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Mzwakhe Mbuli: The People's Poet

Abstract

Poems and Interview

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Mzwakhe Mbuli: The People's Poet

Mzwakhe is a household name in South Africa. He is a prominent and successful participant in the political culture or the people's culture which centres around political meetings and mass funerals. One of the legacies of the Soweto uprising in 1976 was that writers' groups were formed to give popular expression to the the people's cultural values and to express the new mood of defiance in terms of politically critical theatre and oral poetry, or 'read poetry'. The purpose of this was – and is – to take culture to the people and to explore their problems, concerns, antagonisms and protests in forms which are readily available to them. In terms of theatre this means workshopping agitprop, open space type plays, on street corners, in community halls, townships or on farms, and in terms of poetry it means reciting poetry to large gatherings, such as student or trade union meetings, funerals of apartheid victims or mass rallies. These meetings are always of a political, and often, of a highly emotionally charged nature. The task of the poet is to catch the mood of the group and to express their anger or sorrow in a linguistic form which is enhanced, so as to set it apart from other public oral genres, such as political speeches, slogans, chants or sermons, but which at the same time is easily accessible. 'Read-poetry is for the People', says the poet Dumakuda ka Ndlovu. 'It gives them a message to take home. It is simpler than written poetry, so that even a layman can understand it.'¹ Simplicity, and a message which carries anger, sorrow and defiance are the characteristics of Mzwakhe's poetry. The vocabulary is mostly that of political slogans and clichés, a ready made kit of pop art images, carrying instant messages way beyond their literal meaning. These 'signs' are organised into long, formulaic, aggregative incantations which are delivered at high speed and in rhythmic fashion. Mzwakhe's poem 'I am the Voice of International Anger', which he recited to an enthusiastic crowd of fourteen thousand at the national launch of the United Democratic Front in August, 1983, exemplifies these characteristics.

Ig-no-rant
I am ignorant
I am ignorant
I have been fortunate
In the business of ignorance

I am South African
Without Residency
I can read,
I can write,
However ignorant I may be
I know Mandela is in Pollsmoor jail
Though I do not know why.
Oh, people of Africa
Help me before it is too late
Emancipate me from my ignorance.
For freedom is getting rusty
On the pavements of oppression.

In addition to performance and verbal skills a personal history of resistance, in fact, heroism, is an important factor in the status of the poet. Mzwakhe has survived four assassination attempts and has been detained eight times since 1976, including six months in solitary confinement in 1988, during which time he composed and memorised the poems which became the album, *Unbroken Spirit*. Mzwakhe is politically active in the UDF and was elected media officer in the Transvaal in 1985; he has also taken part in the activities of the South African Musicians' Alliance (SAMA), and he is now vice-president of the Congress of South African Writers. In July 1991 he visited Denmark as part of an extended tour of Europe, USA and Canada and the following interview took place during his visit.

NOTE

1. Quoted by Kelwyn Sole, 'Oral Performance and Social Struggle in Contemporary Black South African Literature' in *From South Africa. New Writing, Photography and Art* edited by David Bunn and Jane Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.259.

INTERVIEW

Mzwakhe Mbuli was interviewed by Kirsten Holst Petersen in Aarhus, Denmark, on 6 July 1991.

I went to your concert last night, and let me tell you, you are in the presence of an admirer. What is it like to be famous?

It feels great to be famous, especially when I listen to what people think and say about me and how much they become impressed and appreciative when I recite poetry and sing. Yes, it is something that makes one feel good.

You are not only a singer, like a Western pop-star, you are also a symbol of the resistance in South Africa. Is that an extra heavy weight to carry?

Well, you know, I am called the people's poet, but again, something is happening here. I am becoming a singing poet, but I know my limits, and I don't overstep them. I know that there is a leadership which is authentic and genuine, people like Nelson Mandela, so I don't even think that I am in that position. It is just that I have another role, just as the church has one role, and in sport some people have a role, I have another role in culture, and in this case it is poetry and music, so obviously I have a message, I don't sing or say empty words. I don't sing songs about 'squeeze me, baby'. I have a message, and it is not only confined to South Africa.

Obviously, if you were to stand for election in South Africa, a lot of people would vote for you. Are you going to become a politician in independent South Africa?

No, I am not prepared to become a politician; I want to continue with the role I already have and to improve my career. My band is two years old. I formed it in 1989, and I want to work on new songs, producing albums and albums, performing all over the world. So you see, I still have a very big task ahead. I am very determined, and this has made me tell myself psychologically that the world is not big, really, and I will be able to cover a big distance in a short length of time. I have to take it from zero, because I may be popular at home, but in certain countries abroad I am not known, but I have recorded something new which I believe is a world-wide devastating album which will really boost my image.

You choose oral literature rather than the written form as the model for your poems. Why is that?

It is an African poetic tradition, so it means that the roots of that poetry have always been oral, even if people can read. I prefer to be a live performer, not a reader, not to look at the book, but to look at the people and communicate so that even my hands are expressive; it is my whole being which becomes involved. What I am saying is that our traditional literature is oral. The poets used to appear before chiefs and kings, and they used to do that without writing anything down or reading it out, so my poetry could be an update of that. The tradition has a dynamism, it is not static, it has changed and developed.

And those poets used to sing songs, not only of praise, but also of criticism.

Yes, there is no limit in terms of songs. That is why one song I sing from the beginning to the end, another song I only sing once, then I recite poetry, and here I use different styles. I have made it a point, that if I have a hundred poems they are all different in style. If I have forty or twenty songs they are different in style, so I don't create repetition. There are people whose music is always the same. If you have listened to the first two or three songs the rest are the same. The beat in the rest is the same. Mine are not like that.

Are you what the English would called a dub singer?

No. I am something not far away from that, but I am not a dub singer or a dub poet or rap singer, no. When you listen to my music, it is not somebody else's music, it is original. I am not from any institution of higher learning in terms of music. These things come from the head, the mind, the words spring up from everywhere. Critics can tell that this is funk, that is rock, this is rap, but it is difficult to classify my music. I use many different types of arrangements. I have realised that my voice works well without instrumental backing, but it also works well with choral backing and with a cappella type arrangements. It works, too with reggae beat, with traditional instruments, with percussion only, and the different arrangements work better when mixed with my poetry.

What are your musical roots?

I do not come from the West, I come from Africa, so my style, even if it is my own, is African. That is where my roots are. It is in my blood. It does not matter which country you come from, as long as you are from Africa, you are an African. However, I see myself involved in music, and music is universal. My music is not confined to people in Africa, or only listened to by people in Africa. I am here in Scandinavia now, and I have also been to Holland and Germany, and the response is always the same, irrespective of the language. I have something which I am sure that people

will understand. Even at home there are those that speak a language which is not Zulu, but they will say 'Well, much as I do not understand those poems in Zulu, I still like them.'

When you perform you also dance? What are the dances you do?

They are traditional dances, resembling most of all Zulu dancing, but really, what I do is African dancing. There is so much dancing in Africa. Yes, I do many things. I write, I compose, I dance, I sing, I recite; it just happens to be like that. And I have a voice which people claim is a bit different, in fact, some say it is unique. Other people have thick voices because they smoke, but I do not smoke. Mine is a natural voice, it is a gift.

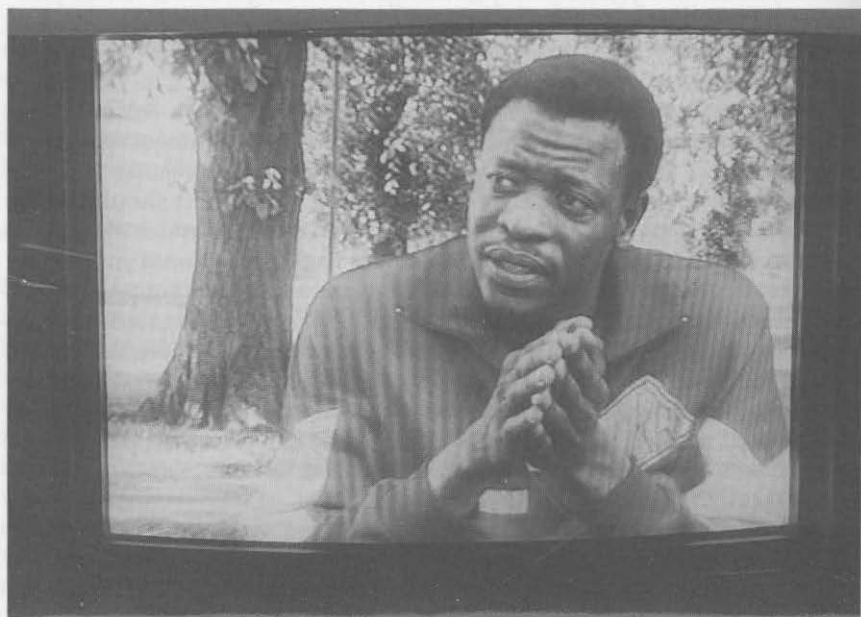
You said earlier that you were not just a singer, but a singer with a serious political message. Your activities have landed you in jail several times. Could you describe what it is like to be arrested and what happens.

To be arrested is not a nice experience, especially in South Africa. There is a knock at the door; it always happens in the early hours of the morning. The police knock down doors with rifle butts, they jump into the house, they are like gorillas, they set up a reign of terror. It should not be accepted in any part of the world. The house becomes under siege, you are not given a chance to breath, to answer back, you cannot move, you must keep quiet, you have guns pointed at you. And your wife and children go through the same trauma. Later, you are interrogated for eight to ten hours, standing naked, splashed with water, blindfolded. It is a painful situation. You are then placed in a cell of detention and you stay for months and months. Later you are released. Let me tell you something which is still fresh in my mind. In 1988 I spent half a year in prison, and when I was released the officer in charge said to me, 'You must say "thank you", because if it wasn't for me, you would have been here longer. I am doing you a favour, so go home and stop all this nonsense.' You see, that made me very angry. You don't spend half a year in prison and go through the despair, and the determination too, and then say 'thank you' when you are released.

What were you charged with?

I have never been charged. On March 17th, 1989 there was another bomb plant. The police raided my home, and they claimed to have found two grenades. The trial took until February 5th this year, so it is two full years of going to court, and after all that I was acquitted. I did not run away, I was always in the court, but the police who claimed to have found the grenades never appeared in court. The charges were just a lie, orchestrated by the police. This is a situation which I have read about from Nigeria and

Zimbabwe; when an artist is a problem for the regime they raid his home and claim to have found marijuana or cocaine or whatever, but fortunately I don't drink or smoke, so the government has a problem. People are saying that De Klerk is changing things, but that is not so. I have had endless passport refusals, and even now my passport is not valid for five years like it is for white South African citizens. We are still the target of the regime. But I am beginning to realise my power. People like me are a problem to the regime, and I have such extraordinary power that it is actually shaking the foundations of the regime.



Mzwakhe Mbuli

Mzwakhe Mbuli

THE CROCODILES

I am the product of hunger
I am the product of social injustice
I represent victims of tyranny
And I come from apartheid land.
I recite for a nation
I represent a nation
A peace-loving nation
A nation that never enjoyed freedom.
My land is blood-stained.
From time immemorial
Human corpses have replaced pockets of cement
In building the future of the post-apartheid land.

Nevertheless, no oppressive might is eternal.

How hard and tormenting it is
To write about the pain and not the joy
How hard and tormenting it is
To write about the slavery and not the freedom.
When shall I write about the daffodils?
How can I write about the beauty of nature
When the ground is daily soaked with the blood of the innocent?

Nevertheless, Agostinho Neto
The late poet president
Used both the pen and the machine
To achieve the liberation of Angola

They build like crocodiles in the river
And no one can find the crocodiles inside the river
South Africa, why therefore bide time
When the crocodiles are against you?
Why give chase to the lizards
When the crocodiles are against you?
The minority may not rule over the majority forever.
When the world is for justice and peace
South Africa is for reforms.
When ancient slavery was abolished

The slaves were set free
When the pass laws were declared abolished
Freedom loving South Africans
remained in bondage.
Nevertheless, the dove of peace
Also belongs to us in the South.
No regime can press down
The hot lid of a boiling pot forever.
The land is the key to social order
And the tradition of 'no surrender'
Is the name of the game
To total emancipation.
The tradition of 'never give up'
Is the name of the game
To total democracy.