

Imbongi in Profile

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# *Imbongi* in Profile

*Russell H. Kaschula*

Archie Mafeje has defined the *imbongi* as

A praise poet who frequented the chief's great place and travelled with him in traditional Nguni society. His distinctive feature is that he can recite poems without having prepared them beforehand. (91)

In view of the socio-economic and political changes which have taken place in South African society over the past few decades, this definition is today too narrow, even obsolete. The *imbongi* is better defined in terms of the social function of his art, rather than within a relationship of patronage pertaining to a precolonial social order.

In fact the tradition of the *imbongi* has never been a static one. As Jeff Opland puts it,

The dynamic element is necessary in our approach since the tradition of Xhosa oral poetry has clearly changed and is continuing to change with changes in Cape Nguni society. Tradition is not a lifeless thing; it alters and adapts to new social circumstance. (236)

Today, many elements of the tradition have been discarded or adapted; nevertheless, the concept of singing praises still retains an identifiable character which is based on past tradition. In this tradition, the *imbongi's* relationship with his audience and the function of his *izibongo* (poetry) within his society are of utmost importance. Any analysis of this communitarian art form will therefore have to take into account the context of the performance, the nature of the audience, and the role of the *imbongi* in a society which continues to be subject to socio-cultural and political pressures of unused intensity. My intention in this article is to provide a case study of Bongani Sitole, a contemporary *imbongi*, in order to instance some of the ways in which the tradition has adapted. During the course of the discussion mention will also be made of other *imbongi*.

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The role of the *imbongi* as mediator and as political and social commentator in relation to the power base of the community within which he operates has been retained over time. For example, Alfred Qabula, an *imbongi* affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), sees his role as that of mediator between the workers and the union which he represents, in the same way that the traditional *imbongi* mediated between the people and the chief. His “*izibongo* are a unique tool in raising workers’ consciousness of their union and its role in their lives as workers. Yet they are also quite clearly an expression of a strong and old art form with its roots deep in social and political awareness” (Gunner 35). Bongani Sitole sees himself as a mediator between organisations with differing viewpoints and also as a conduit to the leaders of the African National Congress of authentic popular sentiment. On the other hand, Monde Mothlabane, an *imbongi* who lives in Grahamstown, is not attached to any particular organization, but represents the interests of the people of Grahamstown in his poetry in whatever context he happens to perform.

The tradition to which these *iimbongi* are heir is a dynamic one which has developed and adapted to new contexts and environments. Urbanization, the impact of education, the formation of the independent homelands, the changing nature of the chieftainship, the emergence of black nationalism, and the recent release of political prisoners and unbanning of organizations have all had their effect on the tradition.<sup>1</sup> David Coplan’s analysis of changes in performance, creativity and culture over the years in South Africa provides abundant evidence of the adaptability of tradition. Coplan stresses that “the production and reproduction of performances must be located within the set of political, economic, social, and cultural relations between performers and the total context in which they perform” (242).

This essay will attempt to contextualize its analysis of *iimbongi* performances in this way.

## Bongani Sitole

Bongani Sitole was born on 21 June 1937 at Mqokezweni location near Umtata in Transkei, an area then under the control of Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo. Sitole was a migrant worker from 1959 until 1976 in the Johannesburg area as well as in Port Elizabeth. He then returned to Umtata where he has resided ever since.

According to Sitole, he began praising while still at school in Transkei in about 1954. He would praise at various functions such as school concerts. His first allegiance was to Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo of the Mqekwezweni region. He later also praised Chief George Matanzima on certain occasions, for example, at the opening of new schools. He states that he was unaware of any corruption by the Matanzima regime during the seventies and early eighties. Since the unbanning of the ANC and the release of Nelson Mandela, he has been attached to that organization.

Sitole's poetry shows how the themes of the *izibongo* have changed or been augmented in order to accommodate new pressures and new power bases. The traditional *iimbongi* (attached to chiefs) were concerned mainly with events which were taking place in the immediate area where the chief lived. Historical themes also permeated their poetry. Today's *iimbongi* are concerned with events which are affecting their lives on both a local and a national level. Sitole's poetry draws its subjects from recent events and the audience's response to them. It also contains historical perspectives regarding, for example, the origins of the struggle against apartheid. Such change in the "textual elements" of the *izibongo* (Opland 241) are a direct result of changes in the "contextual elements" (Opland 253). The context in which the poetry is performed is no longer limited to the purview of the chief. The use of, for example, political rallies as a platform for the performance of *izibongo* has also encouraged a change in the thematic repertoire of poets such as Sitole. The new repertoire naturally reflects the changing distribution of power in South African society.

Sitole states that his ability to produce oral poetry depends entirely on circumstance. The occasion and the audience will largely determine whether or not he feels inspired to perform. When in the mood, Sitole will burst forth, declaiming poetry of whose exact content he is often unaware. He accounts for this as part of a process of *ukuthwasa*, movement into a state of high emotional intensity which is also associated with Xhosa ritual and religious expression. Sitole's performance is typically therefore a text-free, spontaneous one, an entirely oral event of which there is no record outside of the memories of the listeners (unless, of course, the performance is captured on audio or videotape).

Jeremy Cronin makes the following general comments with regard to contemporary oral poetry:

The poetry is, clearly, largely a performance. The bodily presence of the poet becomes an important feature of the poetics. Arm gestures, clapping, and head nodding are often used expressively and deictically. The poets also draw freely from the current political lexis of gestures: the clenched fist salute of people's power (*amandla ngawethu*) . . . .  
(41)

Although the styles of the *iimbongi* mentioned above differ from each other, they do share certain generic features in their resemblance to the style of traditional *iimbongi*. For example, Sitole and Motlabane still use the guttural voice characteristic of traditional *iimbongi*, but Qabula does not. The loudness and speed with which the typical performance takes place is reminiscent of the traditional *iimbongi*. There is also the continued use of what one might call breath units in the poetry, with each line being the equivalent of one breath.

Although the modern *imbongi* normally holds a microphone which can be an inhibiting factor, there is nevertheless much movement and the *imbongi* is seldom stationary. Gesture therefore remains an important part of the performance and it is the performance as a whole which holds the audience's attention. For what the *imbongi* is saying is supported and enhanced by what Opland (248-50) refers to as "textural elements" (those features which an audience can see and hear but which are not reflected in a transcribed text), and here some interesting changes have taken place. For instance, Qabula has developed a type of dancing (which strongly resembles the *toyi-toyi*<sup>2</sup>) to accompany his trade union poetry performances, while both Motlabane and Sitole have regular recourse to a range of dramatic gesture.

Shouts of *amandla* accompanied by audience response are also common in Qabula and Sitole's poetry, though not in Motlabane's. This is once again an attempt to make *izibongo* relevant as these utterances are integral to the collective political identity the performance both invokes and seeks to foster. The use of such formulae further enhances the *imbongi*'s position as the voice of the collective political will of the community (here obviously rooted in the UDF/ANC tradition of the 1970s and '80s).

Sitole's role as political commentator is also reflected in the content of his poetry. In an interview (May 1990), Sitole stated that the *imbongi* today would align himself with a policy with which he agrees: "*Kukho i-African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress, so I don't function with PAC, andikholwa yisystem yayo . . . .*" (There is the ANC and the PAC, so I don't function with PAC, their system does not agree

with me . . . .) Although he may not be inspired to praise the PAC as such, he is still in a position to try to unite the two adversaries. “*Into endinokuyenza kukudibanisa i-PAC neANC, ndibonise indlela emakuhanjwa ngayo.*” (What I could do is join together the PAC and ANC, and show the road on which we should go.)

Clearly, the backgrounds from which these poets come have also contributed to their being drawn towards the power bases from which they now operate. Sitole’s roots in the Transkei (where the ANC is particularly strong) has naturally conduced to his recognition by the people and the ANC as an official *imbongi* in the region of Transkei. Qabula’s role as the most important poet in COSATU developed from his personal experience as a worker, and is inseparable from his continued association with the work place and trade union activity.<sup>3</sup>

The dress of the *imbongi* sometimes reflects the constituency he represents. Contemporary *iimbongi* do not necessarily have a uniform dress, or any particular style of dress at all, for that matter. It depends entirely on the individual performer. The *imbongi* no longer always wears the traditional animal skin robe and animal skin hat. Traditionally he also used to carry a spear. However, one often sees *iimbongi* sporting remnants of traditional dress, such as an animal skin hat, whilst wearing a western-style suit. Cronin has commented on this eclecticism:

The clothing of the performer . . . as often as not . . . is unexceptional. However, quite a few poets, especially those who adopt a more bardic tone, don dashikis as an integral part of their performance. The several trade union praise poets also tend to wear special clothing, traditional skins and ornamentation, or a modern-day facsimile of the kind already noted. (42)

Qabula has created a style of dress which is unique to him. This includes a pair of trousers and a shirt which have been deliberately shredded. The trouser legs are torn into strips. At the same time he wears a tie. These ‘designer rags’ symbolize poverty, especially the pain and suffering which the working class often have to endure. The tie, on the other hand, depicts the capitalist world with its bosses and overseers. The contrast thus created is extremely powerful.

Mothlabane and Sitole are more traditional in their dress. Mothlabane wears an animal skin hat which he carries with him to occasions in case he feels inspired to perform. On the other hand, Sitole wears the full traditional regalia of animal skin and animal skin hat. He also carries a knobkerie.

The only difference is that the skin is braided with the ANC colours whilst the stick is beaded in ANC colours.

### Sitole's Poetry

Sitole's poetry is concerned mainly with political leaders in Transkei and the ANC. The following extract is from a performance at the re-burial of Chief Sabata Dalindyebo (an opponent of the independent homeland system). Chief Sabata, who died in exile during the Matanzima era in Transkei, was being reinterred with ANC approval at his rightful resting place. Also present was the regional ANC representative for Transkei and councillor to the Dalindyebo family, A.S. Xobololo.

*Amandla!*  
*Uzakuphakam'umzukulwana kaXobololo,*  
*uXobololo uzakaxobul'ixolw'emthini kuvel'intlaka,*  
*uXobololo uyaxoboloza,*  
*uxweb'impundu ngokuhlal'estoksini ngenxa kaDaliwonga*

Power!  
 The grandchild of Xobololo is going to stand up,  
 Xobololo is going to peel the bark off the tree until the gum  
 appears,  
 Xobololo is trying,  
 His buttocks are chafed due to being jailed because of Daliwonga  
 [Matanzima].

The *imbongi* introduces the poem by making use of the power salute *Amandla!* This is common in the performances of *iimbongi* within the Mass Democratic Movement. Because the salute invites a response, it creates a sense of unity and power with the organization and the people who support it, integrating the audience with the occasion, the performer and the subject of the performance. Sitole is also critical of Chief K.D. Matanzima who is blamed for much of the hardship experienced by the ANC and its members in this region in earlier days. By condemning the action of the Pretoria-aligned Matanzima, the *imbongi* is emphasizing the power base of the ANC.

The following extracts are taken from poems produced during Mandela's first visit to Transkei after his release.

*Liphupha lamathongo,  
Liphupha lamaMpunge,  
Isizalo sikhale sancama,  
Mingaphin'imiphefumlo ephantsi komhhlaba?  
Zingaphin'izidumbu ngengxa kaMandela?  
Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la  
Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la*

It's a dream of the dead,  
It's a dream that people thought would never come true,  
People have cried till they gave up,  
How many souls are under the ground?  
How many corpses because of Mandela?  
Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la  
Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la

The *imbongi* here refers to those comrades who have already died in the struggle to get Mandela released, never dreaming that freedom would be so near. In lines 6 and 7 the *imbongi* moves from one side of the stage to the other, shouting Mandela's name in a praising way, and, in so doing, enacts Mandela's power.

The poem continues:

*Bambiza bengamazi,  
Bambiza bengazange bambone,  
Yiyo loo nto kufuneka sithozame sithozamelane,  
Kuba side sambona.  
Umzekelo kaYesu erhuq'abantu abaninzi indimbane.  
Weza nabo ngenyaniso nocoselelo,  
Kuloko sinokungqina khona ke siv'amazw'akhe,  
Kuloko amazw'akhe siwaqinisekisile ukuba ayinyaniso.*

They call him even if they don't know him,  
They call him even if they have never seen him before,  
That is why we need to be humble and respect one another,  
Because we have seen him at last.  
An example of Jesus followed by many people,  
He has come with them in truth and dignity,  
That is where we can hear and witness his words,  
That is where we have confirmed that his words are true.

The *imbongi* here plays a mediating role asking people to respect one another. Mandela becomes a Christ-like figure capable of leading the masses. The integration of Christian mythology and imagery within



contemporary political discourse has ample precedent. Christianity is still one of the cornerstones of Xhosa society, and the church wields significant power within Xhosa communities. Many *iimbongi* also operate within the church, praising God in the same way as a chief would have been praised. Janet Hodgson (1982) notes that the first Christian *imbongi* to praise God using the traditional *izibongo* style was Ntsikana.<sup>4</sup> The use of Christian mythology by Sitole is further evidence of the syncretic flexibility of the tradition.

Sitole continues:

*Ziya ce-e-e-engwa izinto,  
Ziyacengwa izinto xa zizakulunga,  
Azenziwa ngobuxhiliphothi,  
Azenziwa ngokungxanyelwa,  
Lithe Chu-u-u-u  
Umntaka Ngubengcuka kaNgangelizwe,  
Uthe chu-u-u-u  
Uhamba nabafundi bakhe,  
NjengoYesu,  
Uhamba noSisulu noMbeki,  
Uhamba noMhlaba,  
Uhamba namadoda aphilileyo.*

Things are approached with skill,  
Things are approached carefully if they are to succeed,  
They are not approached with vigour,  
They are not approached with speed,  
He is steady,  
The son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe,  
He is steady,  
He is accompanied by his disciples,  
Like Jesus,  
He is accompanied by Sisulu and Mbeki,  
He is accompanied by Mhlaba,  
He is accompanied by healthy men.

This extract sees the elaboration of the biblical analogy, with Sisulu and others rendered as the disciples of Mandela/Jesus. The reference to genealogy—“the son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe”—is common in traditional Xhosa *izibongo* and serves to emphasize the legitimacy of the individual being praised.

In another poem Sitole comments on the relationship between Mandela and Sisulu, from the early days up to the present.

*Wayigqibezel'imfundo yakhe bayokudibana ngobugqwetha  
benyaniso,  
Khubhula kaloku amagqwetha ukutheth'ityala lawo  
engagqwethanga kweliny'igqwetha.  
Asuk'ema amagqweth'azigqwethela,  
Kuba yayingagqweth'inyaniso.*

He finished his education and they joined in the law of truth.  
Imagine, lawyers representing themselves.  
They just stood and defended themselves,  
Because the truth could not be perverted.

Sitole comments here on the early involvement of Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela in the legal fraternity in Johannesburg before the banning of the ANC. The extract makes an interesting play on the word “lawyer,” *qwetha*, bearing in mind that Mandela represented himself at the Rivonia trial. Mandela is presented as an “advocate” of truth, in opposition to the false justice purveyed by the South African legal system. This reference to the Rivonia Trial also evidences a typical attempt by the poet to mythicize aspects of the movement’s history.

The poem later continues:

*Asinaku jika ndawo,  
iTshangaan, uMsuthu, iNyasa, umXhosa, iVend'umTswana,  
Hayi madoda nomZulu ngokunjalo,  
Singabantu abamnyama.  
Nce-e-edani!  
Nceda mntaka Mandela,  
Ncedani niyokuthatha uGatsha Buthelezi nimpak'estoksini,  
Ingxak'ilapho.*

We will never change,  
Shangaans, Sothos, Malawians, Xhosas, Vendas, Tswanas,  
And Zulus as well,  
We are black people.  
Please!  
Please, son of Mandela,  
Please go and fetch Gatsha Buthelezi and arrest him,  
The problem is there.

In this extract Sitole appeals for the unity of the black people. He calls for the arrest of Buthelezi in order to create a climate for unity in the struggle. But, notably, it is a unity which privileges and legitimizes the ideological power base from which he is operating.

Stylistically, Sitole's poetry bears many similarities to traditional poetry produced about chiefs. Techniques generally associated with the production of traditional *izibongo* include personification and the use of metaphor and simile. But, as Jeremy Cronin has pointed out, formally speaking

The most notable verbal stylistic features are those commonly associated with principally oral cultures: the style tends to be additive, aggregative, formulaic, and 'copious' . . . . The repetitive and formulaic features assist the performing poet mnemonically. But these features also assist the audience to hear and understand the poem.

(42)

The use of parallelism or repetition is a particularly striking and useful traditional device. It allows the *imbongi* to develop a particular idea, either by initial, final or oblique linking in a sentence. This technique is used by all three *imbongi* mentioned above.

These and other textual elements, retained over time, have nonetheless undergone adjustment. The use of *amandla* as an opening formula is an example of such an adaptation. The adaptation reflects affiliation to a particular power base but is at the same time rooted within the tradition as it existed in the past. The use of animal metaphors and anaphoral repetition also reflects the retention of textual elements found in traditional *izibongo*. Metaphors involving *inkunzi*, a bull, were often used traditionally to refer to chiefs (see Opland 246). In a recent unpublished poem (1991) about Mandela, Sitole refers to Mandela as follows: "*Yinkunzi ethi yakugquba kulale amatye.*" (A bull, kicking up dust, displacing stones.)

Likewise, Meshack Masumpa (88) makes use of this traditional animal metaphor to refer to COSATU: One of his poems is entitled "*UCosatu Inkunz' Emnyama*" (Cosatu, Black Bull).

## Conclusion

In their attempts to remain relevant amidst socio-economic and political changes in South Africa, many *imbongi* have shifted away from "traditional" chiefs seen as implicated in the ethnic ideology of apartheid, toward allegiances which are political in the modern sense, and affiliative rather than filiative in nature.

The modern *iimbongi* are attracted to the new power bases which represent the interests of the average man in the street, and the oral poet thus remains a relevant figure in Xhosa society. *Iimbongi* such as Sitole demonstrate the persistence and adaptability of traditional African culture in the face of drastic societal and political changes in Southern Africa. In the midst of the present turmoil, the voice of the *iimbongi* links the traditions of the past to new directions and visions for the future. The continuity they embody is of enormous cultural significance.

#### NOTES

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1. See Kaschula, "The Transitional Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet in Contemporary South African Society" and "The Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet in Contemporary South African Society," as well as "Power and the Poem in Contemporary Transkei" for further information on the adaptation of the tradition.

2. The *toyi-toyi* is a type of dance where the knees are lifted and the body is kept in a crouched position. It is normally performed at mass meetings and during protest marches. Essentially it is of a political nature. It strongly resembles, and seems to emanate from, the traditional war dance accompanied by song which was performed by Xhosa women long ago to encourage the warriors during battle—a further example of the adaptability of precolonial cultural tradition.

3. For further information on Qabula's role and function in COSATU see Kaschula, "The Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet." Also, "Styles, Themes and the Role of the Contemporary *Iimbongi* in Trade Unions," and Elizabeth Gunner, "Orality and Literacy: Dialogue and Silence," as well as Qabula, Hlatshwayo & Malange, *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle*, 8-12, where "Praise Poem for FOSATU" appears.

4. For further information on *iimbongi* and religion, see Kaschula, "The Transitional Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet," Chapter 3, "Preachers and Poets: Xhosa Religion and Poetry."

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