

# Mandela Comes Home: The Poets' Perspective

Russell H. Kaschula

## Introduction

The oral poet, or *imbongi* (pl. *iimbongi*), still forms an important part of contemporary Xhosa oral traditions. Although society is continually adapting due to changing socioeconomic and political norms in South Africa, the Xhosa *imbongi* has been absorbed into present-day life. The role of the modern *imbongi* is therefore inextricably linked to the ever changing social norms and values in Xhosa society.<sup>1</sup>

Political oratory takes place within the wider social, political, and cultural context (the macro situation) of a particular society; this is also true of the *imbongi*'s poetry today. For example, with the reawakening of Black Nationalism and political consciousness among the Xhosas, poetry in the form of *izibongo* is alive and well within trade unions and political organizations. Thus any ethnographic study of *iimbongi* as political orators and social critics would have to take place within the broader social and cultural context. Such studies would, in turn, possibly reveal changes within society. The micro or immediate context of any performance, and the macro situation, including the broader South African context, within which the *imbongi* operates, are interlinked. This approach clearly illustrates that oral tradition has, in this case, adapted itself to become a vehicle of protest in contemporary South African society.

## The Voice of Protest in Oral and Written Poetry

In an article entitled "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary South African Community," A. Mafeje defines the *imbongi* as someone who lived in close proximity to the Chief's Great Place and who accompanied the

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Kaschula 1991, on which the present essay is based.

Chief on important occasions (1967:193). His performances<sup>2</sup> would be directed at the Chief, decrying what was unworthy, praising what was worthy and even forecasting what was going to happen.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the *imbongi's* role was one that allowed for criticism—hence the voice of protest in Xhosa oral poetry. This voice of protest, according to Ewels (1981:12), “is implicit in the role of the bard in traditional and contemporary society.” Being only one aspect of the poetic tradition, it nevertheless forms an important and vital part of Xhosa oral poetry.

The *imbongi's* right to speak freely, with impunity, has been seriously threatened over the last decade in Transkei. The voice of protest that is characteristic of Xhosa *izibongo* has often been severely censored in order to serve the ends of petty politicians, thereby undermining the credibility of the *imbongi*. Jeff Opland provides an example (1983:266-67) of how Qangule, a well-known *imbongi* in Transkei, was arrested because of his opposition to the way in which the late Chief Sabata Dalindyebo, Paramount Chief of the Thembus, was detained and later deposed. Qangule's poetry was highly critical of the ruling Matanzima regime. Likewise, Mafeje quotes the case of Mr. Melikhaya Mbutuma, who was often harassed by the police prior to Transkei independence because of his pro-Dalindyebo stand and his opposition to independence often expressed in his poetry. However, the voice of protest still remains, and is especially clear within the Mass Democratic Movement. In line with the main topic of this article, namely Mandela's visit home, the voice of protest within contemporary poetry will be outlined.

The contemporary bard continues to act as a social and political commentator. Of course, the socioeconomic and political environment has changed dramatically over the last couple of years in southern Africa. It is therefore safe to assume that these changes have also had some effect on the role of the *imbongi* in contemporary society. Indeed, it is probably the first time that *iimbongi* are producing oral poetry about Mandela in his presence. As J. Cronin observes of contemporary poetry in general (1989:35),

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<sup>2</sup> The *imbongi* is normally male.

<sup>3</sup> There are different kinds of *iimbongi*. The *imbongi* attached to chiefs presents only one category. For example, *izibongo* can be produced about nature and other subjects. The *izibongo* produced about chiefs, however, are often regarded as the most complex.

we must contextualise it within the rolling wave of semi-insurrectionary uprisings, mass stayaways, political strikes, consumer boycotts, huge political funerals, factory occupations, rent boycotts, school and university boycotts, mass rallies, and physical confrontation over barricades with security forces.

The *imbongi* has also, for example, been absorbed into trade unions that represent the interests of workers in the society. The reawakening of Black nationalism and political consciousness among Africans, and the greater need for recognition within the work place (including equal opportunity and remuneration) have resulted in poetry in the form of traditional *izibongo* being produced within the Congress of South African Trade unions. In fact, it is not uncommon for an *imbongi* to produce poetry at a union meeting.

The voice of protest is also entrenched in written poetry. It can be heard, for example, in the writing of Sepamla, Mphahlele, Themba, and others. After the 1976 uprising there was a flood of protest poetry. It is interesting to note that although much of this poetry was, and still is, produced in English, it makes use of traditional styles and techniques. This phenomenon of resorting to English can probably be ascribed to the frustration of the writers in their attempts to reach their oppressors, namely the whites, the majority of whom are unable to understand an African language. English is also an international language, hence affording an author access to a much wider audience.

The voice of protest therefore speaks out in both written and oral poetry produced in a variety of African languages as well as in English. It is also interesting to note that oral, as opposed to written poetry, is now also produced in English, but that it clearly draws on traditional roots. Perhaps the best example of such a performer is Mzwakhe Mbuli, known as “The People’s Poet.” The mass rally that was held in Umtata on April 22, 1990 also saw oral performances in English.

### **Mandela Poetry: Contextual Setting**

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, the President of the African National Congress and now president of the Republic of South Africa, arrived in Umtata on April 21, 1990. This was his first visit to his birthplace since his release from prison earlier that year. Prior to his arrival, the city of Umtata was the scene of frantic activity: banners advertising Mandela’s visit were

being erected, and the media together with foreign visitors were flocking into Umtata. A sense of excitement prevailed among the local inhabitants of Transkei, many of whom were already in Umtata. Marshals were being recruited in anticipation of the highlight of Mandela's visit at a rally to be held the next day.

Approximately 3000 people gathered at the Umtata airport in order to welcome Mandela home. Excitement was at fever pitch as the Transkei Airways plane came into sight. Youths began *toyi-toying* and women ululating. Marshals were everywhere. Mandela emerged, dressed in a leopard skin, the mark of a chief, and carrying a spear. He gave a short impromptu speech; he spoke of his youth in this region—how he stole mealies as a small boy and hunted for birds and wild animals. As his voice broke under the strain of emotion, three thousand fists were raised in the air to meet him. No doubt an emotional moment for Mandela. According to Major General Holomisa, then leader of the Military Council in Transkei, this was a moment of unparalleled historical significance for Transkei.

During his stay in this region Mandela spoke on a number of occasions including at the mass rally. He also delivered an address to the University of Transkei (UNITRA) community. The intention of this article is to comment on these gatherings, especially on the oral poetry which was produced at these meetings, and the written poetry which appeared in local newspapers.

The arrival of Mr. Mandela led, to some extent, to a resuscitation of the production of contemporary oral poetry in this region. Besides Mr Mandela's presence, the reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, there has been the removal of the previous regime in Transkei under which this type of poetry would have been prohibited; and secondly, the partial restoration of freedom of speech within the broader southern African region.

### **Analysis of the Poetry**

The following poem was produced at the April 22nd rally, held just outside Umtata and attended by approximately 100,000 people. Prior to Mandela's speech and immediately thereafter, there were many *iimbongi* who came forward and performed. Due to the number of poems produced, only selected extracts will be analyzed. Where the poems were originally produced in Xhosa, English translations will be provided.

The poem that follows was performed in English by two poets. The style is heavily repetitive and formulaic—a technique always evident in traditional Xhosa *izibongo*. The poets alternate, each producing one line. The poem is produced rhythmically and the last word in each line is temporally lengthened.

How can you win?  
 How can I?  
 How can you want to negotiate?  
 Hunger is Hunger.  
 Ugly is Ugly.  
 How can I?  
 How can you want to negotiate?  
 I am hungry now,  
 Behind the bars.  
 I am hungry now,  
 Behind the bars.

Typically, repetition structures the presentation. The poets are also skeptical about negotiations—clearly, the poem is inspired by Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetry.<sup>4</sup> I quote some verses from Mbuli's poem as illustration (1989:11):

Behind the bars  
 I shivered, I prayed  
 This cell or the next  
 A man slipped to death  
 Another one used a pair of jeans to heaven  
 Behind the bars.

The rally poem continues as follows:

Margaret, do not suggest it for me,  
 Margaret, do not suggest it for me,  
 Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, Margaret, Margaret,  
 is a bitch,  
 Is a busy bitch,  
 Margaret, Margaret,  
 Margaret do not suggest it for me.  
 George Bush,

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<sup>4</sup> Most of Mbuli's poetry is also produced in English.

George Bush is a mafia,  
 George Bush is a mafia,  
 A mafia.  
 George Bush,  
 Mafia, mafia, mafia.  
 Moreover,  
 I shall return,  
 Behind the bars.  
 Struggle inside,  
 Solidarity outside,  
 Margaret,  
 Margaret.

The poets were clearly referring critically to the major Western leaders at the time, namely Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain and George Bush of the United States. The real issue here is their approach to sanctions. The language used to describe the two leaders is nothing less than derogatory, with Thatcher being described as a “busy bitch” and Bush as a member of the mafia. The poets appeal for solidarity outside while the struggle continues inside.

The poem continues:

Welcome home, our leaders,  
 Welcome home,  
 Welcome home,  
 Welcome home, bawo womhlaba,  
 Welcome home,  
 Welcome home.  
 Welcome home, Walter,  
 Welcome home, Walter Sisulu,  
 Welcome home,  
 The Secretary,  
 The General,  
 In general,  
 The Secretary,  
 In general, welcome home, baba Sisulu,  
 Welcome home,  
 Welcome home,  
 Welcome home, bawo Madiba, welcome home.  
 Welcome home, bawo Madiba, welcome home.

This extract is again an excellent example of the formulaic style which characterizes this poetry. Notice also the play on the word “general”: “the general,” “in general,” “the secretary,” “in general welcome home.”

The poem concludes as follows:

The Chief commander of MK.  
 Yiza Mkhonto,  
 Yiza Mkhonto,  
 Amandla!  
 Awethu! (audience response)  
 There is no unity in a group,  
 Where laws are based on the words:  
 Triple oppression and triple exploitation.  
 Unworkable laws,  
 Unnegotiable laws,  
 Unworkable apartheid.  
 This is not a mystery,  
 We are making history.  
 This is not a mystery,  
 We are in the battle.  
 Mandela released,  
 Walter Sisulu in Lusaka,  
 Freedom in South Africa.  
 Amandla!  
 Awethu! (audience response)

In this section the use of both Xhosa and English adds a new dimension to the style of praise poetry. Here the poets make it clear that apartheid cannot be negotiated: “unworkable laws, unnegotiable laws, unworkable apartheid.” The power salute, *amandla*, serves as both an opening and closing formula followed by audience response. It is also common within this poetry for the *imbongi* to utter phrases like *Mayibuye* (“Let it return”), with the audience responding *i-Afrika*.

In another poem produced on the same occasion, the late Oliver Tambo, the leader of the ANC at that time, is referred to as follows:

Ndiyamtyhafela u-Oliver Reginald Tambo:  
 u-0 umele u-organizing,  
 u-R umele u-Resistance,  
 u-T umele u-Take-over.  
 Grayani, Magerilla negraye!

I feel weak on the part of Oliver Reginald Tambo:  
 O stands for organizing,  
 R stands for resistance,  
 T stands for take-over.  
 Grayani, Magerilla negraye!

Tambo is portrayed as the epitome of what the struggle means and entails: organizing, resisting, and taking over. The interesting closing formula (“Fight on, guerillas, fight!”) makes a play on guerilla/gorilla, referring to Mkhonto soldiers.

In a poem that is more localized in the sense that it praises a local Transkei leader, an *imbongi* states the following:

Wena mpandla,  
 Mpandl’empenyelele Xobololo, uvunyiwe ngokumisa ibunzi ejele kuba  
     utshutshiswa nguMatanzima.  
 Hayi, hayi.

You bald one,  
 You shining bald one of Xobololo, they recognize you by your shining  
     forehead in jail because of Matanzima’s cruelty.  
 No, No.

Xobololo was the leader of the ANC in this region, an organization that was banned under the previous Matanzima regime and whose members and leaders were often harassed and detained. The extract clearly laments this history.

The poem continues:

Hamba ke mhlekazi,  
 Sibulela ukuba sikubonile sizukulwana sikaDalindyebo,  
 Hayi ubogorha bukaSabata.  
 Kumhla sayibona le nto iyi-ANC.  
 Hayi umntaka Holomisa lighawe lamaqhawe madoda.

Go then, honorable one,  
 We are thankful to see you, the greatgrandchild of Dalindyebo,  
 Oh! the bravery of Sabata.  
 It was the day we saw this thing called the ANC.  
 We agree the son of Holomisa is the most excellent one.

The *imbongi* here refers to Mandela as being the greatgrandchild of Dalindyebo, as well as to the day of Chief Sabata Dalindyebo's second burial (his remains having been exhumed), when he was buried with ANC support. It was also the day on which Holomisa raised some important issues, including Transkei's possible reincorporation into South Africa. He is praised for this advocacy.

In another poem produced in English, a poet refers to previous ruling regimes and compares them to Mandela:

He [Mandela] would see South Africa for what it could be, in justice and  
total equality, . . . not power, money, and personal interests.  
The word has never seen may leaders of the national party, more especially  
Verwoerd, P.W. Botha, and Vorster, ever achieve such leadership,  
Instead, they drag the black struggle into the deep sea of Robben Island for  
life.

The extracts that follow are taken from three poems produced at the UNITRA rally on Monday, April 23. They deserve particular emphasis, since they were produced by an *imbongi* who never composes written poetry but only performs orally and spontaneously when he feels inspired to do so. Incidentally, he resides in Umtata. It is also interesting to note that he wears the traditional dress of animal skins, braided with the ANC colors, while performing.

Liphupha lamathongo,  
Liphupha lamaMpunge,  
Isazalo sikhale sancama,  
Mingaphin' imiphefuml'ephantsi komhlaba?  
Zingaphin' izidumbu ngengxa kaMandela?  
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la  
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la.

It is 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?  
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la  
Mande-e-e-ela Mand-e-e-e-e-e-e-la.

The *imbongi* here refers to those comrades who died in the struggle in order to secure Mandela's release. He also laments those comrades who perished unaware that freedom was so near.

Here is a second extract from the same *imbongi*:

Bambiza bengamazi,  
 Bambiza bengazange bambone,  
 Yiyo loo nto kufuneka sithozame sithozamelane,  
 Kuba side sambona.  
 Umzekelo kaYesu erhug' 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 witness and hear his words,  
 That is where we have confirmed that his words are true.

The opening and closing couplets contain parallelisms, a common technique in the production of oral poetry. In effect, the *imbongi* is playing a mediating role here by asking people to respect one another. An interesting metaphor compares Mandela to a Christlike figure.

A third selection from this same poet follows:

Ziyac-e-e-e-engwa izinto,  
 Azenziwa ngobuxhiliphothi,  
 Azenziwa ngokungxanyelwa,  
 Litho ch-u-u-u-u.  
 Umntaka Ngubengcuka kaNgangelizwe,  
 Uthe ch-u-u-u-u-u.  
 Uhamba nabafundi bakhe.  
 NjengoYesu,  
 Uhamba noSisulu noMbeki,  
 Uhamba nomHlaba,  
 Uhamba namadoda aphilileyo.

Things are approached with a skill,

They are not approached with vigor,  
 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.

Again we note the furthering of the biblical metaphor with Sisulu and others being described as disciples. There are also instances of parallelism, as in the last three lines. The poet also gives some indication of genealogy, namely “the son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe,” a common feature in traditional Xhosa *izibongo*.

Similar concerns find expression in this selection from another of his poems:

Sidiniwe ngoongcothoza,  
 Hayi madoda nimhloniphe uDaliwonga,  
 Sanukumgxeka nimane nisithi phantisi ngaye,  
 Hayi masimbizele ngeneno,  
 Azohlambulula, kodwa ndimvile,  
 Uyibuyisel’ iPAC ngapha kweli cala,  
 Akancedanga nto,  
 Ibhahhile loo nto.  
 Nde Gram!

We are tired of the traitors,  
 You people must honor Daliwonga,  
 Don’t blame him saying away with him,  
 We must just call him aside,  
 So that he can confess, but I have heard that  
 He is building up the PAC that side,  
 He hasn’t helped a thing,  
 That has lost its value,  
 I disappear!

This extract reaffirms the *imbongi’s* restored right to freedom of speech in this region. Daliwonga (Chief K.D. Matanzima’s *isikhahlelo* or praise name) is referred to as a traitor. On the other hand, the *imbongi* again plays

a mediating role, asking people to try to win him over rather than condemn him. Again, one of the essential aspects of an *imbongi's* role is that of negotiating between the people on the one hand, and the person or organization he is praising on the other. The poet also raises the issue of the Pan African Congress and Matanzima's alleged relationship with that organization.

In another poem the same *imbongi* comments on the relationship between Mandela and Sisulu, from the rally days up to the present. He also portrays the Rivonia trials and the law as follows:

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

Once he [Mandela] had finished his education they [the Boers] met the law  
 of truth.  
 Imagine, lawyers representing themselves.  
 They just stood and defended themselves,  
 Because they were lawyers of the truth.

This extract makes an interesting play on the word "lawyer," *igqwetha*, given the fact that Mandela represented himself at the Rivonia trial. He was also a representative for the ANC at the negotiating table. Mandela is presented as a lawyer of truth.

The *imbongi* can also focus on the issues of unity within diversity, as in the passage below:

Asinakujika ndawo,  
 iTshangaan, uMsuthu, iNyasa, umXhosa, iVend', umTswana,  
 Hayi madoda noMzulu ngokunjalo,  
 Singabantu abamnyama.  
 Nc-e-e-edani-i-i!  
 Nceda mntaka Mandela,  
 Ncedani niyokuthatha uGatsha Buthelezi nimfak' estoksini  
 Ingxak' ilapho.  
 Thathani uGatsha Buthelezi  
 Nimfak' ejele.  
 Kuba nguy' odibene namagxagxa namaBhulu,  
 Kuze kuf' abantu bakuthi.

Mayenzeke loo nto.

We will never change,  
 Tshangaans, 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,  
 Take Gatsha Buthelezi,  
 Put him in jail,  
 He is the one who is connected with the poor whites and Boers,  
 Which results in the death of our people.  
 That must be done.

The poet is appealing for a unified black people. He also goes so far as to call for the arrest of Gatsha Buthelezi in order to create a climate for unity in the struggle.

In a written poem published in *Imvo*, March 2, 1990, an *imbongi* refers to Mandela as follows:

Leza lithwel' isidanga sokumel' inyaniso yoqobo,  
 Wafika gaxa! uRolihlahla irhorho yohlanga,  
 Azi loda lizole de lizole na izwe leAfrika?

He came wearing a cloak of truth,  
 He came wearing it! Rolihlahla, the animal of the nation,  
 I wonder if there will ever be peace and harmony in Africa?

Here the poet uses a metaphor—Mandela is compared to an animal possessing certain terrifying characteristics (*irhorho*), for he is feared by the previous Apartheid regime. The *imbongi* also questions whether there will ever be complete peace in Africa.

In another poem published in *Umthunywa* (March 1990), written by an *imbongi* living at Qunu, Mandela's birthplace, the *imbongi* comments:

Zivela zizitshintsha amabala zixel' umamlambo,  
 ichanti lamadoda asemaXhoseni.  
 Zavela zingoo UDF, MDM, COSATO, SAWU, SARHU njalo-njalo.

They came showing their colours like a mermaid,  
 a snake owned by Xhosa men,  
 being UDF, MDM, COSATU, SAWU, SARHU, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

The *imbongi* suggests here that there are many organizations within the struggle. These are compared to *Mamlambo*, a protean creature possessing changeable characteristics. The organizations may therefore not be the same, but they still fall under the umbrella of the struggle.

The *imbongi* can also treat other principal figures in the struggle, such as the Afrikaner (then) president F.W. De Klerk:

Uyabulela umz' Ontsundu kumfana kaDe Klerk  
 onesibind' sengweny' ukud' avulele umthandi  
 wesizwe aphume esikiti sikaVelevutha.

The black nation is giving thanks to the son of De Klerk  
 Who is brave like a crocodile  
 now that he has eventually let the lover of the nation out of the jail of  
 Verwoerd.

De Klerk is praised and compared to a crocodile, an animal renowned for its courage. The Apartheid jail created by Verwoerd was opened by De Klerk.

Finally, the *imbongi* asks the people to inform their ancestors, to inform Biko and Mxenge who sacrificed their lives for the struggle, that Mandela is back:

Kuba kaloku ephumile nje uRolihlahla, uyabuy' uTambo emahlatini.  
 Vulani amazibuko, lunyathel' ubhel' olumanz' andonga lakuloSabata  
 Dalindyebo.  
 Hambani nokubikel' iintsapho zethu emangcwabeni ukuba ude wabuya  
 uNelson.  
 Xeletani uBiko noMxenge nithi okaMandela uphumile eluvalelweni.  
 Yitshoni kuNzo abuye eLusaka, izinja zikhululwe amazinyo.  
 Xeletani okaTutu OoNyawo-ntle batandazele uNelson;  
 Kaloku nimcelele impilo nde ntle nje ngoMosisi, de sifike enkululekweni.

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<sup>5</sup> United Democratic Front, Mass Democratic Movement, Congress of South African Trade Unions, South African Workers Union, South African Railways and Harbours Union.

Because now that Rolihlahla is back, Tambo will also be back from the forests.

Pave the way so that the handsome one of Sabata Dalindyebo may walk in. Go and inform your deceased in the graves that Nelson has eventually come.

Inform Biko and Mxenge that Mandela is out of prison.

Tell Nzo that he must come back from Lusaka, the dogs no longer have teeth.

Tell Tutu that he must inform the priests that they must pray for Mandela, So that intercessions should be made for his health and long life like Moses till we get independence.

The dogs that now lack teeth are the Boer oppressors. At the same time, Mandela is compared to Moses leading the people to a better future, in the same way that Moses led the Israelites away from Pharaoh.

### **Similarities and Differences: Traditional versus Modern *Iimbongi***

The similarities between contemporary *izibongo* and that of the traditional *iimbongi* seem to be more obvious than the differences because of the modern *iimbongi*'s attempts to emulate the tradition of *izibongo*. The modern *iimbongi* is operating within the tradition rather than outside or in opposition to it. In support of this view, a summary of similarities follows below. This section amounts to an analysis of dress, method of delivery, stylistic techniques (including metaphor and parallelism), role, and themes.

#### *Dress*

*Iimbongi* operating within the Mass Democratic Movement do not necessarily have uniform dress, or any particular style of dress at all, for that matter. The choice depends entirely on the individual performer. By and large this is true of all *iimbongi* today. The traditional animal-skin robe and hat, accompanied by the carrying of a spear, are seldom seen anymore. However, one often encounters *iimbongi* wearing remnants of the traditional

dress, such as the hat, while dressed in a contemporary suit.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Umtata *imbongi*<sup>7</sup> wears an animal skin cloak braided with the ANC colors.

### *Method of delivery*

Cronin makes the following general remarks with regard to contemporary oral poetry (1989:41):

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*).

This style of delivery also resembles that of the traditional *imbongi*, though there are differences. For example, the guttural voice characteristic of the traditional poet is not always retained. The reason for this shift is that the modern *imbongi* wishes his audience to hear and understand each word so as to learn from the performance. The loudness and speed with which the performance takes place is, however, reminiscent of the traditional situation.<sup>8</sup>

Although the *imbongi* now normally holds a microphone, which can be an inhibiting factor, there is still a lot of movement in some instances. Gesture therefore still figures as an important part of the performance. Overall, the kinesic aspects of performance help both to maintain that

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<sup>6</sup> According to Cronin (1989:42), the clothing of the performer should also be noted. As often as not it 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.

<sup>7</sup> This *imbongi*, Bongani Sithole, operates within the ANC and is probably one of the first ANC *iimbongi* to emerge in Transkei since the unbanning of the organization.

<sup>8</sup> There is also the use of what could be called "breath units" in the poetry, each line being the equivalent of one breath.

audience's attention and to support the *imbongi's* message rhetorically. Some of the *iimbongi* have also developed a type of dancing (strongly resembling the *toyitoyi*) that accompanies their poetry performances. Shouts of "amandla" accompanied by audience response are also common.

### *Stylistic techniques*

Techniques generally associated with the production of traditional *izibongo* include personification, metaphor, and simile, all of which are closely linked and involve elements of comparison. These devices are used by modern as well as traditional *iimbongi* to create imagery, an important aspect of their art. In general terms, Cronin observes (1989:42):

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.

This characterization also supports the use of stylistic techniques such as parallelism and linking in the collected poetry, especially since parallelism promotes a certain degree of repetition.

Clearly such forms also abound in the poetry quoted above. Metaphors and similes are also common, including animal metaphors, as when De Klerk is compared to a crocodile, or the Boers are referred to as dogs without teeth.

The use of parallelism is indeed an interesting and useful device. It allows the *imbongi* to develop a particular idea, either by initial, final, or oblique linkage in a sentence. This technique is exploited throughout the *izibongo* poetry. Ideas are sometimes repeated using similar words, but keeping at least one word exactly the same as it was in the previous sentence, or placing it in a different position, perhaps at the end as opposed to the beginning of the sentence. These repetitions again assist the audience in understanding full force of the poet's meaning.

### *Role*

The role of the *imbongi* as mediator and as political and historical commentator has been retained. The role of the modern *imbongi* is also often educational, and as such mandates reference to the history of the struggle. In connection with the modern political dimensions of the poet's role, Elizabeth Gunner states (1986:35):

The *izibongo* are a unique tool in raising worker's 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.

As a historical commentator, the modern *imbongi* therefore fulfills a very important role. This responsibility can be compared to the traditional *imbongi's* constant reference to historical aspects such as the genealogy of the chief and the history of the people.

### *Themes*

Although the poet's cache of themes has changed over time, or perhaps has been added to, it has simply adapted to accommodate new pressures. The traditional *iimbongi* (attached to chiefs) were concerned mainly with events that were taking place in the immediate area where the chief lived. Historical themes also permeated their poetry. Today, modern *iimbongi* are concerned with factors and events presently affecting their lives, and it is these that form the basis of their poetry. Their art is therefore still fueled by contemporary events, the audience's response, and so forth. Also prominent are historical perspectives regarding the origins of the struggle. In general, the themes have changed because the political and social environment (upon which the poetry is a commentary) has also changed.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Mandela's visit to the Transkei/Eastern Cape region not only resulted in a flood of poetry, it also reaffirmed the *imbongi's* position as a

social and political commentator in African society. The vibrant audience response and the vital poetic themes, drawing on socioeconomic and political issues as reflected in this poetry, are clear evidence of this phenomenon. The *imbongi* is fighting to come to terms with a new environment that presents different challenges. According to Gunner (1986:33),

both Zulu and Xhosa praise poetry because they exploit powerful cultural symbols with such ease, appeal in a very direct way to their listener's emotions and attitudes. They intrinsically combine political and aesthetic appeal and perhaps for this reason represent valuable "property" in any ideological struggle.

In the same vein, this article has attempted to show how the *imbongi* is a relevant and significant figure within the political and social structure of contemporary South African life.

*University of the Western Cape*

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