Izibongo* / praise poems have played, and still do play, an important role in traditional society, and the role of an *imbongi* is very important in the sense that the *imbongi* is an historian of the nation. As an historian of the nation, the *imbongi* has a deep understanding of that history and ensures that the nation learns from its previous experiences. In praising the king, an *imbongi* will also recite and explain where the roots of that nation are found and mention the important historical events of the nation. The role of the traditional praise poet was also a complex one, since he was also expected to

criticise the king when the king erred, and praise him for his good deeds. However, this does not simply involve praising in the literal sense, as the name *praise poet* seems to suggest. *Izibongi* also used elevated language from their deep understanding of their language and culture.

*Izibongo* / praise poems are very central to African traditional society. They are recited mainly for the kings and chiefs. A king is usually preceded by his *imbongi*, who walks up and down shouting his praises when the king attends court or an official gathering, and before he addresses his people.

The best definition of *izibongo* is perhaps that given by A.C. Nkabinde when he says:

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

Ndaba summarizes some of the dominant poetic devices that are used in *izibongo*, which include “the gestural (stress, dramatisation and emphasis), formulaic language (parallelism and linking), alliteration, assonance, improvisation and songs as well as what Cronin calls agonistically toned features” (18). *Izibongo* rely heavily on these important devices which give *izibongo* their form and identify them as uniquely oral poetry. These devices produce a very close relationship between form and meaning in *izibongo*.

Ari Sitas argues that “oral poetry has emerged as one of the most powerful means of expression” (150). He says the oral traditions of poetry have had their own trajectory of experiences, and are seen as the domain of two social forces: traditionalists and the black underclass. From the 1950's to the present, there have been a number of poets who see themselves as rooted within the tradition of the oral praise poetry of old, such as HIE Dhlomo, Mazisi Kunene, Mafika Gwala, Mi Hlatshwayo, Alfred Qabula, Mzwakhe Mbuli, Jeff Vilane, Lawrence Zondi, Nise Malange, Dikobe wa Mogale and Zolani Mkiva.

### **1.3 SOME KEY FIGURES IN THE TRADITION OF ORAL PRAISE POETRY SINCE 1950**

#### **1.3.1 HIE DHLOMO**

HIE Dhlomo imagined himself as “a bard , a people’s poet, an *imbongi* of the black population” (Sitas 140). But this was not without its own problems, since Dhlomo felt frustrated because his poetry was different from the praise poets of old: it was in English and it was written. Dhlomo’s frustration is clearly reflected in his poem “A People’s Poet Lament”, where he laments that he is “Unheard by the people, imprisoned by the printed word, he is yearning for the creative impulse that would inspire these two mute masses into action” (Sitas 141). Although Dhlomo felt hopeless about his predicament, Sitas argues that his contribution was important, since “he opened up [...] a clearing, a little territory for further poetic launches”(Ibid).

### 1.3.2 MAZISI KUNENE

Mazisi Kunene took up the gauntlet that was thrown down by Dhlomo and continued where Dhlomo left off. Sitas says that Dhlomo's "versatility in both oral and written genres allows him to imagine himself within the lineages of Zulu *izimbongi*. He is the tradition's inheritor and also its critic" (Sitas 142). Kunene was in a more advantageous position, since his praise poems were written in isiZulu, a language that is dominant in Kwa Zulu/Natal. But his contributions were interrupted when the apartheid regime cracked down on the liberation movements in the 1960's, and Kunene had to go into exile, away from his Zulu audience. While he was in exile and cut off from his audience, his words fell on deaf ears, and had to be translated into English, thus giving him an international and Pan African audience. But Kunene felt that it was wrong to refer to *izibongo* as "praise poetry" and preferred to call them "poems of excellence". He said: "Poems of excellence are so designated because of their social strategy - namely that of elevating the highest desirable qualities in society. They have wrongly been described as praise poems [...] However, they do more than praise and are more complex. Rather, they project an ethical system beyond the circumstances of the individual" (XXIX).

### 1.3.3 MAFIKA GWALA

Mafika Gwala is a poet who emerged in the early 1970's at the height of the ideology of the Black Consciousness Movement. Black Consciousness poetry was performed poetry that started in small activist groups and moved to larger working class meetings. Gwala assumed the role of an urban *imbongi*. Sitas says that most of the Black Consciousness poets failed to perform their poems in working class settings. Gwala was among very few who managed to do that. "So what was written

for performance remained bound by the printed page, affirming rather than enacting orality” (Sitas 147).

#### **1.3.4 ALFRED QABULA AND MI HLATSHWAYO**

In the early 1980's, two poets emerged who were to change the course of traditional praise poetry forever. Alfred Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo emerged in this period, singing the praises of their labour federation and the struggles that were waged by the workers against their bosses and against apartheid in general. They collaborated in the writing of their collection of poems *Black Mamba Rising*. “When Alfred Temba Qabula started in 1984 to orate his *izibongo*, his praise poetry, he released an untapped source of popular energy which, without warning, exploded everywhere in Natal” (Sitas 151). Many workers subsequently began orating their *izibongo* using elements they could gather from their cultural backgrounds. “But most of the poets who started to orate their *izibongo* imagined themselves in print. The unity between the scripted and the oral was thus cemented” (Sitas 151).

#### **1.3.5 JEFFREY VILANE**

Among such *izimbongi* was Jeffrey Vilane, who had come into contact with the tradition of *izibongo* through reading the Zulu praise poems of kings like Shaka, Dingane and Cetshwayo. He swiftly moved from performing his praises at official functions of the KwaZulu Bantustan to mobilizing workers in northern Natal with his poetic skills. This was the poet who Mafika Gwala said “[was] resurrecting oral poetry from the tombs of the past and [was] beginning to construct a robust Lazarus” (Sitas 153). In actual fact, Jeff Vilane was elected to be a member of the provincial legislature after the 1994 democratic elections.

### 1.3.6 LAWRENCE ZONDI

Another significant *imbongi* to also emerge during this period was Lawrence Zondi (a descendant of Chief Bambatha Zondi), who was known as the *imbongi* of the striking workers of Sarmcol. His case was different from the rest of the trade union *izimbongi* in that he was “completely spontaneous as he [was] not formally educated. But at the same time he [was] the carrier of oral traditions from the nineteenth century to the present” (Sitas 153).

What is also interesting about Zondi is the fact that his emergence also coincided with the time when violence was taking place in the Natal midlands. Howick/Mpophomeni was also one of the areas that was affected by political violence as a result of the Sarmcol strike which began in 1986. Zondi mixed his poetic abilities with his singing abilities, his deep understanding of folklore and biblical stories, and his political experience as a leader of the workers in the Howick area from the 1950's onwards. However, Zondi could not perform out of context; he had to be moved by an event or a word, and then he would move up and down while grabbing his stick, and words of powerful poetry would come out.

It is my contention that when the *Echo* poetry page was started in 1986, some of the poets who contributed to it might have come into contact with the works of some of the poets I have mentioned above. It is also highly probable that some had even seen some of the performances of poets like Qabula, Hlatshwayo, and especially Lawrence Zondi, since the Sarmcol strike was a popular strike and well supported and publicized in the midlands. My argument is that the *Echo* poets did not just

emerge out of a vacuum: they were highly influenced by the poetic genre of *izibongo*, they emerged from the concrete conditions that affected them, and they were also influenced in various ways by the poets and praise poets before them.

Since I have dealt with the tradition of oral praise poetry / *izibongo* and showed how it has impacted on the literate culture and vice versa, in the next chapter I am going to look at the history of the *Echo Poetry Corner* itself.

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.1 THE HISTORY OF THE *ECHO* SUPPLEMENT

The history of *Echo*, without any doubt, is directly linked with Khaba Mkhize, a former editor of the supplement. In my interview with him and with other journalists like Piwe Mkhize (who started his journalism career at *Echo* after he was expelled from the Indumiso College of Education) and Lakela Kaunda, it was very clear that Khaba Mkhize left his personal footprint on the supplement.

Khaba Mkhize says that the idea of *Echo* as a supplement to the *Natal Witness* was prompted by the events of 16 June, 1976 in Soweto, when the students revolted against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black South African schools. He said that in the aftermath of 16 June, the owners of the *Natal Witness* realized that the apartheid laws, such as the Group Areas Act of 1952, created many constraints for white journalists who could not move freely in black townships and who had to ask for permits in order to be in the black townships so that they could report on what was happening there. The restrictions on white journalists also meant that reporting on events taking place in the townships became distorted or inaccurate.

Khaba Mkhize commented that the management of the *Natal Witness* at that time had foresight and a long-term strategy for dealing with this issue. They decided to employ black journalists who would be based in the townships, and who would directly bring news to the *Natal Witness* from the townships. In August 1978, the idea of employing black journalists was raised with the Board of Directors of the *Natal Witness*, in the presence of Professor Sibusiso Nyembezi, who was also a

board member. He recommended Khaba Mkhize and was asked to approach him. In September 1978, Khaba started to work for the *Natal Witness*.

Khaba Mkhize said that his first months of working at the *Natal Witness* were hard for him, but he persevered and worked very hard and very diligently, contributing in those first months about twenty five stories which he could not even recognize himself because they were written in a compressed language. He said that he challenged this from a journalistic point of view in the newspaper boardroom, and was a constant thorn in the flesh of those who edited the supplement. This created problems, because he continued to produce stories that the newspaper could not accommodate. As a solution, it was decided that there should be a supplement to the *Natal Witness* that would be aimed at covering stories from the African townships. That is how the idea of *Echo* came about. The process of deciding on a name for this supplement was a long one. Initially, thirty-two names were suggested; “*Echo*” was one of them, and as it was the most popular choice, it was ultimately chosen.

The first issue of *Echo* came out on 1 June 1979. Its first editor was Michael Sullivan. Khaba Mkhize became the first reporter, whilst the first photographer was Percy Khumalo, who had been a beach photographer until then. *Echo* started appearing twice a month, but the demand became too great and the stories too numerous, with the result that the following year it started to appear on a weekly basis. This also meant that *Echo* had to expand its staff by hiring Thandi Moses and Gab Mthembu as freelance writers.

When *Echo* was first published, the *Natal Witness* saw it as a way of “ploughing back” to the community, since the publishers of the newspaper were also Shuter and Shooter, who printed many of the books that were read in the township high schools at the time. The vision that the owners of

the *Natal Witness* had for *Echo* was that it would be a “family newspaper”, reflecting community interests such as wedding photographs, funerals, crime and sports pictures.

Khaba Mkhize said he was not consulted about this vision; hence, he disregarded it in the nature of the stories that he contributed. His stories dealt with the issues that were affecting the community, some of which were political issues. The fact that he was committed to the struggle was also reflected in the *Echo* pages. In addition, he was concerned with addressing the ills of the infrastructure of the townships, like lack of proper roads and traffic lights. These were topics he highlighted in those early days.

Piwe Mkhize concurred with this, saying that Khaba’s vision was slightly different from that of management; hence, he soon transformed the paper into one of the most progressive and respected mouthpieces of the liberation cause. *Echo* started to champion developmental issues and also tackled the problems people experienced as a consequence of apartheid. There was a time when an advice office was opened in *Echo*, so that people could come forward with their problems. For instance, old people would come to report the non-payment of their pension funds, and *Echo* would either expose that or deal with the concerned government department until the problem was solved. Its letter pages were the most dynamic, attracting all sorts of diverse views from the community.

When Khaba Mkhize became a journalist, he had never received any formal training. He was chosen because he was interested in the media. Before he started working for the *Natal Witness*, he had been a regular contributor to newspapers by writing opinion letters. When *Echo* was up and running, Khaba Mkhize was also given an opportunity to write a weekly column for the *Natal Witness*. His views were well respected and received positive critical acclaim. In 1980, invitations for him to attend and to speak at workshops and seminars started arriving. In 1985, Khaba was given a golden

opportunity when he was awarded a Thompson Foundation scholarship to attend a three month course in “Senior Journalism” in Britain. This course empowered him with managerial as well as editorial skills.

When he came back to South Africa, Khaba was promoted to Acting Deputy Editor for *Echo* in May 1986. This was during the absence of Michael Sullivan, who was out of the country at that time. His promotion, however, coincided with the declaration of the State of Emergency by the apartheid regime. The State of Emergency was declared only forty-four days after he took over as the editor of *Echo*. The State of Emergency brought many repressive laws and restrictions that affected journalism in South Africa. This was also the time when there was an outbreak of violence in Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding areas. Piwe Mkhize said that *Echo*, and Khaba in particular, made some important interventions through their editorials, and helped at times to avoid possible scenes of bloodshed. Once they stopped an Inkatha march which would have resulted in bloodshed had it gone ahead. According to Piwe Mkhize, Khaba was probably the only journalist who had the trust of both the ANC and UDF leaders in KwaZulu-Natal. Inkatha leaders would refuse to be interviewed by any journalist other than Khaba, which showed his importance as both as a journalist and a peacemaker.

## **2.2 THE ECHO POETRY CORNER**

Around this time, Khaba proposed that a culture page be introduced in *Echo*. The idea was that one poem would be published every week, but with the advent of the State of Emergency, more poems started coming in and the poems were given a full page. Soon they appeared on two pages. In the beginning, however, there were complaints about the poetry page, especially from some university academics who argued that *Echo* was not a literary newspaper and that, therefore, it was not

supposed to publish poetry. Their complaint was that by publishing poems in *Echo*, Khaba Mkhize was “twisting the form of print media” (see Appendix 4).

Lakela Kaunda said that the *Echo* poetry page was established “to allow young people in particular space for creativity, and most importantly, space to express themselves, their fears, inspirations, day-to-day life experiences, laughter, pain, etc”. She said that “during violence in Pietermaritzburg it became an excellent record of the experiences of communities and what they thought of the war, the role of the police and the apartheid state” (Interview with Lakela Kaunda – see Appendix 1).

According to Khaba, the introduction of the poetry page could not have come at a more opportune time. Poetry became another form of reporting on what was happening in the surrounding townships. He said that it was a tactical way of dealing with the emergency regulations. People would write about their encounters with violence and get away with it. Another advantage of having the poetry page in *Echo* was also that the people’s anger and frustrations about violence were positively channelled. People expressed their anger through writing, rather than through destructive forms like violence.

Khaba said that one of the shortest poems that came to *Echo* at that time was from Lusaka, the ANC headquarters in exile. The poem was written in Zulu and this is how it went:

Uma ngifika eThekwini, bathi ngiyimpatha  
Uma ngifika eGoli, bathi nansi ibhari  
Kodwa manje lapha eLusaka, bathi lafika iQhawe  
Viva Qhawe.

[When I arrive in Durban, they say I am a buffoon  
When I arrive in Joburg, they say I am a fool  
But, here in Lusaka, they say here arrives a hero  
Viva Hero]

(Interview with Khaba – see Appendix 4)

While many poems were published and some were very controversial, Khaba Mkhize said that editing them was a “perpetual balancing act” between all the sides which were in conflict. He said that they tried by all means to publish poems that were socially responsible. They avoided poems that would encourage people to kill each other or to incite violence. They even had what they called “the lunatic fringe” which consisted of unpublished poems that encouraged violence. (Interview with Khaba Mkhize – See Appendix 4).

He said that he constantly got complaints from both Inkatha and the United Democratic Front (UDF) about some of the poems that were published. One day he published a poem which had a message which said “U Botha no Gatsha ababulali” (Botha and Gatsha are killers). He only realised this after having published it: the message was coded and you could only see it if you read the poem from top to bottom using the first letters of each line. Inkatha remonstrated with him, accusing him of siding with the UDF, a charge which he vehemently denied, and they became convinced only when he showed them the collection of unpublished poems which were more direct in their encouragement of violence.

He said that their editorial policy when publishing poetry was guided by their desire to avoid violence. For instance, they would publish poems which said “phambili nenkatha” (forward with Inkatha) or “zivikeleni maqabane” (defend yourselves comrades) rather than poems which advocated that one party should take up arms against another party. In their selection of poems, they tried to provide a balanced view and both sides had to be represented. They published poems from both Inkatha and UDF contributors, and actually encouraged people to write poems regardless of their political affiliations. He said that most poems reflected or expressed the plight of the people living

under oppression and in a violence-ridden society. Poets were discouraged from plagiarising, and when people were caught, this fact was published in the poetry page.

Regarding the role of *Echo* poetry page, Khaba Mkhize believed that it achieved a number of things. It helped to “enhance the liberation of the mind”, and it also “accelerated the rate of change” and “lessened violence, since it diverted people’s anger and people channelled their anger positively” (Appendix 4). The *Echo* poetry page also galvanized resistance against apartheid and helped to develop and sharpen the political consciousness of the people. The energy of the youth was also channelled towards better things.

According to Khaba, the poetry that emerged out of *Echo* also helped to capture and store events as they happened. Piwe Mkhize commented that the *Echo Poetry Corner* was an important outlet, and acted as a springboard for up-and-coming writers. Most poets saw it as an instrument to mobilize the people. According to Lakela Kaunda, the *Echo* poetry page

“allowed the community to express their feelings, share ideas and vent their anger and frustrations. Most importantly, the poems became an instrument of historical record. If anyone went through them now, they would surely gain an understanding of the kind of pain, suffering and frustrations as well as hopes of the people of Pietermaritzburg at the height of violence”. (Interview with Lakela Kaunda – See Appendix 1).

Lakela Kaunda adds that “the advantage of the poetry page was that it was able to beat emergency regulations, as poetic language could be coded in a manner that would not be understood by the police” (Appendix 1). She says that the State of Emergency did not affect the poetry page that much, and some events which could not be recorded in the news found their way through the poetry page.

Khaba Mkhize identified a few people who were helped by *Echo* to develop their skills and who made their mark in the literary world, such as Mlungisi Mkhize, whose poems which were first published in *Echo*, were later published as a collection entitled *One Calabash One Gudu*. Ben Dikobe Martins, who also contributed to *Echo*, later went on to publish his own volumes of poems *prison poems* and *baptism of fire*. Another person who honed his skills in the *Echo* cadet school was Dr Gomolemo Mokaë, who went on to publish a number of books, and become the author of a number of SABC TV dramas. Mkhize also mentioned other poets like Kobus Moolman, who started his career as a poet in *Echo* and later on had his volumes of poetry published.

On the question of why the *Echo* poetry page was discontinued at the end of 1989 and later re-established at the beginning of 1990, Khaba Mkhize said that he was not particularly sure why that happened, but added that towards the end of 1988 he left the country for Canada and thinks that with the change of editors, it simply became a headache to the new editor. Piwe Mkhize said that after Khaba left, there was no interest in the *Echo Poetry Corner*, and when people tried to resuscitate the page, the initiative did not have a positive impact. Poetry also had to compete with short stories, which became more prominent at the end of the 1980's.

This discussion of *Echo*'s background, its poetry page and the type of a newspaper it was, will enrich my forthcoming analysis of the type of poetry that was published in *Echo*. But it is important to first examine the background to the political conflict of the time, which also played a major role in shaping the type of poetry that emerged from *Echo*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BACKGROUND TO THE POLITICAL CONFLICT

It is important to note right from the outset that there are various interpretations of the causes of the political conflict that ravaged the communities in the Natal midlands from the mid 1980's to the early 1990's. (The conflict actually went beyond the period that will be covered in my research, because even long after the first democratic elections of 27 April 1994, the fighting still continued in areas like Richmond.) I believe Maughan-Brown was correct when he said: "The history of the political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area is strongly contested by the two major parties to the conflict" (Maughan-Brown 49).

Inkatha was formed in 1975 under the leadership of Chief M.G. Buthelezi, with the full blessing of the ANC, which had been banned in 1960 and was in exile at that time. This relationship was to continue until 1979; the relationship became sour when it became clear that Buthelezi had used the fact the ANC was banned for his personal advantage.

The banning of the ANC in 1960, the incarceration of its leaders after the Rivonia Trial, the banning of the Black Consciousness Movement in 1977, and the death of Steve Bantubonke Biko that same year, created a political vacuum which Buthelezi sought to fill and use for his own political ambitions, namely, to further his own position as a political leader in his own right inside the country. This was triggered by opinion polls in 1978 which showed "that Buthelezi was supported by 43% Africans in Soweto, Durban and Pretoria, whilst Mandela had only 21% following" (Nzimande

13).

It was with this confidence that he led an Inkatha delegation to meet the ANC in London in 1979, where he broke off all relations with the ANC, boldly proclaiming that he was a leader in his own right. But his actions were to backfire terribly on him and he had committed a serious miscalculation. His dream of replacing the ANC was to be shattered by a number of developments within the country: firstly, the legalization of trade union activity by the Wiehahn Commission in 1979, and secondly, the formation and the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF) a few years later.

The formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983 was to cause major problems for Buthelezi and Inkatha. He was among the first people “to label the UDF an ANC front” (Mzala 86). Soon after the formation of the UDF, there was the Ongoye massacre, where a number of students were killed at the University of Zululand by Inkatha warlords. This event helped in hardening the attitudes of both sides, and further contributed to the deterioration of relations between Inkatha and the UDF.

The UDF and Inkatha were miles apart in terms of their policies and the way they saw issues. The UDF soon continued the ANC tradition of a popular mass struggle; it differed radically from Inkatha, which was seen as moderate. The UDF believed in a policy of non-collaboration with apartheid-created institutions, whilst Inkatha participated in these institutions. There were also sharp differences on key issues like school boycotts, stay-aways and international trade sanctions.

Professor John Aitchison states that it is difficult to say when exactly the conflict started and who started it, but “it escalated into what was described by many as a war around September 1987, and was still continuing at the end of the eighties” (Aitchison 48).

By 1985, the rift between Inkatha and the ANC had widened considerably, and even the President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, acknowledged this in his political report at the 1985 Kabwe ANC consultative conference when he said:

In the first instance, Gatsha dressed Inkatha in the clothes of the ANC, exactly because he knew that the masses to whom he was appealing were loyal to the ANC and had for six decades adhered to our movement as their representative and their leader. Later when he thought he had a sufficient base, he also used coercive methods against the people to force them to support Inkatha. (Mzala 124)

But the most devastating effects of this conflict were to be brought into sharp focus a few years later, when the tensions and conflict became open warfare in the streets of Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding townships and rural areas. In fact, the war affected many areas in the whole of KwaZulu-Natal and claimed thousands of lives, particularly in the Natal midlands.

Inkatha started to form vigilante groups, or *Oqonda* / Straighteners, as early as 1980 in the townships around Pietermaritzburg, the first being formed in Ashdown. These also served as protectors of Inkatha town councillors. "In 1985 a number of radical student leaders in Sobantu and Imbali were harassed, assaulted and in a few cases murdered by vigilantes" (Aitchison 43).

"Between January 1987 and June 1989, some 1400 people were killed in incidents of politically motivated violence in an area of 374 square kilometres around Pietermaritzburg in the Natal Midlands in South Africa" (Maughan-Brown 48). About 1000 houses were destroyed, over 419

houses at Imbali alone. Some 10 000 people moved house permanently, and between 10 and 15 thousand people had to flee their homes for some time during that period (Maughan–Brown 48).

Despite disagreements about the causes of this conflict, it is clear that Inkatha felt it was losing its political legitimacy and stranglehold in many townships around KwaZulu-Natal; hence, around mid-1987, it launched massive recruitment drives. In many areas these were forced recruitments, and they were resisted by communities who organized themselves into street committees. As one person put it: “Once the people united, Inkatha supporters called them UDF. So the people said What the hell, let’s be UDF!”.

The forced recruitment strategy of Inkatha led many communities or people who were otherwise apolitical straight into the hands of the UDF, who then protected those communities from Inkatha, since they then fell into areas known as liberated zones. Inkatha became increasingly unpopular by the end of 1987, and the UDF and COSATU say Inkatha’s response was “to launch an intensified campaign; the violence of coercion was met with violent resistance and resulted in 161 deaths in January 1988” (Maughan-Brown 50).

It is important to look briefly at the prevailing conditions at the time. The State of Emergency was declared on 12 June 1986 in order to deal with resistance to apartheid rule, in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of the June 16 riots that had taken place in Soweto in 1976. The apartheid regime aimed to clamp down on the countrywide demonstrations that were planned for that year. Since the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in August 1983, internal opposition to apartheid had been growing at a feverish pace. The African National Congress (ANC) had also made a call in its 8 January 1986 statement to all South African people to “make the country ungovernable, make apartheid unworkable and turn the streets to the battlefields” (Tambo 69).

The situation was tense in many townships, as the youth of South Africa responded to that call. Many townships had at least one organization that was affiliated to the UDF: many youth, student, women's and labour organizations were part of the UDF. With the growth and strengthening of the UDF, the apartheid regime also stepped up its security and repressive measures. The police were given wide-ranging powers to deal with the opponents of apartheid.

Many townships saw the birth of vigilante groups to deal with wayward youth and to block the growth of the UDF. Many townships became occupation zones as the regime sent its troops into the townships. Detention without trial and the torture and killing of activists was widespread. Freedom of the press was also curtailed. There are different interpretations about the causes of the violence between the ANC/UDF and Inkatha that was rife in Pietermaritzburg in the mid-1980's to the early 1990's. According to Maughan-Brown, "the history of the political violence in the Pietermaritzburg area is strongly contested by the two major parties to the conflict" (Maughan-Brown 5).

It was also clear that Inkatha was supported by the state security forces; in many instances when there was fighting between the UDF and Inkatha, the police took sides. Inkatha's known warlords were untouchable; they were neither arrested nor detained, or if they were detained they would be released shortly afterwards. But many UDF activists were in detention during most of this time, since there was a State of Emergency. Inkatha was allowed to hold rallies and mass meetings, which were not allowed by the State of Emergency regulations. It was only in 1991 that there was conclusive evidence that Inkatha and the state were colluding in perpetrating violence in many townships when *The Weekly Mail* exposed the Inkathagate scandal to the effect that the Security Police had funded Inkatha/Uwusa Rallies.

But despite political affiliations there is no doubt as to the impact that violence had on the communities surrounding Pietermaritzburg. The scars of this political conflict can still be felt or seen even today, fifteen years later, in the form of burnt houses and deserted homesteads in townships like Imbali, especially around Stage 1 and 2. The KwaZulu-Natal Ministry of Housing, in conjunction with the Umsunduzi Municipality, have made a commitment to rebuild these houses, and an amount of about R 3,3 million has been allocated for the rehabilitation of the 419 houses that were destroyed during the conflict. The process of re-building these houses has started, and it is at an advanced stage at the moment.

Before the rebuilding of these houses, if one went to Imbali one would have found houses that lay desolate, and one would have known that there was a war going on there. Deep scars can still be felt when interacting with the youth of many of Pietermaritzburg's townships. The impact of this political conflict was devastating. Many of the victims of violence are unskilled and unemployed today, due to the fact that their schooling was disrupted by political violence. Some are involved in criminal activities as a result

Researchers of this conflict suggest that there were more than 1000 houses burnt between 1987 and 1989 (Aitchison 8). Thousands of people were displaced by this political conflict. In terms of human casualties, there were several thousand people killed in the Natal midlands during the entire period. This does not even begin to articulate the number of victims who were psychologically affected by the conflict. Most of the victims did not get any counselling, and the traumatic psychological effects of the conflict can still be seen in them.

It is in this context that I wish to begin analysing the poetry that was produced in this period by various *Echo* poets, because as Maughan-Brown clearly put it: "The *Echo* poems serve to make the

human cost of the conflict real in many ways that political analysis and statistical data, however instructive, cannot” (Maughan-Brown 49). I think this sets the stage for a true and clear analysis of the poems that were published in *Echo* during the time of violence. In the next chapter I will take a closer look at these poems.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.1 THE ROLE OF ECHO POETRY IN THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

#### **Ofay - Watcher Looks Back**

I want to look at what happened  
That done,  
As silent as the roots of plants pierce the soil  
I look at what happened,  
Whether above the houses there is always either smoke or dust,  
As there are always flies above the dead dog.  
I want to look at what happened...  
When jails are becoming necessary homes for people  
Like death comes out of disease  
I want to look at what happened.

#### **Mongane Wally Serote (1)**

Although Wally Serote is not an *Echo* poet, I have decided to use this important poem in the larger context in order to show the position of the poet in a violent and unequal society, and to introduce the same issues as treated in the *Echo* poems. In this chapter I also want to look at what happened in the Natal midlands, and Pietermaritzburg in particular, during the time of the political conflict that was taking place. I want to look at what happened through the eyes of the *Echo* poets. The period I will be looking at is the period between 1986 and 1994. The *Echo* poems that were published during that period raised many issues and can be divided into various categories under various themes. There are a number of themes that immediately come to the fore, which most poets raised through their poems. The dominant themes that come out of these poems include the themes of war, resistance, peace, mourning, loss, and finally, almighty intervention or salvation from above.

I want to look at a number of poems and suggest what the poets meant and sought to achieve through their poems. I also want to look at the role these poems played for the general populace of Pietermaritzburg, what the poems meant and how they helped people to deal with the predicament of political violence. It is my contention that the *Echo* poems were complex poems in that they dealt with aspects of life in its totality. This can be seen through the types of poetry that were produced. Some wrote poetry for pleasure and entertainment, but most wrote poetry in order to express their feelings of sorrow, loss, hope, sadness and happiness.

I am going to argue that while some poets used *Echo Poetry Corner* as a way of escaping what was happening in their immediate surroundings, the majority of the poets were busy engaging with their reality. Most were raising important and crucial questions about their lives and their situation; it is these poets whom I am most interested in. They raised these questions in different ways and styles. While some were more direct and explicit in their approach, others were more indirect and philosophical in their approach. These latter poets tried to look for deeper reasons and answers for their present conditions.

In my analysis I will also suggest that poetry played an important role in the lives of the poets themselves and their communities. The *Echo Poetry Corner* was important in a number of ways to so many people. But most importantly, the poetry page acted as a form of release for the poets, where they could express their innermost feelings about their conditions, express great emotions, and communicate with people in similar circumstances. When I refer to conditions, I do not only refer to political conditions; I am talking about conditions in a holistic manner, or conditions in their totality, because no matter how people were affected by conditions of oppression, their lives still continued and they celebrated occasions of birth, marriage and many other joys. It helped people to deal with

their harsh realities in more constructive ways. This page was seen as a platform that poets could use to vent their anger against a brutal and ruthless apartheid system that dehumanized and subjugated them.

A number of poets also saw poetry as a tool in the struggle for liberation that was going on in their country. By a tool, I mean an instrument or means by which the poets could further advance the struggle. Poetry was seen as another terrain of struggle where they could challenge the system of apartheid; hence, many poets actively used the *Echo Poetry Corner* to raise consciousness and to mobilize people for the liberation project. But the starting point for most poets was what was happening in their immediate surroundings in Pietermaritzburg.

When one reads the poems that were published in the *Echo* poetry pages, it becomes obvious that these poems played an important historical role as well. History was recorded through poetry as it happened. For instance, you did not have read newspaper headlines to know that Samora Machel, President of Mozambique, had died on South African soil in an aeroplane crash: poets captured that moment in their poems. When Andrew Zondo was hanged for bombing Amanzimtoti Mall, poems dedicated to him were also written. When two uMkhonto we Sizwe combatants from Sobantu were hanged, the *Echo* poets recorded that incident. When violence started to ravage many of the Pietermaritzburg townships, the *Echo Poetry Corner* was there to record those events as they were happening. It was the poets who lamented the death of people's organizations and the rule of warlords. These poems captured the violence and repression and the emergency conditions that affected people at the time.

But the *Echo* poets cannot only be seen as simple historians recording what was happening. They follow in the footsteps of other poets before them, such as the likes of Wally Serote and Mafika

Gwala, in that they used the *izimbongi*'s poetic licence to criticize and challenge authority; hence, I argue that they are rooted in the poetic tradition of *izibongo* or oral praise poetry. Many of the poems that appeared in *Echo* are rooted in this genre in many ways. I agree with Mzamane when he says that most poets used the same stylistic virtues of *izibongo*, and that "they invoke the poetic licence of *izibongo* to criticize the establishment" (Gwala 2). I think, therefore, that these poets cannot be analysed in isolation from this heritage.

## 4.2 DIFFERENT THEMES RAISED BY THE ECHO POEMS

The *Echo* poems have been divided here according to various themes that concerned most of the poets. However, it must be noted that whilst I have tried to group poems around certain themes it is a difficult task to group them so, because sometimes one poem will raise different themes at the same time and themes overlap.

### 4.2.1 LAMENTATION POEMS

#### **Wafa we Ashdown Bo!**

Wafa we Ashdown Bo!  
Awusahlukile ne farm  
Usuthola abantu bephethe izikhali  
Awazi ukuthi baziphatheleni  
  
Abantu sebashaywa mihla namalanga  
Asisakwazi nokufunda kahle ezikoleni  
Sesifundela ovalweni  
Ngenxa yemikhonto namawisa  
Sasesithi siphumule  
Bengasekho o – Sibanibani – D  
Kwasekuthiwa usuyisilaheni we Ashdown  
Ingathi usuyisona

Ngiyayikhumbula I AYO  
Yayingakwenzi I farm  
Yayingayibambi inkunzi

Yayingayiphathi imikhonto namawisa  
Wafa we Scam 6

**M. Mvelase, 18 September 1986**

The poem gives a clear picture of what was happening in the townships during that time of violence. It does this through capturing the most horrific and terrifying events that were happening in Ashdown. The poem laments the death of a township under the rule of the warlords. It is most direct and talks about guns and spears, asking why certain people carry them. It talks about the daily beatings of the people and the fear that this creates amongst the people. It says that Ashdown has been turned into a slaughterhouse.

This poem was written at a time when Ashdown was under the occupation of Inkatha supporters, who ruled the township with guns and spears. The normal lives of the people, especially the youth, had been disrupted. Students could no longer go to schools freely due to this occupation, and people were being intimidated most of the time. The poet laments the fact that this has turned Ashdown into a rural area, with people walking the streets armed with traditional weapons and also mugging others. He says he remembers the Ashdown Youth Organisation (AYO) and questions where it is today. He says that AYO did not do all these terrible things. This is clearly an angry poem, which calls a spade a spade. The poet does not mince his words; he laments the death of Ashdown as the new forces have taken over.

**Pietermaritzburg** (extract)

With my glazed eyes  
I watched those donga beds  
of Maritzburg which were cracked  
by floods of tears  
I couldn't hear a sound  
neither a song  
I asked those donga beds where are the people?...

The answer was loneliness and sadness  
As I climbed up the mountain  
I expected to see houses  
But I saw ashes and flames from people's houses  
With my bleeding eyes  
I looked up to the sky to ask the heavens  
about the talented and gifted people of Maritzburg...  
Where is Jabu  
A woman with lion strength  
A woman with fires in her soul  
A woman with flashes in her heart ...  
As I was watching  
I saw young women with cracked souls like soil erosion  
Watching the graves of their boyfriends...

**Makhosi Khosa, 25 January 1990**

The above poem can also clearly be broadly categorized as a lamentation poem, as it reflects the deep feelings of loss that the woman poet is feeling about losing people who were dear to her heart. She spells out in vivid detail what was happening around Pietermaritzburg when she talks about burnt houses and the sadness of those who have lost their loved ones in the conflict. She also mentions some of the key people who were lost in this conflict, like Jabu Ndlovu, an activist and a trade unionist from Imbali who was killed in this war. The poet, Makhosi Khosa, also mentions that in this conflict she lost her boyfriend, Mduduzi, who had been an MK commander. She uses a number of images, such as “floods of tears” and “bleeding eyes”, to describe the situation and show that death has taken place and that people are mourning the dead. She also repeatedly uses the images of flames and ashes to describe the aftermath of the war and its devastating effects. The loss of Jabu Ndlovu must have had a major impact on her life, since she goes on to describe her character in detail. Jabu is likened to a lion, and is seen as a person with the fine qualities of courage and bravery. She must have been loving and warm if her heart had “flashes”, and she must have been very passionate about her cause if her soul had “fires”. But the poet is also not talking only on her

own behalf here; when she talks about Jabu, she is speaking on behalf of the rest of the community and has adopted a communal voice.

Whilst she laments her loss and that of other people, she is also conscious of the fact that in her poem, she should not demobilize the people but she should mobilize them to continue the fight; hence, she says: “Oh it is hard to believe that death is part of the process/ ... that blood nurtures the tree of freedom./...Nevertheless a chained man is under obligation / of fighting to set himself free.” The poet’s use of “cracked souls like soil erosion” reminds one of Wally Serote’s “It’s a Dry White Season”, when he says “but season’s come to pass”. It is as if the poet echoes Serote here, by saying that what is happening in Pietermaritzburg will also come to an end.

While this is a lamentation poem, it is also a call to action. Some of the *Echo* poems have similar twists and turns like this one. So the poem can be understood at various levels; it has many layers within it and encompasses a number of different themes, as I indicated earlier on. It also has elements of being a historical poem as well, in that it records what was happening around that time and records the history of the area as it happened. The death of people’s leaders, like Jabu Ndlovu, is recorded through the poem and the poet’s personal grief is expressed. The personal and the public are constantly integrated in this poem. The poet also assumes the role of being a historian of the community, one of the prominent roles of an *imbongi*.

#### **4.2.2 PRIVATE AND POLITICAL POEMS (THE POLITICAL ENCROACHMENT INTO THE PERSONAL SPACE)**

Many of the poems that were published around this time also played this double-edged role of being both personal and political. For instance, the following poem also deals with both the personal and the political conflict that was experienced by the poets.

**in her letter**

in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
the umsundusi river  
still runs its  
    serpent - smooth course  
    through the lush  
    evergreen edendale valley

on its way to the sea.  
in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
    fishes no longer break  
    the umsundusi's clear surface  
    at dawn  
for the throat  
of its song  
is now choked with the grim harvest of conflict :  
    mutilated bodies  
    stick in its throat  
    like fish - bones.

in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
in the valley and  
in the surrounding area  
    coffins bearing the remains  
    of comrades and inkatha vigilantes

have become as common  
as kitchen tables.

in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
the valley's thick mist  
    now lies soft and still  
    like cotton wool  
    over the dark wound  
    of its bleeding heart.  
that is often wrapped

in a shawl of fear  
smoke and fire

in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
comrade rolilahlala  
has made an impassioned plea  
to all those whose hands  
are stained red with blood  
to throw their weapons

into the sea  
but the monstrous  
metallic roar of guns  
and the heart - rending sound  
of weeping continues

in her letter  
keitumetse says that  
the search for peace continues  
and other than the foregoing  
life still goes on however

in the land of rusted ploughshares  
spring is in the air  
the world grows greener  
buds abuzz with bees and birdsong  
are fluttering in the breeze  
as she may soon be getting married  
if she can overcome her notion  
that marriage means being pinned down  
like a museum butterfly.

**Ben Dikobe-Martins *prison poems* (26-27)**

This poem by Ben Dikobe-Martins is from his volume of poems, and not from the *Echo* poems. I decided to use this poem because it captures the spirit of the poems that were published in *Echo* and it deals with the same issues that were of concern to most *Echo* poets. I am also using his poem, since from the time he began writing he was among the few poets who contributed to *Echo Poetry Corner* and went on to publish in *Echo*. This poem shows us the extent to which the political encroached into the personal space. The poet was on Robben Island when he wrote this poem,

having been arrested for sabotage and for being a member of a banned organization. He is reflecting on the things that were happening outside the prison walls, which he had garnered through correspondence from Keitumetse. This is a very private and personal poem, which talks about mundane and light things, yet it is also a highly political poem in that it talks about the situation of political violence outside the prison walls.

The poet also seems to be well informed about what is taking place outside prison, especially in Pietermaritzburg. He highlights the peace efforts that have been embarked upon in the form of Nelson Mandela making a peace plea to ANC supporters to “take [their] guns, [their] knives, and [their] pangas, and throw them into the sea. Close down the death factories. End this war now” (Mandela 1). But violence escalated to further heights, despite these efforts. Dikobe-Martins seems to be asking why the violence has not stopped, since it does not benefit either party in the conflict. He also laments the way that this violence has affected and disrupted people’s lives. But the poet also talks about simple things which at face value appear to be non-political, but which show how highly politicized South African society is, when personal issues like marriage have political connotations.

While politics was obviously a major preoccupation of most people in South Africa living under apartheid at the time, this was not the only concern of poets writing in *Echo*. The truth is that no matter how people tried to live normal lives or poets tried to write about normal and natural things, somehow politics always interfered in their lives. The following poem further confirms this political encroachment into the personal space.

### **Lucy and Sipho**

In that thorn bush  
They sat down, then

Hugged and kissed  
Soon he started  
Brushing her thighs  
Then hand moved upwards  
Until she cried;  
“He – e Siphon let us not please”  
“What to do then?”  
Sit, looking at  
One another”  
Ah boredom –  
Lack of  
Recreational facilities.

**Piwe Mkhize 31 July 1986**

The poem starts as a poem about a private moment between two lovers, but because of the conditions that many black people faced at the time, it ends as an attack on the apartheid system and forms part of protest poetry. This shows as well how thin the line was between the personal and the public. The second stanza in the poem raises many questions about why people have no recreational facilities. It ends up as an indictment against the apartheid system as a whole. It is a subversive poem, though in a subtle way. This poem also shows how reluctant poets were to be overtly political; a closer and critical reading allows the reader to ask pertinent questions. It does not prescribe any political formulas or solutions, but its power and strength lies in the fact that it allows the reader to ask crucial questions.

#### **4.2.3 PHILOSOPHICAL CUM HISTORICAL POEMS**

The *Echo* poets used many ways of expressing their views and feelings about their society and, at times, were involved in analysing the history of the country in order to understand their present conditions. For instance, in the following poem, a complexity of responses can be found:

### **I Curse Those Years**

1498 I curse you  
Vasco da Gama  
I wish you did not  
Discover the sea route to India  
Jan Van Riebeeck  
I wish you were not sent  
To make that refreshment station

Dutch East India Company  
Monopoly was inherited from you  
1652 you made a black man;  
a slave  
a worker  
a proletariat  
In his native land

**Piwe Mkhize, 24 July 1986**

The poet here clearly responds to the situation of black people in general, and how they reached their present state of oppression, and he gives an historical answer, blaming the past for his present circumstances. He first criticizes the year that the route to the East, which passes the Cape, was first discovered, and the person who discovered it, Vasco da Gama. He then moves on to name the second culprit in this scenario, Jan Van Riebeeck, the man who was tasked with building a refreshment station at the Cape.

The history of how colonial conquest finally took place is left out, perhaps because it is long and well known to the majority of the black people. He ends the poem by outlining the present state of all black people, that they are slaves, proletarians and workers in their own country. Mkhize's approach in this poem is both philosophical and historical in dealing with the subject that affects many people in the country. Mkhize challenges here the dominant historical teaching that people like Van Riebeeck and da Gama were heroes; he sees them as villains instead, and I am sure most black

people saw them as such as well.

#### 4.2.4 RELIGIOUS POEMS

While some poets were deeply political in their responses to violence and war, others chose to take a religious route. After all, the majority of the people who were involved in this conflict were Christian, so it made perfect sense that some people would appeal to others along the lines of their religious beliefs.

##### **The Time has Come (extract)**

Yes the time has come,  
For you and me to repent,  
To repent our sins before our God,  
To sit together at a table,  
Making the laws for peace and security,  
Of all men in this country.  
Too much blood has been spilled,  
The blood of beloved heroes,  
The blood of our ancestors in Blood River and  
Sharpeville,  
And blood of innocent children in Soweto,  
Still you don't realise the value of time;  
The change of a cruel heart.....

**Nombuso Khumalo, Zibukezulu High School**

The poet here appeals for a change of heart on the part of those who are oppressing people. She traces death and destruction from an historical point of view, mentioning all the dead people from Blood River to Sharpeville and Soweto. She calls for negotiations between the warring parties. She threatens the oppressors that time is running out; one is completely sure that she is talking about the time before freedom arrives, and the time before they face their judgement day in front of the Lord.

But the dominant issue is that the oppressors will be judged if they do not repent, and the poet calls for the intervention of the Almighty to solve the problems of this world.

#### **4.2.5 WHAT IS THE ROLE OF POETRY IN THE STRUGGLE?**

There has always been an ongoing debate about the role of the poet or the writer in times of war. It became a serious issue in the 1980's, when some people felt that it was irresponsible for writers and poets to continue writing while people were dying. They argued that poets should join the struggle on the battlefield. In Africa, many writers chose the gun instead of the pen, amongst them Christopher Okgibo during the Nigerian Civil War in 1966.

Many poets were faced with a predicament about the role of poetry when people were dying, killed daily by apartheid police bullets. This debate dominated the poetic discourse also in the early 1980's. Let me give you an example of this debate through poetry itself, instead of the theoretical debates that were going on at the time. James Matthews wrote the following poem in response to those who disregarded the role of poetry.

##### **they say**

they say  
writing poetry at  
this stage of  
our struggle is  
absurd,, and writing  
black protest poetry  
is even worse  
people need direction  
and not words  
relating the situation  
as it is  
things that everyone  
knows all about  
poets, black poets,

have written themselves  
into a dead end  
they say  
my neighbours do  
not even read  
what I've written  
and that poetry  
will not bring  
about any changes  
in our situation  
a revolution can  
do without poets  
poets should switch to  
things more constructive  
furthering a revolution  
offer a solution  
to the problem  
their contempt  
is acid eating  
the flesh of  
my poetical work

**James Matthews.** (Chapman 162 – 163)

This poem by Matthews shows and emphasises the seriousness of this debate and the feelings of the poet about what is being said about poetry in general. Mafika Gwala also joined this debate through his poem “In Defence of Poetry”. Gwala asks: “What’s poetic.../ about Defence Bonds and Armscor?.../What’s poetic.../ about long term sentences and.../ deaths in detention.../ for those who threaten state security?”. He then concludes by saying that “As long as .../this land, my country.../is unpoetic in its doings.../it’ll be poetic to disagree”.(Gwala in Chapman 203). This was a critical intervention by Gwala, where he defends the rights of poets (especially protest poets) to write about anything and everything that they wanted to write about, and he affirms the role of poets in the national liberation struggle.

Many poets tried to interact and engage with this question, but among the *Echo* poets, Mlungisi Mkhize perhaps remains one of the poets who was most conscious and aware of this dilemma. He

addresses it both through his poetry and also through his essays. One of his poems that best illustrates his understanding of these issues is the following:

### **Just Before Embracing Dawn**

The door was banged  
House filled with authoritative voices  
Bright torches cutting closed eyeballs  
Slashing the flesh of the night  
Came fire – wielding men.

And when the tool of flames  
Pointed at me, threats unfounded  
My writings keenly scrutinized,  
New strength pervaded my entire being.

So give me pen and paper  
I will write  
Verses in the midst of torture.

### **Mlungisi Mkhize, 09 June 1988**

This poem clearly documents some of the things that the police were doing during the time of the State of Emergency. This was clear police harassment - police waking people up at night, banging doors and searching their personal documents. The response of the poet to all this is that he should be given “pen and paper” so that he can write “Verses in the midst of torture”. The poem was written when the apartheid government had renewed the State of Emergency for the third time. Police had wide-ranging powers; they could search and confiscate all the material they thought was a danger to state security; hence, the police keenly scrutinized his work. The police would arrive at all times of the night in order for their intimidating tactics to be most effective.

The poet does not use direct language to describe how the police visit them, but instead uses different images to describe the situation. “the door was banged” shows typical police behaviour in apartheid South Africa, and “authoritative voices” describes how they used to intimidate people.

“Bright torches/fire wielding men” are instruments of their trade. “Tool of flames” refers to the guns that they carry. This show of force was used to intimidate people and ensure that the victim was pushed to a point of submission.

But the poet is not intimidated by this show of strength and exhibitionism; it gives him courage instead, as he says “new strength pervaded my entire being”. He demands to be given pen and paper so that he can write “verses in the midst of torture”. The poet has made a resolution that despite the intimidations and torture, he will continue to write poetry that will challenge the system. The importance of his resolution is that his poetry will continue even beyond the torture; poetry outlives the gun, and this is a triumph not only against state terror, but it is a triumph for the spirit, as his poetry inspired other oppressed people to stand up against the regime, no matter what the consequences were. The poem is a defence of the power of verses, which are dangerous enough to the state to provoke such a violent reaction.

Chinua Achebe also deals with the issue of whether it is important to fight or to write in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. In one passage, when a delegation from Abazon visits the capital city to see the president about their grievances, the leader of the delegation, an old man, tells Ikem, (the writer in the novel) that as a young man he always thought that it was more important to participate in the war as a fighter, but that he has changed his view and now believes that the telling of the story is most important because the story lives long after the war has been fought. “Why? Because it is only the story, that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of the war drums and the exploits of brave fighters” (Achebe 124). This is the view that I am also sympathetic to: a war cannot only be fought on one front, so poets should be allowed to wage the struggle with the tools that they understand best.

It is also clear that the poems that were published in *Echo* dealt with people's real conditions as they faced them. The poets were not selective in their approach to issues. They wrote about social, political and economic ills as well as about religion and love, loss, sorrow, pain, joy and many other aspects of their lives. This is the holistic approach to life that poetry should capture; it should not only capture socio-political issues.

#### **4.2.6 VIOLENCE/WAR THEME**

The poems that follow look at violence in its most horrific forms, at its destructiveness, at its gross brutality, and at how it affects innocent bystanders and disrupts normal lives. They look at anger, frustration and pain. The dominant images that the poets use are shocking images of fire, death, guns, spears, daggers, bullets, confusion, fear and hopelessness and many others.

##### **It's a weekend again**

It's a weekend again  
Execution time  
Daggers ready to obey orders  
Our townships like a hive  
Ever swelling with anger  
Death staring at us like a hungry wolf  
Women wail through the night  
African women.  
Bullets fly in the air  
Unleashing death  
Children lying in tatters  
Blood flowing profusely  
Fresh yet new blood  
It's yet another procession  
Sinathing!  
You have seen nothing  
The worst is yet to come  
Mountain Rise!  
You rose and the mountains echoed  
Haughtily you swallowed them.

It's you and I  
Locked up there  
Peeping through keyholes  
Watching revolution live.  
Is this freedom?

‘**Afropoet**’ Imbali (24 Sep. 1989)

The poet conveys what was happening in Pietermaritzburg on weekends in the most horrifying and terrifying terms. He talks about weekends as times for execution and for the burial of the dead. He talks about death as a permanent visitor to people in Pietermaritzburg. He likens death to an image of a hungry wolf that is waiting to devour the people. The people who suffer most are the women who can be heard crying and wailing through the night, and children who lie in tatters. Pietermaritzburg has been turned into a war zone, with bullets flying around, unleashing death. The poet also talks about the two graveyards of the area, and believes that they have not buried or swallowed enough people as yet. He suggests that the worst is yet to come. The poet's words are prophetic indeed, since what was experienced in the late 1980's was nothing compared to what was to follow in the early 1990's.

The poet also expresses the sense of fear that engulfed the people, who had resorted to hiding behind closed doors and preferred to watch what was happening through their keyholes. Lastly, the poet asks the crucial question: “Is this freedom?” Many people who faced violence at one time or another found themselves asking similar questions about whether freedom was worth dying for. The poet here has assumed the role of an *imbongi* in that he is becoming the spokesperson of the people. He raises a question that most people would like to raise.

## **What's Happening in Maritzburg**

Tell them Khaba  
Tell them about Maritzburg  
Say the capital city is on fire  
Flames are burning like that  
Of a tractor tyre size necklace  
Above the city's head plays the cloud  
The cloud of crisis which is the outcome  
Of this burning capital city of Natal  
Day and night - no difference  
There's always darkness  
People do not recognise each other  
On both sides of the city two graveyards  
Snathing and Mountain Rise are ravenous.

Their thunder being sharpened by the smelling of blood  
Their mouths are ready for action - prey  
They are ready to swallow the dead Maritzburg  
Thus tell them Khakhazile  
Purification is gaining ground in Maritzburg  
But others fear that the outcome is nonsense.  
It is millions of millions of kilograms of ashes.

### **Bonginkosi Bafanyana Ndlovu.**

This poem is also rooted within the African tradition of oral poetry / *izibongo*. It has many elements that are closely linked to this tradition. Firstly, I think the poem's effect can be understood and fully appreciated when it is performed, rather than when it is read. Some of the stylistic features of *izibongo*, like repetition and parallelism, are used. In the first two lines, "tell them" is used twice. It is also rich in its use of images, like the image of fire and flames, thunder and blood. The poet likens Pietermaritzburg to a person who is being necklaced or burned; he sees what is happening as the necklacing of Pietermaritzburg itself, while in reality it is the people who die daily through the same method. He also refers to the city's two graveyards as ravenous: he says Snathing and Mountain Rise are like thunder that has been sharpened by the smell of blood and their mouths are ready for action, such action being the eating or swallowing of the dead of Pietermaritzburg.

In the first stanza, he refers to Khaba Mkhize as Khaba, the name he is affectionately known by, while in the last stanza he refers to him as Khabazela, his clan name. This is a sign of respect and shows the gravity of the matters that he wants him to report on. They say that in Zulu and other African traditions, if you call a person by his clan name, he is bound to listen to you most attentively and sympathetically, hence, this change of approach by the poet. The poet appeals to Khaba, whom he regards as the spokesperson of the people, to tell people about the crisis that is taking place in Pietermaritzburg. This is an old trick which *izimbongi* used to great effect in the past, when they would act as if they were powerless and ask other people to convey certain news (especially bad news), while they are actually doing so themselves. This poet is still acting as a spokesperson, even though he pretends as if he has deferred the role of *imbongi* to another person.

Towards the end of the poem we can see the poet's uncertainty about the future when he says that the outcome will be "nonsense". The same doubts that were prevalent in the previous poem creep in here, and they reflect the poet's sense of despondency about the future. The poet here has managed to show the devastating effects of this war and also raise doubts about its outcome. He has assumed the role of critic of the nation, since he comments critically on how his people are killing each other. This was another important function that the *Echo* poets played; they not only praised every action that was done in the name of the struggle, but they were also prepared to question anti-social actions.

### **The Streets of Pietermaritzburg**

You are wondering what is happening in town  
You were built for vehicles to move  
But now you are a battlefield for fools  
If you have something to say  
Would you tell me the reason for this  
People walk on you having weapons on their hands  
Police are up and down trying to catch  
The culprits but you are divided  
into many different streets  
People die day by day in you

Aren't you tired to see such foolishness  
Hey, Retief Street, how many people  
Do you kill in one year?  
You are looking like you are the worst killer in town  
Hey, West Street, how many people  
Do you kill in one year?  
I regard you as the second best killer.  
Hey you, East Street, how many people  
Do you kill in a day?  
Hey you, Victoria Street, why do you always  
kill people? Aren't you feeling lonely at night?  
Even you, Church Street, the most beautiful  
Street of town, you are also a killer.  
Why do you let killers walk on you?  
Call the police to look after you everyday.  
Otherwise you will be regarded as killing streets.

### **Musa Ndlela**

The focus of the poet here is the streets of Pietermaritzburg and what is taking place in them.

There was a time during the war when people could no longer walk freely in the streets. Certain streets were regarded as no go areas/zones for some people. The streets were controlled by different organizations, and they were regarded as their sphere of influence. Inkatha controlled most of the downtown streets including Retief and East Streets. While the UDF controlled the city center ones. If you found yourself in a wrong street you were as good as dead.

The poet seems as if he is in a conversation with the streets, asking them what is happening in them. He suggests that the reason they were built for, that is to be for cars is not being fulfilled since they have been turned to the battlefields. He describes an abnormal situation where people move with weapons in the city center; that is what Pietermaritzburg had degenerated into.

The poet highlights this abnormality, and asks the streets how many people they have killed.

Obviously this is a rhetorical question since the streets cannot answer; in essence the question is

directed to people who are involved in this conflict. The poet has even rated the streets according to which is the worst killer amongst them. This poem shows to what extent this war had affected ordinary people and their freedom of movement, which was non-existent by then due to the war.

### **Death on my doorstep**

After seeing their targets  
They alighted from the bus  
And gave them chase;  
Then they saw you standing in your home yard  
As their targets ran past the gate,  
They thought you were one of them,  
Gave you chase  
They caught you, then they killed you  
O Lins, Lins  
A few minutes later  
You laid on the street  
Serene in rivulets of blood.  
I know you've met Mdayisi,  
Tana, Sfiso, Mlu, Magugu, Hleke, Nhlanhla,  
And the rest;  
I am sure you have revised  
Your respective brutal deaths.  
And there is no complaining  
About anything anymore.  
And there is not eating, nor smoking,  
No drinking, no cinemas,  
And there is no womanising  
O Lins, Lins  
Your movement to heaven  
Was a reminder that we are  
Not for this world,  
We all have to be covered with  
Our last blankets someday,  
Soil.  
O Lins, Lins,  
You have reached a stage of tranquility and eternity.

**Ellington Ngunezi**

Edendale

This is a poem that talks about the personal experience of a poet, who sees someone being killed on his doorstep. The person who is killed is an innocent victim caught in the crossfire. It shows the devastating effects that this war had on ordinary people who were neutral during the war. The poem is reminiscent of action films, which take you step-by-step through the process of someone being killed. It gives all the gory details about how Lins meets his tragic end. The poem reads like a roll call of all people who have met a similar fate as well. The poet does not seem to be a bitter person in conveying the news of this death, but seems to be content that Lins has joined others who have moved to the land where there are no complaints about the daily tribulations of life.

The poet regards death as a state of freedom in some sense. The sense of relief that the poet feels and his resignation to reality is so amazing that I am reminded of another poem by B M Themba, who had had enough of violence and regarded death as such :

### **Blessed are the dead**

For they will :

Never be suspected  
Never be chased,  
Never be unmanageable  
Never be transformed into firewood

For they are now

Protected from adversaries  
Saved from opponents  
Secured from the persecution of this world

Blessed are those who are dead.

**B.M. Themba.** (Malan 320)

### **The times of ideology** (extract)

“When men becomes ashes through flames  
Of burning tyres and liquid tubes  
When air becomes polluted by smoke  
Of blasted houses and roasted flesh  
The time of ideology is when mourners  
Cry for their lost lovers

I mean these are the times  
Time of ideology ! Ideology ! Ideology !”

### **Happy Majola**

The poet here is tracing the roots of the conflict to ideological issues. He seems to be saying that if there were no ideology, then the conflict might have been avoided. I think the poet here is trying to link people’s suffering as a result of violence to apartheid ideology. He sees apartheid ideology as the root cause of the violence that is taking place. He sees the youth as playing a central part in the conflict in challenging this ideology; the clash of ideologies then results in the war. The youth was armed with its own ideology of freedom; hence, here was conflict when some tried to defend their ideology and others opposed it. The apartheid ideologues were armed with all sorts of laws and machinery, like of the State of Emergency and the police. He names the instigators of this conflict, though in subtle terms. Because he mentions that the police threw teargas, one can see where he stood regarding the ongoing conflict because the police seldom threw teargas at Inkatha supporters. When he mentions police and their aides he must also be referring to Inkatha.

The poet sees the time of ideology as bringing havoc to the black community. He also echoes what other poets have spoken about around the destructiveness of the war. He uses some frightening images when he talks about blasted houses and roasted flesh. The issue of mourning for the dead also shows the extent of loss that people have incurred through this time of ideology.

#### **4.2.7 CALL TO ACTION POEMS (OR CALL TO ARMS)**

Whilst the previous poem is more concerned with analyzing the state of violence and trying to find its roots, while mourning the devastation of violence, the following poem is drastically different in that it is a call to action.

## No Monuments

No Monuments  
Nor Gravestones !  
For those who die in the pride of  
their youth  
For heroes die young  
No wreaths for their graves  
Nor pall bearers  
For those who dare to stand up to be  
counted

Save commemoration services  
To revive the spirit of the nation  
Heavily “protected” with teargas  
and rubber bullets  
They laid down their lives  
To make meaningless freedom  
meaningful  
They brave hailstorms  
In the thick bushes of the Savannah  
Across the crocodile infested  
Limpopo  
Their blood mixed with gall  
Drank from calabashes  
With incense burned for them  
To resist witches  
They crawl like snakes on their  
stomachs  
Brandishing spears of the warriors  
In the middle of the night  
When even wicked witches  
Have cowardly retired to their  
palaces  
Save the ‘Emergency’  
They crawl stealthily from nook to  
nook  
They strike a decisive blow with  
their spears  
Drip with blood of the witches  
They cry Amandla!  
Mahlangu, Msololi, Moloise....  
Ngwana wa Azania  
Wake up we are now advancing  
Mandela, Sisulu, Kathrada...  
Break those chains

Everyone shout Amandla ngawethu  
Let Azania be free  
For freedom has come  
“Afrika”

### **Mlungisi Ka Maphumulo**

This poem does not ask questions about violence or about oppression. It has a direct message for the oppressed. It is a poem that is meant to inspire them, and it is a call to action, a call to arms. It celebrates the struggle of the oppressed people and gives them a sense of pride in what they are doing. Despite the deaths that are occurring, the poet does not seem to be concerned; he dares the people to go forward. He does not see them as victims of violence, but as heroes contributing positively towards their own emancipation. He does not feel pity for those who have died and were buried and feels that no monuments or tombstones should be erected for them. The poet takes pride in the very fact that the heroes die young. I think the poet has history to back up his case, when one thinks of people like Shaka and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who died in their prime. The poet turns memorial services for those who have died into events to mobilise and revive the spirits of those who have not fallen. He mocks the enemy for suggesting that teargas and rubber bullets are for the protection of the people.

Uppermost in the mind of the poet is that he should tell the people about the heroic adventures of the guerillas, the brave fighters who have left the comfort of their homes in order to join the liberation army in exile. Their bravery is seen through their daring actions: facing hailstorms, crossing the crocodile -infested Limpopo, crawling like snakes and carrying spears in their hands. The image of the spear is an inspiring one, since the spear symbolises the heroism of the people and their liberation movement, and represents a fighting, daring spirit. The poet goes on to say that “they strike a decisive blow with their spears”. The poet uses the image of the witches to represent the evil system



And long for the jungle  
fruit.

### **Len Morgan**

This poem has an obscure meaning. One cannot state categorically what the poet means; the poem is deep and complex, and needs to be read and re-read for one to get its full meaning. The poet seems to be despondent and tired of living in a country filled with oppression and unrest. He imagines himself having left already. What he is will do once he has left is unclear, since he seems to simply be demoralized. But on a closer look, it is clear that the poet is calling the people to leave the country and join the struggle outside. This is made clear by his reference to the banks of the Zambesi, a river that was associated with the struggle because it was a crossing point for many guerillas that went into exile. The poet is making a subtle call for the people to join the armed struggle. I think this is as a result of the restriction that the poet experienced, since he lived in a country that was in a State of Emergency. His reference to “jungle fruit” reveals his intentions.

#### **4.2.8 HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE POEMS**

Whilst the war was raging on, killing countless people, some poets called the people to join the struggle, while others looked beyond the war and yearned for a better future. Some poets were looking positively and with hope to the future, they were dreaming about a future that was without any oppression, injustice and violence. The following poem deals with just those issues.

#### **A Future Poem**

And the decaying tree shall have fallen  
And we will be left

Scorched by the sun of irresoluteness  
And we will be waiting to see the seed grow  
We will be healing old wounds  
All memories will be of pain  
We will be caught in wishful thinking  
Our appetites will be whetted for vengeance  
Our beloved will be no more  
Our aspirations shall have vanished  
Our hopes will be pasted on the wall  
Of the New Order  
Which will be forged from the debris of a bitter yesterday.

### **Mlungisi Mkhize**

The poet here is forward looking and views the future with hope and determination. It is a beautifully written, lyrical poem, and is very inspiring and almost musical. The poet is also a good craftsman in the way that he has written his poem. He looks beyond the war and is already dreaming about the time when apartheid will be dead and buried, just like the victims of its war. He predicts an end to apartheid and the war. He uses the image of a decaying tree to represent apartheid. It is a deeply touching and moving poem. His use of imagery is brilliant, as he likens democracy to a growing seed. I think that when he talks about the healing of old wounds he shows his commitment and his belief in reconciliation. However, it is a pity that the poet did not live long enough to see his predictions come true and to see what the new democracy is still trying to achieve.

This is a truly remarkable poem in the sense that despite all the violence that surrounded this poet, he was so focused and was driven to such lengths to write about a future that most poets doubted could ever come to pass. It shows the clarity of his mind and this commitment to his cause to be able to write so beautifully, even in times of disorder and chaos. I think the poet gives hope to those who are involved in the struggle in aid of a just cause not to lose hope, and not to be diverted. He also advises them that those they love dearly could die in the process, but their hopes would be pasted on the wall

of the new order, that is, democracy, freedom and peace. He says that those goals will be built on a foundation of the hardships that they will have endured. This is an excellent poem that evokes all kinds of emotions.

For those who ask where the poetic value of the *Echo* poets lies, this poem goes a long way towards answering that question. The poet unleashes various types of emotions. The poem is deeply emotional, yet it remains sober minded. The poet exhibits no hatred towards the culprits of the ongoing violence, but offers a hand of friendship and of reconciliation. He is prepared to deal with pain and actually understands that pain is perhaps part of the process when one is aiming for the highest goals. He is neither bitter nor vengeful, a noble quality in the quest for reconciliation. He makes it possible for the warring factions to be able to reach each other.

### **Remember**

Remember to call at my  
grave  
When Uhuru finally walks  
The Milky Way.  
So that I may rise  
To tread familiar paths  
To see broken chains,  
Fallen prejudice  
Forgotten injury,  
Pardoned pains.

And when my eyes have  
Filled their sight,  
Do not run away for  
Temporary fright,  
If I crumble to dust again.

It will only be bliss  
If a long - awaited dream  
That bids me rest  
When Uhuru finally visits  
The Milky Way permanently...

## **K. Kheswa.**

This poem shows that while violence affected many people around Pietermaritzburg, the *Echo* poets were positive about life and were positive about the outcome of their struggle. This poem celebrates freedom before it even comes. The poet has no doubt in his mind that liberation, or *Uhuru*, in Swahili, will finally be achieved, whether he lives to see it or not, and states his last wishes to those who will still be alive to call at his grave so that “he may rise to tread familiar paths/ see broken chains/ fallen prejudice”. The poet uses his imagination and thinks about what it will be like when freedom has been achieved. His poem is also a guarantee to all those who died in the service of the struggle that they will not be forgotten. It is a brilliant, hopeful poem that looks at the past and future without any regrets.

The poet’s prediction about a future with “forgotten injury and pardoned pains” clearly shows his view that the path taken by the struggle after the attainment of liberation should not be vengeful. This is what actually happened after liberation, when no Nuremberg-type trials were held for those who promoted injustice and perpetuated oppression. The poet’s wish is to finally achieve the long-awaited dream of liberation.

### **The Hours of Gloom**

When the voiceless people scream  
with anger  
When the armless lift firearms  
When the blind begin to have their  
eyes opened  
The history of thunder shall be  
.written.

When earth turns scorched  
When day becomes night  
Wizards will be blowing the infernal  
horn.  
When theories become practices

When wind changes to clouds

When philosophies become  
performances  
When unemployment breeds tears  
Historians shall be writing the Iron  
Chapter.

When Ashdown rises up and walks  
When Imbali blooms and blossoms  
When Machibise rumbles  
With songs in unison with Eden  
I shall be clothed in a Zulu bhesu  
Roaring in African slogans carrying  
a shoba  
Like an ancient Zulu Mbongi -  
Because  
When aeroplanes descend on us  
When the eagles descend on us  
When the black cows destroy the  
lions  
That will be the hours of gloom.

### **Mlungisi Mkhize**

The poet here is talking about the future and change. He is looking forward to a different future when things will have changed. He exaggerates the importance of change and thus affirming the oppressed. Hence, he talks about what change will do once it has taken place. For instance, he sees change as something that will give power to the oppressed when he talks about the “voiceless people scream in anger.../when the armless lift firearms.../ and the blind have their eyes opened”. Of course, these are rhetorical statements and the poet uses these images in order to underline the importance of

change and the fact that when it comes it will have a momentous impact. Change here is seen as revolutionary in that it will drastically change life as we know it.

The poet also uses contrasting images, and contrasts things that are radically different in order to emphasise his points: “When day becomes night.../ when theories become practices.../ when wind changes to clouds.../ when philosophies become performances”. This use of contrasts makes one think critically about what will happen. It keeps the reader in suspense, waiting for what will happen when all these things take place. The poet predicts that historians will be writing the Iron Chapter, which is the chapter of resistance in this case. His continuous use of “when” creates a sense of urgency. He uses the poetic device of repetition normally used by *izimbongi*.

In the last stanza the poet talks about the future of Pietermaritzburg’s townships without war, and without violence. When he says “When Imbali blooms and blossoms”, he appears to be moving from the premise that Imbali (a flower) has decayed due to political violence, and is looking at the future when it achieves its original or normal form. It is the same with the other townships that he mentions. He mentions them in a changed state: “When Ashdown rises up and walks.../ When Machibise rumbles in songs.../ in unison with Eden...”. He is talking about these townships in a state of change. He sees Ashdown as having fallen, but says that once the violence is over, it will rise up and walk. Machibise and Eden (Edendale) are visualized in a state of unity in the future.

Lastly, he visualizes a different future when it will be possible to go back to traditional life and traditional values when he says: “I will be clothed in a Zulu bheshe .../ carrying ishoba.../like an ancient Zulu *imbongi*”. These traditional items for the poet represent a past that was unfettered by oppression. It represents what was good about African traditional life and he hopes that perhaps in the future this will also be possible. In the last two lines, he predicts the death of apartheid, which is

represented by lions. He predicts the final collapse of the all-powerful apartheid regime, which he suggests will be “defeated by the black cows”. He says that those will be the hours of gloom. I see this as a veiled threat of repercussions towards those who support the system of apartheid. The dominant theme of the poem is that change is inevitable and unstoppable. It gives hope that despite the difficulties and pain caused by the violence at that time, change will ultimately come and will reverse everything.

### **4.3 SOME COMPARISONS WITH IRISH POETRY**

I think there are a number of similarities between the poetry that emerged from the *Echo* poetry pages and the poetry that emerged from Ireland. The similarities firstly come from the fact that both South Africa and Ireland were colonies of Great Britain. Furthermore, Ireland has experienced civil war since 1921, similar to what happened in South Africa and Pietermaritzburg, where people from the same oppressed class were involved in a war that was largely against each other.

There are a number of Irish poems that deal with the same themes and concerns that the *Echo* poets dealt with in their poems. I will take a close look at some of the poems by William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet living during the civil war. It must be noted that this is not a comprehensive study of Irish poetry of the civil war; this comparison is only meant to highlight similarities that exist in countries that are affected by civil war, and the types of poetry that such countries produce.

### 4.3.1 WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

#### **An Irish Airman Foresees His Death**

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross;  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds;  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

Yeats wrote this poem during the First World War. He is talking about the situation of an Irish airman who is possibly going to die in a war, a war that had nothing to offer the Irish people since they were under the rule of the British at that time. The Irish airman has no passion for this war, since he does not hate the Germans whom he is fighting against, and does not love the British whom he is fighting for.

The poet here writes as an Irish nationalist to express his feelings and the dilemma that the Irish airman faces. The Irish airman is involved in what is mainly a British war, from which the Irish stand to gain nothing by participating. The poet subtly criticizes the British authority over Ireland. He is aware of the contradictions that this war holds for the Irish people: when the war is over, the Irish people will still be under British rule, whether the war is won or lost. This poem reminds me of another poem by a South African poet, HIE Dhlomo, which deals with the same issue of divided

loyalties at the end of the Second World War, when he says: “Victory Celebrations!!.../ not for me.../ Ah not for me.../Peace orations.../ Ah not for me.../ my war begins at home”. Couzens: 145) Dhlomo refers to the struggle that the South Africa people still had to wage for their freedom after the war. One can see a clear similarity here with what the Irish poets wrote. Both wrote about their dissatisfaction with their present rulers: the Irish about the British who occupied their country, and the *Echo* poets about the apartheid regime that oppressed them.

I also think that Yeats, through the figure of the Irish airman, makes a case for the individual and personal autonomy to make choices when he says “a lonely impulse of delight”, in the face of layers of political and patriotic demands which can force and impose their way into the personal sphere.

### **Things fall apart (extract)**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer,  
Things fall apart,  
The center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosened upon the world.

### **W.B. Yeats**

In this poem Yeats comments on the state of the world in general and on the changes that were taking place in Ireland at that time. It was a time when there were major changes in Europe, involving a movement from a semi-feudal system to industrialization and capitalism. He views this as a state of anarchy, where the center cannot hold. What people believed in in the past is seen to be rapidly changing in terms of the old values and beliefs. The poet does not seem to be very receptive towards these changes and views them in a negative light.

Another important Yeats poem in this context is “Meditations in Times of the Civil War”. Here the poet explores some of the fundamental issues of life. He explores closely the tensions between the personal and the political, and the individual and the nation, and the dynamics between the two complementary and competing demands.

### **Easter 1916 (extract)**

I have met them at a close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth – century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,  
And thought before I had done  
Of mocking tale or gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

### **W.B. Yeats**

This poem commemorates the 1916 rising of the Irish against the British occupation of Ireland. This is one of Yeats’s public or political poems. In writing this poem, Yeats was also trying to address his art (private) and his politics (public). He was trying to merge the two into one, into a symbiosis. The first few lines represent the comic scenario in Dublin before the Easter uprising. The people that Yeats says he met are the Irish patriots and martyrs whom he knew and had met at a personal level in Dublin pubs.

The second section of the poem deals with the personalities of the Easter Uprising before their destruction. One was a beautiful woman who had spoilt her beauty in the fervour of political agitation; another was a poet and a schoolteacher; another had shown sensitivity and political daring; and the fourth had seemed only “a vainglorious lout”. But they have all been transformed, and a terrible beauty is born. The beauty has been bought at the expense of life. The terrible beauty is war itself. He says that war has these two contrasting elements: on the one hand it is terrible because of its human and material cost; yet on the other, it is also necessary because the cause is a just one. This is a terrible dilemma that the poet faces and has to confront in a war situation.

The third section deals with the general image of a world subject to time and death. The nationalists have transcended the world by the destruction of normal human values. There is an emphasis of terror over beauty. The nationalists have contemplated the vision of a united, independent Ireland without despair.

The poem lastly deals with the complexities of life, and Yeats himself has to resolve a tension in his mind in order to generate a complex image. He had to develop an image that would encompass the event. Thus, he had to transcend himself, by giving up his own personality just like the patriots gave up their own lives. Through this poem, Yeats managed to assimilate a complex political event into the framework of a poem without actually distorting the event itself or losing its human character in abstraction.

In this poem Yeats does something similar to what the *Echo* poets did in South Africa, in the sense that both Yeats and the *Echo* poets write to praise their heroes or people who have died in the process of achieving liberation objectives. This was also found in a number of poems that emerged out of *Echo*. There were many executions that happened in Pietermaritzburg and the poets addressed

this fact, as I have already shown. I have already alluded to the fact that some poets wrote about some of these matters, although in different styles. Some were more explicit and direct, while others were more subtle and used all sorts of images in order to raise similar issues.

In Yeats poetry, we constantly see the struggle between the personal and the political and how the poet deals with this tension. This is very much like what we have seen within the *Echo* poems - a tension, a constant interrogation of the role of the poet within a violence stricken society. This tension is resolved in different ways, as I have suggested before. Different poets responded in various ways. But the dominant thread is that both Yeats and the *Echo* poets seem to come to a similar conclusion: that war is necessary if just. This reminds of what Jimmy Carter said towards the end of 2002 in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good". I think this is the feeling that most Echo poets expressed in their poems as well, highlighting the evil aspects of war with respect to bystanders and neutral people.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

In making my final remarks about the role that the *Echo* newspaper and its poetry page played, it is important to note that the creation of *Echo* as a supplement by the *Natal Witness* was a blessing in disguise, since it was not intended to be what it finally became. Its creators thought it would be a moderate publication, dealing only with family issues and entertainment; however, through hard work, dedication and the vision of its staff members, it ended up being the revolutionary publication that it was during the 1980's, and became well respected. *Echo* was at the heart of raising important community issues. It was also at the forefront of cutting edge, progressive journalism.

The role of the *Echo* poetry page cannot be underestimated. It played a crucial role during the most difficult period of the history of our country. Most poets saw the *Echo* poetry page in a positive light, as it allowed them to express their feelings about their country at a time when the majority of the people were not taken seriously by the authorities in their own country. Poets and other commentators have themselves said that the *Echo* poetry page was crucial in that it allowed young people, especially, to vent their anger at their frustrations through positive contributions rather than pursuing destructive courses of action. The political context was volatile; people were being killed daily, as we have seen in Chapter Three, but the *Echo* poetry page gave them space and provided a platform for poets to become the voices of reason by showing alternative means of fighting.

I have also shown that the *Echo* poetry page played an important role in mobilising, conscientising and educating the people. At another level, it played a crucial role in ensuring that what was happening around Pietermaritzburg was recorded through poetry, and today acts as an important historical point of reference about those times as Lakela Kaunda indicated.

The *Echo* poems that I dealt with in Chapter Four indicate that the poets were well aware of their role in a society that was afflicted by violence. They show a deep understanding and had no illusions about their role in society. They had an advanced sense of understanding about the role of the poet in a violence-ridden society. They saw their role as being part of the ongoing struggle, as well as mobilising and educating others to join that struggle.

The *Echo* poets also understood the function of poetry in expressing their feelings, be they feelings of joy, happiness, pain or sorrow. Their poetry also shows a balanced view of what was happening. The reality was captured in its totality. They were not only concerned with political issues, but they raised issues that covered all aspects of life, from the joys of parenthood, to wedding celebrations, grief, pain and death. They raised all sorts of issues from politics to religion, as well as simple issues of love.

The poetry that emerged out of *Echo* also shows that the poets tried to grapple and deal with their reality in different and varied forms. While most were faced with the urgent reality of political oppression and political violence, their responses were varied and diverse. I have tried to show in Chapter Four that people responded differently to their situations, and their responses were deeply personal. Some returned to their deeply religious backgrounds in order to deal with the situation, while others responded in purely political terms.

I think some of these poems reflect the innermost feelings of the poets, which were also shared by the communities at large, on the fact that “war” disrupted community lives, and created conditions of abnormality. The poets who were concerned with violence described the situation in the most horrific and terrifying terms. They used shocking images of blood, fire, flames and ashes. But they also asked crucial questions about the meaning of this war. They asked when it would end and whether it would have the desired outcomes when it ended. Some of the images that were used show a striking resemblance to images of other violent capitals of the world, like Belfast or Beirut.

The influence that the African tradition of oral praise poetry / *izibongo* had on the *Echo* poets has also been discussed, and it has been shown how some of the poems that were produced in *Echo* were influenced by this poetic genre. They used a number of stylistic features of *izibongo* and adopted a number of *izibongo*’s functions.

There is no doubt that the community and society that these poems came from deeply appreciated them. This can be seen through the amount of poetry that was produced in *Echo*, and the fact that a number of poets who started writing for *Echo* continued writing poems to the level where they produced their own volumes of poetry.

The value of *Echo* poetry also cannot be disputed, since the poems played a crucial role in addressing a number of the issues that faced the people. They managed to ease the pain when people faced adversity and violence. They managed to inspire people and give them hope during those times. They helped to positively channel the anger of some who might have resorted to violence, by giving them a platform and a means through which they could vent their anger.

I believe that the space that was provided by the *Echo* poetry page was not used in vain, since violence was a devastating reality and the *Echo* poetry page helped people to deal with their anger and frustrations in more constructive ways. Mbulelo Mzamane says that “SASO, BPC, BCP, and other black consciousness organizations came out with their own magazines, through which we could publish, they gave us a platform from which we could speak directly to the black community” (Mzamane 6). I believe that *Echo* provided poets with a similar platform to speak to their own people, black and white, and the result was a catharsis of some sort for the community, which was deeply embroiled in violence.

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## APPENDIX 1

### INTERVIEW WITH LAKELA KAUNDA

#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

##### SECTION 1: ABOUT *ECHO* IN GENERAL

Q: When was *Echo* established as a supplement?

A: 1979, I think, but check with Khaba.

Q: What was the rationale behind its establishment?

A: Ask Khaba, I wasn't there.

##### SECTION 2: ABOUT THE *ECHO* POETRY PAGE IN PARTICULAR

Q: When was the *Echo Poetry Corner* started and why ?

A: To allow young people in particular space for creativity, and most importantly, space to express themselves, the fears, inspirations, day to day life experiences, laughter, pain etc. During the violence in Pietermaritzburg it became an excellent record of the experiences of communities and what they thought of the war, the role of the police and the apartheid state.

Q: Who came up with the idea for the *Echo Poetry Corner* and Why?

A: Khaba Mkhize, because of the need to encourage creativity and nurture young talent, while also allowing space for youth to express themselves.

Q: When did poems start appearing in *Echo*? How were its early days?

A: Khaba may remember, or phone *Natal Witness* library.

Q: What were the main objectives of the Poetry page and how were they achieved?

A: Objectives were achieved as many young people were developed and some *Echo* writers went to become well-known, for example Kgomolemo Mokae, the author of a number of SABC TV dramas and one or two books.

Q: How did Emergency regulations affect the poetry corner?

A: The advantage of the poetry corner was that it was able to beat emergency regulations as poetic language could be coded in a manner that would not be understood by the police, so most poems could be published.

Q: What was the community response to this initiative? (Was it popular or not)

A: It was extremely popular, we battled to find space for many of the poems each week.

Q: What type of poetry came through the *Echo* poetry page?

A: Largely political expressions of frustrations with the political system, violence in the city and country, and the occasional love poem.

Q: Which areas contributed more poems (urban/rural). Where would you say most poems came from

A: Most poems came from urban areas because of accessibility, as most were hand delivered by the writers. There were also a few from rural Pietermaritzburg areas like Elandskop.

### **.SECTION 3: ABOUT THE *ECHO* POETRY CORNER EDITORIAL**

Q: Who was responsible for editing the *Echo* poetry page?

A: Piwe Mkhize and Khaba Mkhize

Q: Was there any editorial policy for *Echo* poetry Corner and what was it?

A: The regular editorial policy for instance poems would have to be well-written, not defamatory or inflammatory in any way.

Q: How did the political situation affect the editorial policy? (State of Emergency and Violence)

A: Not much, poems became a tool to beat the emergency regulations. Sometimes events that could not be reported in the news pages found space through poems.

Q: *Echo* Poetry page was discontinued around late 1989 and continued again at the beginning of 1990 Why?

A: Ask Khaba, don't remember.

Q: What would you say was the role and impact of the *Echo* Poetry Corner in the violence ridden community?

A: It allowed the community space to express its feelings, share ideas, and vent their anger and frustrations. Most importantly, the poems became an instrument of historical record. If anyone went through them now, they would surely gain an understanding of the kind of pain, suffering and frustrations as well as hopes of the people of Pietermaritzburg at the height of the violence.

IKE MOSHOETSI 02 December 2002.

## APPENDIX 2

### RESEARCH WORK QUESTIONNAIRE

#### PROPOSED QUESTIONS FOR LAKELA KAUNDA, KHABA MKHIZE AND PIWE MKHIZE

##### (A) ABOUT *ECHO* IN GENERAL

1. When was *Echo* Newspaper started as a supplement?
2. Who came with the idea, and what prompted that initiative?
3. What were its main objectives when it was started?

##### (B) ABOUT *ECHO* POETRY CORNER IN PARTICULAR

4. When was *Echo* Poetry Corner established?
5. Who came with an idea for a Poetry Corner and why?
6. When did it start? How were the early days?
7. What were the main objectives of the poetry corner and how were they achieved?
8. What was community response to this initiative?
9. What type of poetry emerged in the early days?
10. Were there any changes in the type of poetry that was submitted in the early days as opposed to later on e.g. When Pmb was affected by violence?
11. Who were the *Echo* poets and which areas were more dominant in their contributions?

##### (C) ABOUT *ECHO* POETRY CORNER EDITORIAL POLICY

12. Who was responsible for editing the *Echo* poetry page ?
13. Did *Echo* have an editorial policy for the poetry corner and what was it ?

14. How did the political situation affect the editorial policy? (Violence and State of Emergency)
15. Why was the poetry page discontinued around late 1989 and later continued in early 1990?

**(D) ABOUT THE ROLE OF *ECHO* POETRY CORNER**

16. What role did *Echo* Poetry page play in the violence-ridden society?

### APPENDIX 3

#### REPORT OF THE INTERVIEW HELD WITH PIWE MKHIZE

Piwe Mkhize was one of the poets who contributed to the *Echo Poetry Corner* and he was also a journalist for *Echo* between 1986 and 1989. On the history of *Echo*, he said that the pioneers of *Echo* were people like Khaba Mkhize and Percy Khumalo. He said Khaba was central to the direction, vision and the growth of *Echo*. He alluded to the fact that when Khaba joined the *Natal Witness*, he had no formal training in journalism, and to the fact that his success in the media world was proof of his willpower, determination and greatness. He also highlighted the fact that Khaba went on to serve the *Natal Witness* for about fifteen years, before moving to the South African Broadcasting Corporation.

He pointed out that what he could gather about Khaba was that he started his journalism career as someone who used to contribute letters to the *Natal Witness*; hence, he was noticed and later recruited to join the newspaper. He said Khaba Mkhize also came from a background of play writing; hence, he managed to write some of the brilliant plays about Pietermaritzburg like *The Bafanas* and *Pity Maritzburg*.

Piwe Mkhize said that while the *Echo* supplement started as a family newspaper, Khaba soon managed to transform it into a respected publication that was one of the most progressive and respected mouthpieces of the liberation cause, and which was most sought after in the townships. He said Khaba was interested in issues such as the state of the roads and the lack of traffic lights on certain dangerous roads in the township, and he raised these issues and challenged the authorities

about them, thus gaining the respect of the community. In essence, these were developmental issues. He said *Echo* was concerned about tackling people's problems that came about as a consequence of apartheid.

Piwe Mkhize said he joined *Echo* during 1986 after he was expelled from the Indumiso College of Education, where he had been studying for a teacher's diploma, after a student strike. He says he was encouraged by his brother, Mlungisi Mkhize, another *Echo* poet and the author of *One Calabash*, *One Gudu*, to join *Echo* as a journalist. Soon after he joined *Echo*, Khaba asked him to lead the process of establishing *Echo*'s advice office, where they could help people with the problems that they were facing. He said that the office was a major success. They dealt with many problems and helped a number of people who were in desperate situations.

He mentioned one story of a woman whose husband had worked for seventeen years for one employer, and when the husband passed away, the employer tried to rob her of her husband's pension money. They contacted the employer and he ended up having to pay the whole amount. He said they also dealt with cases involving old age pensioners who were not getting their pension money from the KwaZulu government. When such cases were reported, they would either expose such stories through *Echo* or later, when this was too common, they would simply contact the people who were responsible in that department and the problem would be solved.

According to Piwe Mkhize, *Echo* and Khaba Mkhize made some strategic and timely interventions which helped to ensure that bloodshed was avoided in Pietermaritzburg. He mentioned a time when

they exposed a planned Inkatha march that would have resulted in bloodshed had it gone ahead. He said Khaba Mkhize was probably the only journalist whom both Inkatha and the UDF could trust. He mentioned that Inkatha leaders would refuse to be interviewed by any journalist other than Khaba, which showed his importance both as a journalist and a peacemaker. Piwe also says that he was very surprised when Khaba gave him an assignment to telephone the ANC leaders in exile in Lusaka in order to conduct an interview with them, as he found that they knew about *Echo* and held it in high esteem, and respected the role that *Echo* was playing.

Regarding the role of the *Echo* poetry page, Piwe said that it was a very popular page. They received many poems, some from the townships and others from the rural areas, which points to the fact that their poetry page was representative of both parties in the conflict. He said that most of the poems were hand-delivered to the *Echo* offices. He said that the *Echo* poetry page was an important outlet, which acted as a springboard for up-and-coming writers, and that most poets saw the page as an instrument for mobilizing the masses. He mentioned that when the *Echo* page was introduced, it also led to the formation of a Poetry Club, which was short-lived due to a lack of coordination. Piwe said that it was not clear who was supposed to coordinate it; the expectation was that he would coordinate it, but he felt that he was not ready for that challenge, hence, the collapse of the club. He said that except for this club, he was unsure of whether there were any other clubs in the townships. Piwe said that most of the poets who submitted their poems to *Echo* also used to perform their poems in public at funerals and memorial services for the victims of the political violence. Towards the end of the 1980's, there was also a noticeable trend for some poets to follow the style of Mzwakhe Mbuli in both their writing and their performance.

On the subject of the discontinuation of the *Echo* poetry page at the end of 1989, Piwe mentioned that after Khaba left for overseas in the late 1980's, there was no interest shown in the *Echo* poetry page by those who took over. He also mentioned that poetry also started to compete with short stories, which were very popular at the time.

Piwe's love for poetry was inspired and developed by his brother, Mlungisi Mkhize, who was a regular contributor to the *Echo* poetry page. He says that while he contributed many poems to *Echo*, he was aware that this may have been misconstrued as dominating and monopolizing the page, since he was also working for *Echo*; hence, at certain times, he decided to use the pseudonym of Ellington Ngunezi to publish his poems. He mentioned the fact that Mlungisi firmly believed that poetry and art had a role to play in the liberation struggle; hence, he wrote in his poem dedicated to Piwe that "others shall fight/others shall write".

On the role that the *Echo* poetry page played, Piwe mentioned that the page was instrumental in educating young people about what was happening in their country. It also helped to mobilise people in the struggle against apartheid. Most importantly, he mentioned that the *Echo Poetry Corner* managed to nurture young talent, and mentioned the name of his brother Mlu Mkhize. It also managed to deal with the restrictions imposed by the State of Emergency.

IKE MOSHOETSI. 05 DECEMBER 2002

## APPENDIX 4

### REPORT OF INTERVIEW HELD WITH KHABA MKHIZE ON 4<sup>TH</sup> APRIL 2002

#### HISTORY OF THE *ECHO* SUPPLEMENT

In my interview with Khaba Mkhize, the former editor of *Echo*, we looked at a number of issues pertaining to the history of the *Echo Poetry Corner*. First Khaba took me through the history of the *Echo* supplement itself.

He said that the idea of *Echo* as a supplement to the *Natal Witness* was prompted by the events of June 16, 1976 in Soweto, where the students revolted against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black South African schools. He said that in the aftermath of June 16 1976, the owners of the *Natal Witness* realized that the apartheid laws like the Group Areas Act of 1952 created many constraints for white journalists who could not move freely in black townships and who had to ask for permits in order to be in the black townships so that they could report on what was happening there. The restrictions on white journalists also meant that reporting on events taking place in the townships also became distorted or inaccurate.

Khaba Mkhize then said that the owners of the *Natal Witness* had foresight and a long-term strategy in dealing with this issue. They decided to have black journalists who would be based in the townships and who would directly bring news to the *Natal Witness* directly from the townships. In

August 1978, the issue of employing black journalists was raised at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the *Natal Witness* in the presence of Professor Sibusiso Nyembezi, who was also a board member. He recommended Khaba Mkhize and was asked to approach him. In September 1978, Khaba started to work for the *Natal Witness*.

Khaba Mkhize said that his first months of work at the *Natal Witness* were difficult, but he persevered and worked very hard and diligently. He said that he contributed about twenty-five stories in those few months that he could not even recognize himself, because they were written in compressed language. He said that he challenged this from a journalistic point of view in the newspaper boardroom and was a constant thorn in the flesh. This created problems, because he kept on producing stories that the newspaper could not accommodate and as a way out it was decided that there should be a supplement to the *Natal Witness* that would be aimed at covering stories from the African townships. That is how the idea of *Echo* came about. The process of coming up with a name for this supplement was a long one. Initially there were thirty-two names suggested. "Echo" was one of them and as it was the most popular choice, it was ultimately chosen.

The first issue of *Echo* came out on 1 June 1979. Its first editor was Michael Sullivan and Khaba Mkhize became the first reporter, while the first photographer was Percy Khumalo, who had been a beach photographer before then. *Echo* started appearing only twice a month, but the demand became too high and the stories too many; the following year it started to appear on a weekly basis. This also meant that *Echo* had to expand its staff by hiring Thandi Moses and Gab Mthembu as freelance writers.

When *Echo* was started, the *Natal Witness* saw it as a way of “ploughing back” into the community, since the publishers of the *Natal Witness* were Shuter and Shooter, who also printed many of the books that were read in the township high schools at the time. The vision that the owners of the *Natal Witness* had for *Echo* was that it would be a “family newspaper” covering community interests such as wedding photographs, funerals, crime and sport pictures, all of which were aimed at family entertainment. Khaba Mkhize said he was not consulted about this vision; hence, he disregarded it in the nature of the stories that he contributed. His stories dealt with the issues that affected the community at the time, some of which were political issues. The fact that he was committed to the struggle was reflected in the *Echo* pages. He was also concerned about addressing the ills of the infrastructure in the townships. Issues such as the lack of proper roads and of traffic signs are examples of the topics he highlighted in those early days.

When Khaba Mkhize became a journalist, he had never received any formal training. He was chosen on the basis of his interest in the media. Before he started working for the *Natal Witness*, he had been a regular contributor to newspapers by writing opinion letters. When *Echo* was up and running, Khaba Mkhize was also given the opportunity to write a weekly column for the *Natal Witness*. In 1980, he started to receive invitations to attend and speak at workshops and seminars. In 1985, Khaba was given a golden opportunity when he was awarded a Thompson Foundation scholarship to attend a three-month course in Senior Journalism in Britain. This course empowered him with managerial as well as editorship skills.

When he came back to South Africa in May 1986, Khaba was promoted to Acting Deputy Editor of *Echo*. This was during the absence of Michael Sullivan, who was out of the country at that time. His promotion coincided, however, with the declaration of the State of Emergency by the apartheid regime. The State of Emergency was declared only forty-four days after he took over as the editor of *Echo*. The State of Emergency introduced many repressive laws and restrictions that affected journalism in South Africa. This was also the period of an outbreak of violence in Pietermaritzburg and the surrounding areas.

### **ABOUT *ECHO* POETRY CORNER**

At this time, Khaba proposed that a culture page be introduced in *Echo*. The idea was that one poem would be published every week, but with the advent of the State of Emergency, more poems started coming in and the poems were given a full page. Soon they appeared on two pages. In the beginning, however, there were complaints about the poetry page, especially from some university academics who argued that *Echo* was not a literary newspaper, and that therefore it was not supposed to publish poetry. Their complaint was that by publishing poems in *Echo*, Khaba Mkhize was “twisting the form of print media”.

According to Khaba, the introduction of the poetry page could not have come at a more opportune time, as poetry became another form of reporting on what was happening in the surrounding townships. He said that it was a tactical way of dealing with the emergency regulations and that people were able to write about their encounters with violence and get away with it. Another

advantage of having the poetry page in *Echo* was also that the people's anger and frustrations about violence were also positively channelled. People expressed their anger through writing, rather than in destructive forms like violence.

Around this time Khaba says one of the shortest poems that came to *Echo* was from Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia and the ANC Headquarters in exile. The poem was written in Zulu and this is how it went:

AUma ngifika eThekwini, bathi ngiyimpatha  
Uma ngifika eGoli, bathi nansi ibhari  
Kodwa manje lapha eLusaka, bathi lafika iQhawe  
Viva Qhawe

(When I arrive in Durban, they say I am a buffoon  
When I arrive in Joburg, they say I am a fool  
But, here in Lusaka, they say here arrives a hero  
Viva Hero)

Many poems were published and some were very controversial. Khaba Mkhize said that editing them was a "perpetual balancing act" between all the sides that were in conflict. He said that they tried by all means to publish poems that were socially responsible. They avoided poems that would

encourage people to kill each other or that incited violence. They even had what they called the “lunatic fringe” which consisted of unpublished poems that encouraged violence.

He said that he constantly got complaints from both Inkatha and the United Democratic Front (UDF) about some of the poems he published. One day he published a poem that had a message which said “*U Botha no Gatsha ababulali*” (Botha and Gatsha are killers). He said that he only realised this after having published it; the message was coded and one could only see it if one read the poem from top to bottom along the left-hand margin. Inkatha remonstrated with him and accused him of siding with the UDF, a charge that he denied. They became convinced when he showed them the collection of unpublished poems that were more direct in their encouragement of violence.

He said that their editorial policy when publishing poetry was guided by their desire to avoid violence. For instance, they would publish poems that said “*phambili nenkatha*” (forward to Inkatha) or “*zivikeleni maqabane*” (defend yourselves comrades) rather than poems that advocated that one party should take up arms against another party. He said that in their selection of poems they tried to provide a balanced view in that both sides had to be represented. They published poems written by both Inkatha and UDF supporters, and actually encouraged people to write poems regardless of their political affiliations. He said that most poems reflected or expressed the plight of the people living under oppression and in a violence-ridden society. He also said that poets were discouraged from plagiarising, and when caught, the fact was published in the poetry page.

Regarding the role of the *Echo* poetry page, Khaba Mkhize believed that it achieved a number of things such as helping to “enhance the liberation of mind”. It also “accelerated the rate of change” and “lessened violence”, since it diverted people’s anger and people channelled their anger positively. The *Echo* poetry page also galvanized resistance against the IFP and helped to develop and sharpen the political consciousness of the people. The energy of the youth was also channelled towards better things. Khaba said the poetry that emerged out of *Echo* also helped to capture and record events as they happened.

He identified a few people who were helped by *Echo* to develop their skills and who made their mark in the literary world. Amongst them he mentioned Mlungisi Mkhize, whose poems (which were first published in *Echo*) were later published as a collection: *One Calabash One Gudu*. Ben Dikobe Martins, who also contributed to *Echo*, later went on to publish his own volumes of poems: *prison poems* and *baptism of fire*. Another person who honed his skills in the *Echo* cadet school was none other than Dr Gomolemo Mokae, who also used to contribute to *Echo* and has gone on to publish a number of books.

In response to the question of why the *Echo* poetry page was discontinued at the end of 1989 and later continued at the beginning of 1990, Khaba Mkhize said that he was not particularly sure about how that happened, but that towards the end of 1988 he left the country for Canada and thought that with the change of editors it simply became a headache for the new editor.

IKE MOSHOETSI APRIL, 04 2002.

## APPENDIX 5

### *ECHO POEMS*

#### **Wafa we Ashdown Bo!**

Wafa we Ashdown Bo!  
Awusahlukile ne farm  
Usuthola abantu bephethe izikhali  
Awazi ukuthi baziphatheleni

Abantu sebeshaywa mihla namalanga  
Asisakwazi nokufunda kahle ezikoleni  
Sesifundela ovalweni  
Ngenxa yemikhonto namawisa  
Sasesithi siphumule  
Bengasekho o – Sibanibani – D  
Kwasekuthiwa usuyisilaheni we Ashdown  
Ingathi usuyisona

Ngiyayikhumbula I AYO  
Yayingakwenzi I farm  
Yayingayibambi inkunzi  
Yayingayiphathi imikhonto namawisa  
Wafa we Scm

#### **M. Mvelase, 18 September 1986**

##### **Pietermaritzburg** (extract)

With my glazed eyes  
I watched those donga beds  
of Maritzburg which were cracked  
by floods of tears  
I couldn't hear a sound  
neither a song  
I asked those donga beds where are the people?...  
The answer was loneliness and sadness  
As I climbed up the mountain  
I expected to see houses

But I saw ashes and flames from people's houses  
With my bleeding eyes  
I looked up to the sky to ask the heavens  
about the talented and gifted people of Maritzburg...  
Where is Jabu  
A woman with lion strength  
A woman with fires in her soul  
A woman with flashes in her heart ...  
As I was watching  
I saw young women with cracked souls like soil erosion  
Watching the graves of their boyfriends...

**Makhosi Khosa, 25 January 1990**

### **Lucy and Sipho**

In that thorn bush  
They sat down, then  
Hugged and kissed  
Soon he started  
Brushing her thighs  
Then hand moved upwards  
Until she cried;  
“He – e Sipho let us not please”  
“What to do then?  
Sit, looking at  
One another”  
Ah boredom –  
Lack of  
Recreational facilities.

**Piwe Mkhize 31 July 1986**

### **I Curse Those Years**

1498 I curse you  
Vasco da Gama  
I wish you did not  
Discover the sea route to India  
Jan Van Riebeeck  
I wish you were not sent  
To make that refreshment station

Dutch East India Company  
Monopoly was inherited from you  
1652 you made a black man;  
a slave  
a worker  
a proletariat  
In his native land

**Piwe Mkhize, 24 July 1986**

**The Time has Come (extract)**

Yes the time has come,  
For you and me to repent,  
To repent our sins before our God,  
To sit together at a table,  
Making the laws for peace and security,  
Of all men in this country.  
Too much blood has been spilled,  
The blood of beloved heroes,  
The blood of our ancestors in Blood River and  
Sharpeville,  
And blood of innocent children in Soweto,  
Still you don't realise the value of time;  
The change of a cruel heart.....

**Nombuso Khumalo, 05 August 1988, Zibukezulu High School**

**Just Before Embracing Dawn**

The door was banged  
House filled with authoritative voices  
Bright torches cutting closed eyeballs  
Slashing the flesh of the night  
Came fire – wielding men.

And when the tool of flames  
Pointed at me, threats unfounded  
My writings keenly scrutinized,  
New strength pervaded my entire being.

So give me pen and paper  
I will write  
Verses in the midst of torture.

**Mlungisi Mkhize, 09 June 1988**

**It's a weekend again**

It's a weekend again  
Execution time  
Daggers ready to obey orders  
Our townships like a hive  
Ever swelling with anger  
Death staring at us like a hungry wolf  
Women wail through the night  
African women.  
Bullets fly in the air  
Unleashing death  
Children lying in tatters  
Blood flowing profusely  
Fresh yet new blood  
It's yet another procession  
Sinathing!  
You have seen nothing  
The worst is yet to come  
Mountain Rise!  
You rose and the mountains echoed  
Haughtily you swallowed them.  
It's you and I  
Locked up there  
Peeping through keyholes  
Watching revolution live.  
Is this freedom?

**'Afropoet' Imbali (24 Sep. 1989)**

### **What's Happening in Maritzburg**

Tell them Khaba  
Tell them about Maritzburg  
Say the capital city is on fire  
Flames are burning like that  
Of a tractor tyre size necklace  
Above the city's head plays the cloud  
The cloud of crisis which is the outcome  
Of this burning capital city of Natal  
Day and night - no difference  
There's always darkness  
People do not recognise each other  
On both sides of the city two graveyards  
Snatching and Mountain Rise are ravenous.

Their thunder being sharpened by the smelling of blood  
Their mouths are ready for action - prey  
They are ready to swallow the dead Maritzburg  
Thus tell them Khabazela  
Purification is gaining ground in Maritzburg  
But others fear that the outcome is nonsense.  
It is millions of millions of kilograms of ashes.

**Bonginkosi Bafanyana Ndlovu. 18 February 1988.**

### **The Streets of Pietermaritzburg**

You are wondering what is happening in town  
You were built for vehicles to move  
But now you are a battlefield for fools  
If you have something to say  
Would you tell me the reason for this  
People walk on you having weapons on their hands

Police are up and down trying to catch  
The culprits but you are divided  
into many different streets  
People die day by day in you  
Aren't you tired to see such foolishness  
Hey, Retief Street, how many people  
Do you kill in one year?  
You are looking like you are the worst killer in town  
Hey, West Street, how many people  
Do you kill in one year?  
I regard you as the second best killer.  
Hey you, East Street, how many people  
Do you kill in a day?  
Hey you, Victoria Street, why do you always  
kill people? Aren't you feeling lonely at night?  
Even you, Church Street, the most beautiful  
Street of town, you are also a killer.  
Why do you let killers walk on you?  
Call the police to look after you everyday.  
Otherwise you will be regarded as killing streets.

**Musa Ndlela. 26 July 1989.**

### **Death on my doorstep**

After seeing their targets  
They alighted from the bus  
And gave them chase;  
Then they saw you standing in your home yard  
As their targets ran past the gate,  
They thought you were one of them,  
Gave you chase  
They caught you, then they killed you  
O Lins, Lins  
A few minute later  
You laid on the street  
Serene in rivulets of blood.  
I know you've met Mdayisi,

Tana, Sfiso, Mlu, Magugu, Hleke, Nhlanhla,  
And the rest;  
I am sure you have revised  
Your respective brutal deaths.  
And there is no complaining  
About anything anymore.  
And there is not eating, nor smoking,  
No drinking, no cinemas,  
And there is no womanising  
O Lins, Lins  
Your movement to heaven  
Was a reminder that we are  
Not for this world,  
We all have to be covered with  
Our last blankets someday,  
Soil.  
O Lins, Lins,  
You have reached a stage of tranquility and eternity.

**Ellington Ngunezi. 03 September 1989.**

### **Blessed are the dead**

For they will :  
    Never be suspected  
    Never be chased,  
    Never be unmanageable  
    Never be transformed into firewood  
For they are now  
    Protected from adversaries  
    Saved from opponents  
    Secured from the persecution of this world  
Blessed are those who are dead.

**B.M. Themba.** (Malan 320)

**The times of ideology** (extract)

“When men becomes ashes through flames  
Of burning tyres and liquid tubes  
When air becomes polluted by smoke  
Of blasted houses and roasted flesh  
The time of ideology is when mourners  
Cry for their lost lovers  
I mean these are the times  
Time of ideology ! Ideology ! Ideology !”

**Happy Majola 28 August 1986.**

### **No Monuments**

No Monuments  
Nor Gravestones !  
For those who die in the pride of  
their youth  
For heroes die young  
No wreaths for their graves  
Nor pall bearers  
For those who dare to stand up to be  
counted

Save commemoration services  
To revive the spirit of the nation  
Heavily “protected” with teargas  
and rubber bullets  
They laid down their lives  
To make meaningless freedom  
meaningful  
They brave hailstorms  
In the thick bushes of the Savannah  
Across the crocodile infested  
Limpopo  
Their blood mixed with gall  
Drank from calabashes  
With incense burned for them  
To resist witches  
They crawl like snakes on their  
stomachs



The sleep of freedom

Do not wake me  
Leave me to dream  
My dream of departure  
From a land seething in  
Unrest and injustice  
Void of pity  
For I have grown weary  
Of eating the brine  
And long for the jungle  
fruit.

**Len Morgan 03 July 1986.**

### **A Future Poem**

And the decaying tree shall have fallen  
And we will be left  
Scorched by the sun of irresoluteness  
And we will be waiting to see the seed grow  
We will be healing old wounds  
All memories will be of pain  
We will be caught in wishful thinking  
Our appetites will be whetted for vengeance  
Our beloved will be no more  
Our aspirations shall have vanished  
Our hopes will be pasted on the wall  
Of the New Order  
Which will be forged from the debris of a bitter yesterday.

**Mlungisi Mkhize 11 September 1986.**

### **Remember**

Remember to call at my  
grave  
When Uhuru finally walks  
The Milky Way.  
So that I may rise  
To tread familiar paths  
To see broken chains,  
Fallen prejudice  
Forgotten injury,  
Pardoned pains.

And when my eyes have  
Filled their sight,  
Do not run away for  
Temporary fright,  
If I crumble to dust again.

It will only be bliss  
If a long - awaited dream  
That bids me rest  
When Uhuru finally visits  
The Milky Way permanently...

**K. Kheswa. 26 June 1986.**

### **The Hours of Gloom**

When the voiceless people scream  
with anger  
When the armless lift firearms  
When the blind begin to have their  
eyes opened  
The history of thunder shall be  
.written.

When earth turns scorched  
When day becomes night  
Wizards will be blowing the infernal  
horn.  
When theories become practices

When wind changes to clouds

When philosophies become  
performances  
When unemployment breeds tears  
Historians shall be writing the Iron  
Chapter.

When Ashdown rises up and walks  
When Imbali blooms and blossoms  
When Machibise rumbles  
With songs in unison with Eden  
I shall be clothed in a Zulu bhesu  
Roaring in African slogans carrying  
a shoba  
Like an ancient Zulu Mbongi -  
Because  
When aeroplanes descend on us  
When the eagles descend on us  
When the black cows destroy the  
lions  
That will be the hours of gloom.

**Mlungisi Mkhize. 24 July 1987.**