

I Control the Idioms: Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry

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Introduction

Creativity, Innovation, Emergence in the Southern African Context

With its official eleven languages and many more local varieties, South Africa provides an enormously fertile place to observe the whole spectrum of creativity in verbal art. The many forms of verbal art in a wide variety of contexts might possibly reveal the whole spectrum of artistic language use from, to use Richard Bauman's words, "accurate rendition of ready made figures" to emergent language use (1978:18). With reference to the analysis of Ndebele praise poetry that is the subject of this article, "creativity" will refer mainly to two aspects of language use, namely (a) the ability of praise poets to constantly renew well-known formulaic expressions by linguistic adaptation and (b) a more innovative aspect: the coinage of new metaphors, the forte of praise poets in Southern Africa. We will then pose the question as to whether these aspects of creativity are enough to sustain the tradition of praising in Ndebele.

The question of creativity is an interesting one when we consider the position of the present-day South African praise poet. How is the creativity of contemporary poets affected as they are subjected to and participate in contextual changes? Context—which here includes the complete "story" of a performance or a text: history and culture as well the physical situatedness of actual performances—is clearly an important determinant for verbal art. If verbal art originates and thrives in a certain context, it stands to reason that when that nurturing context changes or disappears, the verbal art associated with it may likewise change or disappear. There are many examples to illustrate this "law": initiation songs and other genres linked to this practice among Zulu men have long since ceased because the practice of initiation had already been terminated by the time of the Zulu king Shaka.

Songs that accompanied the communal eradication of locusts have become defunct because the practice itself has become redundant. Folktales are no longer performed in the granny-children-fireside situation because the “informal” educational and recreational context has been supplanted by another system. On the plus side, in recent years King Zwelithini of the Zulus has revived certain customs that have been extinct for many decades. One could cite the so-called Reed and First Fruits ceremonies as examples. Since the original verbal art associated with these ceremonies is not known, songs belonging to other events (such as weddings) have to be imported to make these occasions work. They are performed in addition to the praise poetry that now also forms part of such ceremonies.

Praise Poetry Scholarship and the Art of Praising

In South African universities praise poetry scholarship has, until recently, been produced by African language departments, where, generally speaking, formalism seems to be a way of life. The traditions of praising that have attracted the most attention by far are Xhosa and Zulu, and not without reason; these languages boast the most speakers, and praising is correspondingly the most diversified and developed in these traditions.¹ Apart from the fact that languages other than Xhosa and Zulu have been more thoroughly studied lately, the genre of praising has also attracted the attention of scholars in other departments, and with it diverse critical questions have been applied to the practice of praising. For instance, when dealing with oral art Michael Chapman observes: “The oral voice places the critic under an obligation—I shall argue—to interpret oral tradition as retaining a contentious capacity: as a usable past” (1996:18). The question can then be posed as to “how usable” this art form is in the lives of the people, and to what extent the practice of praising is something of the past.

That Chapman is thinking of praising not only as something intensely concerned with history is clear from this statement: “The ‘imbongi’ glories in the command of royal performance, and while it is easy to be swept along by the recitation of accumulated images into a past age of blood and thunder, questions persist as to whether the ancient panegyric should, or can, be recovered as anything but a curiosity” (60). While for some observers—African and non-African language speakers alike—praising may

¹ In this introductory part of the paper terms such as *ukubonga* (“praising, to praise”), *imbongi* (“praise poet”) and so on, will be shunned as far as possible so as to avoid the canonizing of culture-specific terms.

be little more than a curiosity, what cannot be denied is the fact that this ancient form of verbal art remains a vibrant, highly developed genre in Southern Africa. Every scholar who has studied the genre has at least acknowledged that the praise poem “has remained resilient in its potential for renewal and relevance” and that “the praise poem is in fact Southern Africa’s most characteristic form of literary expression which, prior to its written recordings in the nineteenth century, has been observed as early as the seventeenth century at the court of a Shona king” (Chapman 1996:55).

If the praise poem is Africa’s most characteristic form, it has gained this reputation by the sheer diversity of performance situations in which it occurs and its host of diverse types. Praise poems in Southern Africa can be found anywhere from the private bedroom to the public political meeting, from the family occasion to the trade union gathering, and on subjects from toddlers to recently deceased elders. A few examples will suffice. Among other types, Alec Pongweni (1996) gives many examples of gender- and clan-specific sexual praise poems recited only after sexual intercourse. Predictably, this sort of poem for the male is characterized by images of conquering, a topic that is also prevalent in the praise poetry for kings or chiefs and political leaders (Gunner 1999). Indeed, the extolling of different kinds of “warriors” is probably the most visible type of praise poetry in South Africa. In recent years we have seen how leaders of all the major political parties were praised during their campaigns for the 1998 election. President Mbeki was honored by poets of the major African languages at his inauguration in July 1998. When the delegation of the international football federation (FIFA) visited South Africa in 2000 to evaluate its ability to host the 2006 soccer world cup, it was entertained by a praise poet. The praise poem for kings and chiefs has also been adapted to serve the trade union movement (Kromberg 1993).

The highly revered clan praise poem is indispensable at gatherings of a liminal nature—moving into adulthood, passing from one marital state to another, or at burials. An individual can thus be the beneficiary of more than one kind of praise poem. In the past it was quite common for Zulu mothers to compose *izangelo* for a child after its birth. *Izangelo* is “praise poetry” in the sense that it is composed for a specific child but actually provides an opportunity for the mother to lament aspects of her married life and to reminisce the circumstances of the child’s birth. As a child grows he or she may acquire praise names for certain achievements; these names form the basis of the praise poem “proper.” Zulu *izigiyo* are short praises, particular to a certain person, uttered when that person performs the vigorous *giya* dancing at festive occasions.

The most common *raison d'être*, in my view, is the proclaiming of the individual's uniqueness, regardless of what feature makes that individual unique. This explains why in *izihasho*—the Zulu praise poetry for common people (Turner 1990)—and even in *izibongo zamakhosi*, Zulu praises for kings or chiefs, a person can be praised using items that range from peculiar little incidents to the most vulgar characteristics. In praise poetry for the ruling Zulu monarch, King Zwelithini, one can find the following lines (Mkhize 1989:108):

*Mfula kaNdab' ogobhoz' ekhanda
LikaMatanzima kwelaseKoloni
AmaXhos' onke' anyway' izimpandla
Athi yini liyanetha mfondini
Kanti kugoboz' uMageba.*

River of Ndaba that flows on the head
Of Matanzima of the Cape Colony,
All the Xhosas scratch their bald heads
Saying is it raining my brother?
In fact it is Mageba who is flowing.

These lines refer to a seemingly insignificant incident, namely that while flying over the former Transkei, King Zwelithini had to use the restroom. Similarly, a certain Nomsa is praised as follows (Turner 1990:118):

*Uvovo liyavuza
Kadlulwa zindaba
Kadlulwa bhulukwe
Umathanga akahlangani
Uyazivulukela uma ebona ibhulukwe.*

Strainer is leaking,
No news passes her by,
No trousers pass her by,
Lady Thighs they don't meet [= she doesn't sit discreetly],
She just opens when she sees trousers.

Praising is not directed at people only. Molefe (1992) gives an account of the praises of 16 kinds of domestic animals where the poems for the pig are the longest at more than 40 lines. The praising of divining bones and the ancestors is a focus for some *izangoma* (Zulu healers) as they conduct their sessions.

Formal Conventions

A comparison of the different praises mentioned so far would reveal how similar they are in terms of formal conventions. Invariably, the enigmatic characteristics and deeds of the subject are clothed in metaphor, the trope that rules supreme in the praise poem. These metaphors range from relatively simple equation (expressed in a single noun) to extensive syntactical and multiple semantic layering. The nature and extensive use of metaphor is the result of praise poetry's peculiar reference system, as Karin Barber (1999:29-30) has shown: "the conventions of the genre require or encourage various kinds of oblique, opaque or far fetched attachment of meaning. It is as if composers and listeners are playing a game of signification, in which meanings are generated, secreted, and withheld or retrieved according to definite and specialised conventions, and where access to these meanings may be highly restricted, filtered or layered."

This way of referring to people, events, and places (though hardly ever dates) has strong bearing on how praise poetry deals with history, one of the issues of interest in the study of the genre. In a study on a hitherto unknown corpus of praises, namely that of the Hananwa in the Northern Province of South Africa, Annekie Joubert and J. A. Van Schalkwyk (1999:46) take the view that the praise poem they analyze "gives a comprehensive account of the 1894 siege of Blouberg. It narrates the same historical information, but from the point of view of an 'insider'." Later on they confirm as follows: "It also demonstrates the historic competence of the oral poet. The diachronic course of the events of the war as narrated in the poem is logical and tallies with other orally transmitted versions. By assimilating all the cross references among the proxemic markers, the listener is able to reconstruct a clear picture of the events of 1894" (*ibid.*:46). However, when one looks at the poem, referential clarity is extremely hard to find. When the authors speak of "the same historical information," their statement must by no means be understood as "historically accurate or clear data." The poem understandably does not capture historical details precisely and comprehensively—for example, there are no dates in the poem, and the politician who ordered the war is simply referred to as Paul.

The important point is that a history of the war is presented from the viewpoint of the subjugated. It is the *experience* of and *reactions* to events that must not be forgotten; in the words of Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991:64) the praises *are* the history. Vail and White thus speak of history as metaphor (as opposed to history as code) and history as drama (73), while

Duncan Brown (1998:108) speaks of history as rhetorical presence. Barber aptly summarizes this kind of signification as follows (1999:41): “This is a mode that seems to be founded on the flight into metaphor, not cancelling literal truth—rather, retaining fact as its guarantor and bedrock—but simply evading specification.” Thus the metaphors in praise poetry “tend to draw attention not to specific, idiosyncratic features of the subject in question but to a generalised value such as strength, beauty or value” (*idem*). And remembrance of this kind is best activated through public performance.

Formal equivalence (repetition), although less in evidence than metaphor and other tropes, rhythmically punctuates the excitement created by the action motifs. Repetition can be found in sounds and syllables, verb and noun stems (commonly called linking), complete words and phrases, grammatical and semantic structure (referred to as parallelism), and the recurrence of popular action motifs, which are shared even across different languages. For instance, the formulaic expression “run ye along all the paths” (Gunner and Gwala 1991:19, 54) shows that this expression occurs in the Zulu praises of Shaka, Chief Albert Luthuli, and those of the present Zulu monarch, King Goodwill Zwelithini. The latter’s impending ascent to the throne is described as follows (see especially the underlined section):

*Nani magundwane ahlala eyikhotheni kwaNongoma
gijimani nge ‘ndlela zonkana niyobikela abangake-e-ZW-A!
Nithi “Lukhulu luyeza luyanyelela,
silufanisa nendlovu emnyama yasoBhalule
luzoshis’ i’khotha zakwaNongoma.”*

And you rats that live in the long grass at Nongoma
run along all the paths and go and announce to those who haven’t HE-A-ARD!
Say “Something big is coming, it is sneaking up,
we compare it to the black elephant of Bhalule
it will burn the long grass of Nongoma.”

The formulaic expression appears at least six times in Ndebele praise poetry, including three times in a poem by King Mayisha II himself (or Prince Cornelius, as he was known when the research was done) on Mabhoko, the nineteenth-century Ndebele chief.²

There are, of course, many other poetic devices, such as the manipulation of grammar, direct address, and so forth. But the fact that Southern African praise poetry makes use of similar devices does not mean that different traditions’ ways of remembering the subject are the same. An

² See the Ndebele examples below.

intense debate has, for instance, been waged over the memory versus improvisation issue. We have come to accept that while most of the Southern African praising traditions may be predominantly memorial, Xhosa has in addition excelled in improvisation. Should a Xhosa *imbongi* (praise poet), for example, be asked to perform at a certain event he may well have a lot of things to say about the event itself, not to mention the person he may be praising. Much of what the *imbongi* says may never be heard again. The Zulu *imbongi*, on the other hand, will prefer to perform the praise poetry of a person he has come to know over the years and about whom he has composed a relatively stable set of praises. A phrase such as “relatively stable” in the discourse on praise poetry needs some qualification. Although poets are often adamant that a person’s praises cannot be changed, we understand that they mean among other things that since a person’s praises are in a sense the person himself or herself, they should always be performed in the usual revered fashion, that one cannot detract from what a person has achieved, and so on. Praise poets, on the other hand, are sometimes oblivious to the fact that they make use of varying grammatical constructions to say “the same thing,” that they are switching the order of motifs, and that they are “forgetting” certain motifs. What they are profoundly aware of is that their subject is always growing in stature through interactions with people and events and that the poets accordingly have to keep track of his or her actions.

There are also contextual and situational aspects to consider. Praise poets have to think about the particular occasion and, importantly (perhaps especially for “memorial praise poets”), whom they will be praising. Being clad in skins and brandishing a stick or spear is not absolutely necessary for some poets to function well. The photograph below of the well-known Zulu praise poet, J. Dlamini, shows him clad in trousers and a golf shirt as he was praising Mangosuthu Buthelezi (Minister of Home Affairs, but officiating as the chief of the Buthelezi clan) at a Shaka Day ceremony on September 25, 1999. Audience participation also differs from occasion to occasion. At the Shaka Day ceremony just cited, the audience stood reverently as they listened to the praises of Buthelezi. The poet did not provide an occasion for the audience to utter the well-known participation formula “Musho!” (“Speak him forth!”). By contrast, the Ndebele praise poet mentioned later in this paper always performed in front of lively, even rowdy participants. He often paused to accommodate participation and not seldom had to recommence a line when the crowd was too noisy.



J. Dlamini praising chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Shaka Day ceremonies, 25 September 1999, at Stanger, KwaZulu-Natal.

Functions

Praise poetry's function is largely determined by the context and situation in which it is performed. Clan poetry performed at weddings and praises in the context of divining are clearly more mediatory in that they serve to make a connection with the ancestors. Poetry extolling chiefs or kings and political figures may range from serving as a "traditional" means of propaganda³ to offering highly critical remarks. Essentially though, praise poetry seeks to individualize, that is, to set the individual apart from all others, to build and maintain his or her austere character and position. Whatever the case, audiences enjoy it immensely, so that the functions of entertainment and education (in the sense of inculcating the conventions of the genre) must not be underestimated. Vail and White strongly argue that oral poetry is driven by what they call poetic license: "the convention that poetic expression is privileged expression, the performer being free to express opinions that would otherwise be in breach of other social

³ See Vail and White's analysis of Swazi royal praises in this regard (1991:155 *et seq.*).

conventions” (1991:319). Accordingly, they contend, this aesthetic should form the bedrock of a poetics for oral poetry.

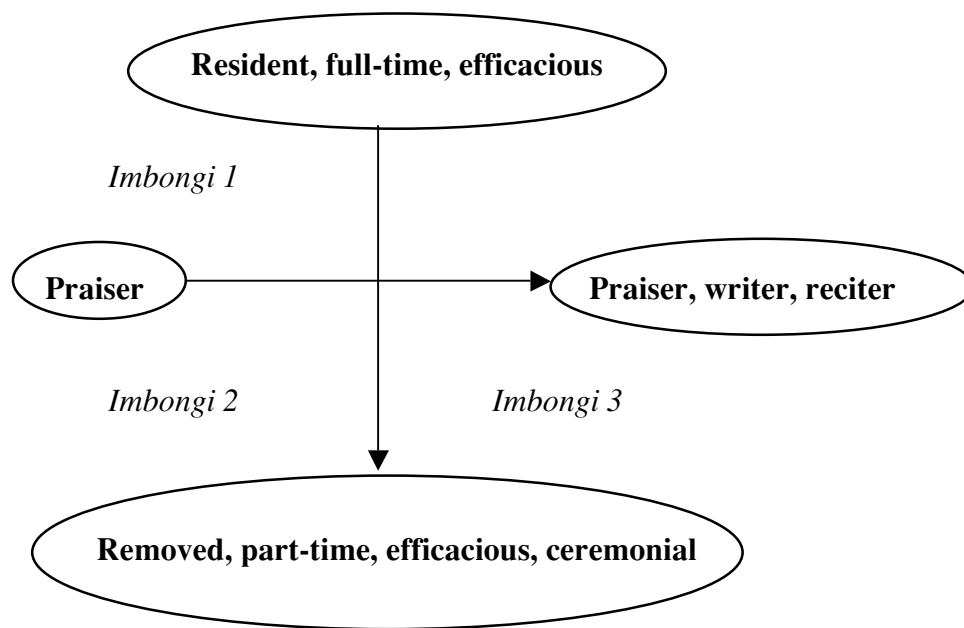
A Tradition in Transition

In the long history that the praise poem evidently enjoys, colonial and subsequent political interventions have probably brought about the greatest changes. But while these interventions have not been kind to some traditions of praising, other varieties are as vibrant as ever. While Barber maintains that “the heyday of praise production in both Sotho and Yoruba cultures is essentially over” (1999:33) and although this observation also applies to other cultures in Southern Africa, it does not mean that no praises are ever recited in these cultures. The residue of knowledge in the art of praising surfaces when the need arises, albeit sometimes as a somewhat canonized piece of culture—something produced, for instance, at culture-specific national days instituted under apartheid, at the opening of a new provincial parliamentary session, and so on. The changes to the tradition could be summarized as an irrevocable distancing of praise poets from traditional contexts, as Russell Kaschula affirms (1991:47): “Any romantic view of the present day *imbongi* as a traditionalist attached only to chiefs would be redundant and naïve.” The weakening of the system of clan and tribal chiefs is probably one of the major factors in the decline of praising in certain cultures. But as old systems are replaced by new, some traditions have simply inserted the praise poem into the new system and in the process have adapted the genre, whether marginally or more profoundly.⁴

The findings of Jeff Opland (1975), published more than twenty-five years ago about the changing role of the praise poet, are still valid today. I have adapted his and other researchers’ findings graphically as illustrated in the diagram on the next page. The vertical line illustrates the context continuum and the horizontal line the mode of delivery continuum; the former will be discussed first. The resident, full-time *imbongi* was not primarily an entertainer at the chief’s or king’s homestead.⁵ His services had

⁴ Relatively profound adaptation occurs in the case of the so-called worker poetry, for example; see Kromberg 1993.

⁵ The highest political leader in traditional African communities is the “chief” (*inkosi* in Zulu, *ikosi* in Ndebele, and so on) who rules within a clan. In Zulu history, however, since the imperialistic rule of Shaka (1818-28), the head of the Zulu clan is recognized as ruler (king) of the Zulu nation. The same generic term, *inkosi*, is used to refer to the “king” (but, in order to recognize his supreme status, the Zulu king is



Positions occupied by past and contemporary praise poets

to do with the serious business of enhancing the political image of the chief. If the chief's medicine man and diviner guaranteed his good standing with the ancestors, the praise poet guaranteed his good standing with the ordinary people. Although the praise poet of today does not reside at the chief's place any longer and does not praise him moment by moment (for instance, when he appears in the morning after his night's rest or when he meets with his headmen), his role is still to a large degree an efficacious one. The chief without a praise poet is as unthinkable, especially among the Nguni people (Ndebele, Swati, Xhosa, Zulu), as one without a diviner. But over and above the efficacious functions of the contemporary praise poet—including mediation and especially individualization or image-building—the commemorative or ceremonial function has developed. The contemporary praise poet is perfectly at ease in rendering his services simply to grace the occasion, as was evident when a number of praise poets performed at President Thabo Mbeki's inauguration ceremony in July, 1999.

The left-to-right continuum shows that the oral poet has become one who not only praises traditionally and orally,⁶ but one who also documents

generally called *isilo*, a term of respect meaning "lion"). Henceforth the title "chief" will be used, but "king" must be understood where the context requires it.

⁶ Taken in the sense Foley (1988, 1996) explains these terms.

his own poetry and writes other poems. Once oral poetry has been documented, the way is open for the reciter who wishes to learn the praises and recite them when occasion arises. To summarize: *Imbongi 1* is the traditional poet who was attached to the chief's household and who ate from his table. Then we find the poet of colonial times and thereafter, *Imbongi 2*. Although he praised the chief as often as was necessary, he was no longer a remunerated, resident poet. Today we also find the poet who praises orally and who documents his or her poetry, *Imbongi 3*. Here we also encounter the new poets, the worker poets, who perform at trade union rallies, funerals, and so on.

Creativity in Ndebele Praise Poetry

The main focus of this paper is on some aspects of my research on amaNdebele verbal art, praise poetry in particular, which was undertaken between 1986 and 1996. Apart from giving a little-known culture some exposure, I am interested in ascertaining how Ndebele praise poetry has been affected in the light of the changes in the tradition as explored above. Although the amaNdebele live throughout the central areas of the Mpumalanga province in South Africa, large numbers of isiNdebele speakers are concentrated in the former KwaNdebele homeland about 150 kilometers northeast of Pretoria. A great deal of the Ndebele praise poetry was performed in the traumatic year of 1988 when the former homeland of KwaNdebele was forced into an election for the acceptance or rejection of an independent KwaNdebele state. Chief Minister Majozi Mahlangu and his legislative assembly took former President P.W. Botha's bait and advocated independence, while Ndebele Ingwenyama (chief) Mabhoko and his sons, who together with other opponents were kicked out of the legislative assembly and jailed on various occasions, rejected independence. As the chief's sons visited various venues—mainly black townships outside the homeland—to rally people against independence, they were accompanied by the chief's praise poet, Sovetjeza Mahlangu (born in 1940), who contributed his praising abilities to the service of a political cause. The political meetings usually progressed as follows. While people were arriving, usually in groups singing topical songs, Sovetjeza would praise well-known Ndebele chiefs of old, with his usual emphasis on Mabhoko, in whose time Boer settlers encroached on Ndebele land (1845). At the arrival of Ingwenyama Mabhoko and his sons (or only the latter), Sovetjeza again praised Mabhoko. Thereafter he would praise Prince Cornelius (the elder son of Ingwenyama

Mabhoko) and Prince James, respectively, as well as other important speakers, prior to their delivering their speeches.

Naturally, some praise poets find themselves on more than one point on the continuum from oral poet to reciter/writer, as described above. Sovetjheza Mahlangu, the *imbongi* yakwaMabhoko (Mabhoko's praise poet), is just such a versatile poet. He grew up learning to praise the Ndebele *amakhosi* (chiefs) in traditional contexts but is also able to praise other subjects. He was, for instance, one of the performers at President Mbeki's inauguration ceremony. When on occasion my fellow fieldworker Philemon Ntuli and I spoke to him about his poetry, he demonstrated that he was able to praise Mandela, whom he had not met at that stage (1990). He gave us the following lines in typical Sovetjeza style, with a long, dramatic opening line:

*UMandela ungumlilo owawuvutha wabonw' abelungu bawuthela
ngamanzi kanti kulapho uzabhebhetheka
UMandela yindlovu eyathi iphuma esirhogweni
Itja yezizwe yavuka uhlanya ithi ayifuni ma-homeland
Kasafuni makhosi.*

Mandela is the fire that flared up that was seen by the whites as they
doused it with water and yet he was to be prosperous.
Mandela is the elephant who when he came out of jail
the youth of the nations awoke (and became) a madman saying they don't
want any homeland.
They want no kings.

Looking at the art of praising by Sovetjeza, there is no doubt that he is a productive and creative *imbongi*. In other words, he is able to produce praise poetry of both traditional and contemporary political figures at will. But how he learned his craft is interesting. Although we had spoken to him on a few occasions, he was very reluctant to reveal details about himself.⁷

Mbulawa Abram Mahlangu, known among the people as Sovetjeza, had to go and live with his uncle at the age of six when his father died. After 13 years he went to stay with another uncle, SoJafutha. It was during this later period that he took an interest in Ndebele history; he was taught about the succession of Mabhoko's descendants and where they had built their homesteads. He was initiated in 1962, and when he was with his district age group at the house of one of the *amasokana* (initiates), he heard a woman praising the chiefs of old. Enthused by this performance, he went home to

⁷ The facts I present here come from M. Mahlangu et al. 1987:i *et seq.*

fetch a book and pencil and, one afternoon when the *amasokana* were at the next initiate's house, he asked the woman to recite those *iimbongo* (Ndebele for praises) while he wrote them down. On another traditional occasion when his uncle held a feast to thank the ancestors (*ukubonga abezimu*), he again listened with great interest as an aunt praised. He also asked her to help him write down the poems she performed. On this second occasion it was the *iimbongo* of the Ndebele chiefs Mkhephule and Rhobongo. From an old man of the Msiza clan he learned more *iimbongo* as a result of having bought him some sorghum beer. Afterward he went around collecting and recording the praises of the chiefs. In 1969 at the Nyabela Day celebration he spontaneously ascended the rock (used as an address platform) after another *imbongi* had praised. He notes that there was much applause and the people were amazed at the verbal dexterity of a man who was then only 30 years old. After this performance he was asked to praise at many meetings of a cultural nature and became known as an *imbongi*. Sovetjeza is a descendant of Matsitsi (in turn a descendant of Mabhoko) and says that of the 23 male descendants of Matsitsi he is the only one with a deep interest in the history and *iimbongo* of Mabhoko's progeny.

My first recordings of Sovetjeza's *iimbongo* in 1986 at the Nyabela Day festival included, strangely enough, only one line for Mabhoko, a line that does not occur in his later versions, namely

UMabhoko uyabusa bayavungama

Mabhoko rules while they are uneasy

The later versions performed at political meetings contain, on average, about 40 lines. Sovetjeza's compositions for Prince James numbered 11 lines in 1986 compared to 32 lines in a version recorded two years later. Likewise, the earlier recordings for Prince James contain portions that do not occur later, such as

*Umkhonto l' onzima ushokoloze ilif elimnyama
Lisiza nesiwezulu lasabalala.*

This black assegai aggravated (? -*shokoloza* is archaic) a black cloud
It comes with the first rains and then vanishes.

Sovetjeza's repertoire is a fraction of what praise poets of other traditions, notably Zulu and Xhosa, are capable of, but then it must be remembered that Sovetjeza praises at least 15 traditional chiefs of the past

and at least four contemporary leaders. Although creativity is maintained principally by presenting well-known motifs or themes in different grammatical configurations and syntactical combinations, completely novel themes do emerge, such as the reference to the Swazis in the last line of the following selection of Mabhoko's praises:

Mabhoko yakha ngamad' amahlahla
Nang' uMswaz' ugangile.
Maphos' umkhontro azondwa eSwazini
Uzondwe konoMswazi
Abansibazibomvu zifana nezegwalagwala.
 (Musho!)⁸

Mabhoko build with long poles [= defend yourself well]
 [because] here is the insolent Mswazi.
 Hurler of the *assegai* hated in Swaziland
 He is hated by the mother of Mswazi
 Those of [= the people of] the red feather resemble those of [= the feathers
 of] the Knysna lourie.
 (Musho!)

The last line of the praise selections, richly coded grammatically, bears an ominous resemblance to the expression "Jozi libomvu izinkwalankwala" ("*assegai* red with blotches"). Such lines, probably composed during performance, bear testimony to Sovetjeza's creative ability. But he is not only an oral performer; he also records praise poetry and writes poetry that departs from *iimbongo*.⁹

Before looking at an example of a reciter in the praiser-writer-reciter continuum, a brief view of creativity among other Ndebele speakers may be of interest. Sovetjeza was not the only person we came across during our fieldwork who made use of *iimbongo*. First, there were those among the audience who were not only able to repeat a few lines, but who could work creatively with familiar lines. In fact, some older men praised with verses never used by Sovetjeza in his performances (but that do appear in Mahlangu et al. 1987). For example, at Mamelodi, a township just north east of Pretoria, a man praised Mabhoko after Sovetjeza concluded a seven-

⁸ The usual response of agreement and encouragement. This is actually the Zulu form; the Ndebele response is *Mutjho!*, as is heard in some of the praises.

⁹ See M. Mahlangu et al. 1987 and M. Mahlangu and C. Mahlangu 1995.

line second poem for him. Note how Mabhoko is addressed as Nyabela.¹⁰ The praiser commences with a line that is so well-known that it can probably be quoted by virtually all Ndebele people, but the lines that follow are never utilized by Sovetjeza:

Mabhoko Sindeni umhlab' unethuli.
UMabhoko ubhodele amatje ngengubo
Bathi bacenga¹¹ naye wazicengel'
 . . . (inaudible)
Siphalaphala siphos' simnyama. 5
Bamkhulu!
SoMtjongweni!
Nyabela!

Mabhoko Escapee when the world is dusty [= in turmoil].
 Mabhoko collects stones in a garment
 When they begged him he begged for himself [= he just calmed down]
 . . . [inaudible]
 The beautiful one who hurls when he is dark [= furious]. 5
 Grandfather!
 SoMtjongweni!
 Nyabela!

Second, dignitaries who delivered speeches at the meetings often praised Mabhoko before they spoke. Solly Mahlangu (nicknamed “Speaker” because he was Speaker of the KwaNdebele Legislative Assembly before he was removed), although not a very dynamic speaker or praiser, was also able to employ lines that Sovetjeza never used. At Vosloorus, Solly praised Mabhoko with the following words before he spoke:

Ngwenyama
Mabhoko
Sindeni umhlab' onethuli
Langa eliphezulu
Elishis' amabele 5

¹⁰ The Ndebele hero who was besieged by Boer commandoes and who was captured only when he came out of his fortress facing starvation, and who is commemorated annually on 19 December.

¹¹ Both in this version and in the one in Mahlangu et al. 1987, note the word *cenga*—line 3, of unknown meaning to speakers we asked. According to Bhuti Skhosana, lecturer in Ndebele in the Department of African Languages, University of Pretoria, it would be more appropriate if the word were *ncenga*, or “beg.”

We khuthani namavilakazi
Madoda gijimani ngazo zoke izindlela nibatjele KwaMhlanga
Nithi Ingwenyama ayivinjelwa iinyanyopha [?last word not
 clearly audible].
 [Much cheering]

Ngwenyama¹²
 Mabhoko
 Escapee in a dusty world
 Sun on high
 that scorched the sorghum. 5
 You, the diligent and the lazy [= all people]
 Men, run along all the paths and tell them at KwaMhlanga.
 Say the Ingwenyama is not stopped by thugs [?last word not clearly
 audible].
 [Much cheering]

Apart from lines 1-3, all verses were apparently composed by Mahlangu himself. Recognized praise poets, it would seem, are conservative and seek to keep *iimbongo* unchanged. They are probably the first to emphasize that praises “cannot be changed.” Other poets who do not share this burden often work more creatively.

As he praised before delivering his speech, Prince Cornelius (elder son of Ingwenyama Mabhoko, and the present ruling monarch of the Ndzundza section of the Ndebele) made quite a few changes to the praises of Mabhoko. It is clear that he was using the medium to convey messages to former President P.W. Botha:

Niyok' bikela uBotha
Ukuthi uMajozi uluzile.
 [Great response by all in the clapping of hands]
Bathi MaNdebele, gijimani ngazo zoke izindlela
Niyok' thokoz' uRamodike 5
Undunankulu waseLebowa [Cheering starts before close of the
 line and almost drowns the next line]
Nithi usebenzile.

You [pl.] go and report to Botha
 That Majozi has lost.
 [Great response by all in the clapping of hands]
 They say Ndebele people, run ye along all the paths,
 Go and thank Ramodike 5
 Chief Minister of Lebowa [Cheering starts before close of the

¹² The standard address for the then-reigning Ndebele chief.

line and almost drowns the next line]
 You should say: he has worked [= done well].

A Creative Reciter

The sequel to the electioneering meetings was a thanksgiving meeting held at Ingwenyama Mabhoko's homestead on August 5, 1989. He called the meeting to thank his subjects for the peace that had returned to the strife-torn area. It was also clearly an occasion to recognize their support that resulted in the successful contesting of the election. At this ceremony the emcee called on a lad about thirteen years old to praise. He apologized for not calling Sovetjeza, but said that he wanted to surprise the people and show them that talented youths are available in KwaNdebele. He also mentioned that the boy had learned the praises from the book *Igugu LamaNdebele* (M. Mahlangu et al. 1987). The emcee then told the boy to relax, and the lad introduced himself and praised as follows:

*Ngilotjhisa Ingwenyama, ngiyalotjhisa namaduna namakhosana
 wok' aKwaNdebele.*

*NgiwuMagadangana kaMphikeleli koQasha l' eMathysloop
 ofundafunda eKwagga eSokhapha is' kole.* 5

Ngifunda ibanga lesine.

Iibongo kaMabhoko.

Mabhoko Sinden i umhlab' unethuli.

Silembe sakoSiphiwa ikom' erag' abelusi.

*Ndlel' ezimazombe zinjengobunyonyo nabuyokudla inyanga
 yezulu koSontimba* 10

Mvumazoke kaMagodongo

Ongasayikwala ndaba

Indaba kaPiet wayivumela nekaFrans wayivumela.
 (Enthusiastic Musho!)

*Ithini? Idung' amanzi kwakuya kwamuka umfundisi Mvalo
 Mhlambi wamahhatjhi wabelungu odle kaFrans wehloli.*
 (Mutjho!)

Imbiza ephekwe phezu kwelitje iphuphume yatjhisa umdoko 15

Simakhomba lapho.

*UMkhananda wakithi uyakhona ongasayikutjhiwa majarha
 Owadla njengamabutho waNongabulana
 Wawadindela njengamabibi wezindlela*

Akwandaba zalutho 20

Igeqe elimnyama

Asiso igeqe lakudla izinkomo zamadoda

Rhotjha limnyama amanye ayakhanya.

- (Mutjho!)
'bob' buyisa bebeth e inarha
Bebethe uMlitjhe noNgwanaphaphu 25
Silwa nezinkunzi eentrath'
Sizibulale sisale silwa nazimbili.
- (Mutjho!)
Indaba inosongo bayisongela
Kanti wena usongele ukwaphula umgobo wamajarha eDidini
Bath' bayakwakha ngamad' amahlahla uMswazi ugangile 30
kwaMabhoko
KwaMabhoko akuvalwa ngamnyango kuvalwa ngamakhanda amajarha
eDidini.
- (Mutjho!)
Maphosa umkhonto eSwazini
Uzondwe ngonomsuzi
Yiziqatha ezibomvu usiso ijozi lokugwaza izinkomo zamadoda
Ijozi lokugwaza abeSuthu 35
Ijozi lokugwaza amaSwazi.
- (Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa [the usual deferential response of a woman])
Idlovu bayibona idlovu yakhamba kwaNdiyase esangweni bayibona
ngomgoga bathi kusile uSothakazi
Amakhuwa angesiza likhona ivimbela lekhethu lakosoMalungwana.
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]
Ngumabusabesala kaMagodongo ngumabusa bengafuni 40
Ngowavimbela evimbela ubuyani bembeth' inarha
Bembethe uKhunwana noSakazana
Kwakumhla kaMzilikazi kaMatjhabana.
 [Specific responses inaudible]
UMabhoko wathatha izindlela ezimazombe eziya eRholweni
Yindlandla yakoS'phiwa eyakhwela kwelitje kwadabuka uMzilikazi 45
kaMatjhabana.
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]
UMabhoko yitjirhi njengehlabathi isindindiwana ngangembho
kom' ibov' 'akoNomalanga
Ngilihlwana libov' kwezamadoda ungadla zakhe uyajabajaba.
 [Specific responses inaudible]
Mabhoko isihlangu esimnyama imilambo emibili 50
Eseyama iNgemana neNontindo
Isihlangu esivikela amaNdebele mhla kunguMzilikazi kaMatjhabana.
 [Specific responses inaudible]
UMabhoko isinakanaka esanakazela emmangweni weMangwana
uMabamba abokomo ngesilevu nguSothakazi.
- (I greet the Ingwenyama, I also greet the headmen and all the sub-chiefs of KwaNdebele.

I am Magadangana of Mphikeleli of Qasha's place at Mathysloop
 who is learning at Sokhapha School at Kwaggafontein.)¹³

I am in standard 4. 5
 The *iibongo*¹⁴ of Mabhoko.
 Mabhoko Escapee when the world is dusty.
 Hoe of Sipiwa's place, the cow that kicks the herd boys.
 Winding ways like ants as they go and devour the medicine man
 at the place of Sontimba.

Agreer to everything of Magodongo 10
 Who will not refuse any matter.
 He agreed to the matter of Piet and that of Frans he agreed to.
 [Enthusiastic Musho!]
 What does it say? It makes the water murky until the minister
 Mvalo left
 Herd of horses of the whites who devoured those of Frans, of the spy.
 (Mutjho!)

The pot that was cooked on a stone, it boiled over and burnt the 15
 porridge
 The one who points there.
 Mkhananda of ours, he is able to do that which the young men can't,
 Who ate the warriors of Nongabulana
 He heaped them up like dirt on the road
 It became a matter of no consequence. 20
 Black frontal covering [? archaic]
 It isn't a frontal covering that devoured the cattle of the men.
 Dark fearsome man while others are light.
 (Mutjho!)

Bring them [ants?] back to cover the land
 To cover Mlitjhe and Ngwanaphaphu. 25
 The one who fights three bulls
 It killed them remaining to fight with one.
 (Mutjho!)

The matter is an oath, they swore to it
 In fact you swore to break the shield [?umgobo is archaic] of the young
 men of Didini
 While they are building with long poles (= defending themselves),
 Mswazi is insolent (= attacking) at Mabhoko's place 30
 At Mabhoko's place they are not closing with a door, they are closing
 with the heads of the young men of Didini.
 (Mutjho!)

Hurler of the *assegai* in Swaziland.

¹³ The parenthetical section of the translation was performed by the emcee as the boy presented himself.

¹⁴ The standard orthography is *iimbongo*.

You are hated by the mother of Mswazi
 It is red hooves, you are the *assegai* stabbing the cattle of the men
 The *assegai* to stab the Sothos 35
 The *assegai* to stab the Swazis.
 (Kwa-kwa-kwa-kwa¹⁵)
 The elephant they saw walking at Ndiyase, they saw it at the gate by
 means of its trunk [*?umgoga* is archaic] when it dawned,
 it is Sothakazi.
 The whites may come, our defender of the place of Malungwana's
 father is present.
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]
 It is Mabusabesala of Magodongo,
 it is the Ruler they don't want. 40
 It is the one who fended off the ants as they covered the earth
 As they covered Khunwana and Sakazana.
 [Specific responses inaudible]
 On the day of Mzilikazi of Mashobana.
 [Cheering, but specific responses inaudible]
 Mabhoko took winding ways that led to Rholweni.
 He is the tall elephant of the place of Siphwa that climbed
 on a rock and Mzilikazi of Mashobana was split. 45
 [Specific responses inaudible]
 Mabhoko is an irritation between the teeth like sand, the short one,
 red cow of the place of Nomalanga
 Reddish eye¹⁶ with regard to the affairs of the men, he finishes his
 and is up and down.¹⁷
 [Specific responses inaudible]
 Mabhoko is the black shield, the two rivers 50
 he crossed, the Ngemana and the Nontindo
 Shield defending the Ndebele on the day of Mzilikazi of Mashobana.
 [Specific responses inaudible]
 Mabhoko is the vigilant one¹⁸ being vigilant on the open
 grasslands of Mangwana,
 Mabamba [catcher] by the beard of the people of cattle, he is
 Sothakazi.

When compared to the *iimbongo* of Mabhoko (M. Mahlangu et al. 1987:31), it is quite clear that Magadangana's performance is to a large

¹⁵ This is the usual deferential response of a woman.

¹⁶ = "diligent."

¹⁷ That is, "busy with affairs of others."

¹⁸ *isinakanaka* may also mean "the long stupid one."

extent a recitation of something he had memorized. His text matches the original fairly well with minor omissions and changes. Although his omissions may be due to memory lapses, there were no uneasy pauses in his confident performance. The young praiser did not pay much attention to line divisions and spaces (probably meant to be participation pauses) in the original. This feature of his performance is a realization on his part that every performance is unique, that the praise poet creates participation pauses according to how he experiences the audience. In addition, the line divisions and pauses are probably artificial in the written text since they are not based on an actual performance. Thus Magadangana's lineation and placement of pauses—in other words, where he ends the paragraph—are the humble beginnings of his own creative endeavors.¹⁹

In fact, some of the young poet's mistakes are clearly due to a conflict between memorization and creativity. In line 22 we see a concordial discrepancy between "*asiso*" and "*igeqe lakudla . . .*"; the poet has memorized "*asiso*" (referring to the *isi-* noun class) while the noun *igeqe* is actually in the *ili-* class. This is a perfectly excusable mistake because *igeqe* (or *isigeqe* as Sovetjeza uses it) is an archaic word that lacks a secure meaning for the young poet. Sovetjeza himself did exactly the same thing with an archaism; in different performances he used the word *tjhokolova* in no fewer than three noun classes:

At Vosloorus:

<i>Tjhokolova likaMkhephule . . .</i>	<i>ili-</i> noun class
(The <i>tjhokolova</i> [aggravator?] of Mkhephule . . .)	

At Mamelodi:

<i>Utjhokolova lukaMkhephule</i>	<i>ulu-</i> class, a class that
(The <i>tjhokolova</i> of Mkhephule . . .)	does not even exist in
	standard Ndebele
<i>Tjhokolova kaMkhephule</i>	class 1a (in the
(<i>Tjhokolova</i> of Mkhephule)	vocative)

Magadangana's adaptations of the written version commence in line 8 ("*ikom' erag'*" instead of "*ikom' irag'*" in the written version) and continue at regular intervals throughout his performance. His variations consist

¹⁹ For example, where the written text has one line, Magadangana divides the line in two (see lines 10 and 11).

mainly of the use of a different type of concord (for instance, relative instead of subject concord), changes in tense form, and minor additions.²⁰ These changes are in no way insignificant and cannot be ascribed to error or memory lapse since the manipulation of grammar, or the use of unfamiliar grammar, has long been regarded as one of the major poetic devices available to the praise poet (see Van Wyk 1975:20). Magadangana's version of this line also represents a different meaning: "He who defeated them like the warriors of Nongabulana"; compare Sovetjeza's line: "He defeated the warriors of Nongabulana."

Such adaptations of the "same" text are quite normal. Sovetjeza himself adapted standard lines. This was evident, to mention one example, in a metaperformance recorded on December 22, 1988 during an interview on aspects of his art. When explaining the historical incidents referred to in the praise poetry of the chief Mkhéphule, he rendered the "same" *iimbongo* as follows (presented line for line below the "original" performance of December 19, 1986 in order to highlight the differences):

<i>Wena mfana gijim' uyotjel' amadoda</i>	You boy, run and tell the men
<i>Mntwana gijim' uyotjel' amadoda</i>	Child, run and tell the men
<i>Uth' uMkhéphule ubuyecelele wenza</i>	Say Mkhéphule has come
<i>Njengayizolo</i>	back and has done like
	yesterday
<i>Uth' uSoqaleni wenze njengayizolo</i>	Say Soqaleni did like
	yesterday
<i>Wahlik' ipera esehla kanye namadoda</i>	He dismounted the horse
	alighting with with the men
<i>Wehl' ipera ekanye namadoda</i>	He alighted from the horse
	with the men

Although Magadangana's performance flows from memorization rather than from improvisation, the variations in the performance unmistakably bear witness to an emerging ability with the conventions of Ndebele *iimbongo*. In terms developed by Walter Ong (1995:11), we could say that although the poet relied mainly on secondary orality, conventions reminiscent of primary orality made inroads into his performance. Magadangana has learned the

²⁰ For example: *Owadla njengamabutho waNongabulana* ("who ate [narrative or 'dramatic' past tense] like the warriors of Nongabulana," line 18), as opposed to *udle amabutho kaNongabulana* ("he ate [short form of the recent past] the warriors of Nongabulana") in the written text.

modern, individualistic way. He has taken a shortcut, instead of the time-consuming traditional path of learning at the feet of the specialist, in order to produce what for all intents and purposes looks like traditional, popular art.

Another instance of role reproduction with some creative changes is provided by the praise poems recorded at an *ingoma* (male initiation). Among the Ndebele, an *ingoma* occurs every three or four years. The many small details are too numerous to describe here; instead, I will summarize the ceremony's three main events. At the pre-initiation rendezvous the boys gather at the houses of chiefs and headmen to dance and sing, while their fathers, the trainers, and other men engage in serious switch-fighting.²¹ After these preliminaries comes the initiation proper, during which time the boys go into the hills for a period of seclusion. Here they are circumcized and taught secret jargon, songs, praise poetry, and so on. After about a month they return to the same venues for post-initiation celebrations.

It was on August 15, 1988 at one of these celebrations, which took place at the homestead of the Chief of the Manala section of the Ndebele, that we recorded songs and praise poetry. We were immediately struck by the fact that the praise poetry of each of the young men was in Northern Sotho and not in Ndebele. The system of praising in the context of *ingoma* is clearly an adopted one. This probably also applies to many aspects of the ritual itself; in fact, the very name *ingoma* is derived from the word *koma*, which refers to female or male initiation in Northern Sotho. It is therefore not surprising that all the young men's praises have almost the same number of lines and make use of the same or similar motifs. We recorded the words of nine young men as they were praising themselves. Here is one example:

E gangwa ke nna Mašila
Mrhirhadiatla, Mafega.
E tšhabela kae?
E tšhabela tlase Botebeleng
Mašila Botebeleng basa ile go senya 5
Ba ile go lwana ntwā ya Maburu le Makgalaka
Ke rile mohlang ke ya go khopa
Lenaka la ka la bothankga bosogana
Gwa lla kgwadi, gwa lla phalafala.
Ba re: ga se phalafala ke tingting 10
Nakana tša rena banna
Ke Mankalakatana
Ka 'naka la tšhukudu ga ke hlabe ka lona
Ke laola diema.
Ke se šikere sa ntatemogolo 15

²¹ They use long slender switches as opposed to the sticks of Zulus.

<i>Sa mapanta a makhwibidu</i>	
<i>Ga ke thuntšhe ka sona, ke laola diema</i>	
<i>Ke three-four sethunya sa masole</i>	
<i>Ba thuntšha ba nanabela.</i>	
<i>Ke two-three verila-verila</i>	20
<i>Ga ke thuntšhe ka sona mpana</i>	
<i>Ke thuntšha ka sona ... [inaudible]</i>	
It is being milked by me Mašila ²²	
Mrhirhadiatla, Mafega.	
Where does it flee to?	
It flees downwards to Ndebeleland	
Mašila in Ndebeleland they have gone to destroy	5
They have gone to engage in the war of the Boers and the Rhodesians.	
On the way I went to wrench	
My horn of being a young man. ²³	
A bull bellowed, a ram's horn was heard	
They said: it is not a ram's horn, it is a ting ting ²⁴	10
The flutes blown by us men.	
I am Mankalakatana	
With the horn of a rhinoceros I do not stab. ²⁵	
I control the idioms	
I am carrying that which belongs to my grandfather	15
That which has red belts	
I don't shoot with it, I control the idioms.	
It is a three-four the rifle of the soldiers	
They shoot while they advance slowly.	
It is a two-three verila-verila ²⁶	20
I do not shoot a barbarian with it	
With it I shoot ... [inaudible] ²⁷	

²² Or "I take up the challenge to 'milk this cow'," that is, to praise.

²³ To be circumcized.

²⁴ A reference to a musical instrument?

²⁵ Meaning "do not have sex uncircumcized?"

²⁶ Meaning unclear.

²⁷ Probably inaudible because they were being recorded. Transcription, translation, and certain interpretations by S. A. Makopo are gratefully acknowledged.

These praise poems are an interesting blend of repeated and unique motifs. In all of the poems the young men are keen to identify themselves by means of a name or names; these could be called personal eulogies (lines 1-3). In more than one poem there is reference to the cow-milking motif that occurs here at the beginning. Another common element is circumcision or the obtaining of manhood via the metaphorical phrase “horn of manhood.” Connected to this motif is the assertion that it is not a ram’s horn as well as the identification of what appears to be a musical instrument—the “ting-ting.” The motif of the rhino horn is important in these poems, since it refers to manhood and sexual knowledge. In a few of the poems the phrase “I am Mankalakatana” occurs, perhaps referring to the evening star with which the young men become so familiar as they spend many clear winter nights out in the veld. The motifs of the red belts (war attire?, line 16) and the controlling of the idioms (line 17) also recur. The latter is another important constituent because it indexes the initiates’ newly acquired verbal authority, for instance their ability to partake in adult discussions.

The young men clearly learn these praises by heart while they are in the hills. Uniqueness consists of the individual’s name in his poem together with a few idiosyncratic lines or phrases. The problem with these copied versions is not so much their similarity, since all praise poetry shares a certain linguistic likeness, but the fact that even action motifs are copied, thus giving the impression that the speakers’ forebears actually participated in certain actions, such as a “Boer-Rhodesian” War (line 6). Nonetheless, the performances have a role in illustrating the spectrum of Ndebele praise poetry.

Conclusion

The extent of the performance of praise poems in the political meetings to which I have referred testifies to the ability of Sovetjeza as Ndebele praise poet. In these meetings more than 80 praise poems were performed, far exceeding the number of political speeches delivered.²⁸ While the *iimbongo* had to entertain, mediate, and sensitize the people, political orators had to educate and persuade. Whereas creativity in the initiates’ praise poems depended almost “entirely on the reuse and recombination of traditional themes, formulas, and ‘ways of speaking’,”²⁹

²⁸ These performances of course include multiple performances of the “same” praise poem.

²⁹ R. P. Martin as quoted in Bauman 1996:18.

creativity in Sovetjeza's art is characterized by a high degree of novelty, primarily in the use of metaphor, rather than by repetitions (see Groenewald 1998). The reason for this high degree of creativity in his poetry is obvious: praise poetry thrives on heroic themes, and there are many subjects in South Africa with unique battle histories, so to speak. On the whole, creativity in Nguni praise poetry is brought about mostly by devices such as imagery (chiefly metaphor), forms of repetition, and various sorts of linguistic resources. The latter was evident in the humble creativity of Magadangana. These devices in all their various forms are immensely varied in Southern African praise poetry; not only is the poet in a position to select from an array of possibilities, but he can also combine them in interesting configurations.

The varied nature of Ndebele praise poetry includes memorization and recitation as well as importing praise poetry from another culture. The importing of praises does not necessarily mark stagnation; in fact, emergence is vital for a tradition to survive. The most vibrant traditions in South Africa, namely Xhosa and Zulu, are characterized not only by linguistic creativity but also by emergence or performance in new contexts. Ndebele praise poets have also placed the art of praising in diverse contexts, such as a highly volatile political situation, and in the printed media. Where no tradition of praising existed, as in the *ingoma* (initiation for men), Ndebele simply borrowed and adapted praises from Northern Sotho. Linguistic creativity in Ndebele praise poetry is another marker of the vitality of the tradition. However, as shown in the introductory section above, contexts are always subject to change.

At present Ndebele praise poetry is performed only at memorial occasions, for instance when the current monarch officiates at the annual Nyabela Day celebrations. Yet this situation need not be seen as the beginning of decline, since the tradition has proved that it possesses a latent vitality to rise to a new contextual opportunity. We can see such vitality in the appearance of younger poets. In general, contextual changes in South Africa have led to more opportunities for the performance of praise poems, illustrating the resilience of one of the most ancient forms of verbal art in this region, in "South Africa's truly original contribution to world literature" (Brown 1998:76-77).

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