

2002

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Liz Gunner

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Recommended Citation

Gunner, Liz, A Royal Woman, an Artist, and the Ambiguities of National Belonging: The Case of Princess Constance Magogo, *Kunapipi*, 24(1), 2002.

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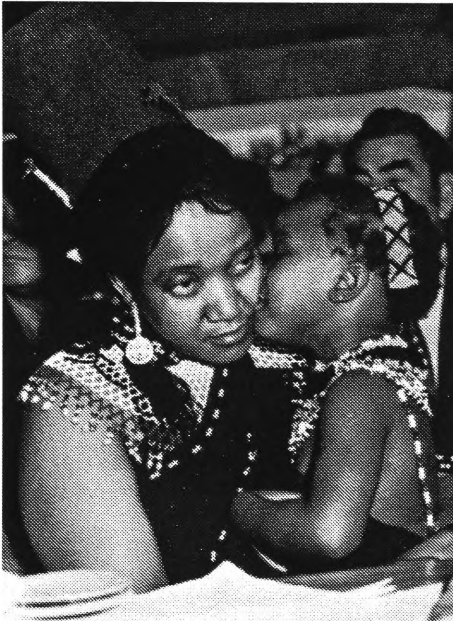
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Abstract

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LIZ GUNNER

A Royal Woman, an Artist, and the Ambiguities of National Belonging: The Case of Princess Constance Magogo



A momentous event on the South African performing arts scene takes place in Durban's Playhouse Opera on May 4, with the world premiere of the new Zulu opera, *Princess Magogo*. (Press Release, Durban, South Africa, April 2002)

'New Zulu opera a fascinating event' — 'A brand new opera being broadcast live to other parts of the world is heady stuff here in KZN.' (Margeret van Klemperer, *Natal Witness* May 6, 2002)

'...the highlight of the event was the timeous awarding of the posthumous lifetime achievement to Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu, the mother of the Home Affairs Minister Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who accepted the award on her behalf.' (Mduduzi Dlamini on the 8th South African Music Awards ceremony. *City Press* May 5, 2002)

Why should an opera on the life of a royal woman, renowned as a composer and performer, with an access to an extraordinarily rich archive of Zulu culture, be hitting the headlines at this particular juncture in South Africa, eight years on from its first free elections in 1994? The opera, called simply, *Princess Magogo*, was staged by Opera Africa for three brief nights in Durban in early May 2002, with the diva of South African singers, Sibongile Khumalo, playing the title role. Her father, Mzilikazi Khumalo, composed the music and the librettist was the writer, Themba Msimang. The versatile Thembi Venturas directed the opera, and the flamboyant set and costumes were the work of Andrew Verster. The focus on a woman flies in the face of the accumulation of the construction of Zulu identity around male figures, and around a particular kind of machismo and patriarchy, a process, which as Carolyn Hamilton has incisively pointed out in her fine study of Shaka, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical*

Invention (1998), was one in which both settlers and indigenous intellectuals and image makers participated. If, as Hamilton argues, the figure of Shaka has become increasingly established as a central metaphor in South African politics, then what role could be played in the shaping of current ideas by a new art work which draws on Zulu history — albeit more recent history — from a consciously gendered perspective?

My intention in this essay is not to comment a great deal on the opera, but to provide an insight into the complex ways in which the historical Princess Magogo can indeed be seen as a crucial figure at a moment of flux and uncertainty in the national imaginary. She can be read in a number of ways, and is without doubt a polysemic figure. My interpretation will focus on the way in which she allows access to another possible configuring of what shaped Zulu identity in the past, and so gives a different view on how such an identity could be articulated, in the present and in the future.

The Durban Playhouse, the venue for the opera, has previously opened its doors to a long and successful run of the veteran dramatist Mbongeni Ngema's musical, *Zulu*, in 2000 and again in 2001. Also, shortly before the new opera, the Playhouse showed the musical, *The Spear is Born*, by the relatively unknown writer and actor, F.R. Mhlongo. The title used the shorthand of his most famous praise name, 'The Spear' (*iLembe*) to signal its intention to focus in a very direct way on the life of King Shaka, 'The Spear', who forged the short-lived Zulu kingdom in a brief decade (1818–1828) before being murdered by his half-brother and successor, Dingane. The contrasts in approach to the subject of the Zulu by these two musicals is itself a fascinating insight into generational differences vis-à-vis contemporary readings of this controversial hero figure. Both musicals present readings of the intangible but ever-present 'Zuluness' that is a feature of both regional (in the province of KwaZulu-Natal — 'KZN') and national life in South Africa. Ngema's sprawling, historical story, with its unbridled cultural nationalism beamed mainly at current black audiences searching for a rooted present identity, is studded with energetic and captivating dance numbers reminiscent of his earlier struggle era musical, *Serafina*. The narrative turns on the fortunes of the last independent Zulu king, Cetshwayo (father of Dinuzulu), his defeat of the British at Isandlwana in January 1879, and the British victory at his capital of Ulundi six months later.

The focus on the figure of Shaka in the musical by F.R. Mhlongo presents him as an icon of the continent, a hero for the modern age, but also a figure linked to the younger generation. Shaka is played by a *young* man; it is youth and the struggles of youth in an era of crisis that emerge as a key concern, closely shadowing the more conventional narrative of the hero. Perhaps this somewhat unexpected twinning explains the predominance of young people in the packed audience on the night when I attended a performance at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, on the University of Natal's Durban campus, in March 2001, shortly



Photo of Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu in *Petticoat Pioneers: Women of Distinction*, comp. Ruth Gordon.

before the group set out on its 'world' tour. There may have been other reasons as well, for its popularity. It chose to highlight the popular musical form known as *maskanda*, thought to have grown from what was originally a women's form of solitary song (James 72) which allows modern troubadour figures to sing in a form that is recognisably contemporary and yet clearly draws on 'tradition'. Its practitioners, the most famous of whom was the male singer, Umfaz' Omnyama [Black Woman], whose early death from cancer in April 2001 occasioned a near

national mourning and a huge funeral in the country town of Nongoma, comment eloquently and often trenchantly, on the modern situation both locally and globally. Both these musicals, however, assume that the grand narratives that help to give people a sense of belonging are in some important way fixed on heroic figures — Shaka, forger of a kingdom, and in the case of Ngema's musical, the heroic, if reluctant, colonial resister, King Cetshwayo father of Dinuzulu.

An opera with its focus on *Princess Magogo*, daughter of Dinuzulu and granddaughter of King Cetshwayo, could bring to the fore a rather different set of questions. What space for a new discourse on women and national belonging might be signalled through the opera? What imaging of the past and present might the new opera on Princess Magogo give its audiences? Will the fact that it is opera and not a musical mean that it automatically moves into a realm of high culture that removes it from being part of a broader popular culture: the spices, smells and cacophony of the market space, the hectic taxis and their rude drivers, the haunting, strident guitar music and the urban-rural singers such as the late Umfaz' Omnyama, who strive to capture all that, and more? What set of discourses will it attempt to be part of? And who will constitute its main audiences? Will Princess Magogo become another national icon, a gendered icon, alongside the sorrowful Saartje Baartman, whose bones the French government returned to South African shores on May 3rd 2002, the day before the *Princess Magogo* opera opened for its world premier in Durban? Who will fight to own her? And will there be a winner? Will she be a contested figure, claimed by many different sections of the national, social and even global imaginary?

* * *

Who *was* the historical Princess Magogo? Born in 1900, the year in which her father Dinuzulu returned from exile on St Helena, she was a member of the Zulu royal house, sister of Solomon kaDinuzulu, the man who was considered their king by the Zulu people, although the South African state never granted him that title. Edward, the Prince of Wales met him in June 1925 when he made a short trip to the small town of Eshowe, in (the former kingdom of) Zululand as part of his great African tour. 'King' Solomon was there to meet him, looking every inch a modern (African) monarch, with his pith helmet, his smart military accoutrements and his leopard skin draped on his shoulders pointing to his signalling of his Western and his African inheritances. The young poet and novelist William Plomer, who was then working in Eshowe, observed that the assembled Zulu regiments gave their own monarch such a show of welcome, that the king-in-waiting of the still largely intact British Empire was quite overshadowed (Plomer 151).

The thoughts, or memories, of the young Princess Magogo, who would surely have been present on that occasion, have not, as far as I am aware, ever been noted. Was she in the royal party? Possibly not. This was, to all intents and purposes a man's affair. The ideology of empire which so deeply embedded the unequal power relations of men and women did not easily allow women access to the

public sphere; moreover a collusion of patriarchal interests, those of the coloniser and the colonised, marked many of the social transactions of empire, in India, as Ania Loomba has pointed out (169), as well as in Africa. The collusion in this instance of colonised African men, in particular older men, with colonial patriarchy, has made it extremely difficult to extract evidence that there might at one time have been a more equal dispensation of power between the sexes. Any sense that women might at some time in the past have been proactive players in the Zulu polity, was not present in public accounts of 'Zuluness' at the time of the Eshowe gathering. In 1925, as the young Solomon kaDinuzulu, himself an embattled colonial subject, was struggling to wield together a new cohesion around a Zulu nationalism that embraced both elements of tradition and modernity — as his costume at Eshowe made clear — his sister, Constance Magogo, had already been promised in an important political marriage to the grandson of Mnyamana Buthelezi, in an attempt to heal a rift between two powerful groups in the old Zulu polity (see Marks 1986; Cope 1993). Her own feelings were put aside as she agreed to marry the man chosen for her by her brother. As she remarked in an interview in 1982, to Nicholas Cope and J.C. Dladla (with no trace of rancour recorded):

I had made my choice elsewhere. I was taken away from my fiancé by Solomon with his own hands. [She recounts how a number of the royal girls were called into the presence of Solomon and his councillors and asked to name their sweethearts. She does not name hers and instead is one of the group who agrees to 'put up our top knots' and so make it clear that they were eligible for marriage. She continues:] We three agreed, not knowing whether ... we would be given men with head rings, going grey. (Cope and Dladla 323, 324)

Instead she was given in marriage to Chief Mathole Buthelezi, who was of the same age group and the same regiment as her brother. She became his tenth wife (eventually the list of wives was twenty) and, later, mother of the boy who was to become Chief Gatsha Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Minister for Home Affairs in the present South African Government, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, and a deeply controversial figure in South African politics since the late 1970s (see Maré and Hamilton 1987).

It would have been quite possible for Princess Magogo to have slipped into the anonymity that has marked the (non)identity of other twentieth-century, and late-nineteenth-century royal Zulu women and the wives of key traditional leaders, such as Mathole Buthelezi. However, the sheer power of her performative eloquence plus, perhaps, the influence of her son, ensured that her profile was different. The very hardships of her early life and the way in which they ensured that she was not plucked from the rich if fragmented idioms of a vernacular culture into the life of a member of the mission-educated elite, may have helped in the acquisition of her astonishing range of cultural repertoire and its historical depth. In the 1982 interview to which I refer earlier, the princess spoke briefly of the

unsettled and fear-filled early life which she and her two royal brothers endured after their father, Dinuzulu, had returned from exile on St Helena, to the humiliation of diminished status, an uncertain future and as 'chief' of a fraction of what was historically the old Zulu kingdom (see Guy 1982). The turmoil of her early years increased after the onset of the Bambatha rebellion in 1906 when Bambatha Zondi led a short but bloody uprising against colonial Natal. During that time, the three royal children (Solomon, her half-brother David and herself) were often moved secretly at night, and lived in constant fear of their lives. 'King' Dinuzulu was charged with conspiracy in the Bambatha rebellion in 1908, a charge he denied, but he was again sent into exile, this time to the Transvaal where he died in 1913 (Marks 1970, 303).

After the death of both her royal parents, it was her brother Solomon who tried to help supply her most basic needs. Princess Magogo's recollection of those early years conjures up images of danger and poverty:

I had no mother. I was troubled by many wives [of my father's], sixty-six of them. Solomon [would] go around pleading for me that they should sew up bad [seconds] yard goods for me to dress in.... He would go around people's homes and persuade the people to sew for his sister.... Oh, I know all about hardship. However it is good because it makes a person wise. (Cope and Dladla 323, 324)

Princess Magogo's troubled early life, and loss of her mother did not, ironically, isolate her from the company of other royal women, the mothers of her father Dinuzulu, and her many grandmothers, the widows of her grandfather, King Cetshwayo. It was in the company of these women — however difficult the proximity may have been at times — that Magogo absorbed the forms of cultural production that give such a deep insight into the complex subjectivities of Zulu women in the earlier precolonial and the colonial era. It is when the material disseminated by Magogo is put alongside other fragments of cultural insights, and asides, that a possible different reading of the balance of genders and their interaction in the articulation of Zulu culture begins to emerge.

* * *

I met Princess Magogo for the first time in February 1976 at the Buthelezi family home of KwaPhindangene (Come Back Again!) at Nkonjeni near Mahlabathini in northern KwaZulu. Then in her seventy-sixth year, she had a formidable reputation as a singer, poet and composer working within the poetic and musical frames of the forms she had absorbed from her girlhood onwards. I sat and rather tremblingly interviewed her, along with the three chief Buthelezi *izimbongi* (praise poets), Hezekiah and Nkomiyaphi Buthelezi and Mgezeni Ndlela, while her son, Chief Buthelezi, listened intently, made a few interjections and clearly enjoyed the occasion enormously (Gunner 1989, 12–37; Gunner and Gwala 88–97; 112–125). What emerged from the meeting was, firstly, the extent of her knowledge, and her active involvement in the broad range of sung and



Princess Constance Magogo kaDinuzulu playing the ugubhu, from the oil painting by H.R. Dent reproduced in Rycroft 1975a.

spoken forms that at one time comprised Zulu cultural production. It was also, a remarkably ungendered knowledge. She was supremely confident in her role as artist; she began by reciting the royal Zulu praises, *izibongo*, the poems which mark the careers and personalities of their bearers, and travel through time, carried

by those skilled in the rhetoric of the form, accessing social memory in a swift and powerful way, and evoking the past in the present (Cope 1968; Gunner 1984). The Buthelezi *izimbongi* listened respectfully as the princess recited the *izibongo* of the late-eighteenth-century figure, the Zulu leader, Senzangakhona kaJama, father of Shaka. It was clear that they knew they were in the presence of one at least as skilled as themselves in the difficult art of praising.

After her powerful rendition of the royal Zulu *izibongo*, the form of poetry so clearly linked in the public domain to political power and ideology, to lineage and to status, the princess turned to another area of the poetry of identity — royal women's praise poems. A few royal women's praise poems had been documented by the mid-1970s but they were clearly seen as belonging on the periphery of the royal praise poems. They were largely to be found tucked away in works such as Samuelson's *Long Long Ago*, where the *izibongo* of Zingelwayo, a mid-eighteenth-century figure, grandmother of Senzangakhona, are presented without any specific social or political context (Turner 1986; Coullie 1999). Mtoniya was: 'The She-Elephant who has her front covered with the paunch of a leopard/ While other married women have their front covered with the normal child-sling' (Samuelson 255).

Certainly, a number of early royal women were (as Mtoniya's *izibongo* imply), both powerful and formidable; Mnkabayi, aunt of Shaka, by whom people in the Zulu kingdom used to swear for some time after Shaka's death, and who had control of the Bebebe regiment and the military base of the aQulusi, must rank among the best known of the early royal women, and her *izibongo* give a chilling sense of her powers: 'The Cunning One ... Morass of Menzi ... that caught people and finished them off' (Cope 1968, 179, 172–73). Royal mothers — or widows, in a number of cases — had control of important *amakhanda* (military bases). Mpikase, King Dingane's mother was in charge of the military base at Khangela (Cowley 51), while Queen Mkabi (born c.1760), the great wife (and widow) of Senzangakhona, had charge of the large Isiklebeni homestead, and was also in charge of Shaka's Jubingqwanga regiment at the same site (Cowley 83), and there were others. Yet in spite of their public status and responsibilities, the *izibongo* of such women (with the possible exception of Mnkabayi) were not recited in the grand arenas when *izimbongi* held centre stage at events such as the installation of royalty, or before battle, or at the visits by dignitaries of other nations, and so on.

What Princess Magogo presented, when she turned to the *izibongo* of royal wives and mothers, was not the grand stage on which public affairs were played out, the battles won, the lists of hapless victims which mark, for instance, the stirring and heroic *izibongo* of Shaka (Cope 1968, 88–117). Instead she presented elliptical sketches that caught the intricate minutiae of domestic and emotional life and at some points a finely tuned wit, turning on household matters. The genre was the same, but its execution and focus appeared to be different. Suddenly, out of the silence, came two cameos of the lives of nineteenth-century royal women.

With them, a whole area of Zulu cultural life, almost forgotten in the endless images of battle on which so much insider and outsider imaging of 'the Zulu' has focused, came into view. Ngqumbazi of the Zungu clan, mother of King Cetshwayo (and a wife of King Mpande), was caught by her contemporaries, circa 1845, in these allusive frames:

Close Peerer,
 Swallows' Clothes,
 The Needy One at the grain basket.
 She stints herself,
 She went even further and stinted the Royal One himself.
 Helper of those far away, the close at hand cry with her. (Gunner 1989, 28)

Ngqumbazi was, Princess Magogo explained, extremely tight-fisted with food and as a result everyone around her suffered, including 'the Royal One Himself'. She was also someone who felt the cold. Her personification as 'Swallows' clothes' had its genesis (we were told) in the fact that the queen liked to wrap herself up at all times, to keep warm. She wore a black shawl, and two of the corners would hang behind her like the forked tail of a swallow. The explanation, unfolding its 'secret joy' for those not in the inner circle of knowers, pointed up one of the key poetic features of Zulu sung and spoken genres, namely the aesthetics of allusion and the pleasure of tracking a metaphor to its referent that would often contain a kernel of narrative that tied into the community's social or historical life and its knowledge of itself.¹ Sometimes, too, a praise name can metonymically provide an insight into key components of social structure that are hard to discern in other ways. The reference to 'the grain basket', in an almost casual way, points to women's key role in pre-capitalist Nguni society as the producers of cereal, and of the production and reproduction of the household unit, even though their labour power, like their fertility, was ultimately controlled by men (Guy 1990, 35). It is even possible to see, in the laughing half-ironic reference to stinting 'even the Royal One himself', a recognition of this deeper social power which underpinned the social order even though women were subject to male control.

If such a poem, which circulated as part of a much wider body of sung and spoken poetry on the subject of identity, provided a glimpse of the daily private life of royalty and the deep axes of the society, the second set of *izibongo* that the princess recited had its own linked but different revelation. The *izibongo* for Nomvimbi Mzimela, mother of King Dinuzulu (and a wife of King Cetshwayo), composed most likely in the period immediately prior to the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879, again focus on the fine-grained, revealing minutiae of domestic life, but in this case they also introduce the commonly used motifs (in women's praise poetry) of slander and victimisation. They also point up the struggle to survive as an individual by means of forging a poem as a verbal artefact of both defence and attack in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a large polygynous group:

The slandered one
 Slandered by men and women,
 Little wagon that is a nuisance to the [big] carriages
 The desired one she went on her wedding journey;
 The married women went [too], a bunch of conspirators. (Gunner 1989, 28)

Clearly, being known by such praise names which the speaker would use herself and by which she would be addressed, Nomvimbi, mother of the future king, was asserting *her* voice in the at times stifling surroundings of the women of the royal household.

That Princess Magogo's own mother (in the following generation) endured similar treatment from other domestic conspirators was demonstrated by the powerful memorial invective of another kind of praise poem — the praise names composed for an infant by its mother (known as *izangelo* (kisses) or *izibongo zengane*, the praise poem of infancy). The anger of her mother, Silomo Mdlalose, is caught in her poetic expose of the unnamed co-wives and their hateful behaviour to her:

... They plaited for me a rope of mutual disdain,
 All the royal household turned in disdain from me.
 I have come out with the great mother of the royal line.
 The day I walked out to the harvest gathering
 I was mocked by the vultures
 I was mocked by the cuckoo shrikes... (Gunner 1989, 33)

What the princess, effortlessly recalling her praise poem of infancy seventy-five years after its composition, was opening up to an astonished and fascinated outsider (myself), was the existence of a poetic tradition (both like and yet unlike the tradition of the big public praise poems) which allowed its practitioners freedom to compose verse that captured a personal angst, which drew on stark imagery from the natural world (the vultures and shrikes) in its close range verbal attack, and which would afford its composer psychological satisfaction. It would be constantly recited, for her child, the baby — the toddler — Magogo; it would, as poetry, afford its speaker complete immunity from the charge of insult or slander and it would, through performance, further the life of the art form so closely connected to the politics of polygynous domestic life. The poem would also become a mirror in which the child (the adult) saw an intimate portrait of her mother, linked always, through poetic words, to herself. In the *izangelo* the space of the narrowly domestic is set against that of agricultural labour, 'the harvest gathering', again pointing up women's role as grain producers, even though by 1900, when this would have been composed, the pre-colonial economy had been swept aside, the colonial hut tax had been in place since the 1880s, and the Zulu kingdom had been annexed by Natal and absorbed into the settler capitalist economy.

Although the praises of infancy (*izangelo*) that the princess herself composed in 1928 for her own infant son contain no reference to grain or harvest, they

continue the sense of the embattled position in a polygynous household that even the most 'privileged' of women experienced. The princess was, after all, one of twenty wives, even if her position as senior wife and mother of the future heir was assured. Images of poison and pollution dominate the first part of the praises, as dream and waking life merge:

I felt as I was sleeping that an otter squirted me.
I was pursued by another long trailing thing that would not remain
in the [cursed] forest of Sondaba. (Gunner 1989, 31)

The speaker then with great economy sketches in an impression of danger in landscape and of a lonely figure negotiating such danger. What is striking is the compact evocation of the range of landscape in which the speaker moves: she is pursued and then bitten by something like a (poisonous) mamba,

The one that lies in freshly burnt veld, where the mealie leaf does not disturb it...
I was struck down by a mamba there in the thick bush country.
And I was brought back to life by medicine from the lonely highveld.
(Gunner 1989, 31)

The allusion is to a journey the princess made when pregnant with her son, to a healer 'in the lonely highveld', in fact to a renowned healer and leader of an African independent church, Isaiah Shembe, when she was sure that she had been bewitched by a jealous co-wife. This form of poetry which can so powerfully and economically evoke pain and assertive response was meant not only to be heard but overheard, as its performance could take place even in the presence of those pointed out in the vituperative but protected, allusive mode of address that the poetry allowed.

Evidence of *izangelo* from the manuscripts of the linguist and collector of oral histories, James Stuart, who worked with Zulu historians and local intellectuals from the late nineteenth century to the early 1920s (Hamilton 1998), show with more detail how they operated alongside the other more public *izibongo*. They did not simply fade away but appear to have had a tenacious presence in men's lives in the domestic sphere. Long after childhood, they were used to mark moments of domestic intimacy in married life, when, for example, a man's wives would wish to thank him formally if a beast had been slaughtered. Thus this domestic rhetoric, the act of naming and identifying outside the public arena, was passed down from mothers to wives, and, in some cases, it would seem, carried on after death — as a kind of female form of rhetoric that constituted part of a genealogy of women's voices, making poetry, and making song. The *izangelo* were, perhaps, a way in which mothers and wives continued to 'write' their presence and their voice into the lives of sons and husbands even after their death. As the bard (*imbongi*), Mangothi, told James Stuart, 'My mothers still *bonga* (thank/praise) my father Godide by the praises given him by his mother, Memose, and yet he died years ago.² Recent path-breaking work on South African women's

songs by Deborah James (1999) and David Coplan (1996) has shown how genres either emerge and are carved out of former men's genres (James) or co-exist, somewhat on the edges of the men's genre (Coplan). However they relate to genres that may be more publicly accessible, they are extremely important as conduits of often, gendered, social consciousness, and of the making of meaning. In the case of the *izangelo* they constituted threads of continuity not only between generations of women, but also between women and men, perhaps, for men, undercutting the insistent and rigid constructions of masculinity imposed increasingly on them from the onset of the Shakan era.

* * *

However it was not only the praise songs of all but forgotten royal mothers that the young Princess Magogo heard and remembered when she lived in the company of the women of the royal household — women of different generations whose cumulative knowledge of forms of song and dance from the different regions of Zulu territory would have represented a dense and rich cultural archive. From one of King Cetshwayo's wives the princess learnt a love song which must have been one of many such songs, performed, like the *izangelo* or praise songs of infancy, to be overheard as well as listened to directly. The song, called simply, 'Nomagundwane' (Woman of the Rats) recalls, in the form of a miniature drama — which the listener/audience seems to be overhearing rather than listening to directly — the story of a lost love. Songs of loss and longing are a hallmark of the tradition of young women's songs, which are often accompanied by the single-stringed bow known as the *umakhweyane*, but as David Rycroft has pointed out, the length and intricate dramatic structure of 'Woman of the Rats' suggests that the form was capable of much greater variation and expression of psychological and emotional complexity than had been acknowledged either by cultural practitioners or critical commentators (Rycroft 1975, 62). The jilted girl addresses her sister, Nomagundwane, and tells her the story of how she visited her lover's family and was treated at first very politely but always with certain slights which, it became clear, were carrying an oblique message of dismissal, more from the lover's family, and particularly his mother, than from the young man himself. In fact the young man seems distinctly ill at ease with the treatment being meted out to the visitor and the favouritism shown to the second girl, called in the song, 'Miss Favourite'; but he seems unable to stop the flow of events. Although the song hints that it is the singer who spent the night with her lover, it is 'Miss Favourite' who is given the best blanket, the kiss from her 'mother', and who, on the following day, is not offered *amasi* by the household, a sure sign of marriage rejection. The narrating persona, on the other hand, is offered *amasi* and realises immediately that this is a sign that she must leave. The song of over 70 lines, transcribed by Rycroft, with its regular chorus of '*Mayebabo!* (Alas!)' ends like this:

We entered the young men's hut.
 His sister came, bringing water;
 She went out again.
 She came in with some food, it was brought covered up;
 I started to uncover it;
 And I cried out: 'Oh, but it is thick milk!...[*amasi*]
 I came out crying: 'Now he has spurned me!'
 I cried: 'Woe, O my father! Today he has spurned me!'
 I cried out: 'Woe, O mountains! Now he has spurned me indeed!'
 Alas, O people! As for me, he has now spurned me!' (Rycroft 1964)

The near obsessive repeating of 'he has spurned me' — '*selingidumele*', gives the song great poignancy and illuminates the complex language of social signs by which people lived. The power of the whole song lies partly in the way in which it assumes a shared knowledge of the message so clearly yet so obliquely given. At the same time it gives the listener/reader entry into a young girl's personal experience of jilted love and thus shows its provenance as part of a much wider store of women's songs on the topic of love and loss.

The ballad-like 'Nomagundwane' was recorded by interested outsiders attempting to document and understand aspects of an indigenous South African musical tradition largely hidden from public view at a time of high apartheid when, on the one hand, indigenous cultures were seen by some anthropologists as existing in a kind of eternal ethnographic present, a view which the ideologues of apartheid keenly upheld. Another view of these 'timeless societies' was one that predicted that their cultural products would eventually fade away in the relentless march of modernity. Both views can be seen as deeply flawed. Transformation or mutation of genres and forms has in many cases taken place. Both Tracey and Rycroft have in the case of Princess Magogo's songs assisted in the process of change, as I will show. David Rycroft first recorded the ballad from the princess in 1964, and again (when she performed it with slight variations) in 1974; both Rycroft and the ethnomusicologist and broadcaster Hugh Tracey appear to have been fascinated by the store of musical knowledge to which the princess had access. What emerges both from the songs on the 1974 Gallo recording assembled by Tracey, and from an article on the 'Zulu Bow songs of Princess Magogo which Rycroft published in 1975/6 is, again, an impression of the range of genres to which women had access and made good use of. The love songs are intense, passionate, elliptical and eloquent, as for example, the following which, like 'Nomagundwane', is intended for a solitary singer and perhaps a solitary listener, or no listener at all:

Helele, helele! Oh helele!
 He was handsome that boy, alas!
 O mother, O mother, O mother!
 Hold me my mothers, hold me!

When he looked at me, I loved him!
 When he laughed I loved him!...
 When he rode a horse he looked so fine!
 When he rode a brown he looked so fine!
 When he rode a white he looked so fine!
 When he rode a train he looked so fine!
 Hold me, hold me, hold me. (Princess Magogo in Rycroft 1975/6, 49)

Another example, a song from the reign of King Mpande (1840–1872), shows that young women composed songs to compliment the regiments on their appearance when they came to the royal homestead. Yet another, counterpointing the passion of ‘Hold me my mothers!’, mocks a well-dressed young man, by pointing out that appearance is not everything. A further aspect of the way in which a song could be both a vehicle for difficult and complicated emotions, and a means of using such a moment to moralise and philosophise, is in the elliptical, ‘She was deceived by the burnt mountain’, which relates how two young women loved the same man — one became pregnant and aborted, the other was angry, mainly, it seems, because of the pregnancy, abortion and the publicity of the whole affair. The ‘burnt mountain’ becomes a metaphor for the dangerous pleasures of sexual intercourse outside marriage, and, the song states, its false sweetness (Tracey 1974). There are, though, songs of a wider, publicly political canvas. One such song is a protest song from a period in Zulu history when Shaka’s successor, his brother (and assassin), the unpopular King Dingane, victimised and killed many of his own subjects; in its compression and direct comment, it mirrors many later protest songs of the modern era, both in Zulu and in other South African languages. It states simply, but with the power of melody driving it: ‘Each day we are killed by Dingane’ (Tracey 1974).

A song showing the intertwining of personal and the public, again recorded by Tracey (and in print by Rycroft 1975/6), links politics and love, and was sung by the young women in love with Cetshwayo’s sons; they mourned the death of King Cetshwayo and set his sudden death at the door of his cousin and rival Zibhebhu. Yet other songs the princess recorded show her composing within the idioms available but moving out to embrace new topics. One such, was composed for Good Friday and Easter: ‘The stones broke open/ They said he was the King of Stones’ (Tracey 1974; Rycroft 1975/6, 90). The melody could have been one used for a love song, but instead it is an Easter hymn. Such imaginative cross-linking of cultural knowledge — the Christian story and the music of an indigenous tradition — has in other cases led to the creation of a body of dynamic, hybrid poetry in the hands of an African Church leader such as Isaiah Shembe (d.1935) (Gerard 1971; Muller 1999, Gunner 2002), or the early Xhosa prophet, Ntsikana, but Princess Magogo did not move beyond the single remarkable ‘King of Stones’. She was a baptised Anglican and may have felt that there was no place in her religious belief for her own compositions, but her skills as composer and performer

enabled her to range widely between compositions that embraced love, war, political commentary and domestic anxiety, and this would suggest that such a range was one that women did have access to, even if publicly their access was in general more circumscribed.

* * *

It is difficult to know whether Princess Magogo's position as an aristocrat gave her automatic rights over, and access to a wider body of song than other women would have had. Perhaps it was also her great talent that helped her range as widely as she did. Her power as a carrier and maker of poetic song was often proudly displayed by her son to foreign visitors (or white outsiders) to KwaPhindangene, in the 1960s and well into the 1970s, but it may not have been so easily available to her own people, and possibly, in her husband's lifetime (Chief Mathole died in 1959) her life as a composer and performer may have been one that was largely hidden from public view. The thirty-three years of her married life are not ones that — to my knowledge — she has commented upon publicly, and the vituperative vigour of her *izangelo* for her son suggest that her life as one of many wives in a competitive polygamous marriage would be far from easy. Mgezeni Ndlela, one of the Buthelezi *izimbongi* present at the 1976 meeting I had with the princess, recited the *izibongo* of her husband, Mathole kaTshanibezwe Buthelezi. Some of his praise-names, in the typically oblique yet penetrating way of such praise poetry, suggested that Mathole was a jealous man who could be violent to any man who might approach his wives, and a line of the *izibongo* warns of the dangers of 'firewater' (whisky). Place names which tie in to the history of the Buthelezi, and Chief Mathole's own history, mingle with attribute and personality in these coolly assessing, yet celebratory, *izibongo*:

Sudden-upshoot like the Buffalo River...

Concoctions of Firewater:

They are bitter, they will corrode the intestines — fatally.

Mamba that set up his homesteads

Between the Two-Seats Mountains

The Big One and the Little One...

Elephant who ate whilst trumpeting

At Mashonangashoni...

Mokomane, bird whose head is not eaten.

Swallower of both grog and blood.

He who chops off the penis-head there where lies the fatal source.

That is Mathole, son of Tshanibezwe. (Gunner and Gwala 1994, 125)

* * *

As a royal woman with privileged access to the more hegemonic form of public praise poetry as well as to the subaltern forms of women's poetry that I have touched on, and a composer in her own right, Princess Magogo was indeed

in a unique position. In the 1970s and early 1980s, her role as a gifted carrier of a rich heritage seems to have been increasingly acknowledged not only by her son but also by the radio station known as Radio Zulu, which was controlled by the Government and propagated the views of the apartheid state in its news and information broadcasts. One of her last public appearances may have been in 1979, five years before her death at the age of 84, when she performed the royal praises at a small official gathering in Durban, but there were other ways of publicising (and capitalising on) her cultural knowledge. Thus from the mid 1970s and into the 1980s, when the battle between the supporters of the still-banned African National Congress and those supporting the Inkatha Freedom Party raged in what was then Natal and the fragmented 'homeland' of KwaZulu (now the single province of KwaZulu-Natal), Radio Zulu played her songs with increasing frequency. Presumably the recordings were those from the Tracey-Gallo recording, and perhaps the less accessible Rycroft recording. No doubt, they were intended to be absorbed as part of a defiant cultural nationalism, counterpoised against a broader nationalist and pluralist discourse espoused by the follower of the banned African National Congress, and the United Democratic Front, but the songs were, in fact, largely the subaltern song of women. So these formerly muted stands of poetic and musical discourse were given public airings to its approximately three million urban and rural listeners. Singers, or prospective singers also heard them. The singer Tu Nokwe, as well as Sibongile Khumalo, who played the role of Princess Magogo in the opera, have both acknowledged the influence on them of Princess Magogo's songs heard on the air waves in these years.³ There are now a number of women's groups singing in the *maskanda* tradition (to which I referred earlier). They seem to have found a place for themselves alongside the hugely popular male singers such as the late Umfaz' Omnyama and Ihash' elimhlope (White Horse). By doing so they may be engaging in a crucial kind of reclamation and reshaping of women's sung forms in contemporary culture. They are finding a place for themselves in a musical form, (claimed for a while solely by men in the urban space), which seems to have grown from the earlier women's genre of solitary love-singing exemplified by a song such as 'Helele, Hold me mothers!' A current song by the group Izingane zoMa (Mother's Little Ones) has as its main line, 'Granny, tell me, what's my surname?'.⁴ Certainly this is not about love, but loss, and is suggestive of the many kinds of social stress currently being experienced in the province.

* * *

But what of the opera, *Princess Magogo*? It was advertised on uKhozi FM, the renamed Zulu language radio station, operating as part of a vastly different, post-apartheid SABC, and it received considerable publicity on television and on the English-language station, SA-FM. On the first of its three nights it was attended only by invited celebrities, and was beamed live to a Chicago television station, and to viewers in Germany and the United Kingdom. On the second and third

nights the public came, and — on the night I was there — a mixed audience of English, Zulu and Afrikaans-speakers of all ages gave it a warm reception. It was an opera largely in Zulu, with snippets of English continuity (but not recitative), but it was certainly not attempting to inform opera with Zulu musical idioms. Five songs made famous by Princess Magogo are woven in to the performance which in terms of narrative structure works through flashbacks. As the opera opens with the dying princess on her bed, she sings the song of the young girls as they watched the regiments pass by; the sombre first act shows Magogo's father, Dinuzulu, courted by the eloquent Bambatha, resisting the attempts to be drawn into the Rebellion, but nevertheless arrested; later, the narrative turns to Princess Magogo's first love and we see her singing, 'Helele, Hold me mothers!'. This was hugely popular with the audience, who began to join in the 'Helele' refrain. We see her take the decision to renounce the man she loved and accept her brother's choice of a husband for her; and in one of the most moving scenes of the opera, the young Solomon and Magogo sing to each other with warmth and lyrical intimacy: he tells her that now he is to be 'king' he can really care for her and her days of hardship will be over (we have earlier seen, briefly, the taunting 'foster-mothers' who made her early life miserable).

As the opera moved to its close and the brilliantly clothed ancestors, resembling spectacular angelic figures, came to claim the princess and take her with them, one was left with the impression that the princess's life had been read in terms of a national script, an ambiguously national script that could be claimed by an audience seeing itself as South African rather than narrowly Zulu. I wonder how she wished to be seen? Biographies — and this opera was in some ways a biography — sometimes avoid untidinesses. In one of the interviews on the radio station, SA-FM, about his mother, in the days leading up to the opera, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi spoke of the enormous musical influence she had had on his life, and how she loved opera, and he mentioned her affection for — Rossini! Perhaps, then, there was something deeply fitting in presenting Princess Magogo through a musical medium that could resist any narrow essentialising, that gave a sense of the sweep of her life in a turbulent history, and its creative links both with the past and with many presents.

NOTES

- ¹ My ideas on the importance of allusion have been influenced by discussion at the Advanced Seminar on Reading Texts, held under the auspices of the Popular Literature in Africa Research Group, at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand, April 2002. Karin Barber's earlier work (Barber 1997) and her contribution at the seminar were particularly useful.
- ² James Stuart Archive, Notebook 76, Book of Eulogies 2, 48. Killie Campbell Africana Library, University of Natal, Durban.
- ³ My thanks to Laura Allan for information on this point in Johannesburg, 8 April, 2002.

- ⁴ Heard on Ukhozi-FM, mid-July, 2002.
- ⁵ Many thanks to my colleague Catherine Woeber for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of the essay, and also to Patricia Hayes and Wendy Woodward of the University of the Western Cape for their extensive comments on a very early version of this essay which I read at the Gender and Colonialism Conference at UWC in January 1997. My thanks also to John Wright for his helpful discussion on points of gender and Zulu history. Funding that helped in the preparation of this essay came from the 'Orality, Literacy and Colonialism' National Research Foundation group grant, and I wish to acknowledge its assistance here

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