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Mzwakhe Mbuli, “The People’s Poet”

Keeping South African Oral Traditions Alive

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Introduction

The research that I have carried out on South African history and literary traditions, and on Mzwakhe himself, has proven to be extremely captivating on different levels, as I have broadened my knowledge not only on historical and social issues such as racial conflict, but also on the African literary and musical traditions, which still preserve and cherish the communicative and empathic power of orality. It has offered me the opportunity to reflect on how a language such as English, which came to South Africa as the colonisers' linguistic medium, can now channel and convey messages of resistance and hope.

English, nevertheless, is not the first European language to have arrived in the lands of southern Africa. What is now known as the Republic of South Africa began its history of colonialism way before the arrival of the British: 'the cultural history of South Africa has always been one of a multilingual composite, within which English South African culture is merely one part of a broader historical-cultural happening' (Gray 1979:2). As Gail Nattrass reports with clarity in his book *A Short History of South Africa* (2017), the first European visits date back to the final decades of the fifteenth century, when Portuguese traders stopped at the Cape on their way to India, the same pathway that would be travelled by English and Dutch fleets at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is only in the mid-1600s that the Dutch established large-scale settlements at the Cape, thus beginning their cultural and linguistic domination. These Dutch settlers were called 'Boers', and soon submitted the local tribes of Hottentots and Bushmen. Nevertheless, it is not earlier than one century later, in 1795, when the British started a period of occupation that persisted until 1806, the year in which they gained complete control of the land from the Dutch and proclaimed the Cape as a British Colony. It remained part of the British Commonwealth until 1961. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the South African territory saw itself stolen from the local kingdoms – Zulu, Thlokwa, Ndebele, and Sotho – and debated

between the ruling and cultural hegemony of two European communities: on one side the English-speaking settlers and British missionaries who had just declared their governmental dominion, and on the other side the Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking descendants of the previous colonisers.

English and Afrikaans have since then been the two most spoken European languages, coexisting along with Indian – brought by Indian workers in eastern South Africa – and the indigenous African languages. It is this cultural-linguistic landscape that must have suggested to Stephen Gray the term 'multilingual composite'; it is this 'multilingual composite' that later developed into a 'rainbow nation', as Mandela would proudly say. However, despite these optimistic views, it is widely known that the coexistence of languages and cultures in South Africa has not always been peaceful; Michael Chapman (1996) states that South Africa's history has always been characterised by racial and ethnic conflict, and Itala Vivan (1996) describes South Africa as a country where 'Africans have been ripped off of their land and citizenship right by Europeans, and where Africans have resisted throughout the centuries with every means at their disposal.'¹ Further well-known examples of a violent coexistence are attested by the Anglo-Boer wars and the apartheid regime (additional details will be given in the following chapters).

Due to the long-term dominion of the former British Empire, English has now become one of the official languages, together with Afrikaans and the African indigenous languages – the main being Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana. English is mostly dedicated to business, bureaucracy, and literature. This dissertation will insist on this last field of usage of the English language, as it is centred on a poet who employs English just as much as his native language – Zulu. The extensive body of South African literature in English (from Douglas Livingstone to Nadine Gordimer, among many others) has been referred to by scholars as part of the 'new literatures in English', a categorization that 'includes writing in English by both indigenous people and immigrant

¹ My own translation from Italian.

populations' (Davis 2003:5). South African literature has also been defined under the much-debated umbrella term of 'postcolonial', a word that has encountered both opposition and favour: in the first case, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, as Davis reports, finds that it 'groups together literatures and cultures which do not necessarily cohere,' while in the second case, Tiffin, Ashcroft and Griffiths regard it from a less anglicised perspective and see it as covering 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (Davis 2003:7). This dissertation refers to South African literature in English as 'postcolonial', aligning itself to the latter view on the term.

As previously stated, my work will investigate and analyse the poetic and performative work in English by oral poet Mzwakhe Mbuli. The aim of this analysis will be that of trying to understand the relevance that his works have been playing in contemporary South Africa, firstly in keeping the oral traditions alive, and secondly in rising awareness of worrisome social issues such as racial conflict, imprisonment and censorship, corruption and fight for freedom. A foreseeable difficulty in carrying out this task will be given by the fact that the bibliographical sources used as backbones for the analysis are mostly composed of video interviews, web articles and more general criticism on orality and South African literature; being Mzwakhe Mbuli a contemporary author, there is not yet enough extensive critical secondary material on himself and his work. Despite this probable hindrance, I will attempt to provide a personal analysis and interpretation of Mzwakhe's poems, building on historical and literary criticism concerning the period and social background in which the poet lived.

In order to contextualise the afore-mentioned analysis, this dissertation will begin with a chapter dealing with relevant details on a specific historical background. It will introduce the barbarous regime of apartheid and what it has meant from the 1950s to the 1990s to South African black population. This chapter will provide insight on the major historical occurrences that

have marked Mzwakhe's life. It will also dispense general knowledge on what has happened after the 1994 first free South African elections. A second chapter will dive deeper into the core matter of this dissertation – that of the oral poetry tradition. Drawing from Zumthor, Brown and other critics, it will give a general overview on the topic together with some examples. It will dwell primarily on the oral tradition in South Africa but also – though less extensively – on other African cultures. Furthermore, it will take into consideration some of the cases in which oral delivery is accompanied by music. A third chapter will introduce Mzwakhe Mbuli's biography, highlighting its close connection to the historical developments mentioned in chapter one. It will also present the literary and artistic influences that are likely to have affected Mzwakhe's style and career, among which feature traditional South African oral forms such as Zulu praise poetry and more recent trends including the Soweto poetry tradition and dub music. The fourth chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of selected poems and lyrics. These poems will be presented chronologically, so as to convey the evolution of Mzwakhe's work through the years. The analysis will be carried out on two main levels: first, on a formal level, reflecting upon lyrics and rhetorical strategies, and considering oral performances; second, it will concern a thematic analysis of the poems, examining the impact they had and how they were received by the audience.

CHAPTER ONE

From the Threats of Apartheid to the "Rainbow Nation". A Historical Overview.

This first chapter will provide relevant insight on the South African historical background that has contextualised Mzwakhe Mbuli's life. It will therefore depart from the origins of the Apartheid regime which preceded of a decade the birth of the poet. This chapter will then focus on the main events from the 1960s to the 1990s and on the end of Apartheid. The conclusion will regard significant events in the first years of the twenty-first century.

1.1 From the origins of the apartheid policies to 'Sharpeville'

1.1.1 Premises

The apartheid regime did not appear overnight. It was made official in 1948 with the political victory of the National Party; nonetheless, racial discriminations had already begun around the turn of the century as a result of a rising of Afrikaner (white) nationalism. The start of segregation policies for black people is recorded in 1905, with the introduction of pass laws and, subsequently, the Land Act (1913), under prime minister Louis Botha². 'The Act made it illegal for blacks to purchase or lease land except in demarcated reserves' (Nattrass 2017, p.142). It was promulgated in response to a demand for equal opportunities and gradual inclusion in government made by the South African Native National Congress (SANNC). Not only black Africans found themselves restricted to an availability of less than 8% of their native land, but they were also prevented from sharing farming land with white farmers. This Act was the premise to similar Land

² In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed. Botha was the first prime minister of the Union, with Jan Smuts as deputy. Both men had been Boer generals whose aim now was to reconcile the Afrikaners and the British (Nattrass 2017, p.137).

Acts in 1923, 1936, and to the homeland policies of the 1950s. Despite the fact that the SANNC did not miss the opportunity to protest against these discriminatory laws, it did not obtain justice. Even so, it went on fighting for black Africans' rights: in 1923 it changed its name into the African National Congress (ANC) and by the 1940s it had become the main resistance organisation.

1.1.2 The World Wars

Being the Union still under the British Empire, South Africa was forced to take part in World War I on the side of Britain. Yet, Afrikaners strongly opposed this participation and led a rebellion against their own government. Although the rebellion was suppressed, this event ignited the nationalist sentiment in the Afrikaners and paved the way to the formation of the Afrikaner National Party, led by JBM Hertzog. After WWI, the government – now led by Smuts – passed other acts which limited black Africans' freedom; the Urban Areas Act, for example, allowed black people to come into urban areas to work, but not to live. The circumstances were slightly different when World War II broke out. Hertzog's Afrikaner Nationalists had achieved autonomy from Smut's government, and this permitted the South African Union to decide whether to participate or not in the war. The country was divided between those in favour of engaging in war (Smuts and the government) and those against (Hertzog and the Nationalists). Eventually, it was put to vote in Parliament, and it was decided that South Africa should once again support Britain in war, a decision that signalled the beginning of a new political struggle. At the end of the war, DF Malan – the leader of an extreme Afrikaner group – gained political consent by pressing on post-war grievances and taking black people as a scape goat for the unstable situation. New political elections were in sight and planned for 1948; Hertzog and Malan unexpectedly joined their parties thus defeating Smut's United Party.

1.1.3 The establishment of apartheid

In 1948 the National Party officially proceeded to pursue apartheid policies, a system which lasted until the early 1990s. As Natrass outlines, 'black, coloured and Indian people [...] were excluded from any active or meaningful participation in government and were disadvantaged in terms of opportunity and education' (Natrass 2017, p. 167). As the word itself explains, apartheid was all a matter of separation, not only between blacks and whites, but also within blacks, according to their ethnical differences. For the sake of this separation, one of the first enactment was that of officialising the native reserves as 'homelands' or 'Bantustans'. The mind behind this – and behind most of the worst laws of apartheid – was Hendrik Verwoerd. In 1951, he passed the Bantu Self-Government Act which created ten homelands based on ethnicity (Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Tswana, Sotho and others) and forced millions of black people to move there. According to Verwoerd, these homelands would be granted self-government and independence, but they were too small territories to manage autonomy. Boonzaier (in Vivan, 1996) states that Bantustans were the aspects of apartheid which caused the greatest sufferings, as families were torn apart and people uprooted from the land they had been living in for generations, and whoever dared break these laws was immediately arrested.

Other effects of apartheid were reflected on a deep separation of even the simplest everyday activities, such as using public transport or visiting parks and shops. Benches, bus seats, entrances, were all marked with notices that destined them to either whites or blacks. This was made lawful by the Separate Amenities Act of 1953, which also proclaimed public places such as restaurants and hotels for whites only. Other acts passed in the 1950s were the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act, which prohibited marriages or sexual relations between blacks and whites; anyone caught breaking this law was arrested. In addition, the Population Registration Act obliged every person to be classified according to the colour of their skin as either black, coloured,

Indian or white, and to carry a document which attested it. The classification was completely arbitrary as colour differences were slight and difficult to decree, therefore one could appear 'white enough' to enjoy white privileges, while another person from the same ethnicity but with a slightly darker skin could be relegated to a lower group. The quality of people's life depended entirely on the group in which they had been classified; the darker their skin, the worse their conditions, which also extended to inferior education facilities. About this issue, Nattrass states that with the Bantu Education Act of 1953, 'education for black people became even more inferior. Children in black schools, for example, were not given the chance to learn mathematics or science' (Nattrass 2017, p. 179). Boonzaier (in Vivan, 1996) adds that school curricula for black and coloured children were entirely dependent on the government; in other words, their school programmes and texts bore the mark of apartheid policies, which were trying to 'retribalize' the indigenous population.

In these first years of segregation, some resistance groups organised protests and riots, such as the Defiance Campaign of 1952 which aimed at defying discriminatory laws by encouraging black people to use and access white-only public transport or areas. The effects were thousands of people arrested for breaking the law and overcrowded jails, which resulted in an embarrassment for the government. Three years later, in 1955, members of black, coloured, Indian, and other resistance groups gathered near Johannesburg to adopt the Freedom Charter – which later became the basic policy of the ANC. The Freedom Charter declared:

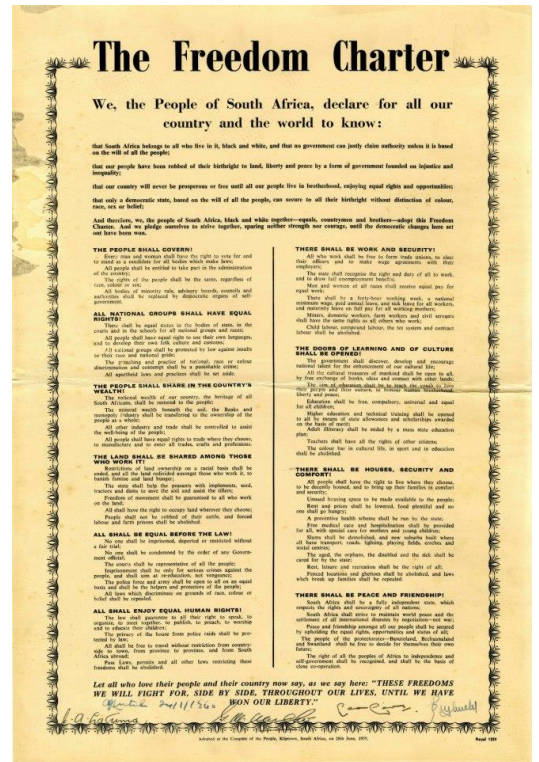


Figure 1 – The Freedom Charter (<https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/south-africa-fast-facts/news-facts/the-spirit-of-the-freedom-charter-integral-to-south-africa-s-dna>)

“that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people; that our people have been robbed of their birthright to land, liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality; that our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities; that only a democratic state, based on the will of all the people, can secure to all their birthright without distinction of colour, race, sex or belief; and therefore, we, the people of South Africa, black and white together – equals, countrymen and brothers – adopt this Freedom Charter. And we pledge ourselves to strive together, sparing neither strength nor courage, until the democratic changes here set out have been won.”³

As figure 1 shows, a number of articles were then listed stating the beliefs of the Charter, such as equal rights, sharing of the land, a right to equal education, work and comfort, and the document was finally ended with the signature of the activists.

1.1.4 The formation of the PAC and the Sharpeville Massacre

In 1960 a new, more radical black resistance group was formed by former member of the ANC Robert Sobukwe. He called it Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), highlighting the ‘Africanist’ aspect as it took a more rigid view on the anti-apartheid path compared to the ANC stance. Sobukwe believed that the responsibility for resisting apartheid should only be in the hands of black South Africans, instead of a shared multiracial resistance campaign. Sobukwe, therefore, proceeded to organise a demonstration against the Pass Law, which directly involved black South Africans, who were required to carry documents allowing them to access the urban areas that they had forcibly left. The anti-pass demonstration was to take place in Sharpeville, south of Johannesburg, and it would see black South Africans occupying Sharpeville’s police station and publicly burning their passes. The morning of 21st March 1960, a mob of approximately five

3 ‘The spirit of the Freedom Charter integral to South Africa’s DNA’ (25 June 2015), in Brand South Africa, retrieved from <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/south-africa-fast-facts/news-facts/the-spirit-of-the-freedom-charter-integral-to-south-africa-s-dna> Viewed 17/08/2018

thousand people gathered out of the police station. Natrass reports that various versions exist on what happened, but what is most likely is that, even though the demonstration had begun peacefully, some people might have been involved in actions such as stone-throwing, which triggered panic and provoked the impulsive reaction of inexperienced policemen. 'Sixty-nine people (men, women and children) were killed and about 180 wounded, some of them shot in the back as they tried to run away' (Natrass 2017, p.187). This tragedy made it to the front page of newspapers all around the world and became known as the 'Sharpeville Massacre'. As a consequence, the government declared a state of emergency and banned both ANC and PAC, along with other groups and organisations as considered subversive.

1.2 The 1960s: South African independence and the Rivonia Trial

A further triumph of Afrikaner nationalism was represented by the long-desired South African independence, which came in 1961 with the establishment of the Republic of South Africa. It had been demanded by the National Party for some time, and once obtained, it signalled the exit of South Africa from the British Commonwealth. Verwoerd became the prime minister and appointed BJ Vorster as Minister of Justice. He exacerbated laws against resistance movements by increasing bannings, detention without trial and house arrest. Sobukwe, for instance, was affected by these laws and sentenced to several years in prison, which he partly spent in Robben Island. Moreover, as a consequence of these bannings, the ANC and PAC went underground and created secret military wings, namely Umkhonto we Sizwe ("The Spear of the Nation", abbreviate to MK), established by Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. This organisation was born despite the ANC pledge to non-violence, as a response to increasing repression and discrimination from the government. It perpetrated sabotage acts with home-made bombs, directed at public buildings, until, on the 11th July 1963, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu and other MK leaders were arrested in a farm in Rivonia, which had been used by Mandela and other ANC members as headquarters. Although, at that time, Mandela was already in jail for having incited workers to strike, he was

tried together with Mbeki, Sisulu and other leaders, because documents in his handwriting had been found in a hideout in Rivonia. They were accused of sabotage against the government and of promoting communism. In court, Mandela acknowledged his responsibility in the MK movement, but he also made an appeal for equal rights for black people, as well as for equal education and opportunities. Despite the fact that his words became known worldwide giving him an iconic status, Mandela and the other defendants were found guilty with high treason and sentenced to life imprisonment in Robben Island.

During the years following the Rivonia Trial, oppression augmented furtherly; the days of detention without trial increased from ninety to one hundred eighty, opposition was more easily suppressed due to the Terrorism Act (1967), and new methods of physical and psychological torture were introduced. In 1966, apartheid was declared a crime against humanity by the UN. As will be subsequently explained, Mzwakhe Mbuli's early childhood was in a way affected by the dreadful apartheid policies of the sixties, as the first reality he came to know was that of secluded and poor townships, kept separated from the wealthy and developed urban areas.

1.3 The 1970s and 1980s: the Soweto uprising and the states of emergency

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s are particularly relevant to understand Mzwakhe Mbuli's work, as at that time he was a teenager and young adult whose social awareness and artistic projects were being shaped not only by the historical occurrences, but also by new literary, poetic and musical movements that were starting to circulate.

As Natrass (2017) states, the early 1970s were characterised by a wave of strikes carried out by black labourers with the intention of reacting to apartheid. The discriminatory policies had caused a series of sanctions and boycotts from European and other African countries, which critically affected not only South Africa's economy, but also its whole life. A pivotal turning point was represented by the Bantu Homeland Citizenship Act (1970), which decreed that black people

were no longer South African citizens, but instead every ethnic group had to identify with a homeland. This caused several reactions and rejection movements, such as the mass cultural movement 'Inkatha' ('crown' in Zulu), built by KwaZulu chief minister Buthelezi. Meanwhile, Umkhonto we Sizwe set its headquarters and military training ground in Angola, after the ANC and PAC had been banned from South Africa.

The mid 1970s saw the birth of a new kind of resistance movement, called Black Consciousness, which asked black people to reject the feelings of inferiority and called for a 'black pride'. This movement, inspired by black American activists like Malcom X, was started by a student, Steve Biko, who had previously founded the South African Student Organisation, which was essentially composed by black students. The famous Black Consciousness slogan, 'Black man, you are on your own', conveyed the movement's idea of a black-only fight against apartheid, as nobody but black people could understand the real struggles of oppression. Biko's movement had significant effects not only in South Africa but also more generally in all the African continent, and despite his untimely death – caused by serious injuries inflicted by the police during his detention – his teachings ignited the spirits of all black students of the seventies. Indeed, students appear to be the real protagonists of the resistance movements of this decade, since their indignation

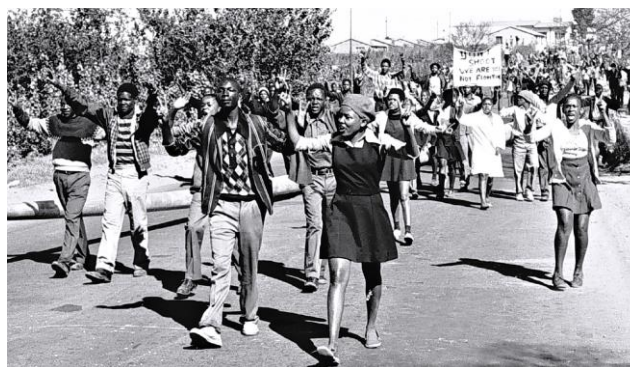


Figure 2. The Soweto uprising

(<https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising>)

came from the 'Bantu education' policies that up to that moment had signalled a deep quality gap between the education provided to white and black students, with black children schooling far more inferior than that offered to white children. Students of all ages, who had always been conscious of this discrepancy, started becoming increasingly aware – thanks to Biko's example – of the need to change the situation; this led to a march on 16th June 1976, where around twenty thousand

schoolchildren in Soweto (figure 2) protested against a specific decree issued in 1974, which had declared Afrikaans as the official medium of instruction in secondary schools. This had been perceived as a further disempowerment of black people, who were prevented from developing their native language and forced to learn the language of the segregators. The protest, which had started peacefully, soon turned violent when the police opened fire on the students, killing many young people. Pictures of the tragedy were broadcast and seen around the world, causing outrage and shock, and revealing the atrocity and brutality of apartheid. The events of Soweto did not end there, and had repercussions in other parts of South Africa, causing more protests and more tragedies, and inducing many young men to join the armed ranks of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

By the beginning of the eighties, opposition to apartheid had spread around the world together with an increase in military resistance inside South Africa; the early years of the decade also saw growing student protests, such as bus boycotts. In reaction against the apartheid regime, international sanctions and boycotts became fiercer and fiercer, not only towards South Africa's economy and trade, but also against its culture and sports. As a response to this, some reforms were implemented: in 1984, a constitutional reform gave coloured and Indian people a power-sharing measure for the first time. However, black people were still denied participation in South African elections and were only allowed to vote in their respective homelands. By 1986, black trade unions were made lawful, which paved the way to the creation of the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) with thousands of members. COSATU played a significant role in promoting strikes that would slightly improve working conditions for black people. In the same year, laws on interracial marriage became less strict, but on the other hand, policies on black education kept schools segregated. Despite these reforms, acts of violence and sabotage continued; several states of emergency were declared, leading to increasing detention and torture, which, in turn, caused more unrest. Such context saw young Mzwakhe Mbuli start his career as oral poet and public performer, though not without trouble: in 1986 his cassette *Change Is Pain*

was banned for denouncing the horrors of apartheid. At the same time, nevertheless, the second half of the 1980s also saw signs of change and openness: secret meetings had begun to take place outside the country between ANC members, church people and white business leaders. In 1987, sixty-one whites and seventeen ANC members, led by Thabo Mbeki, met in Dakar, Senegal; the meeting lasted three days with the shared aim to find a peaceful solution to South Africa's conflicts. Secret meetings continued in the late eighties, opening the way to a new, more hopeful decade.

1.4 The 1990s: glimpses of hope

1.4.1 The early 1990s and Mandela's release

The last decade of the twentieth century began in a promising way, and 1990 represented a true turning point in South African history. On 2nd February, the new prime minister De Klerk started negotiations to achieve peace. Such negotiations comprehended a democratic constitution, equality before the law, the protection of individual rights, and the release from prison of former leaders of banned organisations. Thanks to this, on 11th February, Nelson Mandela was set free after twenty-seven years spent behind bars. His liberation was welcomed by people marching in the streets, singing and dancing. Natrass (2017) reports the words of journalist Audrey Brown who witnessed the events of 11th February; "I laughed with delirious joy," she said, "because everything was suddenly possible [...]." Mandela's release not only gave abundant hope to black South African people, but it also granted the liberation of other political prisoners and exiled activists, who could reunite with their families and communities. A period of unprecedented freedom followed, while talks and meetings between the white government and ANC leaders continued. However, the years leading up to the 1994 democratic elections were still marked by tensions between the two sides; almost two years passed before formal constitutional talks could start at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) in December 1991, a convention that nonetheless presented contrasts between De Klerk and Mandela. The former criticised Mandela for not dismantling Umkhonto we Sizwe, which was allegedly deemed partly guilty of

episodes of violence that were afflicting the country; Mandela criticised De Klerk for not doing enough to contain the afore said violence. Despite these clashes, Mandela and De Klerk worked together with the common aim of a new democratic country, and they were finally awarded with a shared Nobel Peace Prize in 1993.

1.4.2 From the 1994 democratic elections to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In the elections held in 1994, black, coloured and Indian people voted for the first time, with the consequent result of the ANC gaining an overwhelming majority. Nelson Mandela, being the ANC leader, became thus the first democratically elected president, with Thabo Mbeki and De Klerk as deputies. Mzwakhe Mbuli, who had had previous contacts with Mandela, performed at the celebrations for the ANC victory and remained a close supporter of Madiba⁴. During his political activity, Mandela pursued reconciliation and good race relations, and in 1996 enacted a new constitution which was based on the principles of the 1955 Freedom Charter. Another significant change regarded the military force: instead of underground movements such as MK, the first national defence force was established – the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). In his years of presidency, 1994 to 1999, 'Mandela promised protection for all cultures and made it clear that he embraced all the people of South Africa' (Nattrass 2017, p. 227).

Along this line, in 1998 Archbishop Desmond Tutu was appointed by Mandela as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an attempt at uncovering information from both victims

⁴ Madiba has become one of the many names with which Mandela is called; originally, it was the name of the Xhosa clan to which he belonged, as well as the name of a Thembu chief who ruled in Transkei in the 18th century. Nowadays, it is immediately associated with the memory of late Nelson Mandela as a sign of reverence, often combined with the endearing name 'Tata' ('father' in Xhosa). Source: Alexander, H. (06/12/2013), 'Nelson Mandela, Madiba, Tata - what's in a name?', *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelson-mandela/10501587/Nelson-Mandela-Madiba-Tata-whats-in-a-name.html>, viewed 24/08/2018

and perpetrators of apartheid policies, and seek reconciliation. People involved in apartheid crimes were asked to speak and share testimonies of the actions they either inflicted or suffered. The role of Tutu was that of carefully listening, and begging criminals to apologise, and victims to forgive. In some cases, this system left some victims – or victims' relatives – unsatisfied, as they criticised it for failing to bring justice or underrating crimes such as rapes against women. Indeed, as reported by Davis (2003), Archbishop Tutu himself was aware of the complexity of the case, and realised that what he was doing could not be enough to put a decisive end to apartheid. He had pointed out, 'if apartheid is supposed to be dead, why haven't blacks seen the corpse or been invited to the funeral?' (Davis 2003, p.36). All things considered, the great achievement of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that of revealing the horrors of apartheid with first-person accounts, and that of bringing forth a national desire for building a new, peaceful future.

1.5 The twenty-first century

The last section of this first chapter, dedicated to South Africa's historical background, will provide an overview on the occurrences of the first decades of the twenty-first century, and especially on the events after Mandela's presidency.

Since Mandela, the ruling party has always been the ANC, with Thabo Mbeki as president from 1999 to 2008. Unlike Mandela, who encouraged reconciliation, Mbeki supported a path of transformation, as part of an African Renaissance (Nattrass 2017, p.233), a concept that had previously been introduced in 1962 by historian Cheikh Anta Diop; he believed that across African people, there was a cultural continuity that was more important than the single different ethnic groups. Along this line, Mbeki had given a statement in 1996, commonly remembered as the 'I am an African' speech, giving force to the power of black people in reformulating the concept of being African, and underlining their responsibility in solving their country's problems, rebuilding economy and entering geo-political affairs, without white or foreign intervention. Thabo Mbeki, however,

faced some opposition, particularly due to his controversial questioning the existence of the HIV virus and his involvement in the 1998 arms deal.

During Mbeki's presidential term, the issue of corruption in politics emerged, concerning Jacob Zuma – Mbeki's deputy president – who was fired in 2005 after being charged with corruption regarding the arms deal, and with rape. Incidentally, political corruption, crime, rape, and other social issues had also become the new focus of Mzwakhe Mbuli's protest lyrics, to which he had turned after the defeat of apartheid. The charges against Zuma cost Mbeki his place as ANC president, and in 2007 he was replaced by Zuma, who was also elected as President of the Republic of South Africa in 2009, managing to rule for two office terms, until February 2018.

The years of Zuma's presidency have seen many turns of events in different fields, such as politics, trade unions and education. To start with, 2009 was the year when economic recession struck, leaving poverty and unemployment. These circumstances increased the crime rate and worsened financial problems coming from the apartheid period. Despite the worst of the crisis had passed by 2010, many social problems persisted. The main example of this is provided by the Marikana massacre of 2012, the worst event involving union activity since Sharpeville. Miners, working in a platinum mine owned by Lonmin⁵ in the area of Marikana, had decided to protest against a growing disparity in earnings between workers and managers, and poor living and working conditions. The protest soon turned violent on both sides, that of the strikers and that of the police, causing the death of forty-four people. In the beginning, president Zuma defended the police, stating that the strikers had started violence first. However, after the processes, the police were given most of the blame as they had acted before giving strikers a chance to deposit their weapons. The Marikana massacre caused indignation among public opinion, and several scholars dedicated works to the memory of the tragedy. The following year, 2013, is mostly remembered

⁵ A primary producer of Platinum Group Metals in South Africa.

for Mandela's departure from life, which saw a whole nation mourning. As an article on CNN World by Arwa Damon and Faith Karimi reports, "South Africans mourned the death of their first black president, weeping, singing and gathering near Nelson Mandela's homes and other landmarks linked to him nationwide. [...] In Soweto township, where Mandela lived before he was imprisoned for 27 years, giant posters of his face adorned streets. Residents surrounded his former red brick house on a busy street and sang songs of freedom." State funerals and tributes took place subsequently, in one of which Mzwakhe Mbuli performed on television with young South African singer Zahara, singing a song they composed for Mandela; the words of the chorus, "Nelson Mandela, Tata Madiba, father of the nation", perfectly reflect how Mandela was perceived. "Madiba will be an evergreen legend in the world, a symbol of reconciliation" (Mbuli 2016).

The years 2015 and 2016 were characterised by student protests over the increase in university fees and the decolonisation of curricula. Students called for a renewal of educational institutions and a decolonisation of their university programmes, as many saw the legacy of colonialism as one of the causes of education problems in South Africa. A different type of protest came from women in 2016, during the celebration for the local-government election results in Pretoria; a group of women stood in front of the podium, silently protesting rape culture in South Africa (Nattrass 2017, p. 241). Zuma, who had already raised criticism for some misogynous comments, was there and made his bodyguards forcefully remove the protesting women. This lack of ability to deal with current serious social issues – not only rape, but also health, education and working conditions – has probably been one of the causes for the ANC's loss of support in the 2016 elections. Despite this fact, and despite Zuma's resignations in the early months of 2018, the ANC is still ruling South Africa, with current president Cyril Ramaphosa.

I would like to conclude this historical introduction with a poem by Mzwakhe Mbuli, which I believe summarises and encapsulates the events that have been presented in this chapter. The

poem was published in 1989 in *Before Dawn*, and released the same year as part of the album *Unbroken Spirit*. Therefore, it provides a vivid account of apartheid as felt by the author, as well as by all black people, going through an overview of the developments of the regime. The poem starts by mentioning historical facts, such as the beginning of apartheid in 1948, and former apartheid promoters, namely Smuts, Malan, Verwoerd and Vorster. Then, it continues suggesting how the situation has worsened with the passing of time, and how black people have witnessed unjustified racist crimes, until the last stanza, where the determination to overcome injustice and the hope for a better South Africa are the leading messages.

Do Not Push Us Too Far

The National Party came to power in 1948,
They introduced Apartheid policies,
Since they came to power,
They began the pushing,
Created a forum for white South Africa,
And this was done in the presence of the deprived landowners.

The pushing continued,
And this pushing never stopped,
From Smuts-Malan-Verwoerd-Vorster's era to the current incumbent,
Yesterday the pushing intensified,
But today the pushing is no more easy.

Years have gone past,
Decades of turmoil and toiling,
Years of negotiations and pleas,
Decades of detentions, killings and forced removals,
Years of patience and hope,
Years gone by to this bitter end of bondage.

"Do not push us too far", so goes the saying,
Suppressing freedom in the name of Law and Order,
The voiceless silenced without a parliament,
Reform implemented by coercion,
Like inferior education received at gunpoint,

If this is slavery – where is true democracy?

Nats do not push us too far,

And later protest that you have been pushed too far,

Stop and think, who initiated the pushing?

My people have been pushed into overcrowded graveyards in South Africa.

Human beings created by God,

Pushed into a bitter corner,

Are bound to strike back,

Inevitable and courageously,

Like a sting of a dragon,

The people's patience is not endless,

Yes, victory is certain.

(Mbuli 1989a:40-1)

CHAPTER TWO

The Oral Tradition: origins, developments and contemporary trends.

"For centuries the African has been a creator, performer and lover of verbal art. He has created and handed down (orally) to successive generations an organic library of songs, poems, narratives, proverbs, riddles and many other literary forms. Beside being an expression of the soul of the African, these forms testify to his oral craftsmanship."
(Sunkuli, Miruka, 1990:vii)

The second chapter of this dissertation will provide an overview on South African oral traditions, considering how oral forms, unlike written literature (related to Western tradition and to the influence of colonisation), have proven to be the main source of poetic and literary delivery in Africa since ancient times, and still represent inspiration and influence on contemporary African poets. Brown (2000:1) has observed: "Oral forms have been important means of social articulation throughout the history of South Africa, and continue to adapt to new contexts".

Mzwakhe Mbuli's own poetic career is mostly oral: the only book he published is a collection of his oral poems. In view of the fact that chapters three and four will dwell on his figure as an oral poet and on the analysis of some of his work, it has appeared necessary to bring forth a panoramic view on the traditions that underlie Mzwakhe's poems. This will therefore be carried out starting from an outlook on the origins and development of South African oral poetic genres, amplifying then our focus on other significant African oral forms. Moreover, this chapter will consider some of the cases in which music and poetry collide, as it often happens in Mzwakhe Mbuli's performances, and will analyse the mechanisms that are enacted in such cases.

2.1 Genres and Developments

"No one would think to deny the important role that oral traditions have played in the history of humankind: archaic civilizations and a good many cultures still marginal today have maintained themselves solely or principally by means of these traditions" (Zumthor 1990:4). In Zumthor's words, orality is seen as the very origin of literature in different cultures around the world. This is especially the case of Africa, as Zumthor has signalled various times in his book, a continent that provides the best examples of a lively orality, still permeating societies. A closer look on South African oral forms will be hereby given, drawing on works by Brown, Chapman and others.

Duncan Brown⁶ has carried out extensive research on the field of South African literature, and in particular on oral poetry and performance, providing relevant critical material for future studies on that very field. In *Voicing the Text* (1998), not only he supplies readers and students with an outstanding and detailed panoramic over the origins and traditions of South African oral poetry, but he also dives into a comparative analysis between two oral poets, Alfred Qabula and Mzwakhe Mbuli; the insights he furnishes have formed one of the fundamental and most significant critical text on Mzwakhe Mbuli. This chapter will consider the origins and developments of South African orality and performance, bringing forth Brown's theses as well as those of other scholars.

"Oral poetry and performance have been important features of South African society since the development of the first human communities on the subcontinent," argues Brown, who additionally asserts that these forms continue to play a key role among African people, adapting themselves to the changes in time and society. Oral forms have, as a matter of fact, "adapted to industrialized, politicized contexts," as a consequence of urbanization and colonialism. Oral poetry more recently flourished in the 1970s as a means of avoiding the threats of censorship imposed

⁶ Lecturer at the University of Natal, Durban.

on printed black poetry during apartheid. In his introduction to *Oral Literature and Performance in South Africa*, Brown delineates how oral forms have represented, for the African people, a way of expressing their "concerns, understandings, insights and protests," especially during the repressive years of apartheid. Up to the present days, African poetry has demonstrated to rely frequently on orality in various different circumstances, from the ancient praise poems uttered in honour of tribe chiefs, to the contemporary oral poems performed by Mzwakhe Mbuli at public functions and state funerals. An issue that Duncan Brown has highlighted in his studies concerns the fact that – throughout scholar research – South African oral literature has occupied a minor place compared to mainstream printed literature. This is due to two main reasons: the first regards the difficulties of transcribing and translating an oral text, an operation which involves in most of the cases an act of mediation, which inevitably modifies the original oral text; the second is related to a difficulty in producing critical texts on the oral tradition, since the literary paradigms traditionally used for analysing and commenting written literature may not be applied to oral texts in the same way. These issues might represent a complexity in writing this very same dissertation, since the oral poems that it will analyse can be completely understood and appreciated only by viewing their actual performance. Nevertheless, Brown suggests the need to develop a "new critical methodology for oral texts" (Brown, 1998:15), which would both help to recuperate suppressed forms and reconceptualise the study of poetry as a whole, providing students and scholars with appropriate tools for their analysis of oral texts and performances. Thanks to Brown's efforts, among others, we can now have a deeper understanding of the substantial mark that oral poetry has been leaving not only in South Africa, but on all of the African continent.

The oral genre has developed in countless forms and shapes, giving birth to an abundance of different kinds of oral poetry. In order to present a comprehensive view of such tradition, this dissertation will present some of the main forms and poetic genres following a chronological order, as suggested by Brown, providing relevant contributions from other critics, such as Paul Zumthor,

Steven Gray, and Michael Chapman. The fact that oral poetry has evolved does not mean that 'primitive' forms have been replaced by more recent ones. On the contrary, ancient forms – in the majority of cases – have survived and have coexisted with contemporary ones.

2.1.1 The encounter between oral forms and colonialism

"Almost all oral cultures on the subcontinent have been influenced by their contact with the literate cultures of the colonial settlers" (Brown 2000:9). This contact has meant either the suppression of certain oral traditions or the attempt of colonisers to transcribe and translate⁷ such oral forms. Inevitably, this procedure involved acts of mediation and transformation which have modified the original meanings and ways of delivery. Despite all this, orality has proven its strength through surviving to the present days. As far as this is concerned, a passage from Brown's introduction to *Oral Literature and Performance in South Africa* has to be quoted here:

"While almost all colonial occupation involved the physical and discursive subjection of indigenous peoples, the destruction of social orders, and the ruthless suppression of dissent, even a cursory acquaintance with oral and popular performance genres from colonial and postcolonial societies suggests that the attempts to silence the other were far from successful: the colonised have continued to speak, often in unofficial ways and from unofficial spaces, but also from the centres of their societies." (Brown 2000:10)

Moreover, Gray (1979) reports a quotation from professor Bob Leshoai⁸, asserting the importance of the study of oral culture, whose "literary merit is not inferior to that of any written culture's" (Gray 1979:162). Leshoai declared as follows:

"We know that long before the white man's arrival our honourable ancestors had created their own culture, their own way of life that we are proud of today. One of the most important ingredients of this culture was a rich and profound oral literature of myths, legends, folk tales, folk songs, rhymes, praise and heroic poems, proverbs, idioms and riddles.

7 From African native languages to English.

8 Benjamin Letholoa Leshoai (1920 -), Professor of Literature at the University of Bophuthatswana.

It was through this rich oral literature that the nation of children, men and women learned about morality, religion, philosophy, wisdom, geography, history and politics and the entire spectrum of human existence in the various communities." (Quoted in Gray, 1979:162)

Through Leshoai's words emerges the idea of a deep pride in South Africans of their oral traditions, a pride that has struggled to keep such traditions alive despite colonisation, discrimination and racism. It has managed to bring the primitive orality to contemporaneity. This feeling of attachment to their oral tradition is utterly exemplary of the pivotal role that orality has always had in African societies, despite the colonisers' attempts to silence it.

2.1.2 The oral traditions of the /Xam Bushmen: the earliest examples

"The oral literature, engravings, and paintings of the Bushmen offer, among other things, some of the earliest accounts in southern Africa of colonization from the perspective of the colonized" (Brown 1998:36). "Bushman paintings and stories tell [...] of destructive meetings with Africans and white farmers. [...] The story of the Bushmen is one of cruelty and virtual extinction" (Chapman 1996:21). As mentioned above, despite the attempts of colonisers to silence the culture of the indigenous people, some of this culture has survived until the present days, and reveals us the interesting point of view of the colonised, together with a thick net of myths and legends that often compose the cultural baggage carried by contemporary South Africans.

Before the arrival of the Dutch, the Bushmen living throughout southern Africa were approximately 150,000 to 300,000; they were hunter-gatherers and lived in small bands composed of related families. Nowadays, around 50,000 Bushmen remain, due to the colonialist policies of extermination which deprived Bushmen of their lands and livestock. Brown states that this attitude of cruelty and discrimination towards the Bushmen has also determined a lack of interest in their cultural utterance. The first transcriptions were made in the second half of the 19th century, mainly by a German linguist – W. H. I. Bleek – who, together with his sister-in-law, learned the /Xam

language and transcribed and translated the songs and narratives of the Bushman people (Chapman 1996:22). An example of such translated narrative is the one provided by an informant called //Kabbo, who offered Bleek an account of his arrest; he was detained for stealing a sheep and forced to work in a wagon. Brown (1998:34-5) reports a passage of this transcription and offers a possible analysis of its intentions and deep meaning. As far as the structural and written form is concerned, Bleek transcribed the narrative as it was being uttered, therefore it reflects the actual stream of words which flows without a pre-conceived introduction, development or conclusion. Chapman says that Bleek's transcription recorded "all the hesitations, repetitions, circling progressions, apparently a-logical digressions and mutations of stories-within-stories, that [...] suggest the oral mind in its procedures of memorisations" (Chapman 1996:23). Whenever the informant stopped to think, formulate his thought or rephrase, Bleek represented it in transcription with empty parenthesis.

The rhetoric of the narrative presented juxtaposed sentences featuring repetitions and parallelisms. Despite the inevitable mediation resulted from transcription, the idea and dimension of orality, even in translation, are thus conveyed by the colloquial and flowing structure of the narrative, as stated above. Brown (1998:43) observes: "none of the repetitions has been deleted, and the translation strikes the reader as literal in its reliance on some very awkward syntactical structures in English." The analysis of the meaning suggested by Brown highlights the contrast between the world of the colonisers, represented in the technology of the wagon and in the repressive atmosphere of the police and the law, and the world of the Bushman society; indeed, //Kabbo is not alone in that wagon, he is together with his family and other members of his community. Through the description of what they eat, how they cook their food and how they had obtained that same food, we can recuperate an insight on the Bushman life and customs.

By the end of the 19th century, however, due to an increased contact with colonisers, Bushman society started to come to a disruption. Many of the Bushman narrators and informers were therefore telling stories and accounts they had not experience first person, but, on the contrary, they had been told by their own parents or grandparents. Precise information on the Bushman society, as a consequence, started to diminish and disappear. It is doubtless, however, that the works of Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy C. Lloyd have provided the primary and most resourceful source for a deeper understanding of the Bushman orality. Regarding this, Brown lists some of the different types of poetry and narrative that characterised Bushmen orality, which comprised both sacred and profane songs and stories that permeated all aspects of Bushman society, apparently mixing 'prose' and 'poetry' elements⁹. Storytelling occupied a key role in the transmission of knowledge, as myths and narratives about gods, stars and processes of creation suggest. The rhythm of delivery was made of "sound patterning, pauses, abrupt breaks, and fluctuations of tone and volume" (Brown 1998:50), techniques that are often used by contemporary oral poets, as well. The oral delivery conveyed the symbolic meaning of the words through the "lively performance of the narrator" (*ibid.*), which involved bodily movements, facial expressions and climatic or dismissive gestures, aimed at underlining the pathos of the narration. Bushmen orality was not only restricted to ceremonial performances or mythical narratives; it also comprised everyday-life stories, which, again, presented the rhetorical devices of repetitions and refrains.

9 Chapman observes the lack of differentiation, among the Bushmen, between oral genres: "in oral studies, clearly, we are dealing with texts that are 'unstable', and matters of interpretation and classification remain challenging. As far as classification of Bushman literature is concerned, there were no generically distinct categories in ancient African communities corresponding in a self-consciously literary way to Western forms of poem, narrative and drama." (1996:24)

Bushman orality confronted itself with themes such as "the clash of cultures, racial confrontation, and the destruction of indigenous inhabitants by the technology of a stronger colonial power" (Brown 1998:71). Such themes were integrated and developed in the oral literature of the following decades and by different ethnical groups, which might make us understand how heartfelt the above-mentioned themes were and still are to contemporary oral poets. As Brown asserts, "the texts of the /Xam [Bushmen] suggest not the primordial child-man [...], nor the idyllic African past evoked in popular media and advertising, but a complex imaginative response to pressing social and economic needs" (*ibid.*).

2.1.3 Praise poetry: the *Shaka* Epic of the Zulu

This subchapter wants to introduce a relevant genre of oral poetry in South Africa; although it originated in the Zulu tribe, it has been retrieved by many contemporary poets and it has influenced contemporary oral performers – like Mzwakhe Mbuli himself. One of the most well-known examples of oral praise poetry is the epic poem about the victories and military campaigns of the warrior Shaka, an ancient chief of the Zulu tribe. Its English printed version, translated from Zulu oral sources, has become known and widely available thanks to Mazisi Kunene (1979). *Shaka* is a poem that has kept its power and intensity despite having been translated and transcribed, and for this reason Brown includes it as an exemplary text for his analysis of the praise poem genre.

Brown (1998:75) reports that written accounts of Zulu praise poetry have survived until this present day and age thanks to the work of Rev. George Champion, who, in the 1830s visited the court of the Zulu king of the time (Dingane); Champion recorded, among other experiences, the presence of a man at court. His performance consisted in addressing the king in flattering epithets. Providing this first-person account of Zulu praise poetry performance, Champion also highlighted how this form of poetry was "one of the most important cultural and political institutions of Zulu society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Brown 1998:75). This

is due to the fact that, in contrast with the egalitarian Bushman society, traditional Zulu society was hierarchical and stratified; therefore, addressing kings and chiefs with praise poems and performing with similar acts in their presence is – still nowadays – regarded as fundamental. Praise poetry was usually performed in events such as great ceremonies, declarations of war, celebrations of victory. Zulu oral literature also includes other forms of praise poetry, such as wedding songs, warrior songs and prayers; however, the most complex and prominent kind is the one dedicated to chiefs, which saw appliance in other tribes as well, such as among the Xhosa, Ndebele and Sotho. Indeed, Zumthor observed that these songs and poems

“were a crystallizing element in the national will starting from the time of Shaka’s rule and were cultivated, organized, and systematically exploited by the ruling powers. Even today, preserved in memory, there are several old war songs that have been adapted to political and social struggles.”
(1990:72)

In the present subchapter and in further points in this dissertation, I will draw from Brown’s consideration of the Zulu praise poetry as central to all South African oral literature history, since its literary and social relevance is not bound to the tribes and communities of the past, but continues to play a key role in contemporary society. A central claim of my dissertation is, as a matter of fact, that present-day oral poets such as Mzwakhe Mbuli are perpetuating and keeping the oral traditions of their ancestors alive, by applying to their poems and performances the same poetic devices that have been used in previous generations. Praise poetry is – as Brown calls it – a living form, continuously changing and modifying itself with every different performance and from poet to poet. It is a “human document”, “an act of rhetoric with the capacity to persuade, to mobilize or to negotiate relations of power” (Brown 1998:78).

The Zulu word for praise poem is *izibongo*, and the praise poet is called *imbongi*. There exist different types of *izibongo*: beside the royal praise poetry, praises to animals or ancestors are also relevant. Whichever *izibongo* is performed, nevertheless, it has some specific functions: firstly,

the function of establishing cognitive maps within social relations between human and animals, rulers and ruled and between individuals; this social function offers a discursive means of stabilizing society and creating social cohesion. A second function of the *izibongo* is that of establishing historical continuity, which permits to examine the present in terms of past events, and, in turn, allows to re-examine the past according to contemporary society. As far as the formal characteristics of the *izibongo* are concerned, Chapman (1996:54) points out that the praise poem comprises a cumulative series of praise names applying to a single person. Other features include little rhyme or metre, and rhythmical structure given by the "breath-groups" – verbal units defined by the performer's regular pauses for breath – which determine the pace of delivery. Rhythm is also provided by an extremely recurrent rhetorical device in African oral poetry, which is the use of repetitions and parallelisms by initial linking; alongside giving a rhythmic scansion, repetitions and parallelisms have the function to stir the emotion of the audience during performance. Brown (1998:102-3) quotes some passages from Cope's translation of *Shaka* (1968), to exemplify how impactful is the use of repetition:

He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more;
He who while devouring some devoured others,
And as he devoured others he devoured some more.

The concept of 'devouring' is hereby used as a metaphor for combat defeat, and the intensive repetition of such concept is aimed at impressing the crowds as well as worshipping the king/chief. Again, an example of parallelism by initial linking might be represented in the following lines, with the intent of creating a dramatic sense of the extent of Shaka's conquests:

He attacked Phungashe of the Buthelezi clan,
He attacked Sondabe of Mthanda as he sat in the council,
He attacked Macingwane at Ngonyameni,
He attacked Mangcengeza of the Mbatha clan,
He attacked Dladlama of the Majolas,
He attacked Nxaba son of Mbhekane,
He attacked Gambushe in Pondoland,
He attacked Faku in Pondoland.

The *izibongo* usually presents an opening formula consisting of a salute to the ruler, aimed at attracting the attention of the crowd and at creating silence for the performance; the praise poem then ends with a closing sentence such as 'I disappear'. Also, the *izibongo*, as well as other kinds of black poetry, presents a cyclical structure, by repeating at the end words or concepts that had already been mentioned at the beginning. Another important feature of this oral poetic genre is the principle of naming, or giving epithets which are often drawn from the natural world and juxtaposed in no particular order, with the only intention of describing the moral, physical and political qualities of the king. Again, Brown (1998:107) quotes a passage from Cope (1968) so as to convey this idea:

You are a wild animal! A leopard! A lion!
You are a horned viper! An elephant!
You are as big as the great mountains of
Mpehlela and Maqhwakazi,
You black one,
You grew while others loitered.

Related to this aspect, the extensive use of imagery is worth underlining; the language of the *izibongo* appears as highly allusive and metaphorical, with direct impact on the structure of the poem. Brown (1998:99) reports a quotation from Coplan (1987) stating that "structurally the poems are a series of verbal pictures created from the limitless resources of African language. [...] these images are ordered according to an emotional and aesthetic logic of incremental effect." The

fascinating aspect which links the traditional *izibongo* to more recent poetry stands in the retrieving of the afore-mentioned formal aspects of the *izibongo* and their employment in written poetry (for instance, in the Soweto poetic movement) and in present-day oral poetry, such as Mzwakhe Mbuli's. The *izibongo* is a form subjected to changes due to political and historical conditions, and it continues to cover an important role in current South African society in which it advises, criticises and delivers praise in modern circumstances. As Janet Hodgson (In White L., Couzens T. 1984:31) states, "praise-poetry is primarily eulogistic," a fact that has been widely visible even in recent times, when praise poems have been performed at state funerals and memorials.

The figure of the *imbongi* (plural *izimbongi*) is worthy of consideration; traditionally, it is a figure not paid by the king and not designated as a poet through heredity. On the contrary, he has to earn the acclaim of the people. He learns how to deliver praise poetry by listening to other *izimbongi* and by adapting and extending his own *izibongo*. In performance, he usually wears animal skins and holds either two sticks or a shield and a spear. The position of the *imbongi* is not merely laudatory or adulatory; he has a role of responsibility in negotiating relations of political power within society. Indeed, he is allowed to even criticise the king when necessary, as long as social order is maintained. Concerning this aspect, Liz Gunner (in Brown 2000:52) mentions the danger that criticising the chief might have represented: she provides the example of a recent *imbongi* who was assassinated in 1992 for "being on the wrong side". However, the *imbongi* is permitted to employ certain words or language that is normally considered inappropriate – namely sexual references – which, however, has not been recorded in written form in the past due to censorship reasons.

Many of these aspects of both the *izibongo* as an oral poetic form and the *imbongi* as the figure of oral poet might remind us of modern-day oral poets, such as Mzwakhe Mbuli himself,

who performed praise poems in many public situations. Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane (In White L., Couzens T., 1984:147) declares that the praise poetry genre – whether belonging to the Zulu, Xhosa or Ndebele tradition – is the poetic form that has influenced black poets to the greatest extent; he defines it “the highest form of poetic expression known to blacks” not only concerning oral poetry, but also regarding its written adaptation. He develops this thought giving the reason that the *izibongo* deals with heroic actions, and “heroism remains an essential weapon in the liberation struggle in South Africa” (White, Couzens 1984:147). Liz Gunner (in Brown, 2000:52) also mentions the importance of praise poetry as ‘political commentary’ in South Africa, drawing from the key part that such poetry has played in the struggle against apartheid. In particular, she refers to a form of praise poetry whose target was not necessarily a chief or a king, but rather a ‘free nation’.

2.1.4 The encounter between orality and Christianity: Hymns.

A further example of oral poetry is provided by the hybrid form of the hymn, a form of religious poetry with influences from traditional African oral forms. The genre of the hymn flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially through the works of Isaiah Shembe, a Zulu messianic evangelist (Brown 1998:120). At that time, the colonial occupation and the growing urbanization were disrupting the traditional Zulu social structure; Shembe, therefore, founded the Church of the Nazarites seeking to revitalise Zulu society by maintaining their traditions and customs while, at the same time, trying to conciliate them with the Christian faith. This combination found a concrete result in the hybridization of the Christian hymn with traditional Zulu praise poetry and other oral forms. Moreover, Shembe “created forms which expressed religious and political resistance to colonial oppression” (*ibid*); however, if the topics and contents of his hymns expressed such resistance, the very structure and form of the hymns represent an encounter, a ‘dialogue’ between the indigenous oral traditions and the “‘educated’ forms of the

occupying power" (*ibid.* p. 127). This aspect is of particular interest to this dissertation, as the contents and structures of this poetic genre might have influenced contemporary oral poets.

Brown reports the English translation of *Hymn 45*, which contains some details worth noting:

I shouted day and night
Why did you not hear me?
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible
Before the uMsindisi [Deity].

I was stopped by all the nations
Which are under heaven.
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible
Before the uMsindisi.

You maiden of Nazareth
May you cry like a rushing stream
About the disgrace that has befallen you
In the land of your people.
Nations go to sleep that Zulu may be audible
Before the uMsindisi.

You young men of Nazareth
You cry all like a rushing stream,
About the disgrace that has befallen you
You young men of Shaka
Before the uMsindisi.

Brown does not provide an analysis for this hymn; nevertheless, I considered it relevant to point out certain details that connect compositions such as this one to South African orality through time and history. First of all, we may notice that the traditional device of repetition and parallelism through initial linking has been suggested, for instance, at the beginning of the first two stanzas (repetition of the pronoun 'I') and at the beginning of the other two stanzas (repetition of the pronoun 'you'). Furthermore, all four stanzas end with the same sentence, and the first three also share the same ending couplet. In addition, the poetic voice appears as expressing itself in first person at the beginning, and then addressing a hypothetical addressee or audience, which is a

technique that reminds us of the figure of the *imbongi*. As far as the imagery used is concerned, this hymn presents both references to the African world and tradition and to the Biblical tradition. The poet mentions the Zulu people, their deity uMsindisi, the warrior Shaka, and uses images taken from the natural world, such as the 'rushing stream'. At the same time, however, the register and tone he uses reminds us of the emphatic language of the Bible, as in 'I shouted day and night/why did you not hear me', or 'the disgrace that has befallen you/in the land of your people.' Biblical explicit references are represented by words such as 'heaven' and 'Nazareth'; however, a more subtle and ambiguous reference could be the 'land of your people', which might be both the African land taken from the Zulu, or the Promise Land from the Bible accounts. Finally, the general mood of the hymn conveys the idea of a cry for help, or an expression of indignation for the situation in which South Africa was living – themes that will be retrieved by the protest poets of the Soweto movement as well as oral poets like Mzwakhe Mbuli.

Speaking of themes, Brown points out that Shembe's hymns deal with many of the most critical issues not only of Zulu history, but also of South African modern history as a whole. Such topics are:

"ownership and occupation of the land; economic dispossession; African nationalism and ethnicity; the ideological and educational role of missionaries; the suppression of orality by the epistemological and cognitive authority of the Western tradition of print; and the pattern of psychological subjugation and black resistance" (Brown 1998:124).

Despite the fact that Catholicism was – and is – inevitably linked to European colonisation, religious hymns were an extremely popular means of addressing the above-mentioned topics in an effective and affecting way. As an example of this, Brown reports Shembe's *Hymn 17*, which he defines as "one of the most powerful of Shembe's hymns" (Brown 1998:152), and was composed in the same period of the birth of resistance political parties such as the SANNC (South African Native National Congress) – the forerunner of the ANC. Zumthor, too, stated how the period of

the African independent movements favoured a development of powerful and popular adaptation of indigenous practices merged with Christianity to create "a high-quality musical poetry that [was] even choreographed" (1990:73). Therefore, the singularity of *Hymn 17*, besides its traditional formal aspects taken from the Zulu *izibongo*, is that of a strongly political message reinforced in every stanza by the repetitive couplet 'rise up, rise up/ye Africans.'

He who is beaten is not thrown away
Let him not despise himself,
Rise up, rise up
Ye Africans.

The form of the doorway
Causes you to bend,
Rise up, rise up
Ye Africans.

The enemies of Jehovah
Rise up against you
Rise up, rise up
Ye Africans.¹⁰

In these lines, not only can we perceive the strong feeling of African identity transpiring through the words, but we can also recognise how Isaiah Shembe managed to create a new genre of oral poetry, merging African and Western poetic devices.

Moving on to another distinctive aspect of Shembe's hymns, great importance was given to the music which accompanied them. Usually, European mission church hymnody employed the tunes of European or American composers, such as Bach or Sankey; Shembe, however, moved away from these western influences giving African tunes and rhythms to his hymns, also involving group singing and dancing, and representing the true innovation in Shembe's hymns. Brown declares that

10 First three stanzas of the original hymn.

"the hymns are performed in a call-and-response style, with the prophet or group-leader as precentor and the congregation following him or her."¹¹ The performances were also accompanied by traditional musical instruments, a tradition that has remained in present-day oral poetry performances.

To sum up, this section has considered the hybrid genre of Shembe's religious hymn, which mixes the western tradition and the Zulu cultural resources, conveying not only religious meanings, but also a sense of "empowerment and resistance" (Brown 1998:157). As demonstrated, Shembe's hymns sometimes appear to anticipate the protest poetry of the black consciousness movement and of contemporary protest poets like Mzwakhe Mbuli.

2.1.5 *Black Consciousness* and recent oral poetry trends

The poetic genres discussed above have all influenced South African orality throughout history and have survived in various forms up to the present day, influencing contemporary poets. A tangible example of this stands in the social and literary movement of the late sixties and seventies called *Black Consciousness* (often abbreviated in BC). The protagonists were mainly college students who started using poetry as an expressive medium for their dissatisfaction with different struggles they were experiencing, from low quality education standards to the harsh discrimination of the apartheid period. A tradition of oral poetry aimed at political protest had already flourished after the Second World War, as independence movements developed; such poetry was based on local panegyric and inventive traditions, and it was used for emancipation

¹¹ This description is likely to make us think of the gospel music genre, which has roots in African music and traditions and is performed in the exact same way, with a 'preacher' (group-leader) leading a group of singers who repeat in song what he or she say. Obviously, the gospel genre has an exclusively religious target, unlike Shembe's hymns, which often addressed social issues. Nevertheless, it appeared legitimate to recognise a connection between the two expression of orality.

movements or political campaigns (Zumthor 1990:75). The *Black Consciousness* movement found its written expression in the Soweto Poetry movement in the seventies, but this section will only consider the aspects of the literary movement concerned with orality and performance.

Brown (1998:166) defines BC as the mobilization of oral forms and poetry performance in a context of political oppression such as the one of apartheid. Indeed, such movement emerged after the tragedy of Sharpeville (1960). It was followed by a period of intense repression, with the banning of ANC and PAC. Poets were faced with threats such as poetic silence and censorship, beside the generalised separation and segregation. BC originated in black universities and its founder is believed to be Steve Biko, who founded the black South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in 1969. Brown reports as follows:

"As Steve Biko argued in 1973, black consciousness was based on the "realisation of blacks that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (1986:29). It stressed the psychological and political liberation of black people [...] and reasserted the communal values of a black humanism." (1998:169)

The SASO was also responsible for the Soweto uprising of 1976 (explained in detail in chapter one), attributable to the awareness generated by the Black Consciousness movement and influence. Beside the black students' realisation of their value, BC was also responsible for a deep work of historical and cultural recuperation. Regarding so, Brown reports a quotation by Allan Boesak which might be significant for the purposes of this dissertation, as it demonstrates how BC has given importance to the historical and cultural roots of black people, and, consequently, to their oral traditions:

"Black Consciousness may be described as the awareness of black people that their humanity is constituted by their blackness. It means that black people are no longer ashamed that they are black, that they have a black history and a black culture distinct from the history and culture of white people. It means that blacks are determined to be judged no longer by, and to adhere themselves no longer to white values." (Boesak 1986:41)

Such feelings of dignity, value and recognition, therefore, were translated into poems, which were both orally recited and published (despite the frequent bannings). Through oral poetry, black people were once again keeping their cultural traditions alive, with a renewed awareness of their worth. Cultural festivals celebrating black identity started to be organised, and saw the performances of black artists and poets, which led to the process of black cultural assertion. Shirli Gilbert exposed the purposes and reasons for performing arts and poetry in the period of *Black Consciousness*. She asserts that black people's art

"was not elitist or exclusive, but was intimately connected with 'the people'. Its purpose – she continued – was not only to portray their plight [...] but to articulate their 'hopes and aspirations', to encourage commitment to the struggle, and to promote the affirmative values of a democratic South Africa. [...] Truly revolutionary art served to educate, awaken political consciousness and [...] was a vehicle for condemning the regime." (in Olwage 2008:172)

Gilbert also added a quotation from Langa (1988:26-7) which summarises the significance of such cultural movement at that particular time: "Culture was emphatically promoted as a 'weapon in the struggle for national liberation and democracy."

Poetry concerning black awareness and identity was usually performed at communal gatherings until it reached its peak with the Soweto facts, and it started to give preference to the page; the so-called Soweto poets were published poets, rather than oral. Nevertheless, their poems often presented similar features to the traditional oral compositions. Written and oral poetry in the seventies developed in parallel ways; oral performances were preferred in circumstances when the threat of censorship was present, or simply to avoid being published in white magazines, and therefore keeping black poetry only to black people as a further assertion of their identity. Thus, poems were memorised and passed on without the risk of a ban.

Having established the importance of the oral performance for the poets of the *Black Consciousness* period, let us move on to a closer observation of the features of such poems. First

of all, poets would perform in front of numerous crowds in townships, thus remaining unknown to white audiences; their performances were often accompanied by flutes and drums, and the poets would wear traditional African clothing. Brown states that "using rhythmic movement, facial expression, gesture, intonation, alternating pace of delivery, pauses, and the hypnotic beating of the drums, the poets transformed poetry from a printed phenomenon into a performance event" (1998:184). What Brown has mentioned is a list of the main performative resources of oral poets; however, from a linguistic point of view, oral poems in English also presented a disrupted textuality, which is typical of the oral dimension, but which might also be due to the inferior 'Bantu education' received by black poets, thus explaining the inaccuracy of the grammatical structure or of the language in general. In fact, oral poets recovered indigenous oral forms such as the *izibongo*, traditional songs and music, and translated them into English with multiple purposes: on the one hand, it represented an act of resistance against colonisers, and on the other hand it was used to revive the African past that had been suppressed by colonisation and apartheid. Indeed, the search for their origins through poetry is also commented by Mzamane (in White, Couzens 1984:152) who wrote that BC adherents would participate in this form of Black pride by reaching back to their 'sources, their roots'.

The emotional wave of *Black Consciousness* left its visible traces also in the relationship between poet and audience: the performance was based on the interaction between poet and crowd which reinforced the sense of shared identity. As far as the structure is concerned, oral poems presented many of the traditional features of African oral forms, namely parallelism, repetitions and cyclical constructions. The rhythm was often uneven, and the rhythmical scheme was provided by 'breath-units' pauses and emphatic moments.

Oral poems were mainly recited in townships with the purpose of uniting and motivating people belonging to the lowest classes of society, and giving them a sense of belonging. Such

performances had, indeed, "specific political and social purposes" (Brown 1998:167), such as that of asserting the value of black identity, or that of spreading a message of resistance rather than protest. In addition, another target of oral poems was that of sharing a pan-African message, a message of "African unity across linguistic, racial, ethnic, economic, and geographical boundaries" (*ibid.* p. 203). An exemplary poet who embodied all these features is Ingoapele Madingoane, who in the late seventies took part to the Soweto poetry movement. He started as oral poet, but his career was briefly stopped when, after publishing his poems, he was banned, which led him to resort to orality. He was mouthpiece for messages of resistance, and "sought to reclaim black identity and reassert the importance of black creativities and cultural forms, including forms of oral poetry" (*ibid.* p. 168). An article on the website *Sowetan Live* reads:

"Madingoane performed [...] widely in Soweto, accompanied by Mhloti Black Theatre's flutes and drums, mainly at protest rallies and funerals of anti-apartheid activists. He was honoured with a SALA¹² Literary Posthumous Award in 2007, nine years after his death due to a long illness."

I hereby report some relevant lines of Madingoane's poem 'Africa My Beginning, Africa My Ending', which might exemplify the characteristics of Black Consciousness and Soweto poetry, exposed above.

Africa my Beginning
They came from the west
Sailing to the east
With hatred and disease flowing
From their flesh
And a burden to harden our lives
They claimed to be friends
When they found us friendly
And when foreigner met foreigner
They fought for the reign
Exploiters of Africa
[...]
No easy way to freedom

12 South African Literary Award.

Ten lonely years black hopeful men
Food being their wish
Courage their pay
Until Africa was respected
For a leader had emerged
From the bush to Maputo
[...]
Azania here I come from apartheid in tatters
in the land of sorrow from that marathon bondage
the Sharpeville Massacre the flames of Soweto
I was there I will die there
In Africa my beginning
And Africa my ending
[...]
(Madingoane, 1979)

As we can see from this extract, Madingoane, as part of the broader movement of Soweto poetry, combines in his lines a 'stream-of-consciousness'-like flow of speech, which is typical of orality, with images of struggle (reference to colonialism, apartheid, and the tragedies of Sharpeville and Soweto); beside this, the pan-African message mentioned above is also present throughout the poem, as the title itself makes clear: in Africa the poet – as representative of the entire population – finds his beginning and his end, in a unified continuum through oppression and freedom. In an interview with Dieter Welz, in 1986, Madingoane stressed the importance for the poet to speak "as a voice of the people", therefore advocating the pan-African message; he said: "When you speak as a man of the people, you know, you will speak to a nation" (Madingoane 1986, quoted by Welz 1987:51).

2.1.6 Oral poetry in the 1980s and 1990s

"Poetry in South Africa today has moved away from the page to the stage. It is recited on public occasions, during commemorative gatherings and funeral services and get-togethers of all sorts. It is infused with the traditional spirit of the *izibongo*." (Mzamane, in White, Couzens 1984:155)

This short assertion by Mzamane summarises at best what is oral poetry in modern-day South Africa. In particular, towards the end of the apartheid era, protest voices increased,

addressing the crowds of the townships with engrossing performances that merged the traditions known to the audience with innovation, through new, experimental styles of poetic delivery. My dissertation centres on the figure of Mzwakhe Mbuli, an oral poet who started his career in the 1980s, lifting up his voice in a cry for freedom, peace and unity. As chapter three will describe, he was not spared from punishment for his defiance to the apartheid state; in fact, he was more than once imprisoned and saw his first album banned. Nevertheless, the power of his oral poetry never ceased to move crowds, who entitled him 'the people's poet'. Further details on Mzwakhe Mbuli will be given in the following pages.

This section will deal with the general oral poetry panorama of the last years of apartheid, highlighting how "the oral culture permeates the contemporary consciousness of most of South African citizens, especially native speakers of African languages¹³" (Gunner in Vivan, 1996:303). Liz Gunner, in an essay reported by Vivan (1996), explains how such oral culture belongs to the people, in other words, how it is perceived as a humble form of poetry, compared to the noble praise poetry of the ancestral tradition. Actually, such 'low' poetry is indeed influenced by praise poetry, and – in a way – it *still* is a form of praise poetry. It exemplifies in other forms of oral poetry, such as wedding songs, lullabies, clan songs, and – surprisingly – war songs used to convey messages of freedom. Regarding this, Gunner quotes a refrain of a war song probably dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century and used in the eighties as a freedom song. Its translation says: 'We will shoot him, we will shoot him; we will shoot him, / we will shoot him with cannons.' The 'freedom song' – states Gunner – is indeed a new oral genre developed from the eighties, and it could be both recited and sung. Vivan (1996:353) also declares that oral artists who verbally fought apartheid were carrying out a cultural operation, since their political discourse drew from their tradition and vindicated their identity. This represents a further proof of how

13 My own translation from Italian.

contemporary oral poetry and oral communication is profoundly rooted and influenced by the oral forms of the African tradition, and therefore can persevere in keeping such traditions alive. Along this line, Brown (2000:3) observes that 'during the 1980s poets like Alfred Temba Qabula and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo utilised the form of the *izibongo* to mobilise support for the union movement.' The *izibongo* tradition has been used even more recently by Mzwakhe Mbuli himself, who composed a poem to Nelson Mandela, as well as by other poets who celebrated Madiba's release and election in the 1990s.

2.2 Further features of African orality

This section will present other significant characteristics of African orality. Despite the fact that some of them belong to other African countries or ethnicities, they all present similar traits to the South African tradition and might have influenced Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetic career. First, some rhetorical features will be presented; then, we will move on to present themes that frequently appear in African literature and poetry. Finally, this section will briefly introduce some oral traditions of specific tribes and ethnicities from Southern Africa and from other areas, too.

2.2.1 Rhetorical features

Sunkuli and Miruka (1990:106), in *A Dictionary of Oral Literature*, present the problematic issue of classifying African oral forms; they state that such difficulty is presented by the fact that oral genres overlap and influence each other¹⁴. In order to solve this problem, they report a suggestion made by Austin Lwanga Bukonya, which involved four types of classification: folkloristic classification (which regarded oral literature as a mere part of a community's folklore); generic classification (which classified oral forms according to genres); situational or sociological

14 They report, as an example, a love song that was often sung during work. This led to the question whether this song became a work song, or remained a love song despite being performed in a different context than usual.

classification (by which oral forms were classified according to when, where and by whom they were performed); and stylistic classification (which differentiated oral forms by their style of delivery – sung, narrated, recited...). The very presence of so many different possibilities of classification makes us understand the vastity and fluidity of the oral tradition, but at the same time it offers a touchstone according to which we can identify and define a piece of oral production.

In the same book, the authors present a key element of the oral tradition: the audience. It is presented in this chapter as part of the rhetorical features due to its relevance for the performing act as the audience plays an interactive role in the majority of cases; indeed, an audience – of different kinds – is one of the basic requirements for oral performance, "audience members 'take part' in the performance" (Zumthor 1990:183). Oral poetry performed at weddings, funerals or political gatherings always entails the presence of a public, which does not limit itself to listening, but it actively participates in the performance creating a balance of action between poet and audience: neither of them prevaricates on the other. Zumthor highlights an interesting fact regarding the role and experience of the audience. The public 'receives' poetry; its reception "is a unique, fleeting, irreversible act, and an individual one, for it is doubtful that the same performance is experienced in an identical manner [...] by any two audience members" (*ibid.*). What Zumthor is stressing is the subjectivity of the oral poetry experience; therefore, being it so personalised, it signals how audience members are actively participating in the performance. Zumthor provides a further proof of this observing that "the gestures and the voice of the interpreter incite a response in the spectator, a response in voice and gesture, one that is mimetic" (*ibid.*). In oral poetry performance, the audience sympathises with the poet, answering to the poet's provoking sentences, cheering or supporting what is being said. Such a behaviour can be detected, for instance, in videos of some of Mzwakhe Mbuli's performances, where the messages he is announcing are felt as important by the audience members.

As far as rhetoric and form are concerned, Zumthor (1990:106-7) declares that oral poetry and written poetry use an identical language, made of the same grammatical structures, the same syntactic rules, the same base vocabulary. The main difference between oral and written poetry is represented by the strategies of expression. Syntactic structures, Zumthor adds, are frequently paratactical in orality, with juxtaposed elements and no subordinates; this is rendered linguistically by cutting the discourse in short affirmations or exclamations, and by privileging nominal elements rather than verb phrases. Zumthor (*ibid.* p. 128) justifies the disruption of discourse saying that it accommodates a "desire to get outside language" that is typical of all oral poetry. Therefore, discourse in oral poetry presents "absurd phrases, repetitions accumulated to the point that meaning is exhausted, non-lexical phonic sequences, pure vocalisms" (*ibid.*).

Moving on to rhetorical figures, Sunkuli and Miruka present the device of imagery, which is the most used linguistic technique in all African literary and oral traditions. They state that "many people are in the habit of seeing images only in terms of metaphors and similes. The scope of the image is, however, much wider and much more inclusive" (1990:111). In fact, African poets and authors make a vast use of sensory imagery, which Sunkuli and Miruka come to classify in four types: tactile, olfactory, auditory (often related to ideophones and onomatopoeia), and visual, each – obviously – linked to its relative sense, and drawn from the physical and cultural environment of those who use them. Further aspects of imagery include apostrophe, personification (often used to give Mother Africa human and maternal qualities) and symbolism. Another rhetorical device presented by Sunkuli and Miruka is the use of narrative formulae, or the repetitive use of the same expressions to introduce or conclude a narrative; with the opening narrative formulae, the narrator "seeks the audience's permission to go ahead" (*ibid.* p. 113), asks for silence or salutes his audience. This happens in narratives, but it can also be present in oral poems and epics in which the poet interacts with the audience.

2.2.2 Themes

A theme that is widely explored in African literature and orality is that of heroism. Heroes are the protagonists of the action, they can be human or not, and possess the most important values of African traditional societies: physical strength, extraordinary skills and intellect, morality, sense of justice and freedom, and human virtues such as hospitality, love, generosity and sacrifice. An example of such a hero is the Zulu warrior Shaka, of whom we have already discussed. Tales of heroes are usually told in the *epic* form (like the *Epic of Shaka*). "The epic poem stages virile aggressivity for the sake of some grand venture" (Zumthor 1990:81). It is a long narrative, either in prose or poetry, which recounts the life and deeds of a hero. It has an episodic structure and provides knowledge about the history, genealogy, traditions and culture of the community which the hero belongs to (Sunkuli, Miruka 1990:107-8).

A second topic that is often central to African narratives is that of myths and legends, which are two similar concepts but present significant differences (Sunkuli, Miruka 1990). On the one hand, myths are set in more ancient times as compared to legends. In fact, they seek to explain the origins of the world, of natural phenomena and of socio-cultural traits. They involve deities and represent "Man's search for First Causes." With respect to this, Oboe (1994:21) states that "everything in myth happens naturally and innocently and possesses the clarity of a statement of fact". Legends, on the other hand, are set in more recent times and in more familiar backgrounds. Their subjects are wars, migrations, and natural disasters, and present the effects of such events rather than the origins. While gods are the central characters in myths, heroes and heroines are the protagonists of legends. Despite these differences, both myths and legends share the element of fantasy.

Moving on to another important theme in African narratives, scholars such as Sunkuli, Miruka, and Oboe have identified the motif of the setting. It can be understood as setting in time

and place. The former is usually the most explicit, while the latter, though being more implicit, is generally the easiest to establish (Sunkuli, Miruka 1990:119). As far as setting in time is concerned, stories are usually set '*a long, long time ago*', with the effect of distancing the audience of the present from the events of that past, while expressing an everlasting message, defying the barriers of time. The setting in place concerns places known to the audience, given the "alleged 'symbiosis' existing between a certain piece of earth and 'its' community" (Oboe 1994:139). Indeed, Oboe explains, the identity of certain communities is built on the attachment to the land they live in, hence the recurrence to familiar places as setting for stories: it grants a sense of identification and recognition in the audience. The landscape is also given certain qualities so as to symbolise traditional values or specific social and political situations; in doing so, the audience can furtherly identify, 'taking sides' in the story. Moreover, the spatial setting is often identified with feminine or motherly qualities, such as "fertility, fruitfulness and warmth of the maternal womb" (*ibid.* p. 148), thus reconnecting with a wider tradition of seeing land and the Earth as a mother.

Beside the temporal and spatial settings, Sunkuli and Miruka identify a third type of setting: social setting. It refers to the occasion on which the narrative is based and it is typical of song, a genre that has various different uses according to the changing context (a circumcision ceremony, a wedding, a funeral...). By adapting the words and contents of a narrative or song to a specific occasion, the social setting becomes the actual subject of the performance (Sunkuli, Miruka 1990).

2.2.3 Ethnical traditions

All African communities possess their traditional baggage of oral literature which has shaped their social customs and might still be influencing the literary and oral works of contemporary poets and authors. Following, a selection of significant examples of such traditions is reported. It provides evidence of the widespread oral tradition which has been modelling African

societies. Among others, Beier (1979) edited a collection of essays regarding different traditions belonging to various African communities; in each essay, the most relevant details concerning their spoken narrative and poetry are reported, and the current section will summarise the most noteworthy traits, considering the influence they are likely to have had on contemporary oral poetry.

Yoruba poetry

A traditional type of oral poetry among the Nigerian community of the Yoruba is the so-called *ijálá*. It is "speech-like song [...] chanted by talented men and women at the religious gatherings of the devotees of Ògún, the Yoruba god of war and of iron implements" (Babalola A, in Beier, 1979:12). The poet connects with the audience by expressing his or her deep feelings with a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions. As far as metre and structure are concerned, *ijálá* does not rhyme or have a regular metre, therefore, in the English translations, scholars have chosen to employ blank verse. From the point of view of the oral delivery, *ijálá* poets use a specific voice tone, different from that of other forms of Yoruba songs (like funeral laments, praise songs or incantations).

Akan Poetry

The Akan community, from Ghana, presents a wide range of oral traditions, both poetic and narrative. Oral poetry is usually recited at ceremonies, by minstrels who are also the masters of the ceremonies. These poems are dedicated to chiefs, which reminds us of South African praise poetry, and are delivered in dramatic and highly expressive ways, varying the pace from slower to faster according to the effect required. The structure of such compositions is usually a juxtaposition or cumulation of utterances, or sometimes it appears in dialogic form. In the case of Akan funeral poetry, a peculiarity is given by the fact that sobs, cries, pauses and body movements

convey the irregularity of the rhythm (Zumthor 1990:138). As for the central themes of Akan poetry, they are derived from social experience; the use of animal and vegetal metaphors is bound to provide the audience with identifiable similes and comparisons, taken from their daily experiences.

Hausa poetry

The oral tradition of the Hausa community stems from an extremely interesting detail: "among the Hausa each individual has what is known as a drum rhythm. It identifies him [...]. This is at the base of the oral tradition" (Scharfe, Aliyu, in Beier, 1979:34). What we can understand from these lines is that orality is a crucial part of the individual's identity, as each person possesses a personal and unique drum rhythm. Moreover, other fields of every-day life are identified by different oral compositions; for instance, each social class has its own song to use as identification. Formal aspects of Hausa poetry are its chant-like structure, its regular rhyming, and its wordplays such as punning and alliteration. Hausa poems often use both satire and praise, and, depending on the audience, are accompanied by musical instruments.

Xhosa poetry

The traditions of the South African community of the Xhosa present similar traits to those of the Zulu; Xhosa poetry follows the tradition of the *izibongo*, of praise poetry and oral eulogy. Janet Hodgson (In White, Couzens, 1984:24) reports a particular example of the poetry tradition of the Xhosa: Ntsikana's hymn. After his conversion to Christianity, Ntsikana¹⁵ started to compose hymns that would combine the Xhosa oral tradition to Biblical words and themes. These hymns

15 Born around 1790, son of a member of the Cirha clan (set in present-day Ciskei). 'Following his father's death, he became a councillor and won renown as an orator, singer and dancer at local celebrations.' (Hodgson, in White, Couzens, 1984:24)

made use of series of praise-names depicting God as Creator and Preserver and describing His nature and attributes. Imagery and metaphor were also extensively used in the composition of hymns, together with a wide range of synonyms belonging to the same semantic field. To this regard, the devices of repetition and parallelism – taken from the *izibongo* tradition – were found not only in words, but also in meanings, and their aim was that of repeating the same concepts over and over again in infinite variations.

2.3 Poetry and music

The third section of chapter two will take into account particular cases of the (South) African oral traditions in which poetry is accompanied by music – as is often the case with Mzwakhe Mbuli's own performances. In order to understand better the analysis of Mzwakhe Mbuli's poems and performances in the following chapters, it appeared useful to provide a general overlook on the relationship between poetry, music and staging, and on the importance of voice and sound as elements which provide musicality to the performance.

2.3.1 Music within voice

Despite the fact that his book concerns poetry and music in a more generalised scope, considering different traditions around the world, Stefano La Via (2006) has given interesting statements about the relationship between voice and music, which can be applied to the African context as well. He claims that any type of vocal expression has in itself a flux of sound, contained in the flow of time. In other words, the *voice* is itself a musical expression made of rhythm, tone, pace and meaning. Therefore, we might say that speech does not particularly divert from singing, as they are both articulated in the parameters of time (speed, pace) and sound (high or low pitch). Having stated this similarity between spoken voice and singing, we might also assert that, with or without musical accompaniment, oral poetry can be considered a form of musical performance, especially in the African tradition, in which speech is characterised by different tones, and rhythm

is given by the pace of delivery. Zumthor, in addition, suggests the importance of considering voice as energy contained in each syllable, which follows the breath, beating to the rhythm of the heart, and thus conveying the rhythm of the performance (1990:5-6). He adds that "African civilizations consider rhythmic and chanted speech to be the power of life and death" (*ibid.* p. 210). In other words, orality is the very origin for literary invention; its instrument – voice – possesses intrinsic sound and rhythm. In African oral traditions, voice itself is power *and* music.

2.3.2 Sung poetry

Songs, in the African landscape of traditions – as well as in different cultures elsewhere – are often performed in rituals, and therefore carry a social significance. Indeed, Martin Clayton (2007:7) highlights the importance acquired by songs in rituals which "mark points of transition such as those between seasons or an individual's move from child to adult, unmarried to married, or living to dead." As an example, he provides the case of *lamenting*, traditionally performed at weddings and funerals. It combines spontaneous emotions (crying) and stylised poetry which conveys a wider social and ritual meaning. Performances during rituals can also be accompanied by traditional musical instruments, as in the case of the Ghanaian Akan community, where heroic poetry is led by horns, pipes and drums, whose rhythms follow a verbal basis (Nketia, in Beier 1979:29). Work songs are another example of African sung poetry. As Zumthor exemplifies, in many African communities "every manual task normally has some kind of song to go along with" (1990:66), with the effect of making the work feel "nothing more than the auxiliary of the song" (*ibid.*). A more private example of sung poetry is the one represented by lullabies, manifestations of a child-oriented orality: Zumthor brings forth the case of Zulu circles "in which every child has his own lullaby, composed for him and which remains his for life, like a name or an epitaph" (1990:69).

2.3.3 South African examples

Examples of combinations of poetry and song – or music – in Africa are to be found among many different ethnical communities, and specific examples brought forth by Zumthor regard the *intsomi* tradition of the Xhosa (1990:144), a genre of story built on a song, where part of the story is sung and the rest is spoken, and the traditions of Yoruba and Akan communities, which accompany oral poetry with percussions and drums (*ibid.* p. 134). In addition, Zumthor states that the most common form of representation of oral poetry consists in performances where “an orchestra or a band accompanies the speaker or singer” (*ibid.* p. 179), which is precisely what happens on stage with Mzwakhe Mbuli’s performances.

Focusing our scope on South African examples, in the second half of the twentieth century there have been experimental groups who intended to make South African musical and poetical traditions known inside and outside their country. The most famous examples are the Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble and the Amandla Cultural Ensemble. The former was a London-based group, born in 1975, made of ANC members, that “achieved considerable success in Europe with its agitprop performances incorporating narrative, poetry and song” (Gilbert, in Olwage 2008:156). The latter was a similar group, which started a few years later and was based in the MK training camps in Angola. The two groups were similar under many points of view: they both united the African performative traditions of orality and music with modern experimental compositions, and their aim was that of raising awareness of the dreadful circumstances that apartheid had been creating in South Africa. However, Mayibuye and Amandla presented significant differences; Mayibuye’s performances mainly dealt with dramatical readings of poetry, interspersed with various traditional and political songs; “unlike Mayibuye, [Amandla] offered large-scale, increasingly professionalised performances incorporating choral singing, jazz, theatre and dance” (*ibid.*). While Mayibuye’s repertoire was mostly centred on tradition, Amandla proposed newly-composed music

pieces, which were faster, more upbeat, and presented a militaristic rhythm. They drew on jazz influences, since this music genre reproduced many performance principles of African traditional music (Coplan 1985:146).

Another genre that combined music and traditional oral poetry, a genre which emerged in the years of the anti-apartheid movements, was that of *freedom songs*, an informal and un-professional genre performed at funerals, during marches, mass gatherings or assemblies, which was also broadcast on television in the eighties, as a way of testifying the struggle for change in South Africa. As Gunner (in Vivan, 1996) states, freedom songs composers inserted the strength of an ancient performative tradition into a modern political movement. Both the Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble and the Amandla Cultural ensemble drew extensively on the body of freedom songs, and – though his performances are centred on spoken poetry rather than sung poetry – Mzwakhe Mbuli himself might be seen as a representative of such genre, given the tangible influence that freedom songs have had on him.

CHAPTER THREE

Mzwakhe Mbuli, The People's Poet.

"The biggest human quality is to become unstoppable, I am unstoppable." (Mbuli, 2003¹⁶)

This chapter will mainly focus on the biography of oral poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, a figure that in the past three decades has been central to the musical, poetic and cultural development of South Africa. As this chapter will explain, his life has been entangled with the tragic circumstances of the apartheid regime, from the day-to-day discrimination to official bannings and imprisonment.

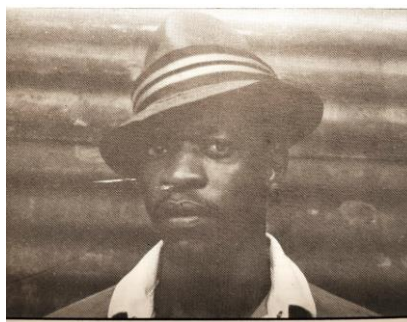


Figure 3: Mzwakhe Mbuli in 1989. Picture featuring in the back cover of *Before Dawn* (1989)

Nevertheless, the power of his message, the influence he managed to have on crowds, and his resilience led him to become what is known as 'the people's poet'. The first part of this chapter will therefore summarise Mzwakhe Mbuli's life, highlighting how historical turning points marked it and what significant facts occurred. Biographical information will be drawn from three types of sources: first, Duncan Brown's *Voicing the Text* (1998), particularly from a chapter dedicated to the analysis of the figure of Mzwakhe; second, from online articles belonging to certified websites on South African history and culture; third, as far as the most recent events are concerned, from videos of performances or interviews with Mzwakhe. The second part of the chapter will, instead, investigate the poetic, musical, artistic and cultural traditions or movements that might have had relevant influence on Mzwakhe's career. Particular attention will be thus paid to the Soweto poetry tradition and to musical influences from South African culture and elsewhere, such as dub poetry.

16 Reported by Nicholas Frid, in an article on *SAHO* (*South African History Online*) in 2012

3.1 'The People's Poet'

Mzwakhe Israel Mbuli was born on 1st August 1959, in a Zulu family living in the township of Sophiatown, in the suburbs of Johannesburg. Four years before, in 1955, black families had started to be forcedly moved from Sophiatown to Soweto due to apartheid policies; the final aim was that of demolishing the township of Sophiatown in order to rebuild a settlement for whites only, which would be later called Triomf. Mzwakhe was thus born in the middle of a harrowing time for black families, who would see their ordinary life disrupted overnight. This situation of forced removals continued until 1966, when the township was bulldozed and removed from maps. The experience lived by the families of Sophiatown, including Mzwakhe's, was unimaginably critical. Lucky Sindane collected testimonies of the removals and gathered them in a commemorative article written in 2005, fifty years after the beginning of the end for Sophiatown. Some former residents recalled the pain of those moments, and remembered the trauma of losing the house they were born in without any explanation or warning. Worst of all, many families were forcibly separated as a consequence of the racial classification and separation of group areas enacted by the government: former resident Paul Mashinini stated that 'some [family] members would be classified as coloured, others as black. Therefore, they would be forced to live in separate townships' (Sindane, 2005). Though luckily Mzwakhe's family was allowed to stick together, it is easily understandable how the poet's early childhood must have been marked by the oppression of the apartheid policies.

3.1.1 Mzwakhe's first approaches to artistic performance

Mzwakhe's mother belonged to the Xhosa tribe, while his father was a Zulu; Mzwakhe's first language is Zulu, as is the cultural background in which he has been living. As a matter of fact, his father – Elijah Katali – was a traditional *mbube* (harmonic) singer who performed periodically at hostel gatherings or *mbube* sessions conducted by workers. At weekends, Mzwakhe would follow

his father to such events, which represented for him the first source of contact with poetry and music, as he also experienced oral poetry performed for visiting chiefs and traditional dancing. Mzwakhe sadly lost his father at sixteen, in 1975, but carried forward his interest in traditional singing and dancing by taking part in many projects involving different kinds of performances.

'During the 1970s, while still at school, he was involved in musical and dramatic groups which, under the aegis of black consciousness, sought to advance black creativity' (Brown 1998:214). Moreover, Brown adds, Mzwakhe was politically active from an early age: with one of the first groups he joined – the New World Quartet – he performed at gatherings of the Soweto Students' Representative Council during the turbulent years following the upheavals of 1976. Indeed, the Soweto uprising, says Nicholas Frid (2012), was a very formative experience for the young Mbuli. His own school adhered to the protest, and he was thus encouraged to start writing poetry. 'Mbuli refers to this event as "God's miracle" because of how crucial it was for forming his opinions and beginning his career' (Frid 2012).

In a 2016 interview for MTC Namibia, Mzwakhe recalled the first-hand experience he had of the Soweto uprising; he remembered the impotence and helplessness of his fellow students in their school uniform who were being shot by the police without reason. In fact, they were not carrying stones or weapons. "I feel pain when people underestimate what we've gone through. It's not a surprise why young people started to join MK; because there was the desire of revenge, to fight back, because it was not acceptable" (Mbuli 2016).

In the late seventies, Mzwakhe started to increasingly take part in theatrical productions, and in 1979 he formed a group called 'Khuvhangano' (meaning 'unity') with which he performed several times in public. However, after two members left and went into exile, Mzwakhe turned to individual poetry. He started composing pieces that he would recite at public gatherings; some of his most well-known early poems were *Sies* and *Ignorant*, which he was asked to perform at the

funeral of Father Castro Mayathula in Soweto in 1981, 'and which were to propel him to the public sphere' (Brown 1998:241). Frid quotes Mbuli's memory on this first major public performance, which the poet defined as 'the beginning of Mzwakhe' and therefore signals the starting point of his career as an oral poet.

3.1.2 The eighties: the rise to success and the dangers of apartheid

The eighties represent the vibrant and fiery decade that has both launched Mzwakhe at the top of the protest poetry scenario and taken him down through bannings, charges and eventually detention. His commitment to politics and resistance against apartheid became increasingly more consistent, and in 1983 he was asked to perform at the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF), with which he collaborated the following years: in 1985 he was elected Transvaal media officer, and the following year he helped to establish the Cultural Desk, of which he became head.

The mid-eighties are the years of the first States of Emergency, which saw thousands of people detained without trial and hundreds of books and objects banned for political reasons. Among the victims of these discriminatory manoeuvres was Mzwakhe Mbuli. In 1986 he had obtained a contract with the record label Shifty, and recorded his first album, *Change Is Pain*, which was banned the same year¹⁷, due to its foreseeable impact on resistance groups. Indeed, the reason for banning given by the Directorate of Publications was that "[the album's] stirring music and dramatic presentation [would] have [had] great influence among revolutionary groups in the RSA and at mass-meetings as well" (Brown 1998:244). Nicholas Frid reports a piece of an interview

17 Anderson (2003) recalls being curious to know more about the oral poets that performed for black crowds. However, being white, apartheid policies forbade him to access township stadiums. He states: 'I had bought a copy of a clandestinely circulating audio-cassette of the most popular of the oral poets, Mzwakhe Mbuli, and listened to it with great care.'

with Mzwakhe dating back to 1988, in which he was asked how he felt after the banning of his first album. This is what the poet replied:

"That was an experiment. This is a sick society. How foolish is the government to decide to ban an experiment before the actual product. I am going ahead with my next album which will be titled 'Likely To Be Banned'. The banning of 'Change is Pain' has served to motivate and inspire me. They haven't banned my mind yet. I can still produce plays, poetry, dance and music.

I am joining the masses black and white, as well as the international community, in calling for the unbanning of the outlawed organisations. If that happens maybe my tape and other people's works could be unbanned." (Mbuli 1988. Quoted in Frid, 2012)

That same year, Mzwakhe himself was detained and spent a period in solitary confinement, a time in which he composed and memorised a series of poems, which he recorded and published as soon as he was released in 1989. The album was entitled *Unbroken Spirit*, it was qualified for gold status without the benefit of radio exposure (Harris) and it contained the pain, the angst and the willingness to resist the regime felt by the poet at that time. Mzwakhe's struggle for resistance and liberation from apartheid characterised all the decade, until the first free elections of 1994, both inside and outside prison. His performances at political gatherings were constantly menaced of being silenced by government authorities, forcing him to live and perform on the run from the security police (Brown 1998).

Despite these threats, Mzwakhe demonstrated to be a real advocate for people's rights: before his detention, he had performed at the ceremony for the assignation of the Nobel Peace Prize to Desmond Tutu (1987) in a church in Braamfontein, and his performance was said to be so powerful that while Mzwakhe's voice 'swelled to a thick resonance to fill the vault of the church,' at the same time he 'seemed to grow in stature' (Anon. in Brown, 1998:214). Immediately after his release, in 1989, he welcomed with his performances the prisoners that were being released from Robben Island. Also in '89, Mzwakhe published his only book, *Before Dawn*, which is a collection of most of his poems from his first two albums, *Change Is Pain* and *Unbroken Spirit*. The

book, luckily, did not undergo any bannings. However, as Frid (2012) reports, his legal troubles continued, as in the same year Mzwakhe was arrested with his wife for possession of two hand-grenades. Fortunately, they were acquitted two years later for lack of sufficient evidence. 'In the 1980s alone, Mbuli was arrested 8 times and refused a passport 39 times' (Frid 2012), not to mention the many attempts at his life by the security police. This should make us realise the extent of the threat that his poetry made against the apartheid regime.

3.1.3 The nineties, the 'Mandela turning point' and the '98 trial

The last decade of the twentieth century began with one of the best-known events in the history of not only South Africa, but also of the broader struggle for human rights: Mandela's release from prison, in February 1990. After twenty-seven years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela was welcomed back to his home country with triumphant joy from the people of South Africa. Mandela knew and appreciated Mzwakhe's work; indeed, the year before, he had sent the poet a letter from Victor Verster Prison, expressing all his admiration and support. The letter read, 'I would like you to know that you are loved and respected far beyond the borders of your home town' (figure 4). The fact that Nelson Mandela himself explicitly supported Mzwakhe's activity is a telling example on how striking and affecting his poems were for the oppressed black South Africans.

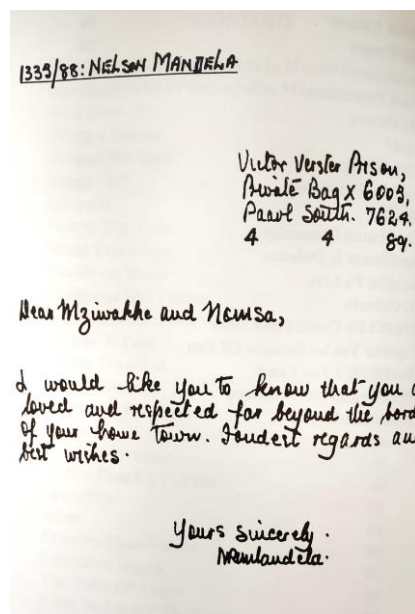


Figure 4: copy of Mandela's letter, printed in *Before Dawn* (Mbuli, 1989)

As explained in the historical overview in chapter one, Mandela's release meant hope for the future and for a new, democratic South Africa. Therefore, beside the spontaneous cheering of the crowds, mass rallies were organised with speeches by ANC authorities and, especially, by

Mandela. The most famous case is the gathering in Umtata, Mandela's birthplace, where he arrived on 21st April¹⁸. During the period of his stay in the region of Umtata (Transkei), Mandela gave numerous speeches, which were often accompanied by traditional performances and oral poetry. Indeed, Kashula (1995:94) argues that Mandela's release went along with a rebirth of orality and of published poetry, due to the partial restoration of the freedom of speech in the country. Kashula, moreover, provides evidence for this, quoting the verses of a poem recited in Umtata for Mandela's speech by two *izimbongi*. These verses, he states, were inspired by Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetry, as they took some of Mbuli's own verses¹⁹. Despite the reciprocal admiration, Mzwakhe did not perform for Mandela until the first free elections and Mandela's victory in 1994. Nevertheless, as stated above, Mzwakhe's poetry had become so widespread that the traditional *izimbongi* who performed at the assemblies for Mandela's release did draw inspiration from 'the people's poet'.

In the spring of 1990, Mzwakhe had a disagreement with some ANC leaders regarding who should speak at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival edition of that year. Mbuli was head of the Transvaal Interim Cultural Desk²⁰, therefore he had a say in cultural and artistic matters; he criticised the decision for the intervention of the ANC leader Masekela at the festival, arguing that such event was 'too "controversial" [...] for an ANC official to speak' (Frid 2012). He suggested himself as a speaker, instead, but found the opposition of other ANC members who supported

18 Russell Kashula describes the arrival of Mandela to his hometown as a moment of great excitement: '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 [...]. Approximately 3000 people gathered at the Umtata airport in order to welcome Mandela home.' (1995:93-4)

19 The verse 'behind the bars', inserted in the praise poem recited in Umtata, is actually the title and recurrent verse of one of Mzwakhe's own poems.

20 An initiative he had helped to create as a branch of the UDF (United Democratic Front), in order to deal with cultural boycott.

Masekela's intervention. This quarrel affected Mzwakhe's reputation in the artistic community of South Africa and in the ANC, who saw his desire to speak instead of Masekela as a power grab. Nonetheless, Brown reports an anecdote that reveals how Mzwakhe continued to be cherished and praised by admirers:

'On 1st April 1990, Mzwakhe Mbuli drove to the KwaThema Stadium to perform his poems at a rally marking the third anniversary of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO). On arrival, he was mobbed by fans who, in their enthusiasm, removed his trousers and shoes, leaving him in his shirt and underwear.' (1998:213)

In the same year, Mzwakhe began his international career²¹, performing in Berlin with Youssou N'dour, Miriam Makeba, and Thomas Mapfumo. He also wrote and narrated a history of apartheid in South Africa which was broadcast on BBC radio the year after. Mzwakhe's fame and success, however, exposed the poet to further threats, and in 1991 he survived an assassination attempt when a grenade was thrown into his house (Frid 2012). The year 1992 saw the publishing of another popular album by Mzwakhe, *Resistance is Defence*²² and in 1993 the album *Afrika* was released. From the latter, the song 'Peace In Our Land' was taken and used as a national anthem to celebrate the second anniversary of the National Peace Accord on 2nd September 1993 (Frid 2012).

The year 1994 is considered by many as a turning point in the history of South Africa, marking the official move towards democracy. 'By 1994, Mbuli had risen to the upper echelon of South African music and was invited to speak at Nelson Mandela's inauguration' (Harris); he

21 Though his fame remains still nowadays mostly in Southern Africa.

22 The songs contained in this album are mostly recited in South African languages (namely Zulu, Xhosa and Venda), with intervals in English. The poem *Resistance is Defence*, which gives the title to the album, appears there with its Zulu title 'Ndimbeleni', and is slightly different from its printed version in *Before Dawn* (1989a).

delivered a speech on May 19th, introducing the new freely-elected president. In fact, as McNeil (1998) said in an article for the New York Times, Mzwakhe 'was the chief praise-singer at Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration, where the President hugged and praised him back.' Frid (2012) reports Mzwakhe's memory on that day, quoting an interview on Shaya FM dating back to 2003, in which he stated as follows:

'It took so many of us to reach where we are. People died having called the name of "Mandela," chanting the name of "Mandela", having not seen him, how he looked like, and people died for him. And 1994 was, yes, a turning point, yes for all of us that at last heard his words "never, never again should you go through what we have gone through," it was really so uplifting.' (Mbuli, 2003)

The same year, Mzwakhe released the album *Izigi* (meaning 'footsteps'), whose title track is an ode to Mandela and his accomplishments; two years later, in 1996, the album *KwaZulu-Natal* followed, placing itself once more at the centre of dispute and banning attempts. The track which gave the title to the album, 'KwaZulu-Natal', appeared 'extremely successful and controversial' at the same time (Frid). As a matter of fact, it was a cry for peace addressed to the Zulu infighting that had been going on between ANC members and IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) supporters. While on one side 'KwaZulu-Natal' was described as Mzwakhe's best poetic song, on the other side Nomthandazo Mkhize (a provincial member of the IFP) tried to have the song and music video banned.

With Mandela as president and the end of the apartheid regime, life in South Africa was starting to know justice and equality. Therefore, Mzwakhe's focus in his poems shifted from the oppression and discrimination of apartheid to other social problems, such as corruption in politics, lack of unity among South African people, violence and other forms of injustice. Unsurprisingly, he encountered once again the opposition of the addressees of his social denunciations, with the

consequence of more attempts to his life and a sentence for an alleged crime²³. In 1996 Mzwakhe survived after nine shots were fired into his car, and in 1997 he was arrested on charges of bank robbery in Pretoria. Frid defines this event as Mbuli's 'most famous brush with the law', as it had a consistent impact on his public image. It might be considered as a further attempt at silencing him, and not as an arrest moved by concrete proof, since by 1998 contrary evidence had begun to amount thanks to the independent investigation of a watchdog. Frid explains the probable reason underlying Mzwakhe's arrest stating that the poet had been discovered to be aware of a drug trade between people in Swaziland and some South African government officials. Mzwakhe (1998) stated: 'they wanted me out of the way because I was speaking out against drugs. That's something I will never do again - look what happens when I do.'

During the trial, Frid adds, Mzwakhe was denied bail five times; he was first held in Pretoria Central Prison and eventually moved to Pretoria Maximum Security Prison, where he spent fifteen months. During this period, the International Committee on Writers in Prison requested to the South African government a fair trial for Mzwakhe Mbuli; nevertheless, in March 1999, Mzwakhe was not only charged with bank robbery, but also with possession of a hand grenade. He was sentenced to thirteen years of forced labour in Leeuwkop Maximum Security Prison. Donald McNeil (1998) wrote that Mzwakhe was 'upset to find himself sharing prison corridors with the country's worst criminals,' especially with the killer of Chris Hani, a renowned member of the ANC, at whose funeral Mzwakhe had performed.

The imprisonment of Mzwakhe provoked a flood of dissent from public opinion and critics. Indeed, many suggested the possibility that the poet had been framed, and started to question the unusual proceedings of the case, which included the suicide of one of the policemen who arrested

23 A deeper investigation would have later proved that he was innocent, but despite this he did not manage to escape imprisonment.

Mzwakhe right before the beginning of the trial. Moreover, journalists pointed out the faulty identity parade used to identify Mzwakhe and the bank's failure to record the robbery on their surveillance system (Frid 2012). Newspaper articles were published, denouncing the violent treatment suffered by Mzwakhe from police officers and bringing to light Mzwakhe's reasons for being in Pretoria the day he was arrested (Amupadhi 1999)²⁴. Even after six months in prison, McNeil (1998) observes, Mzwakhe had a solid optimistic view; the poet declared: 'they will intimidate those that are weak, but to me this is ice cream. I will go out the same door I came in.'

During his time in prison, Mzwakhe managed to release his 'Greatest Hits' album, entitled *Mzwakhe Mbuli Greatest Hits: Born Free But Always In Chains* (1999). Moreover, in 2002, the Supreme Court of Appeal in Bloemfontein reduced Mzwakhe's sentence to ten years instead of thirteen, after overturning the charge of possession of a hand-grenade (Frid). The same year, Mandela called in on Mzwakhe in prison for the first time, after having more than once rejected the opportunity of doing so. Mandela's visit was followed by similar visits by other ANC members, and the following year, 2003, Mzwakhe was finally released on good behaviour. He spent a total time of six years and one month in Leeuwkop Maximum Security Prison.

3.1.4 Mzwakhe's career after prison (2003–2010)

Right after the end of his prison sentence, Mzwakhe released the album *Mbulism* (2004). The following year, Mzwakhe went back to his traditional role of oral poet and performer at public gatherings; as a matter of fact, he helped to organise a concert for tsunami victims as well as a celebration for Nelson and Winnie Mandela's birthdays (Frid). Mzwakhe also became mouthpiece for the ongoing battle against musical piracy, and in 2007 he headed the organization 'Operation Dudula'; it consisted in a group that worked with the South African Musicians Alliance in order to

²⁴ See Appendix A for the complete article.

'achieve more airplay for local artists on South African radio' (Frid). This operation is said to have helped the music industry save a consistent sum of money and resulted in arrests due to raids and seizures of pirated material. In the same period, Mzwakhe was rewarded with the gold disc from the record label EMI/CCP for his album *Thunder*, and the Heritage Award from the Kwazulu-Natal Arts, Culture and Tourism Department for his single 'God the Best'.

Despite a further arrest in 2008 for pointing a firearm and assaulting, kidnapping and intimidating five people while demanding to know who had killed his uncle (Dlamini 2012)²⁵, Mzwakhe has continued to involve himself in the artistic and cultural life of South Africa. For instance, in 2010 he launched the first annual Siyabakhumbula Awards, which commemorates deceased South African people who have left a positive legacy in the country (Frid). A heartfelt quotation by Mzwakhe is reported by Frid in his biographical article, and it reads: 'we dare not forget, lest we become a nation that not only knows its roots but where it's going' (Mbuli 2010).

3.1.5 Contemporary Mzwakhe (2010–present)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mzwakhe's lyric content changed with the transition from apartheid to democracy, and the poet explored different musical genres and fields, such as gospel²⁶. More recent work has dealt with critical topics concerning contemporary society, namely abortion, HIV/AIDS, and drunken driving. Mzwakhe justifies this shift saying that he moved from being the voice for the UDF to operating as more of a social critic (Frid).

In the 2010s Mzwakhe has kept his campaign against piracy alive by launching in 2011 the initiative 'Shoot the Pirate', aimed on the one hand at preventing pirates from selling fake CDs and DVDs, and on the other hand at stopping police from encouraging the distribution of pirated

25 See Appendix B for a detailed article on the case.

26 With the album *Umzwakhe Ubonga Ujehova* (1998).

copies. In January of the following year, the radio station Metro FM joined the campaign after hosting Mzwakhe in a show. 2012 was another year of musical production and political commitment; indeed, in February the album *Amandla* was released (subtitled *Struggle Songs... Songs of Freedom*), which contained a series of Mzwakhe's successes dealing with resistance to oppression and praise of freedom. In March 2012, Mzwakhe spoke and sang at a gathering in Gauteng during a massive civil protest (Frid), reconfirming his traditional figure of 'people's poet' and orator, committed to social justice.

2013 is sadly remembered as the year of Mandela's death. Mzwakhe Mbuli intensely asserted his presence in public tributes and memorials in honour of the deceased president. He performed, together with young singer Zahara, an original song dedicated to Mandela at a memorial in Port Elizabeth on 13th December²⁷, and gave a speech at Mandela's funeral at Waterkloof the day after. Here, declaring 'We salute the first black president of a democratic South Africa!', Mzwakhe praised the achievements of not only Mandela, but also of his fellow ANC members, namely Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani, Jacob Zuma, among many others, calling them 'the veterans, the heroes [...], from Rivonia to Robben Island Prison.' He then dedicated a poem to them, *Stalwarts*, from *Resistance is Defence* (1992), to 'the leadership that stood the test of time, like the baobab tree' (Mbuli 2013), in front of a crowd waving South African flags and listening, raptured, to Mzwakhe's words.

In March 2015, the people's poet gave a heartfelt speech at Alexandra Stadium, north of Johannesburg, at the funeral of South African rap star Nkuli 'Flabba' Hamedi. Moving continuously

27 The same song had been broadcast on television a few days earlier, on SABC Digital News. It became an incredible success, not only in South Africa, but more broadly on the southern continent, as it was aired continuously on every radio station for three days, while the country was mourning Mandela.

from English to Zulu, rising and lowering the tone of his voice to create intensity variations, breaking the discourse into affecting pauses, Mzwakhe reached the heart of hundreds of mourners gathered to pay respect to the late rap artist. In his speech, Mzwakhe remembered other musicians that had been killed, and addressed issues that have been central to his interest, such as the battle against piracy and the need for his country to cherish and celebrate South African artists more than foreign artists. His words wanted to ignite the hearts of the audience with feelings of respect not only towards the deceased musician, but also towards the whole South African music industry, by exhorting his listeners to invest in national rather than foreign music. I hereby quote fragments of his speech, transcribed from a video uploaded by SABC Digital News:

"If me and you love Flabba, we'll buy his music, so that his music will live forever, and not pirate his music, if we love him. We can give a better life with our lives than with our lips.

[...]

When Whitney Houston or Michael Jackson died, the television in this country paid tributes to these foreigners, but when our fellow South Africans pass on, only sometimes they mention it.

[...]

Long live the spirit of Flabba, long live! Long live the spirit of Flabba, long live! The pages of the music industry of this country will never be complete unless you mention the name of Flabba."
(Mbuli 2015)

In December of the same year, Mzwakhe was interviewed in a talk show on SABC News, 'Question Time', after he had accused the South African Broadcasting Corporation of perpetuating tribalism and bantustanism. His accusations derived from an issue he had already pointed out, which is the little attention that his country had been paying to South African artists compared to western artists. Mzwakhe observed that SABC radio stations only aired foreign music, and this lack of emergence of South African music on the national radio appeared to him as a perpetuation of the discrimination of the former apartheid regime, which, according to him, was not acceptable after twenty-one years of democracy (Mbuli 2015). "This is the only country that celebrates foreign music and does not actually patronise its own," claimed Mzwakhe during the interview, and

added that a further maddening example of tribalism was the way the media had ignored the death of a Venda artist earlier that year. As he had affirmed during Flabba's funeral, South African media seemed to give credit only to foreign music stars, whereas South African artists were left in the shadow. "It's as if the life of these black people didn't matter so much" (Mbuli 2015). Mzwakhe's accusations were supported and shared by many South Africans who felt the same way about the need to give more space to local music, and thanks to the poet's efforts to promote South African artists, in 2016 the SABC announced it would play 90% local music on all its radio platforms (Makhele 2016).

Mzwakhe Mbuli is a musician who advocates for black consciousness, says Tshepiso Makhele (2016), and has come to regard the idea of black identity – the question of what it means to be African – as primary for his poetic and social work. Makhele interviewed Mzwakhe in 2016 on this very matter, and published the poet's thoughts in an article for *The Citizen*. '[Mzwakhe] believes being an African involves more than just a coincidence of birth, [and that] instead of adopting cultures that are not their own, South Africans should appreciate the variety of cultures that the country possesses' (Makhele 2016). Moreover, Mzwakhe professed his opposition to what he calls 'Americanism'²⁸, saying that it can be avoided if South Africans invest more consistently on the music of their own country. Makhele quotes: 'Americanism can be further avoided if Africans understand that they are a nation that sings when in mourning, when happy and even when angry. There is no need to copy other cultures. Appreciate your own' (Mbuli 2016).

Also in 2016, Mzwakhe participated to other talk shows and TV interviews who sought to know his opinions on different contemporary issues. He was invited by CNBC Africa to speak about an anti-racism song he composed, entitled 'No Love, No Life', which was unveiled by the Arts and

28 The ever-growing trend in South Africa to copy American lifestyle and music traditions, which directly affects South Africa's cultural identity.

Culture minister Nathi Mthethwa. During the show, Mzwakhe shared his thoughts on the power of music to – if not solve problems – at least affect the way people think and act. In the same year, he was invited in Namibian inspirational talk show 'Masters of Success', in which he dialogued with the host in a thorough interview. Mzwakhe was asked to share his memories of the 1976 Soweto uprising, he was asked to tell how affecting the bannings, detention, torture and imprisonment had been, and what the principles behind his compositions are. Mzwakhe's answers denoted the purity of his conscience and the deep moral sense by which he has been moved. During the interview, moreover, he announced that he was working at a new anti-xenophobia song, which would involve many different South African artists, entitled 'Africa for Africans'. In another interview for SABC News, carried out a week after the release of the song, Mzwakhe stated that the cream of South African artists had fluently united to create such song, and that the support they were having was overwhelming.

One of the latest interventions by Mzwakhe Mbuli in the public scene took place in the spring of 2018, when he paid a tribute for the death of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela with a song he composed specifically for the occasion in only fourteen hours, with fellow composer and music producer Chicco Twala. In an interview for SABC News, Mzwakhe defined Winnie Mandela as 'allergic to cowardice and addicted to freedom.' He added: 'she was to us a goddess, a guru, a legend' (Mbuli 2018). The song was performed at the official memorial service held by the government in Orlando Stadium, in Soweto. The video of the performance, uploaded by SABC Digital News, shows the huge crowd of citizens gathered together to honour the 'Mother of the Nation' – as she was called – while proudly holding hands, cheering and listening to Mzwakhe's praise.

Despite further legal problems²⁹, Mzwakhe is an ever-present figure in the South African musical, artistic and social landscape, not only through his interventions in public tributes, but also through the lyrics of his songs, which address problems that his society faces day by day. At 'Masters of Success' he declared that he never runs out of material on topics to write about; this is because – he claims – he has a message to deliver, to young and old: a message about fearlessness and resilience (Mbuli 2016).

3.2 Oral, literary and musical influences on Mzwakhe Mbuli's career

3.2.1 Oral influences

Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetic career has without doubt been influenced by the ancient African oral traditions that have continued to characterise South African culture. As explained at the beginning of his biography, Mzwakhe came into contact with Zulu oral traditions very early in his life; as a child, Mzwakhe was exposed to traditional Zulu music and singing, namely the *mbube* singing tradition, introduced to him by his father. *Mbube* is a genre of *a capella* harmonic and polyphonic singing, in which singers (usually men) overlap melodies creating intricate compositions. The influence of this style of singing is retrievable in Mzwakhe's musical arrangements which serve as background for his poems.

Another source of influence for Mzwakhe's poems is the *izibongo*, or praise poetry, tradition. The influence that this genre has had on 'the people's poet' is visible under many points of view, not only on the poetic text itself, but also on the performative context. As a matter of fact, Mzwakhe's performances and poetic delivery present the characteristic traits of oral *izibongo* that have been exposed in the previous chapter, namely the rhythm of delivery, determined by the

²⁹ Mzwakhe sued Google for labelling him HIV positive.

'breath unit', the voice pitch changing according to the meaning conveyed, the type of imagery and metaphorical language used, and the circumstances in which his oral poems are recited.

Peter Horn (1996) has observed how the *izibongo* heritage manifests itself in Mzwakhe's oral poetry, for example, 'in the traditional similes and metaphors of a rural community in close contact with an untamed nature' (Horn 1996:119). Quoting the words of Hodza and Fortune (1979), Horn explains how, for thousands of years, praise poetry has been 'the medium of expression for the sentiments of homage, appreciation and thanks' (Hodza, Fortune 1979, in Horn 1996:122), which are the very purposes at the basis of Mzwakhe's own poetic career. As previously mentioned, his first public interventions were indeed performances as homage and appreciation of South African authorities who had passed away. The interesting and innovative aspect of Mzwakhe's poetry, which sets him one step ahead of the *izibongo* tradition, is the message contained in his poems, which is 'neither revivalist nor traditional' (Horn 1996:119). In fact, Mzwakhe himself has proudly stated his interest and involvement in contemporary social issues, such as, in the beginning, apartheid discrimination and racism. More recently, he has been addressing drug traffic, moral decay and corruption. Therefore, we might affirm that the true innovation enacted by the people's poet is that of combining a traditional oral style of delivery with contemporary and unconventional contents and messages.

In chapter two I have presented some of the main African oral genres and traditions, apart from the *izibongo*. Mzwakhe is likely to have drawn inspiration from them as well, as they form a broad body of oral traditions which are common or known to most of the sub-Saharan populations. From a rhetorical perspective, Mzwakhe's poetry shares, with the African oral tradition, a flowing style of speech, unrestrained from metre, which resembles colloquial language rather than conventional poetry. Let us think of a written poem that is read aloud for an audience; it could never be comparable to Mzwakhe's oral poems, which contain the pathos and the emotional

involvement of spontaneous oral speech. Although this concept can be understood and appreciated better when heard live, the idea and sense of a flowing, colloquial discourse can also be gathered from the printed version of Mzwakhe's poems.

Being free from conventional metrical schemes, Mzwakhe's poems adopt the device of the 'breath unit', already employed by traditional Zulu poetry, to insert pauses in his recitation and to convey a sense of rhythm. In particular – as the following chapter will analyse more closely – the 'breath units' in Mzwakhe's poems coincide with the end of each sentence. In the poems printed in *Before Dawn* (1989), it is clearly visible how each sentence is separated from the following one, usually inserting a comma or semi-colon at the end. In performance, the 'pause' corresponds to that sign of punctuation.

The metaphors and imagery employed by Mzwakhe are also to be traced back to the oral tradition of his cultural background. As in the oral narratives and epics of southern African cultures, similes and metaphors in Mzwakhe's work are drawn from the natural world and from daily experience, with the result in conjuring vivid images in the readers' and listeners' minds. However, we should not mistake Mzwakhe's apparently straightforward metaphors for shallow figures of speech; on the contrary, 'the people's poet' is once again combining the ancient linguistic device of metaphor, which employs words and images that have been used by generations and cultures throughout time, with deep and thought-provoking meanings. I will hereby provide an example so as to clarify such combination:

Now is the time,
To climb up the mountain,
And reason against habit,
Now is the time.

Now is the time,
To review the barren soil of nature,
Ruined by the winds of tyranny,

Now is the time.
(Mbuli, 1989:18)

In these first two stanzas from the poem 'Now Is The Time', it is plainly understandable how the poet has managed to use imagery drawn from the natural landscape surrounding him, and shape it so as to convey a striking message of resistance against autocracy. Mzwakhe is thus perpetuating the tradition of his ancestors as far as the linguistic devices are concerned, while at the same time entirely revolutionising such tradition, by conveying innovative meanings.

As Mzwakhe Mbuli also explored the gospel genre in his album *Umwakhe Ubonga Ujehova* (1998), we might assert that a further source of influence in his career is represented by the *hymn* genre, presented in chapter two. It has been said that hymns, in turn, recover the tradition of the *izibongo*, merging it with European musical and lyrical traditions. Hymns were meant to be performed by a lead voice, or preacher, and by an audience, in a 'call-and-response style' (Brown 1998:148), and in such a way Mzwakhe's gospel songs are performed, with his voice reciting verses and a choir singing the chorus in response. Moreover, hymns are accompanied by musical instruments and, often, by dances, which represent another traditional aspect that Mzwakhe has retrieved in his own work.

3.2.2 Literary influences

Mzwakhe Mbuli was seventeen when he joined his fellow students and marched along the streets of Soweto, protesting for better education standards for black young people. He saw before his eyes young men and women being killed by the brutality of the apartheid police, and he experienced the fear and anger of such a sight. After the 1976 uprising, pushed by the influence of the Black Consciousness movement, a group of poets – later known as the Soweto poets – started to compose a kind of poetry which was meant to address the injustice of the regime by revealing its horrors. We might say, therefore, that the poetry of Mzwakhe and of the Soweto

poets emerged from the same feelings of indignation towards the apartheid discriminations. Due to the fact that Soweto poetry developed slightly earlier than Mzwakhe's work, we might also assert that the Soweto literary movement guided and influenced the people's poet's own work.

Michael Chapman commented on one of the best representatives of the Soweto poetry movement, Mongane Wally Serote: 'time had run out for the racist order; black anger had found its historical moment; whites had to learn to listen, blacks had to learn to talk' (Chapman 1996:328). Through his words, we might recognise the same outrage and willingness to change the country that has also characterised the first decades of Mzwakhe's poetry. Chapman adds that Soweto poetry highlighted 'details of township life in its violence, poverty, alienation and desperate need for a healing community' (*ibid.* p. 333), which are also some of the main themes that Mzwakhe's poetry has been tackling, both before and after apartheid; hence, a further proof of Soweto poets' influence on Mzwakhe.

Moreover, Soweto poets retrieved African oral traditions, by trying to express on the page the same feeling given by spontaneous orality. Therefore, their poems did not rhyme or follow a precise metrical structure. On the contrary, the poets suggested the flow of speech by alternating lines of different lengths; they conveyed rhythmic pauses by visually breaking the discourse with punctuation marks or by displaying the verses in different parts of the pages; and they suggested the rising and lowering of voice tone by printing the words in different fonts and sizes. I will hereby report fragments of texts belonging to the Soweto poets, so as to make clear how they visualised orality on the page.

Schoolchildren,
you are as beautiful as the lily
that grows near our gate.

Your beauty is
like that of green pastures in summer,
where sheep graze.

Your beauty is
like water springing from a fountain
under the mountain of Ngele.

[...]

(‘Schoolchildren, You Are Beautiful’³⁰, Mtshali 1980:5)

[...]

I sat with wooden-faced commuters,
who uttered no word

and flashed not even the flicker of a smile;
only their bodies spoke –

the silent language of tombstones
in a crowded city cemetery.

(‘Riding in the New York subway’, Mtshali 1980:54)

revolution is...

when the first ray of light
slashes night and day asunder

revolution is...

when a woman gives birth
with her thumb raised high
urging “Amandla!”

revolution is...

when a child marches from a womb
with a raised clenched fist
saying “mama, we are on our own!”

[...]

(‘Revolution is...’, Patel 1983. In Pajalich, Fazzini 1994:206)

30 Taken from the original Zulu poem by A. M. Nzimande.

AND
words,
Make pain,
Like poverty can make pain.
Words,
WORDS,
Like thought, are elusive,
Like life,
Where everybody is trapped.
I wonder who trapped me,
For I am trapped,
Twice,
Like,
a word can mean two things,
Who. and Whitey
Trapped me.
I read.
Words,
WORDS.
Trying to get out
Words. Words. By Whitey.
No. No. No. By Whitey.
I know I'm trapped.
Helpless
Hopeless
Trapped me whitey. Meem wanna ge aot Fuc
Pschwee e ep boobooduboooodu blllll
Black books,
Flesh blood words shitrrr Haai,
Amen.

('Black Bells', Serote. in Royston 1973:26)

The two excerpts from Mtshali's poems are an example of the printed displacement of sentences which conveys the idea of an oral broken discourse; the same idea is provided by the extract from Patel's 'Revolution Is...', which also employs the direct discourse to emphasise the speech dimension. Onomatopoeic effects are rendered by Ndebele with 'GOGOM GOM...', representing how drum sounds are reproduced vocally, and a similar action is carried out by Serote, in the last lines of 'Black Bells'. In all examples, there is little use of punctuation or capital initial letters, whereas entire words spelled in capital letters are used to convey emphasis on what is being said. Repetition and parallelism are common traits of all the fragments, as they are fundamental rhetorical devices that characterise most of African poetry.

Although Mzwakhe's poetry – in his only printed example, *Before Dawn* (1989) – is generally written in regular lines and stanzas, there are, indeed, examples that remind us of Soweto poetry layouts. I will subsequently report a few examples taken from *Before Dawn*.

With love I smile, with love I give,
With love I found new ways to live,
And there is nothing in the world,
That I cannot do, WITH LOVE.
(‘With Love’, Mbuli 1989:11)

Triple “M” why know the truth?
Triple “M” why distort the truth?
Why pick on me?
Why pick on Africa?
Who were you leaders before?
Where are they now?
MATANZIMA, MANGOPE, MPHEPHU,
Why ruin Africa?
Why tear Africa?
Massacres of my land,

Now is a MESS:
MHhh..meme..ss MATANZIMA, MANGOPHE, MPHEPHU, SEBE,
Mmmess it's a mess,
Yes it is a mmess.
(‘Triple “M”’, Mbuli 1989:15-6)

The will and determination of my internal being,
Cannot be seen by an eye,
The longer the period of arbitrary and hate,
The more the status of freedom becomes clearer,
While fighting for the truth,
Others are battling for the riches to dry Africa,
Pambere Ne Chimurenga – Pambere Nehondo.
(‘aChimurenga’, Mbuli 1989:66)

In the extracts from ‘With Love’ and ‘Triple “M”’, some words have been written in capital letters, so as to, on one hand, give prominence to the meaning of the word, and on the other hand to convey the emphasis that would have been given in an oral performance of the poems. Moreover, in ‘Triple “M”’, the sound produced in the pronunciation of the word ‘mess’ with a ‘triple m’ is rendered in the transcription of such words as ‘MHhh..meme..ss’, or ‘mmmess’. Finally, the sentence in bold at the end of the first stanza of ‘aChimurenga’ signals a sort of chorus in the poetry, which is repeated, with some variations, at the end of each of the other three stanzas.

Soweto poetry was a literary trend of published poetry which was originally meant for oral performance. Pajalich has also observed that some of these poems were well-known in townships, where they were performed in front of enraptured crowds, often with the musical accompaniment of drums and winds. Furthermore, such poems were read aloud at funerals, meetings, concerts and private events (Pajalich 1994:10), which is precisely the way in which Mzwakhe’s own career as a poet started. For this reason, we can quite safely assert that Soweto poetry was Mzwakhe’s main literary influence in his own poetic career.

3.2.3 Musical influences

Mzwakhe's poems were not, and are not, conceived as song lyrics; they are born in the poet's mind primarily as oral poems. The instrumental track is either added later in the editing process, or used as accompaniment or background for his performances. Nevertheless, Mzwakhe's career in general must have been influenced by certain music groups or musical tendencies, both in the style and in the content of his songs. Brown described Mzwakhe's use of music saying that 'he generally performs his poems to a musical backing which draws on a variety of styles, from *mbaqanga* and *isicathamiya* to reggae and rap' (1998:240), and added to his description that 'his musical renditions involve a complex complementarity between rhythm, melody, and verbal delivery' (1998:246). This subchapter will therefore try to understand in what ways Mzwakhe has been influenced by the afore-mentioned music styles, and what significant groups or artists might have represented a model for 'the people's poet'.

As far as South African musical traditions are concerned, Mzwakhe's musical accompaniment draws on the *mbaqanga* and *isicathamiya* genres, which originated both in the Zulu culture. *Mbaqanga* literally means 'sweetcorn porridge' in Zulu, and as a music genre it began in the late fifties and early sixties in the townships of Sophiatown and Alexandra, where the atmosphere was infused with urban influences, due to the proximity of the two townships with the city of Johannesburg. *Mbaqanga* fused traditional songs and sounds of several tribes, and, in the beginning, it was played on pennywhistles and Zulu guitars. Later, the music was applied to electric guitars and brass instruments, developing into a South African version of jazz. *Mbaqanga* music is fast paced and cheerful, favouring major chords and repetitive melodies. Coplan (1985) provides interesting information on *Mbaqanga* performances, from which we can identify the influence that this genre had on Mzwakhe Mbuli:

"Mbaqanga shows generally have several segments, proceeding from the most traditional in music, dance and costume towards the more Westernised. Songs in the opening segment begin with a lead guitar introduction, followed by the bass melody pattern [...]. Piano or accordion lines are laid on top in African staggered fashion, each part entering the phrase cycle at different points. [...] Most arousing for the audience is the correspondence between body movement, gesture, melody, and rhythm." (Coplan 1985:185-6)

An exemplary group that flourished in the eighties and brought the *mbaqanga* genre back into the popular scene is 'Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens', who employed western musical instruments (drumkit, electric guitars, keyboards, synths) to play traditional sounds. Their performances saw a combination of singing and dancing, with the singers dressed in traditional South African clothes. Mzwakhe has retrieved the *mbaqanga* tradition in a similar way, as in his concerts he provides musical backing that follows the *mbaqanga* sounds and rhythms, while using non-traditional instruments. In the first years of his career, he would also perform dances in the pauses from reciting his poems, wearing traditional clothes (figure 5).



Figure 5: Mzwakhe Mbuli during one of his performances, 1989/1990. Screenshot of the documentary 'Songololo. Voices of Change' (1990).

Retrieved from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hxZMHYkhXo

Another traditional South African musical influence for Mzwakhe's career has been the *isicathamiya* genre. Virginia Gorlinski, in an online article featuring in *Enciclopedia Britannica*, described it as follows:

"a type of secular a cappella choral singing developed in South Africa by migrant Zulu communities. [...] *Isicathamiya* is a synthesis of diverse traditions, including local music, Christian choral singing [...]. The music is performed in call-and-response fashion by male choral ensembles that range in size from 4 to more than 20 singers [...]. The group sings in four-part harmony, typically led by a tenor soloist. Zulu is the principal language of performance, although many songs contain an admixture of English." (Gorlinski)

The group that brought the *isicathamiya* genre to global popularity in the mid-eighties is 'Ladysmith Black Mambazo', led by Joseph Shabalala. They perform in combinations of seven to thirteen members, with a lead singer, and insert traditional Zulu dance moves in their performances. Though nowadays Shabalala – who is in his seventies – does no longer perform, his sons, members of his group and heirs of his musical creativity, are keeping 'Ladysmith Black Mambazo' on the top scenes of South African music (see the 2011 interview for *RUTV Journalism Rhodes University*).

Mzwakhe might have been influenced by the *isicathamiya* of 'Ladysmith Black Mambazo', firstly, giving the contemporaneity of their career and the beginning of Mzwakhe's, and secondly, due to the similar recovering and usage of Zulu dance moves – especially those involving leg movements and kicking. Moreover, despite the fact that Mzwakhe himself does not sing, his songs often feature a call-and-response style or structure, mainly the songs that have a sung chorus or the ones belonging to his gospel albums.

If we are to consider other South African groups that have shaped Mzwakhe Mbuli's identity and poetic career, we should mention two formations: the Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble and the Amandla Cultural Ensemble. Their relevance for South Africa has already been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, however, a deeper consideration of their importance for Mzwakhe's career deserves attention. Both the Mayibuye and the Amandla ensembles emerged in the 1970s, however, the former was based in England and achieved success in Europe, while the latter was based in Angola, where MK training camps were set up. Both groups proceeded from ANC members and sought to spread anti-apartheid messages, offering stimulating performances which involved music, poetry and narrative.

Gilbert (in Olwage, 2008) described how Mayibuye came into being thanks to the initiative of ANC activist Barry Feinberg. In 1974 he had published an anthology of South African freedom poems and had organised a public reading of such poems to inaugurate the publication. 'Based on the success of this performance, Feinberg and Kasrils decided to establish a more permanent ensemble. They named the group Mayibuye, echoing the familiar liberation slogan *'Mayibuye iAfrika'* (let Africa return)' (Gilbert in Olwage, 2008:159). Beside poetry, the musical performances they offered consisted in traditional songs with a political orientation and fast-paced freedom songs. Gilbert also states that these freedom songs drew on the tradition of *makwaya*, a type of choral singing that combined South African traditions and Christian hymnody, 'set to simple melodic phrases, sung *a capella*, and repeated over and over in a call-and-response style' (*ibid.* p.161). The influence that such ensemble has had on Mzwakhe Mbuli is noticeable in the 'combative and rebellious' tone and the 'explicit references to life under apartheid' (*ibid.* p.160) that characterised the songs performed by Mayibuye.

Shirli Gilbert goes on to describe how the Amandla Cultural Ensemble originated:

Amandla's conceptual origins date back to the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. Participating in the festival were artists, poets and musicians from all over Africa, Europe and the United States, many appearing under the banner of the ANC. Inspired by the diversity of talent represented at the festival, exiled musician Jonas Gwangwa was motivated to put together a temporary ensemble that he called Amandla (meaning 'power', and drawing on another popular liberation slogan).' (Gilbert, in Olwage 2008:166)

The decision to change the ensemble from temporary to a more permanent formation was made the following year, 1978, when a group of ANC members gained enormous success for their performance at the 11th World Festival of Youth and Students in Cuba. The innovative elements in Amandla's performances, compared to Mayibuye's, were, firstly, long theatrical productions aimed at political discussions, and secondly, the presence of a jazz band that played original songs composed by Gwangwa and other members. Furthermore, the repertoire of the band included

kwela and *mbaqanga* pieces, 'at the time also referred to as African Jazz' (*ibid.* p.170). The lyrics of the songs were focused more on a positive, encouraging outlook, stirring the crowds to move towards freedom, and the ensemble eventually became a successful ambassador for the ANC.

Mzwakhe Mbuli's career is likely to have been shaped by the activity of these ensembles, given the similar imprint of the poems' content; moreover, the musical accompaniment that supported Mzwakhe's performances highly resembles the African jazz played by Amandla, which, in turn, drew on the same musical traditions used by Mzwakhe. Last, but not least, 'Amandla' is the very title of one of the latest albums by the people's poet, containing a series of his best known 'struggle songs', as mentioned on the front cover of the CD.

Finally, a genre that combines poetry and music, and is likely to have had an influence on Mzwakhe's spoken style of delivery, is dub poetry. It is a genre of spoken poetry that developed in the 1970s among the Jamaican community in Great Britain. Campbell (2012) observed:

'the 1970s in Britain were challenging for immigrants and first-generation Britons. There was widespread racism and minorities believed the policies of Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, late that decade, made things tougher for non-whites. This hostile climate [...] gave birth to another militant medium the British press tagged dub poetry.'

Therefore, Mzwakhe's poetry and dub poetry seem to have flourished from the same context of struggle, despite belonging to different countries. It is interesting to notice how circumstances of racial discrimination and oppression have found voices of protest in poets who have turned their poetry into a weapon of resistance.

The entry for 'dub poetry' on the Oxford Reference website states that the term 'was at first applied to the improvised 'rapping' of the Jamaican disc-jockeys known as 'toastmasters', who sang or recited their own words over the dub versions of reggae records (i.e. the purely instrumental re-mixed versions on the B-sides).' This custom was then applied to the British trend in the '70s,

when dub poets started performing their poems to a musical backing which drew on the Jamaican reggae tradition. One of the best examples of dub poets is Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in Jamaica in 1952 and emigrated as a young teenager to England. During his school years, he experimented with poetry while suffering the injustice of racism. He published his first poems in the mid-seventies, and towards the end of the decade he published his first LP, *Dread Beat An' Blood*, released by Island Records; 'it contained hard-hitting pieces such as 'Man Free', which called for the freedom of Darcau Howe, a Trinidad-born civil rights activist who was imprisoned at the time' (Campbell 2012). This success launched him on the international music sphere as a dub poet. In similar fashion to what Mzwakhe Mbuli did a decade later, Linton Kwesi Johnson added a musical track to his recited poems, which contained anti-racism and freedom messages.

The similarity between Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mzwakhe Mbuli in terms of poetic content, style of delivery and combination of poetry and music leads us to think that the people's poet is likely to have had some knowledge of Johnson's work when he began his own career. Regarding this resemblance, I will hereby quote a passage from Brown (1998) which highlights in what way has Mzwakhe drawn from Johnson:

"Though he denies that he is a 'dub poet', given that his repertoire extends beyond mere recitation to a reggae beat, he does acknowledge affinities with the work of [...] Linton Kwesi Johnson [...], with whom he has shared platforms. The influence of rap music and Rastafarian 'toasting' is particularly evident in Mzwakhe's diction, as the words often seem to be chosen as much for their rhythm and rhyme as for 'meaning'. Similarly, the line sequence sometimes appears disjointed when the poems are viewed on the page, although there is coherence in the rhythms of performance." (Brown 1998:252)

In conclusion, though retaining his singularity and uniqueness, it has been plainly visible how Mzwakhe Mbuli has been influenced by oral, literary and musical traditions throughout his life. The very fact that he embraced such traditions, incorporated them in his own work, and reshaped

them with innovative elements is the tangible and convincing proof that the people's poet's work is keeping South African traditions alive.

CHAPTER FOUR

An analysis of Mzwakhe Mbuli's poetic work.

This chapter will focus on the core matter of this dissertation: understanding, through an analysis of a selected number of poems and their performances, how Mzwakhe Mbuli has been keeping South African oral traditions alive and what the extent of his impact on South African society has been. As I have signalled in the introduction to this dissertation, there is not extensive critical material on Mzwakhe's poems yet. This is due to the fact that his activity, on the one hand, has been hindered for many years by apartheid, and on the other hand, it has developed mainly from the 1980s to the present days. As a consequence, the analysis that I bring forward in this chapter is primarily built upon my own interpretations of Mzwakhe's poems. It is supported by the historical, social and literary notions that have been gathered and exposed in the first three chapters.

In the course of the previous chapters it has been shown how the historical and social background have shaped Mzwakhe's personality and career, and how he is still nowadays advocating a better world and a better South Africa. The current chapter will therefore present a selection of Mzwakhe's most significant poems and songs, considering what has been presented up to this point, and starting with an evaluation of the importance of the performative element in oral poetry and in Mzwakhe Mbuli's career. As far as the actual analysis is concerned, it will be carried out on two main levels: first, on a formal level, in which the rhetorical and linguistic features used in the poems will be taken into account; second, on a thematic level, in which the issues and

messages of the poems will be brought out and examined, so as to understand and appreciate the meaningfulness of Mzwakhe's works. In those cases in which a record of the poems' performances exists – either audio recordings or videos, the poems' performative aspect will be examined in order to see how the poet manages to combine African tradition and innovation.

4.1 Performance and oral poetry. Mzwakhe Mbuli's case.

4.1.1 The performative element in oral traditions

It has already been mentioned how oral traditions and oral poetry use elements such as different voice tones, body movements and facial expressions to convey specific meanings. If we are to collect these elements under a broader term, we could gather them under the concept of 'performance'. Performance is an essential part of oral delivery; this concerns orality in general, not only African oral traditions. Various scholars and critics have supported this assertion. Perhaps the most significant contribution on this matter has been made by Paul Zumthor, who carried out thorough research on the field of oral poetry. He observed that "performance fully realises and determines all the other formal elements that have no more than a virtual relationship to the performance" (1990:117), highlighting the centrality of the performative element for oral poetry. He added:

"Performance implies competence. [...] Performance displays a knowing-how-to-be in both space and time. Whatever the spoken or sung text evokes through linguistic means, performance imposes on it an all-encompassing referent at the corporeal level. It is through the body that we are time and space." (ibid. p. 118)

According to Zumthor, performance is not only spontaneity added to what is being uttered, but rather it is the key component of oral delivery, the one that connects all other elements and creates cohesion among them. Oral poetry, therefore, finds its fulfilment and ultimate realization in performance, as the latter brings together all the different parts of oral delivery in order to convey

meaning. As Zumthor observed, "poetic speech, voice, melody – text, energy, acoustical form – actively united in performance cooperate in the singularity of meaning" (*ibid.* p. 147).

A further noteworthy aspect of performance, signalled by Zumthor, is the employment of traditional clothing; this is especially relevant for Mzwakhe's performances, as he often wears traditional clothes during specific events where South African cultural and traditional heritage is particularly strong. Zumthor states that according to how the performer is dressed, he/she can represent different values or meanings; with "neutral" clothing, the poet blends into the surroundings, while with traditional clothing, he/she is more than a mere "*porte-voix*", and stands out as a representative of the tradition of which he/she is part (Zumthor 1990:162). The following section will focus more deeply on how Mzwakhe Mbuli employs different types of clothing and how this relates to what Zumthor has extensively written about. Moreover, it will give additional information on the characteristics of Mzwakhe's performances.

4.1.2 Mzwakhe Mbuli in performance

Despite the publication, in 1989, of the book *Before Dawn*, Mzwakhe Mbuli is primarily an oral poet. To Western culture, the figure of 'oral poet' might sound difficult to grasp, but in the African context, as my dissertation has demonstrated so far, the role of orality has always been central, and poets like Mzwakhe Mbuli are preserving such a tradition in the present days. Therefore, being an oral poet, Mzwakhe delivers his poetry in different public contexts which always entail a specific kind of performance. Whether it is recited-only or accompanied by music, the very act of delivering poems is in itself a type of performance. This section wants to highlight the most significant characteristics of Mzwakhe Mbuli's performances so as to understand on the one hand how, through performance, 'the people's poet' is keeping South African oral traditions alive, and on

the other hand, to what extent the performative element makes the message of his poems clearer to the audience.

We can identify two main types of performance when analysing Mzwakhe Mbuli's work: performance with musical backing, and performance without musical backing. The former has been employed in his albums' recordings, and it characterised his early career as an oral poet. Indeed, in his albums Mzwakhe usually recites his poems over a musical track, which is often fast-paced and cheerful, with sung refrains and intense drum-beating (Frid 2012). Moreover, in the late eighties and nineties, when Mzwakhe participated in festivals, concerts and rallies, he would perform together with a band. This kind of performance is explicitly linked to the South African performing traditions, since Mzwakhe would also dance and use expressive body gestures in pauses between the poems' verses. The 1990 documentary *Songololo* shows scenes of such performances, in which Mzwakhe appears on stage, with musicians and dancers, all wearing traditional clothes.

The second kind of performance, the one without musical accompaniment, is soberer, and therefore is destined to more serious situations, such as funerals or memorials. When invited to speak at funerals, Mzwakhe appears alone, and he recites his poems with his thunderous voice over the silence of the crowd. In this type of performance, Mzwakhe usually wears less flamboyant and colourful clothes (figure 6) – usually smart shirts or jackets – which set him inside a more formal context.



Figure 6: Mzwakhe Mbuli at Mandela's send-off (2013). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCzoYoeRQGU>

We can thus observe how Mzwakhe's performances change according to the context in which they appear. "Mbuli is known for performing at a variety of venues throughout his career. He would perform at festivals, church services, and funerals frequently unannounced in order to avoid the attention of the police" (Frid 2012). Therefore, what differentiates the performances at each of these diverse places, apart from the presence or lack of musical accompaniment, is Mzwakhe's dressing choice. On the one hand, traditional South African clothes make him a mouthpiece of the long-lived oral tradition of which he is an example; on the other hand, 'ordinary clothes' represent both the formality and the solemnity of political gatherings, funerals and memorials. These clothes, which are more similar to contemporary Western fashion, might also represent a way to connect South African traditions to more a globalised culture. Nevertheless, even when wearing 'neutral' clothes, Mzwakhe manages to underline his sense of belonging to his country; as it is visible in figure 6, he often wears a scarf with the national flag colours.

Regardless of whether he performs with or without a musical backing, Mzwakhe's performances have proven to intensely affect audiences and crowds. This is due to a number of reasons including the effective way in which he rises and lowers his voice, the powerful images employed in his poems, and the connection he manages to create with the audience during his performances, by merging tradition and innovation. Indeed, by retrieving traditional Zulu techniques and adapting them to the English language, Mzwakhe might not only be trying to defy the (former) oppressor by speaking its language, but he is also making his poetry and songs more widely accessible (Frid 2012).

4.2 A selection of Mzwakhe's poems.

This second subchapter will present a selection of Mzwakhe Mbuli's most well-known and significant poems, ordered chronologically, so as to display how Mzwakhe's poetry has evolved in

time. The foregoing selection has been decided according to the relevance of the poems' words, meanings and linguistic features. Most of the poems' texts will be taken from *Before Dawn* (1989a), and the selected pieces will cover a span of time from 1986 to 2008, examining how social and historical circumstances have influenced the production of the albums here taken into consideration. The general aim of this analysis, beside praising the poetic genius of Mzwakhe Mbuli, will be the understanding of how the 'people's poet' has been keeping South African oral traditions alive in his works.

4.2.1 *Change is Pain* (1986)

Change is Pain is Mzwakhe's first album (figure 7), in which he gathered poems he had composed in the previous years and had already performed in public occasions, adding original musical arrangements. As explained before, in the biographical chapter, this album – originally released as an audiocassette – was banned due to apartheid restrictions. A review of the album on AllMusic.com says:

"This session by poet Mzwakhe Mbuli didn't make it across the oceans until 1992. His text included several passionate, fiery, and incendiary poems, narratives, and expositions about the historical brutality and oppression instituted in the apartheid era. The backing ranged from supportive to emphatic, while Mbuli's voice sometimes sounded sad, and other times menacing, aggressive, or optimistic."

The poems that will be analysed from *Change Is Pain* are 'Behind The Bars', 'The Day Shall Dawn', and 'Now Is The Time', selected for revealing how the power of Mzwakhe's protest against apartheid bloomed in the harshest years of the regime.



Figure 7: *Change Is Pain* (1986), cover picture. Retrieved from:

<https://shiftyrecords.bandcamp.com/album/change-is-pain>

4.2.1a 'Behind The Bars'

Silently I sat,
A thinking cap I put,
Brilliance I applied,
And constructively I planned,
5 Behind the bars.

A meeting in mind took place,
Uncountable plans emerged,
Children my worry,
My sweetheart in mind,
10 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,
15 Behind the bars.

Maybe I am wrong,
Yes someone was naked but manacled,
Yes naked but killed,
In Graaf-Reinet Cemetery my body was there.

20 Retirement was my choice,
But Apartheid never retire,
Politically I developed,
And solemnly I vowed,
Bars or no bars the struggle of the voiceless
[continues,

25 Mayibuye iAfrica I said behind the bars.

(Mbuli 1989a:14)

This intense poem features five stanzas composed by non-rhyming, irregular lines. The first three stanzas present a similar structure: five lines each, with the same ending line for each stanza, 'behind the bars', to create a repetitive pattern of connection between each verse. The fourth verse has four lines and does not repeat 'behind the bars', which is instead repeated in the last line of the last stanza, at the very end of the poem. Repetition, a traditional device of African poetry, is not extensively used in this poem, as 'behind the bars' is the only sentence to be repeated four times (lines 5, 10, 15, 25). On the other hand, the device of parallelism has been more thoroughly employed; indeed, in the first stanza, lines 1-4 present a parallel structure of object-subject-verb, which is unusual for the English language, and therefore is likely to be an example of the author's poetic freedom. Such a structure might aim at emphasising the objects of each line, in order to provide readers with a direct visualisation of what the *poetic I* is doing and feeling in prison. A similar structure features again in lines 22, 23.

Punctuation is not employed for the linguistic sake of separating different syntagms, but, on the contrary, it is only used with the purpose of separating one line from the following one, so as to convey a realistic sense of the oral recitation of the poem. Hence, a comma is put at the end of each line, and a full stop closes each stanza. This type of syntactical fragmentation, present in all of Mzwakhe's written poems, reminds us of the 'breath-unit' device employed in the South African tradition of oral poetry, from *izibongo* to Soweto poets.

As far as rhetorical devices and figures of speech are concerned, this poem uses a quite straightforward language, employing very few metaphors or similes. The most striking image evoked through metaphor appears in line 14, 'Another one used a pair of jeans to heaven'. The poet is talking about the tragedy of men dying in prison cells, and the man he refers to here possibly took his own life using a pair of jeans, probably strangling or hanging himself. It is interesting to observe what meaning here the word 'heaven' might convey; since the poet is talking about prisoners, readers might automatically and unwillingly judge them guilty and sentenced to Hell. Instead, the prisoner who committed suicide used a pair of jeans 'to heaven', which might reveal the poet's belief that many prisoners, during apartheid, were actually innocent, and hence worthy of Heaven.

When Mzwakhe Mbuli wrote this poem, he was living in the most dangerous years of apartheid. He had witnessed the rising of the States of Emergency, in which a countless number of people had started to be detained and imprisoned without trial. Before 1988, Mzwakhe did not experience detention, so, despite the first-person voice of the poem, he is not making autobiographical references. Instead, the people's poet might have adopted the point of view of one of the many victims of apartheid, unjustly convicted, and eager for rebellion. This victim, who is at the centre of the poem, speaking in first person, on the one hand might be physically behind

prison bars, but on the other hand such 'bars' might refer to a psychological imprisonment caused by the apartheid regime, where dissent was severely punished.

The poem begins with what looks like a cinematic close-up of the protagonist, sitting in his cell, lost in his reasonings and thoughts. Though it is never made explicit, it is likely that the speaking voice is that of a man, since other men are mentioned later, conveying the idea that the setting is a men's prison. The protagonist must be clever, as he is portrayed in the action of planning 'constructively' (line 4), applying 'brilliance' (line 3), and producing 'uncountable plans' (line 7). From the second stanza, we can infer that the speaking voice has left his family, which are now his main concern, and probably the reason of his cogitations. The third stanza, on the other hand, suggests the harsh reality of prison-life; the protagonist declares: 'I shivered, I prayed' (line 11), inside alienating cells, among death. The language is so direct that we almost feel as cold and terrified as the prisoner. In the last two stanzas the focal point seems to shift from the speaker to a broader subject: the speaking voice appears to identify with a group of people, called 'the voiceless' in line 25. By 'voiceless' we might understand a reference to all victims of apartheid, which were never granted the right to speak for themselves, but rather were silenced by barbaric racism. A sense of collectiveness is also given by the identification of the poetic voice with the corpses buried in Graaf-Reinet Cemetery (line 19), and by the last cry: 'Mayibuye iAfrica I said behind the bars' (line 25), which echoes the liberation slogan meaning 'let Africa return'. By this final statement, we understand that the protagonist's struggle is not the struggle of one person only, but instead it is the fight of an entire population, a community struck without reason first by colonialism, and later by apartheid.

As for the album version, Mzwakhe and his band added a fast-paced track that features predominantly the extensive use of percussions, together with keyboards, guitars and bass guitars. Percussions are the leading instruments, as different types of drums can be identified while

listening. Thus, the rhythm of the song reminds us of traditional African music, which is mostly centred on percussions. Generally speaking, the musical track develops in a continuous crescendo from the beginning to the end, adding instruments or varying the melody, together with a slow but steady rising of Mzwakhe's voice tone. Music and voice, thus, swell until the final climax coinciding with the words 'Mayibuye iAfrica I said'; then the music suddenly stops, and Mzwakhe's voice resounds, full and clear, saying: 'behind the bars'.

4.2.1b 'The Day Shall Dawn'

A new man is born,
Full of strength and agility,
To demonstrate conventional wisdom,
In defence of the fatherland,
5 Through cannons of criticism,
His dragon force and enthusiasm,
Shall perform a daring combat against fascism.

Man shall initiate a campaign,
Against genocidal crimes,
10 Committed and perpetrated against beloved
[humanity,
Today housing is another means of exploitation,
And before the spirit of Hitler destroys man,
Wake me up to join you in the march,
To a people's kingdom.

15 Man is swallowed by limited pleasures of time,
Man is forsaken like a memory lost,
Say it aloud, justice is absent and democracy is nil,
Say it aloud, to counter the state lie,
Again shout it aloud,
20 The government is riding fast to a greatest fall,
From one great defeat to another.

Tuberculative bodies of young and old,
Shall come to pass,
Institutionalised violence is silent in holocaust by
[design,
25 However like a surprise the day shall dawn,
And the world shall mourn,
At the burial of fascism,
And a threat to world peace shall be no more,
The doors of hell are golden,
30 Possessed and displayed by Western powers,
Self-interest is a vehicle to the graveyard,
Hidden worms shall come to exposure,
And collaborators like giant spiders,
35 Shall belong to the dustbin of history,
All this shall take root before dawn.

Shalom is the language of world peace,
North, East, South and West,
The Inkomati accord is not freedom but a deal,
40 No state power shall legislate me not to love man,
Do something to facilitate change in Africa,
Do something to fling the doors of Pollsmor and
[Robben Island prison wide open,
Do something favourable for the exiles to return back
[home,
Oh! Africa let all this be done before dawn,
45 Oh! Peace loving South Africans let it be done before
[dawn.

(Mbuli 1989a:27-8)

'The Day Shall Dawn' is the poem which gives the title to Mzwakhe's book *Before Dawn*. The prophesising tone of the poem suggests the poet's gaze to a better future, when a triumphant day will come and defeat the powers of apartheid. The characteristic traits of Mzwakhe's poetry – straightforward language and impactful images – are extensively present here, and provide readers and audiences with a strong message of hope and a deep sense of trust in the power of people to change life in South Africa.

Unlike the previously analysed poem, 'The Day Shall Dawn' presents longer stanzas, with longer lines. The first three stanzas feature seven lines, the fourth has fourteen lines and the fifth has nine lines. As for 'Behind The Bars', the first three stanzas of the poem are equal in length, while modifications are enacted in the last two. This pattern of structure might suggest the rhythm of oral delivery, which begins steadily and regularly, and slowly changes together with the creation of a rising climax. Compared to 'Behind The Bars', 'The Day Shall Dawn' occasionally uses rhymes. A few examples can be found in lines 5-7, with the rhyming words 'criticism', 'enthusiasm', 'fascism', and in lines 25, 26, with the rhyme 'dawn', 'mourn'. The fact that rhyming is not dominant in Mzwakhe's poems is the clear evidence of the influence of traditional orality on his poetic work, in which discourse develops and flows similarly to spontaneous oral speech, unrestrained from the metrical schemes of the written tradition and of the European tradition.

As in all of Mzwakhe's poems that have been transcribed for the page from the original oral version, 'The Day Shall Dawn', too, presents a singular use of punctuation, employing a comma at the end of each line to signal the brief, rhythmical pause uttered in oral delivery, while a full stop is only placed at the end of each stanza. As I observed in the analysis of the previous poem, punctuation does not serve language, since in many cases commas are placed between words or syntagms that are not to be separated normally; punctuation is instead used to convey rhythm.

The traditional poetic device of repetition by initial linking appears to us in many examples in this poem. In lines 15, 16 the sentences begin with 'Man is', followed by an adjective ('swallowed', 'forsaken'); subsequently, in lines 17, 18, 'Say it aloud' is repeated at the beginning of each line. Then, in lines 41-43, the exhortation 'Do something' opens each consecutive sentence, and at the very end of the poem, the last two lines (44, 45) begin with the exclamation 'Oh!'. Generally, repetition has an emphasising effect on what is being said, especially if the repetition appears at the beginning of the lines. In this poem's particular case, such emphasis is given to the word 'man' (lines 15, 16), understood as a general term for the whole group of human beings, victims of apartheid. The encouraging phrases 'say it aloud' and 'do something' are also made stronger through repetition, as is the final exclamation 'Oh!', which provides both a sense of dramatic passion and an idea of direct discourse, as if we – readers and listeners – were the addressees. As far as repetition and parallelism are concerned, throughout the whole poem the modal verb 'shall' is repeated ten times, placing the entire discourse in the future tense, as if the poet was prophesying a miraculous event that is about to come; this event, however, depends on the action of the people, and therefore the poet/prophet urges his compatriots to intervene and assert their authority against the destructive powers of apartheid, which is compared to fascism.

Moving on to consider the symbolic language used in 'The Day Shall Dawn', the first stanza introduces the theme of the hero. As presented in chapter two, heroism is one of the most widespread motifs of African literary and oral traditions, as it depicts characters embodying traditional values such as physical strength and morality. Mzwakhe might have drawn from this convention by introducing, at the beginning of his poem, this 'new man', who is 'full of strength and agility' (2), and who is about to redeem the country from the evils of apartheid through 'daring combat' (7). This symbolic man possesses 'wisdom' (3), 'enthusiasm' (6) and a dragon-like force, and will not be stopped despite the 'cannons of criticism' (5). In this metaphorical description, we

might see a representation of a utopian new society, imagined by the poet, which would rise up against the regime. The identification of the 'new man' with a new society might be supported by the fact that whenever the reciting voice is to address an interlocutor, it is done towards either a generic 'man' (which can be understood as 'humankind'), the entire continent, 'Africa' (line 44), or his compatriots, 'peace loving South Africans' (line 45). A different interpretation, however, could also be applied; the 'new man' speaking out against apartheid might even be a symbolic depiction of the poet himself, as he was indeed defying the regime, 'through cannons of criticism', with his poetry.

Another relevant theme that the poem covers is a direct condemnation of the apartheid regime, through similes and metaphors that highlight the tragedies brought about by the regime. Such figures of speech are, for instance, the definition of apartheid as 'genocidal crimes' (line 9), which are to be vindicated by 'man' (line 8). This man could either be the 'new man' introduced before, or an identification of South African society and what it is called to do. Moreover, apartheid is compared to fascism (lines 7, 27) and to Nazism – though it is not said explicitly. The latter comparison can be deduced by sentences such as 'before the spirit of Hitler destroys man' (line 12), where the 'spirit of Hitler' is a plain reference to the regime of apartheid, and also by a reference to 'holocaust' (24), which, just as apartheid, was an example of 'institutionalised violence' (24).

Towards the end of the third stanza (lines 32-34), the poet gives audiences and readers a sense of how rotten the political and social situation in South Africa was at that time. Mzwakhe uses a long metaphor with language belonging to the semantic field of rubbish, dirt and decomposition: 'Hidden worms shall come to exposure,/And collaborators like giant spiders,/Shall belong to the dustbin of history'. Worms are a symbol of decay, and here stand to represent the moral decay in which South Africa was dwelling (which was previously mentioned in line 17: 'justice

is absent and democracy is nil'); they are hidden, but they are about to be exposed. The poet is trying to do the same thing with his poem: he is determined to reveal apartheid's untold crimes in order to restore peace in his country. Spiders, too, are creatures connected with dirt and darkness, and in the poem they represent the authors of apartheid's racist crimes, who are destined to be defeated and forgotten, just as spiders are thrown into dustbins. While denouncing the seriousness of the regime, Mzwakhe is nonetheless infusing a deep sense of hope for a decisive turn of events that would re-establish equality in South Africa.

Therefore, the other dominant theme in the poem is hope. The speaking voice – which might belong to the poet as well as to any other person concerned with South Africa's redemption – is encouraging the population of South Africa to take control of the situation and 'do something' to change its country. From the beginning, the poem clarifies that such change depends on the people ('Man shall initiate a campaign,/Against genocidal crimes', lines 8, 9), who have the power to defeat the regime (lines 20, 21) only if united. Hope, in addition, is represented with the metaphor of dawn; indeed, dawn is the moment when you wake up, therefore it is a symbol of a new beginning and new birth. The very title 'The Day Shall Dawn' conveys the idea of a new day rising like dawn to bring hope and a new reality in South Africa.

Turning now towards the musical track that accompanies the album version of the poem, we can identify some differences compared to 'Behind The Bars'. The pace in 'The Day Shall Dawn' is much slower, and constant. The whole song, in terms of both music and voice, develops as a crescendo. The first stanza only has a guitar riff as backing, the same riff that is repeated over and over throughout the song. In the second stanza, percussions and drums are added. The peculiarity of this song's rhythm is given by the drumroll on the snare drum, which reminds us of the sounds used in military marches. Mzwakhe might have made this choice as the poem itself can be understood as a sort of 'call to arms' to defeat apartheid. In the third and fourth stanzas, wind

instruments are added, as the poet's voice swells and rises. Before the last stanza, some space is given to an instrumental bridge. Finally, the second half of the last stanza is repeated twice, with the addition of synths. The music eventually comes to a sudden stop before the poet utters, at the very end, 'let it be done before dawn'.

4.2.1c 'Now Is The Time'

Now is the time, To climb up the mountain, And reason against habit, Now is the time.	25 While my heart beats, Give them today, While my heart yearns for jubilee, Now is the time.
5 Now is the time, To review the barren soil of nature, Ruined by the winds of tyranny, Now is the time.	Now is the time, 30 To treasure the thorns of slavery, Spear them for my grave, Keep them for the day to come, Where my struggling body, Will struggle no more,
Now is the time, 10 To commence the litany of hope, Now is the time.	35 Neither roses nor thorns, Would affect it at rest, Now is the time.
Now is the time, To disentangle vilification, That afflicts the planet of humanity apart, 15 Now is the time.	Now is the time, To edify authentic action, 40 Against pre-conceived notions of prejudice, Now is the time.
Now is the time, To vomit the remains of fascism, Back to the bucket of imperialism, Now is the time.	Now is the time, To blot out pillars of Nazism, Now is the time.
20 Now is the time, To give me roses, Not to keep them, For my grave to come, Give them to me,	45 Now is the time, To violate the eleventh commandment, For today's pain is tomorrow's imminent comfort, Now is the time, Yes it is the time.

(Mbuli 1989a:18-9)

This powerful poem contains all of Mzwakhe's willingness to fight for a democratic South Africa, and all of his courage to speak out against apartheid. As we read in these lines, his battle was fierce and determined. 'Now is the time', a phrase that explicitly dominates the poem, is an exhortation to all South African citizens to face reality and change it, to resist discrimination and turn their country from inhumane to humane. As in 'The Day Shall Dawn', Mzwakhe is once more using his poetry to stir people's hearts, and 'Now Is The Time' is an even more compelling call to action.

The poem is structured in ten stanzas of irregular length and with irregular metre; however, a pattern can be identified in the alternation of shorter and longer lines. Indeed, the short, repeated line 'Now is the time' encloses each stanza, since it appears at the beginning and at the end of each verse, alternating with longer lines, which compose the body of each verse. Of the three poems from *Change Is Pain* that have been presented in the current chapter, 'Now Is The Time' is the one to most emblematically employ the device of repetition, as the phrase 'Now is the time' is repeated twenty times throughout the text. Since repetition has the aim to emphasise concepts, by repeating this phrase the poet wants to underline the urgency to act and rebel against apartheid. Stressing this concept suggests that people can no longer postpone their uprising because the time to restore democracy in South Africa has come. The language is mostly metaphorical: the poem never says explicitly the word 'apartheid', but it expresses the need to fight it by listing a series of actions to do, using strong images that make readers and listeners immediately think of apartheid.

Let us have a closer look at what the poet is doing when he urges South African action. In the first stanza, the speaking voice mentions the need 'To climb up the mountain,/And reason against habit' (lines 2, 3). The image of climbing can represent the difficulty of the task of defeating apartheid; in addition, it coherently draws on African traditions of recurring to familiar natural images to build metaphors. Line 3 contrasts the act of reasoning with the concept of 'habit'. Habit,

per se, does not possess negative connotations; however, when something becomes a habit, people tend not to question it. This is what might have happened during apartheid: unfair rules had been set to separate blacks and 'coloured' from whites; these rules were utterly arbitrary, and yet, people were forced to follow them as if they were the absolute truth. Thus, a racist mentality had settled in and had become habit. In order to question such a habit, people needed to 'reason', to use culture and education as protest weapons; this might be what is being encouraged at the beginning of the poem.

Another image that recovers the tradition of 'natural' metaphors appears in lines 6, 7. The speaking voice is asking 'To review the barren soil of nature,/Ruined by the winds of tyranny'. Natural images are employed to explain the effects of the regime in South Africa. Just as harsh winds ruin crops and make soil unfruitful, in the same way tyranny ruins society. The idea of people being made 'barren' by tyranny can be interpreted in two ways: first, victims of a regime are considered worthless, with the result of making them feel empty and useless; second, in the specific case of apartheid, blacks were deprived of dignified educational instruments which could allow them to contribute in the South African cultural frame. Since black people could not access education, they were bound to remain ignorant, and therefore culturally unfruitful.

A further vivid image conveying the poet's rejection of apartheid appears in lines 17, 18. The poet wants the people "To vomit the remains of fascism,/Back to the bucket of imperialism'. As for 'The Day Shall Dawn', Mzwakhe is connecting apartheid to both fascism and Nazism (line 43), and he is directly blaming imperialism for the apartheid regime. The image of vomiting is an explicit rendering of the repudiation of racism that South Africans are being pushed to enact.

In the following couple of stanzas, the poet makes references to roses and thorns, dwelling once more in the semantic field of nature. The poet asks to be given roses while he is still alive, and spear the thorns for his grave; 'roses' might symbolise pleasant things – therefore, in this context, they might refer to victory over apartheid. Hence, he might mean that he wishes to see

victory over racism while he still lives, urging immediate action. Speaking of action, in the ninth stanza, the poet renews his petition to react (lines 38-41): "Now is the time,/ To edify authentic action,/ Against pre-conceived notions of prejudice,/ Now is the time." Here, since the action has to be taken against 'notions of prejudice', we understand how apartheid is linked with the concept of preconception and discrimination. The poem ends with a heartening sentence, "For today's pain is tomorrow's imminent comfort", so as to promise South Africans a better future, in which the struggles of the present time will finally have a victorious outcome.

The album version of the poem makes use of a reggae style, with sonorous trumpets, drums and guitars. The song opens with a quite long instrumental introduction (almost forty seconds), followed by Mzwakhe's voice, which begins in a low but firm tone. Gradually, as usual in Mzwakhe's performances, his tone rises, charging his voice with meaning and strength.

4.2.2 *Unbroken Spirit* (1989)

Unbroken Spirit is the album that Mzwakhe composed while he was in solitary confinement over the year 1988. As mentioned in chapter three, Mzwakhe managed to memorize all the poems during his detention and recorded them as soon as he was released the following year. As for *Change Is Pain*, *Unbroken Spirit* takes an open stance against apartheid, but the novelty of the latter album is that the poet based his texts on his first-hand experience in prison.



Figure 8: Front cover of *Unbroken Spirit*.

Retrieved from:

<https://shiftyrecords.bandcamp.com/album/unbroken-spirit>

In order to grasp the essence of Mzwakhe's message, I have selected three poems from this album: 'Alone', 'Accused', and 'Crocodiles'. The texts will be taken once again from *Before Dawn*.

4.2.2a 'Alone'

Alone all alone,
One hundred and seventy-six days,
One hundred and seventy-six nights,
In solitary confinement,
5 Alone all alone.

Perhaps like God on the day of creation,
Alone all alone,
Perhaps like an animal inside a cage,
Alone all alone.

10 Isolated and thinking,
Alone all alone,
Dreaming and suffered nightmares,
Alone all alone,
Cut-off from the world of human beings,
15 And brought closer to the world of lions and mambas.

No visits from my beloved, beloved ones,
Alone all alone,
Neither Bishop nor Bible allowed in,
Alone all alone.

20 No music not even from the Police Brass Band,
No mirror permitted to create my twinsel,
And conquer the loneliness,
Alone all alone.

One hundred and seventy-six days,
25 One hundred and seventy-six nights,
In solitary confinement,
Alone all alone.

Alone in a solitary cell alone,
Alone in a solitary corner alone,
30 Alone in solitary confusion alone,
Alone in solitary conversation alone,
Yes, alone in solitary combat,
Against solitary confinement,
Alone all alone.

(Mbuli 1989a:44-5)

This is the most straightforward account of Mzwakhe's experience in prison. It is straining the concept of loneliness with an almost haunting result, as it uses striking similes to depict the poet's condition. The poem features common characteristics in Mzwakhe's work, such as stanzas of varied length and alternation of short and long lines with no rhyme. It is also extremely rich in repetitions, with the phrase 'Alone all alone' repeated eleven times throughout the text. The same sentence is used to create parallelism as it opens and closes the first stanza – conveying, moreover, a sense of cyclicity. Other examples of parallelism can be found, first, in the repetition of 'one hundred and seventy-six' (lines 2, 3 and 24, 25); then, in the second, third and fourth stanzas, where the phrase 'alone all alone' is repeated, alternating with other sentences (lines 10-13 and

16-19); and finally, in the last stanza, where a sequence of four lines presents an almost identical structure in each line, with only the exception of one changing word for line (lines 28-31). It is extremely evident how Mzwakhe is hereby employing traditional rhetorical techniques coming from South African oral heritage, and applying them to impactful and affecting themes such as captivity.

Moving on to consider the figures of speech suggested in the poem, the pair of similes in lines 6 and 8 appears as particularly captivating; the poet is describing how the experience of confinement felt, and he associates it first with being as alone as God during the creation of the world, and then he compares himself to a caged animal. The first simile carries particular irony: if we think of God on the day of creation, we think of an extremely powerful being who, despite being completely alone, managed to make primordial elements obey his will. In prison, Mzwakhe was indeed alone as God, but he was not even in the slightest way as powerful as Him. Therefore, the second simile moves closer to what his real condition was: lonely, frustrated and powerless, like an animal in a cage. This simile is then retrieved at the end of the following stanza (line 15), where the de-humanising aspect of prison life is once again underlined. The poet declares to be isolated from other people, the way wild animals are kept at a distance; as usual, Mzwakhe draws on familiar African elements for this concept, mentioning, as exemplary wild animals, lions and mambas.

The fourth and fifth stanzas reinforce the concept of loneliness by listing – and beginning each sentence with a negative adverb – a series of actions or people he was not allowed to do or see. He could not see his family or friends, he was not permitted to have a spiritual guide, and he could not even look at himself in a mirror so as to feel less lonely. Moreover, what makes Mzwakhe even more distressed is the complete lack of music. The poet is therefore highlighting how cruel this kind of punishment was under the apartheid regime, since it deprived convicts of things that might appear as ordinary – a mirror, some music – but are in fact what gives dignity to life. The poem ends with a final stanza that speeds up its pace, by using insistent repetition:

Alone in a solitary cell alone,
Alone in a solitary corner alone,
Alone in solitary confusion alone,
Alone in solitary conversation alone,
Yes, alone in solitary combat,
Against solitary confinement,
Alone all alone. (28-34)

The focus here appears to become narrower and narrower as the lines proceed. First, the poet is alone in a solitary cell; then, he is in a corner of the cell; then the perspective zooms closer and enters the poet's mind, which is in solitary confusion, and a consequence of this is solitary conversation. In these lines, 'alone' is repeated twice in each line, at the beginning and at the end; this appears to retrieve the same device employed in the very first stanza, which conveys a cyclical structure. It might mean that the poet's everyday experience in prison starts and ends in loneliness. Finally, the poet acknowledges his position as activist against apartheid; however, he also realises to be alone in this fight: it is a 'solitary combat'.

As far as the performative aspect is concerned, I will discuss here both the album version, and one of the many public performances of the poet, which appears in the 1990 documentary *Songololo*. The album recording of the poem opens with hypnotic and intricated drumbeats, followed by flutes, which play a somehow distressing melody that might convey the mood of the poem. Mzwakhe's voice here plays with rhythm by articulating the words 'Alone all alone': he inserts pauses between each word, accentuating them by rising his tone and making longer vowel sounds. In some points, audio effects are added, especially to the word 'alone', which is followed by its own echo. This might have a double meaning: on the one hand, it appears to have an ironic effect, since it makes it sound like somebody else is there, repeating the poet's words; instead, we know that he is alone. On the other hand, the echo is precisely a natural effect made by sound bouncing on the empty



Figure 9: Mzwakhe accompanying his poem with body gesture. Image taken from:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hxZMHYkhXo

walls of a space, hence emphasising the lonely condition of the poet. When the recitation comes to the final stanza, the poet's voice helps to create an ascending climax by rising its pitch in the first 'alone' of each sentence.

From the footage of the performance in *Songololo* (1990), we can gather interesting performative traits that highlight Mzwakhe's retrieval of traditional elements of oral performance. First of all, Mzwakhe is seen to employ what has been called an 'opening formula', a sentence or phrase uttered to catch the audience's attention, and which signals the beginning of the delivery. In this case, he says 'So we start' and 'I begin'. During the recitation, the way he modulates his voice is similar to the album version, however, in a public performance – instead of a recorded one – the poet also makes use of body gesture and facial expressions. In the video, Mzwakhe mostly uses his hands to underline and emphasise the content of his poem; he especially accompanies the word 'alone' with his raised index finger, so as to give a visual symbol of his being one and lonely (figure 9).

4.2.2b 'Accused'

I have been accused, By those who differ with me, And those who differ me, Differ with my people.	15 Those who betrayed the soil and the soul of man, I call it an overall insult of the people's dignity.
5 For the concordance I have made, I stood against those who caged my people, Since my oath is a commitment to the nation, I have been accused.	What a curse this world is, I was born in vinegar times, And fed with lemons, 20 By those who constructed roads to plunder and theft.
For sporting crime agitating the mind, 10 I have been accused. This is my story against a devil philosophy, A philosophy of culture with roots of slavery.	For standing against a global charter of fascism, And prosperity of animalism with nepotism, I have been accused, By gentlemen from the western darkness/jungle,
I have been accused, Both by internal and foreign parasites,	25 What a damn this world is, My people oppressed on behalf of America and [Britain, These are identicals of imperialism, That named colonial terrorism – Law and Order.

Peace loving humankind,	The people shall govern,
30 Rise up and crush the multinational system of evil,	Is the road sign,
Dismally, gunpowder has failed,	To architectural destination of man,
To suppress the spirit of the people.	This is my poem signed with the blood of Amilcar
The people shall govern,	[Cabral.
Is the road message,	
35 To the promised land,	(Mbuli 1989a:36-7)

With this poem, Mzwakhe is once again speaking out against apartheid, highlighting the consequences of his battle; he has been accused and persecuted by the government for his poetry's claims. These lines, composed and memorised in prison, want to reveal the true brutality of apartheid to various audiences, so as to disclose the hidden reality of the regime. Nevertheless, a message of hope does not fail to emerge, marking one of the characteristics of Mzwakhe's protest poetry.

Similarly to all of the previously analysed poems, 'Accused' presents a number of stanzas which begin quite regularly (stanzas 1-5 have four lines each) and become longer towards the end, as if to suggest a rising of intensity. The usual lack of rhyme is once again confirming the link between Mzwakhe's poetry and traditional South African oral (though not only) poetry. Unlike poems such as 'Alone' or 'Now Is The Time', 'Accused' does not include so many repetitions and parallelisms; the only sentence to be repeated is 'I have been accused', but it does not create a parallel pattern, as it is placed in different points in each stanza. We might say, therefore, that the poem's structure is leaning more towards the tradition of colloquial speech-like poetry, rather than the tradition of systematic repetitions and parallelisms.

Let us now turn to consider the poem's content, verse by verse. Mzwakhe begins by bringing up a theme that he has widely used in his poems: the identification and unification between the poet and the people (either the victims of apartheid or more generally all South

African citizens who hoped for a democratic country). He states that he has been accused by those who disagree with him (lines 1, 2), and adds that if they disagree with him, then they automatically disagree with his people. The identification here is visible, first, from the connection poet-people highlighted by a sort of syllogism; and second, from the use of the possessive adjective 'my' in reference to people, repeated again in lines 6 and 26. Also in line 6, Mzwakhe says his people are 'caged', which alludes to the same image as in 'Alone' (line 8) and expresses the idea of what it felt like to live under apartheid.

In the third stanza, the poem emphasises its autobiographical nature (line 11, 'This is my story against a devil philosophy'), and mentions, with the word 'slavery' a theme that will be touched again later in the poem: the direct blaming of colonialism and imperialism for the establishment of apartheid. This theme is again mentioned in the following stanza, when the poet blames 'internal and foreign parasites' (line 14) of having betrayed South Africa. Here the alliteration of the s- sound in 'soil' and 'soul' and the pun on the similar pronunciation of the two words stress the sense of unity between a people's land and its soul, a sense of identification that has been disrupted by apartheid. Such a betrayal is felt as an insult to the people's dignity (line 16).

Lines 17-20 present a metaphor that depicts the harshness of the reality in which the poet has lived, comparing his world to the sour taste of 'vinegar' and 'lemons'. The world is cursed, declares the poet (line 17); it has 'gone bad' just as stale wine turns into vinegar. Furthermore, if lemons metaphorically represent the poet's nourishment provided by the leaders of his country ('...fed with lemons,/By those who constructed roads to plunder and theft'), we can understand how the poet's childhood and adolescence have not only lacked the correct sustenance, but have also been characterised by mercilessness and sorrow.

The sixth stanza, which is longer than the previous ones, presents a clear accusation against apartheid through the explicit connection to the crimes of not only fascism, but also imperialism and colonialism, perpetrated by America and Britain. In these lines, Mzwakhe is courageously speaking out for 'his people' (line 26), who have suffered oppression for too long. However, it is in the next stanza, lines 29-32, where a confident message of hope brings forth a sense of justice. Using words and sentences that remind us of some passages in 'The Day Shall Dawn', Mzwakhe addresses his poem to 'peace loving humankind', encouraging his fellow South Africans to concretely act against the regime. Lines 31 and 32 express all the confidence that the poet has on the people's power to overcome apartheid, as he states that not even violence ('gunpowder', line 31) has managed to 'suppress the spirit of the people' (32). The willingness to change, to move towards a free, democratic South Africa, is stronger than racist hatred. One of the most powerful messages of the 'people's poet' is contained in these two lines, and it makes us understand the reasons behind Mandela's appreciation of Mzwakhe: he was advocating with poetry and music what Madiba had been fighting for.

Again, as in 'The Day Shall Dawn', in the last stanza the poet uses the modal verb 'shall' to express an action that is bound to happen in the near future, and he repeats twice the phrase 'The people shall govern', making thus a strong assertion of the people's ultimate victory. The poem ends with a reference to Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973), a Bissau-Guinean anti-colonial activist who was assassinated for being the leader of the pro-independence movement PAIGC. The fact that Mzwakhe drew on the example of an African activist from another country is an example of the pan-African message that he has promoted in several of his poems. Moreover, with the image of his poem being signed with the blood of Cabral, Mzwakhe is openly siding with any anti-colonial and pro-independence movement in Africa.

This poem's performance, as recorded in *Unbroken Spirit*, is significantly different from those of the poems previously analysed. For this one, instrumental backing is not present, and it is replaced, instead, by female *a cappella* choruses which Mzwakhe himself joins at certain points. The first sixty seconds of the song are covered by such choruses, sung in Zulu, harmonising the melody. It is a kind of singing that might draw on the *mbube* tradition to which young Mzwakhe had taken part with his father. Since the whole song then develops with Mzwakhe's recitation over a vocal backing that repeats the initial chorus, we might also claim that this particular arrangement might have been inspired by the *isicathamiya* tradition that has been described in chapter three.

4.2.2c 'Crocodiles'

I am the product of hunger, I am the product of social injustice, I represent the insulted majority, I represent victims of tyranny, 5 I come from apartheid land.	20 How can I write about the beauty of nature? When the ground is daily soaked, With blood of the innocent, Nevertheless Agostinho Neto the late Poet-President, Used both the pen and the machine, 25 To achieve the liberation of Angola.
I represent a nation, I recite for a nation, A peace loving nation, A nation that never enjoyed freedom, 10 Since conquest my land is blood stained, From time immemorial, Human corpses have replaced pockets of cement, In building the future of post-apartheid land, Nevertheless no oppressive Kingdom is eternal.	The land is the key to social order, The people are like crocodiles in the river, And no one can fight crocodiles inside the river, South Africa why therefore buy time? 30 When crocodiles are against you, Why give chase to lizards? When crocodiles are against you.
15 How hard and tormenting it is, To write about slavery and not freedom, How hard and tormenting it is, To write about pain and not joy, When shall I write about daffodils?	The minority cannot rule over the majority forever, When the world is for justice and peace, 35 South Africa is for reforms, When ancient slavery was abolished, The slaves were set free, When pass laws were declared abolished, Freedom loving South Africans remained in bondage.

40 Nevertheless the dove of peace,
Also belongs to us in the South,
No regime can press over a hot lid,
Of a boiling pot forever,
The land is the key to social order,

45 And the tradition of no surrender,
Is the name of the game to total emancipation,
The tradition is no give up,
Is the name of the game to total emancipation.

(Mbuli 1989a:42-3)

I conclude the section concerning *Unbroken Spirit* by looking at the poem 'Crocodiles', one of the most well-known pieces of the people's poet. As for the other poems from the same album, 'Crocodiles' is not only a declaration of resistance to apartheid, but especially a cry for justice, and a direct threat to the regime. In this poem, many of the themes already employed in other texts from the same album are present, making its content coherent with the general message contained in *Unbroken Spirit*.

Considering the structure of the poem, we notice the usual employment of irregular metre and lack of rhyme which make the text similar to oral discourse. Repetition and parallelism are broadly used throughout the poem, employed specifically to emphasise certain ideas. We see a first example of emphatic repetition and parallelism at the very beginning of the poem, in the first stanza:

I am the product of hunger,
I am the product of social injustice,
I represent the insulted majority,
I represent victims of tyranny,
I come from apartheid land. (1-5)

The anaphorical anteposition of the pronoun 'I' in each line stresses the focus on the poet, who, despite speaking in first person, is representing and assuming the point of view of any apartheid victim. The poem, therefore, opens directly with an emphasis on what apartheid has done to individuals, since the 'I' is associated with the worst aspects of the regime (hunger, injustice, tyranny), and since the individual has become part of an 'insulted majority' (3). Apartheid, thus, appears as an abusive oligarchy, subjugating the black majority of the population. This first stanza

is in itself a statement of the poet's clear opposition to the regime. The second stanza, which is longer than the first and has longer lines, begins with the poet's identification with his nation, 'I represent a nation,/I recite for a nation' (6, 7), which is 'peace loving' (8) – a term Mzwakhe used in other poems as well when addressing his country or his compatriots – but has 'never enjoyed freedom' (9). The explanation for this comes in the next line, 'Since conquest my land is blood stained' (10), in which we can recognise the already-mentioned themes of colonialism ('conquest') and identification with national soil ('my land'). The second stanza ends with another recurrent theme in Mzwakhe's poetry: hope. 'Nevertheless no oppressive Kingdom is eternal' (14). The word 'nevertheless' itself is signalling that something is about to change: despite the tragic consequences of apartheid, the regime is not destined to survive, it is not 'eternal'. The third stanza is interestingly structured with alternating repetitions of sentences and of the verb 'write':

How hard and tormenting it is,
To write about slavery and not freedom,
How hard and tormenting it is,
To write about pain and not joy,
When shall I write about daffodils?
How can I write about the beauty of nature?
When the ground is daily soaked,
With blood of the innocent, (15-22)

The sentence repeated is the exclamation 'How hard and tormenting it is,' followed by its subject: first, writing about 'slavery and not freedom' (16), and second, writing about 'pain and not joy'. Here, the first-person speaker is indeed the poet, as he realises the toughness of his task in that precise historical period. He sees himself forced to write about sorrowful topics, which are the opposite of what he would like to write about: using parallel structures, the poet contrasts 'slavery' with 'freedom' and 'pain' with 'joy'. To this painful realisation, a couple of questions follow, both concerning his poetic task. They are rhetorical questions, since their obvious answer is to be found both in previous and following lines: 'the ground is daily soaked,/With blood of the innocents' (21,22). Such a dreadful sight cannot but force the poet to entirely dedicate himself to the fight

against apartheid. The third stanza ends with another allusion to hope, again introduced by 'Nevertheless' (line 23), and with the mentioning of an African figure, central to the liberation struggle in Angola: Agostinho Neto. He was a poet who led the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola and became the first president of his liberated country. As he does in 'Accused', Mzwakhe is bringing forth the example of another victorious African character, as a further stimulus to inspire people to free South Africa.

The fourth stanza is characterised by the metaphor of the 'crocodiles', which gives the title to the poem. Once again, we see how the African tradition has influenced Mzwakhe's poetry, as it emerges in the use of concepts that are familiar to African audiences. Crocodiles represent danger, as they are insidious animals that hide before attacking. Mzwakhe builds his comparison on this concept, comparing people to crocodiles inside a river (lines 27); the river is their kingdom, crocodiles cannot be fought there (28). Similarly, a fight to apartheid would entail a clash among the people of the same country, which is dangerous but inevitable. This urgency is expressed in lines 29-32:

South Africa why therefore buy time?
When crocodiles are against you,
Why give chase to lizards?
When crocodiles are against you. (29-32)

Here crocodiles are mentioned in contrast to lizards, which symbolise minor, irrelevant problems the country is occupied with instead of facing the real danger: crocodiles/apartheid. With a structure of two couples of alternating questions and statements, and the repeated assertion of the statements, Mzwakhe is prompting his country to take action.

Alternating repetitions are also found in the fourth stanza (lines 34-39):

When the world is for justice and peace,
South Africa is for reforms,
When ancient slavery was abolished,
The slaves were set free,

When pass laws were declared abolished,
Freedom loving South Africans remained in bondage.

Here we see three pairs of sentences, of which the first, third and fifth are parallelly structured, with the anaphoric position of the adverb 'when'. They are meant to compare South Africa's situation to other circumstances elsewhere in space and time. First, the poet highlights the difference between his reform-worn country and peaceful and fair foreign countries. Then, he signals how apartheid-time South Africa appears regressive compared to slavery times: back then, slaves managed to gain their freedom, while during apartheid black South Africans are constantly oppressed, despite the alleged abolishment of certain laws.

The poem's final stanza begins with the word 'Nevertheless', which, as in previous cases in the text, introduces the theme of hope for a new, better South Africa. The metaphorical image for this is the 'dove of peace' (line 40) – a symbol retrieved from the Biblical tradition – which 'belongs' to South Africa (41). A striking metaphor follows these lines: 'No regime can press over a hot lid,/Of a boiling pot forever' (42,43). The image represented here is that of a boiling pot; if we picture it in our mind, we see water starting to pour from the pot, and its lid struggling to stay put. Just as that lid will have to be removed, so apartheid cannot oppress a population which is rising up like boiling water. Sooner or later, the water/population will overcome the strength applied by the lid/regime, and – quoting line 33 – the minority will not rule over the majority forever. The instrumental track composed as backing for this poem, in *Unbroken Spirit*, begins with a bass guitar riff that has similar sounds to western rock tradition. The drums and percussions inserted beat a quite slow but steady rhythm, to which is added a lead saxophone that plays solo parts in different points of the song. Mzwakhe's voice follows the placid rhythm of the music, as it begins with a low and full pitch; it will slightly rise



Figure 10: Mzwakhe's facial expressions.

Screenshot retrieved from:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Vo8yObOFx0&t=363s>

and animate as the poem proceeds. In *Songololo* (1990), Mzwakhe is more than once filmed while performing this poem, both with and without musical backing. Close-ups of his face show the expressions he makes while reciting, mainly closing his eyes and slightly shaking his head, looking concentrated, almost as if underlining with these expressions what he is saying (figure 10). In another context, when reciting his poem without his band, he makes a more extensive use of body gesture (figure 11), especially using his hands (in a similar way to what I have mentioned for the performance of 'Alone'). It is plain to see, thus, how the traditional elements of African performance, such as body gesture and modulation of the voice pitch, find clear expression in Mzwakhe's poetic performances.



Figure 11: Mzwakhe's hand gestures in performance. Screenshot retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDTVRV6sOJY&t=692s>

4.2.3 *Resistance Is Defence* (1992)

The poetic and musical activity of Mzwakhe Mbuli bloomed and developed in the late eighties, during the last years of the apartheid regime. His career saw powerful protest poems being composed and turned into songs, with musical and rhythmic structures drawing on African traditions. At the beginning of the 1990s, with Mandela's liberation and the start of negotiations to end apartheid, Mzwakhe's poetic focus began to slightly shift towards other issues and perspectives. He was working for the UDF, therefore his commitment to politics and democracy was not losing strength, but he also started to expand the content of his poetry to different matters from those ones concerning only apartheid. An example of this can be found in the album *Resistance Is Defence* (1992), which contains more songs in South African native languages as compared to his previous albums – possibly an attempt to reconnect with South African roots after the discriminatory years of apartheid – turning to consider



Figure 12: Front cover of *Resistance Is Defence* (1992). Retrieved from: <https://www.allmusic.com/album/resistance-is-defence-mw0000678997>

contemporary events, such as the imprisonment of Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists (as in the poem 'Stalwarts'), or socio-economic problems (as in 'Land Deal'). In this section, I have selected one poem from *Resistance Is Defence*, 'Land Deal', to exemplify the change in Mzwakhe's poetry content together with a persistent recurrence of traditional linguistic and rhetorical devices.

4.2.3a 'Land Deal'

Remember, remember, remember, khumbula (x7).	The land bought, the land never sold,
Let me remember,	The land sold, the land never bought.
I can't remember,	
Who can remember?	Philosophers, historians, hear my call,
5 Do you remember?	Philosophers, historians, disclose the truth,
I cannot remember,	25 Philosophers, historians, disclose the facts,
Yes, I do remember World War I,	Disclose to me the vouchers of the land deal,
I do remember World War II,	Disclose to me the unknown price,
But I do not remember the land deal,	Who sold the land?
10 I do not remember the auction sale,	And who bought the land?
The land bought, the land never sold,	30 The land bought, the land never sold,
The land sold, the land never bought.	Today people pay for the unoccupied land,
	People pay for the no man's land,
Remember, remember, remember, khumbula (x7).	People pay for the mother land,
I can't remember,	People pay for the father land,
15 I cannot remember,	35 People pay for the so-called farmers' land,
I can't remember,	What freedom kind people died for?
I do remember World War I,	What freedom you and I struggled for?
I do remember World War II,	When land unoccupied is long sold?
But I do not remember the land deal,	The land bought, the land never sold,
20 I do not remember the auction sale,	40 The land sold, the land never bought.

Unlike poems from *Change Is Pain* and *Unbroken Spirit*, whose texts were printed in *Before Dawn*, Mzwakhe's poems from the nineties onwards have not been officially published in poetry books. Therefore, the text of 'Land Deal' reported here has been taken and adapted from two sources: a 2017 article on 'African Times' which quoted the whole text and commented it, and the audio recording of the song, which helped to understand the separation of stanzas and the repetition of refrains.

The anonymous article published in 'African Times' in December 2017 mentioned Mzwakhe's poem as part of a book review; the book in question is *The Land Bought, The Land Never Sold. Land Dispossession in South Africa – Makgabeng As A Case Study* (2012), by Dr Tlou Setumu. Its title is clearly inspired by Mzwakhe's poem, as 'Land Deal' is indeed trying to uncover the illegal arrangements concerning land that had occurred throughout the colonial centuries in South Africa. "In this poem, Mzwakhe refers to how land was dispossessed from its owners without being negotiated or being sold," the article states. It goes on: "In Africa, the European colonial forces simply annexed land and took it to themselves without having bought it. Later, the same white colonial authorities sold that land, which they had never bought in the first place. That is why Mzwakhe is exclaiming, 'The land bought, the land never sold. The land sold, the land never bought'". The main meaning of the poem is thus explained. Nevertheless, the deep significance of the poem is rendered through a careful use of repetition and anaphora, of rhetorical questions and provocative statements, which make Mzwakhe's poem much more than a simple plea for land justice.

As for the majority of his poems, Mzwakhe is once again employing traditional literary devices to discuss central issues of his time. In 'Land Deal', beside an extensive use of repetition and parallelism, the main rhetorical device employed appears to be anaphora; indeed, most of the repeated words and sentences are placed at the beginning of successive lines. Such strategy stresses further the emphatic effect of repetition. Examples of this can be found in lines 23-25 ('Philosophers, historians'), 26-27 ('Disclose to me'), 32-35 ('People pay for the'), and 36-37 ('What freedom'). These lines can also be examples of parallelism, since the anaphoric repetitions are not limited to one word, but often regard almost the whole line. A further example of extensive use of repetition can be found with the word 'remember', which is present in almost every line of the first two stanzas. The insistence with which repetition is used throughout the poem is what

conveys a rhythmical structure. Again, as usual in Mzwakhe's poetry, there is not a fixed metrical scheme and rhymes are absent; therefore, rhythm is expressed through repetition.

Repetition does not only concern single lines, but also entire stanzas; this is the case with the first two verses of the poem, which are almost identical. Both stanzas are opened and closed with the same lines, almost as if recalling traditional customs of 'opening and closing formulas' to start and finish oral poems. Both verses thus feature the chorus 'Remember, remember, remember, khumbula' (lines 1 and 13), which is repeated seven times in each verse; the stanzas then present the same ending couplet, which is also repeated at the very end of the poem: 'The land bought, the land never sold,/The land sold, the land never bought' (lines 11-12, 21-22, 39-40). The echoing of these refrains gives the poem another characteristic that comes from African oral tradition: the cyclical structure of the poem/narrative. The 'body' of the first two stanzas is composed of a series of statements and questions, winding around the action of remembering. The poet is affirming that he cannot remember the 'land deal' (9, 19) and the 'auction sale' (10, 20) in which African land was bought or sold to European settlers. That is because the land was 'never bought' and 'never sold': it was abruptly and illegitimately taken from native populations. The repeated couplet in which all this is expressed takes the form of an antimetabole, a literary device that involves repeating a phrase in reverse order.

All through the poem, the poetic voice communicates in first person. However, it is more likely that this first person stands for a generalisation of the African people, rather than referring to Mzwakhe himself (the speaking voice declares to remember the two world wars; it could not be Mzwakhe speaking, since he was not born yet at that time). Hence, we see how, once again, the perspective of Mzwakhe's poem is comprehensive of the entire South African population he wants to represent.

The third stanza does not begin with the opening refrain that was used in the previous two verses, but it rather propels the discourse towards a direct plea for justice. He addresses his request to 'philosophers' and 'historians', since they had the power and authority to question what had brought the dispossession of land into being. The article in 'African Times', commenting the poem, observed: "Conquest was one of the main forms in which indigenous communities were dispossessed of land, livestock and other resources. Therefore, conquest was one of the land deals which Mzwakhe is asking philosophers and historians to disclose the truth and facts about." Moreover, another reason for his asking to unveil the truth might have come from the fact that in the early nineties, when Mzwakhe was writing the poems for *Resistance Is Defence*, negotiations to end apartheid had begun. Thus, in the poem, he is addressing people that might have had a say in such negotiations³¹.

The couple of questions in lines 29, 30 can be interpreted in two ways; on the one hand, they might refer to what the poet wants to know from the 'philosophers' and 'historians', while on the other hand, they can be understood as rhetorical questions, as the poem has more than once made clear that nobody had officially either bought or sold the land. From line 31 to 35, the poet portrays the injustice that black South Africans were forced to undergo as a result of the dispossession of their land:

Today people pay for the unoccupied land,
People pay for the no man's land,
People pay for the mother land,
People pay for the father land,

31 An issue that the poetic voice might have wanted 'philosophers' and 'historians' to discuss could have concerned the land arrangements regarding the 1913 Native Land Act. The 2017 article from 'African Times' states: "According to that arrangement, only land dispossessions which occurred after the passing of the notorious 1913 Natives Land Act would be considered for restitution, redistribution and tenure reform. In other words, large tracts of land that had been forcefully annexed from the indigenous African communities prior to 1913 were not negotiable."

People pay for the so-called farmers' land (31-35)

The anaphoric repetition of 'people' has already been pointed out, and it suggests the people's position as main victims of unjust payments. Next to each repetition, these lines present a series of epithets referring to South African land: 'unoccupied land', 'no man's land', 'mother land', 'father land', and 'farmers' land', each expressing a characteristic of such a land. 'Unoccupied' refers to the state of the land prior to European colonisation; 'no man's land' might describe it from the colonisers' point of view, since they considered it as a land at their total disposal, regardless of how native populations had been living in it; 'mother land' and 'father land' convey the close relationship between the land and its inhabitants, as does 'farmers' land', which indicates that colonisers deprived African inhabitants also from their cultivated soil.

The portrayal of African populations as victims of the 'land deal' is also suggested in lines 36, 37, as the poet inserts another couple of rhetorical questions concerning a hypothetical freedom for which 'kind people' struggled and sacrificed themselves. By asking 'What freedom...?', the poet implies that, as long as the truth about the 'land deal' is not disclosed, South Africans will have fought in vain, as – at the time when the poem was being written – they were not yet free.

Lastly, another aspect worth considering is the album version of the poem, which reveals how Mzwakhe retrieved South African musical traditions. The melody and rhythm of the song is fast-paced and cheerful, as most of his tracks are. This aspect connects Mzwakhe's music to traditional melodies of his country, but at the same time it creates a clash with the content of the poem, which touches tragic topics of South African history. This seeming contradiction is often found in Mzwakhe's sung poems, and it is likely to have been willingly employed in order to create a sort of ironic effect: the poet is joining a melody built on major chords – traditionally associated with light-hearted topics – and lyrics concerning a thorny subject in South Africa. Traditional African music, unlike European compositions, is by far characterised by major chords and might

not conceive the Western duality between major key/happy and minor key/sad. However, Mzwakhe's work has more than once made use of European-like minor key arrangements, demonstrating his knowledge of Western musical traditions. It can be asserted, then, that his choice of fusing a major melody with melancholy lyrics is not only driven by traditional influences, but rather it is intentionally done with an ironical purpose.

A final interesting aspect of the album version of 'Land Deal' concerns the use of a sung chorus. The refrains of the poem ('Remember, remember, remember, khumbula' and 'The land bought, the land never sold,/The land sold, the land never bought') are sung and repeated by a choir of female voices. This might make us think of the *isicathamiya* call-and-response music style, to which Mzwakhe makes reference more than once.

4.2.4 New Perspectives: *Mbulism* (2004)

After the 1994 democratic elections, Mzwakhe's poetry turned away from apartheid and started to face other issues that represent problems in twenty-first century South Africa. Together with 'greatest hits' albums, Mzwakhe released new albums with poems addressing issues such as rape, abortion, moral decay and corruption in politics. In order to provide an example for this change of perspective, I have selected a poem, 'Rape', from the album *Mbulism* (2004). This poem/song has been deemed highly significant for its content, as it explicitly shows Mzwakhe's protest's new focus – from apartheid and racial discrimination to moral and ethical issues.

4.2.4a 'Rape'

As I have mentioned above, Mzwakhe did not publish his poems in books after *Before Dawn*, therefore the text of 'Rape' will be transcribed from the album track³². In order to transfer

32 This came to be a challenge in my work; despite thorough research, the CD was difficult to purchase online, and no reliable websites shared the lyrics of the poem. The transcription was

the text on the page in a way that respects Mzwakhe's usual poem structure, I have divided each line according to the 'breath-units' and pauses that Mzwakhe makes in reciting, and I have interpreted instrumental bridges between the spoken lines as breaks between stanzas.

Why should they die?	30 Rapists have gone berserk,
Why should they be raped?	They rape women who raise reared them,
Why should they die?	Rapists are like wolves in a sheep skin,
Why inhumanity?	They loot female bodies [intrusively],
5 Why should they die?	Rapists are engaged in a dead game of attention and
Why should they be killed?	[intention,
Why should they die?	35 They ruin and tear wounds apart,
Why inhumanity?	Africa and the world must explain,
Why should they die?	Who are these creatures?
10 Why should they be raped?	Who are these demons?
Why should they die?	Who are these psychopaths?
Why inhumanity?	40 Who are these sociopaths?
	Why should they die?
Rapists are abusive and brainless,	Why should they be raped?
They are merciless and ruthless,	Why should they die?
15 Rapists are vile vipers and coldblooded,	Why inhumanity?
Rapists are like thorns and weeds in a flower garden,	45 Why should they die?
Africa and the world must explain,	Why should they be killed?
Who are these creatures?	Why should they die?
Who are these demons?	Why inhumanity?
20 Who are these psychopaths?	
Who are these sociopaths?	Rapists have no description,
	50 They look like gulls yet bite like sharks,
Why should they die?	Women and children are constant targets,
Why should they be raped?	Rapists have disgraced the sacredness of manhood,
Why should they die?	Human demons are not placed under the sun,
25 Why inhumanity?	55 Human vampires, human vultures have no place on
Why should they die?	[earth,
Why should they be killed?	They belong to bottomless pits,
Why should they die?	Africa and the world,
Why inhumanity?	It is too late to explain,
	The damage done cannot be quantified,

thus carried out with a meticulous and in-depth listening of the audio track (retrieved from Mzwakhe's official Spotify channel).

60 Rapists are jungle-bound,	Why inhumanity?
They ought to be relegated to a priest status,	Why should they die?
Rape is a cruel trauma,	Why should they be killed?
Yes, it is a cruel trauma.	70 Why should they die?
	Why inhumanity?
Why should they die?	
65 Why should they be raped?	
Why should they die?	

As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, we can recognise some habitual traits of Mzwakhe's poetry, namely unrhyming lines and stanzas with irregular length. However, a further interesting aspect that connects Mzwakhe's latest poetry with the South African oral tradition is the presence of recurring choruses, placed at the beginning and at the end of the poem, and in between the verses. In 'Rape', this is presented in these lines:

Why should they die?
 Why should they be raped?
 Why should they die?
 Why inhumanity?
 Why should they die?
 Why should they be killed?
 Why should they die?
 Why inhumanity?

This refrain, composed of an anaphoric sequence of questions, is found in lines 1-12, 22-29, 41-48, and 64-71. By opening and closing the poem, and by separating each stanza, this refrain gives the text a sense of a cyclical and rhythmical returning to the same point. We can understand this cyclicity in a double way: as a formal strategy, it represents the African device of shaping oral poems and narratives in cyclical structures. As a metaphor, the insistent and recurrent repetition of these unanswered questions might represent what actually happens again and again whenever news of raping and femicide spread: people find themselves asking similar questions without obtaining a satisfactory answer or without seeing the problem solved. Similarly, in each stanza the poet is denouncing the cruelty and inhumanity of rapists, yet, his speech is interspersed with

refrains of questions that do not find their answers in the poet's words. Just as the barbarity of rape appears to be inexplicable, so the question 'Why should they die?' remains unanswered.

Between choruses, the poem is divided in three stanzas arranged in similar structures. Despite their different lengths, each stanza is composed of a first half in which the poet condemns rape by describing rapists with similes and comparisons that express their ruthlessness, and of a second half in which the poet is urging his country and the whole world to find an explanation to this sinful crime. In particular, the first stanza (lines 13-21), after attributing negative adjectives to rapists ('abusive', 'brainless', 'merciless', 'ruthless'), describes them with a metaphor and a simile that remind African audiences of familiar animal and natural spheres. Rapists are called 'vipers' and 'coldblooded' – a typical trait of reptiles (line 15), and are compared to 'thorns and weeds in a flower garden' (line 16). This simile is quite straightforward, since rapists are harmful and hidden among inoffensive people, just like thorns among flowers. The second half of the stanza sees the poet addressing his discourse not only towards his continent, Africa, but also to the whole world. With this we can understand how the tragedy of rape and femicide is a cancer that is not only limited to African countries, but has spread throughout the world; therefore, the responsibility to find a solution should be equally held everywhere. Following this plea for clarification ("Africa and the world must explain," l.17), a series of questions are presented in a parallel and anaphoric structure:

Who are these creatures?
Who are these demons?
Who are these psychopaths?
Who are these sociopaths? (18-21)

This is what the poet is asking the world to explain. He expresses the urge to find an answer, and therefore a solution, to this wicked crime. These four questions, which are repeated in the second stanza, are almost identical, with only one changing element: the nouns through which rapists are

labelled. 'Creatures', 'demons', 'psychopaths' and 'sociopaths' reveal how rapists are deemed inhuman, profoundly disturbed and dangerous.

The second stanza (lines 30-40), like the first, opens with vivid references to rapists' cruel actions – see the use of the verb 'loot' (33) – and with metaphorical depictions of the criminals. Once more, such metaphors contain detectable references to the familiar animal world, as in line 32, where rapists are compared to 'wolves in a sheep skin'. Mzwakhe is thus exposing the most dangerous aspects of rapists using straightforward figures of speech, in order to render his poetry accessible to all kinds of audiences and, in this way, spreading his protest message. From line 36 to 40, the second stanza repeats the same appeal as in lines 17-21, thus stressing the need to find, if not a solution, at least an answer to such an inexplicable tragedy as rape.

The third stanza brings about some differences. As usual in Mzwakhe's poems, this verse is longer than the first ones, as the emphasis and climax rise. Similarly to the previous stanzas, it begins with a first half directed at describing rapists, and continues with a second half where the poet addresses his country and his compatriots. However, the discourse here slightly changes. While in the first two stanzas the poet began his speech by suggesting adjectives to define rapists, here he declares that 'Rapists have no description' (49). At first, this might sound as a contradiction, since the whole poem up to this point is indeed a description of rapists. However, this assertion might mean that no matter how hard one may try to understand the crime of rape, rapists' brutality is so outrageous that cannot be defined. Hence, this stanza suggests the most appalling similes and metaphors to condemn them and to describe their inhumanity. Once again, a simile taken from the animal world is employed, 'They look like gulls yet bite like sharks' (line 50), to underline once more how their apparent innocuousness covers their hidden cruelty. Rapists' inhumanity is also expressed by phrases such as 'human demons' (54), 'human vampires' and 'human vultures' (55), which are not worthy of occupying the same place on earth as other human

beings; instead, the poet condemns them to what can be understood as Hell: 'bottomless pits' (56) where darkness reigns.

After this declaration of rapists' indescribable barbarity, the second half of the stanza sees, indeed, the poet addressing 'Africa and the world' (57), yet with a different attitude. Whereas previously in the poem the poet was demanding an explanation of this crime, he now declares that 'It is too late to explain' (58). He justifies: 'The damage done cannot be quantified' (59). It is not that the poet is yielding to the idea that rape cannot be explained or avoided; on the contrary, he is stating that the crime's seriousness is so significant that there are no solutions or explanations that could ever justify it. In lines 60-61, the poet reaffirms how rapists should be isolated from the rest of the people, saying they are 'jungle-bound', and how they should be forced to chastity ('priest status'). The stanza ends with a double statement of the cruelty of rape, using the emphatic power of the repetition device:

Rape is a cruel trauma,
Yes, it is a cruel trauma. (62-63)

This poem/song can represent another example of the influence of the *isicathamiya* genre on Mzwakhe's career. The call-and-response style is exemplified by the alternating refrains (sung by a female choir) and verses (recited by Mzwakhe). Singing and recitation thus merge, marking one of the most easily recognisable characteristics of Mzwakhe's style.

Mzwakhe has released albums in the late 2000s and early 2010s, such as *Tribute To Mandela* (2008), *Amandla* (2012), which is a collection of his best-known successes from his early works, *Born Free But Always In Chains* (2015), his greatest hits album, and he has been collaborating with young singer Zahara on an extremely successful single dedicated to Mandela (2013). He continues to inspire the people of South Africa by performing at rallies and public ceremonies, but

he is best remembered for his commitment to the anti-apartheid cause of the 1980s and 1990s. Though the number of poems that deserved close attention was higher, I believe that the selection of eight pieces that I have presented in this chapter lets us understand and appreciate not only the deeply committed work of 'the people's poet', but especially the skilful manner in which he has been keeping South African oral traditions alive.

Conclusion

This dissertation has presented the most significant works of South African oral poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, highlighting the ways in which the people's poet has kept the oral traditions of his country alive while merging them with contents which were relevant to his contemporary society. I have shown how the topics touched by the poet have moved from condemning of apartheid to denouncing other problems relevant to post-apartheid South Africa, such as moral decay, abortion and rape. South African oral traditions have emerged in Mzwakhe's work not only through rhetorical and literary devices, but also through the musical arrangements created to accompany his poems. It is indeed thanks to his retrieving of traditions, together with the richness of their contents, that his poems appear so meaningful to South Africans.

Currently, Mzwakhe is continuing to participate in public events reciting his poems and giving inspiring talks to crowds. In a 2016 interview on Namibian inspirational talk show 'Masters of Success', Mzwakhe was asked significant questions regarding his career and the principles on which it has been built. Mzwakhe declared that at the basis of his work stood the principle of fearlessness. After surviving nine bullets in 1997 – he said – he was determined to show the world what he was capable of; hence, the advice he gives young poets is to "go out and tell the truth" (Mbuli, 2016), just as he has been doing.

Moreover, Mzwakhe was asked by the presenter what his source of inspiration was in post-apartheid South Africa. He answered that his inspiration mainly came from the message he wants to spread to motivate the youths. He declared that poor teenagers are often victims of peer pressure, which leads them into drug addiction and crime. Therefore, when he is invited to speak at public gatherings, he tries to give his speech a specific message against substance abuse and criminality (Mbuli, 2016). As a person who has survived through apartheid and several attempts to his life, Mzwakhe has made of the value and sacredness of life his main poetry message in

contemporary South Africa, encouraging his audiences to embrace resilience as a beacon of hope in their lives.

I wish to conclude this dissertation with what I consider the best quote by Mzwakhe Mbuli, which shows the profound wisdom of 'the people's poet' and his thoughtful perspective on life:

"We are never defined by what we have, but by what we have done." (Mbuli, 2016)

APPENDIX (A)

Following Mbuli's trial and detention in 1998, critics and journalists started to investigate and write articles in order to bring light on the developments of the case. Disappointment was expressed regarding the harshness of the sentence, given the fact that evidence appeared to be inconsistent. In 1999, Tangeni Amupadhi wrote an article for the *Mail & Guardian* after a policeman confessed witnessing three of his colleagues beating Mzwakhe Mbuli before his eventual detention.

The afore-mentioned article is hereby reported so as to provide a sense of the impact that the case had in South Africa.

Cop witnessed Mbuli beating

29 Jan 1999, 00:00, Tangeni Amupadhi

A policeman is to testify against three colleagues accused of beating "People's Poet" Mzwakhe Mbuli last week.

Sergeant Maraka Lesika said he saw three other policemen assault Mbuli, but he refused to give details of what he witnessed.

Mbuli laid charges of assault and *crimen injuria* at the Lyttelton police station in Pretoria on Thursday, and immediately went for a medical examination. This week the police watchdog, the Independent Complaints Directorate (ICD), interviewed Mbuli and his police witness.

Representative Jabu Dlamini confirmed that the ICD has taken the case, but would divulge no further details.

Mbuli was assaulted by the three officers after he appeared in court last week. Mbuli was asking for a transfer to police cells from the Pretoria local prison so that he could spend more time with his lawyers. He said there were too many fans visiting him and this cut into his time with counsel. The request was refused.

Mbuli said the three officers rammed him against a car and manhandled him while moving him from the Pretoria Magistrate's Court. He claims the policemen also called him a *poes*, *bobbejaan* and *kaffir* after he complained that the handcuffs were hurting him.

Police representative Morne van Wyk denied the assault charges, saying the policemen used "minimum force" when the poet refused to be handcuffed.

Mbuli, who was wearing a sling on his left arm when his robbery case resumed this week, has been in prison for 14 months. He was arrested with two friends, Ben Masiso and Happy Shikwambane, on October 26th 1997, just moments after a bank was held up in Waverley, Pretoria. Mbuli said they went to Pretoria to meet someone who claimed he had information about an attempt on his life earlier that year.

They were charged with the armed robbery of R15 000 and for illegal possession of a handgun and a hand grenade.

Mbuli has maintained apartheid-era police officers in cahoots with top government officials concocted a set-up so he would stop his own investigation into drug-trafficking transactions between South Africa and Swaziland.

Cracks began to appear in the state's case this week. Captain Johannes Hanekom admitted in court that an identity parade he organised disregarded the rules: none of the men resembled Mbuli, he was by far the tallest, and only one of six witnesses had pointed the poet out.

Hanekom said alleged cash-in-transit mastermind Collin Chauke was made to stand next to Mbuli. Marble Hall heist suspect Patrick Hlongwane and Bronkhorstspuit heist accused Lucas Yende were also in the line-up. Under cross-examination, Hanekom said he believed the parade was irregular as regulations state that participants should be of a similar height.

About 100 supporters turned up to follow the court proceedings. Although disappointed by the lack of support from the African National Congress, Mbuli has had visits from human rights luminaries such as Helen Suzman.

Retrieved from <https://mg.co.za/article/1999-01-29-cop-witnessed-mbuli-beating>

APPENDIX (B)

In 2008, Mzwakhe Mbuli underwent another arrest for pointing a firearm, assaulting and kidnapping, motivated by a desire to avenge his uncle's death. Despite being known as a 'big-head and troublemaker' (Christgau 1999) as a consequence of the many times he has come face to face with justice and police, in 2012 Mzwakhe sued the state for malicious prosecution.

Penwell Dlamini published an article for *Sowetan Live*, giving details of what he calls Mzwakhe's counterattack:

Mzwakhe Mbuli fights back

09 January 2012, 10:00, Penwell Dlamini

The "People's Poet", Mzwakhe Mbuli, is suing the state for R10-million for malicious prosecution.

Mbuli's lawyers, Jerry Koma and Donald Somo, say in a statement sent to Sowetan that the poet has briefed them to act against the state.

"The state's case has been peppered with contradicting testimonies from state witnesses, and a slew of inconsistencies on behalf of the prosecution against Mbuli that sealed its fate and has reversed the legal tables, so to speak, with his acquittal," they say in the statement.

Mbuli was arrested after his uncle, Mandlankosi Mbuli, was gunned down by two men at Leondale in Ekurhuleni in 2008.

He was accused of pointing a firearm and of assault, kidnapping and intimidating five people while demanding to know who had killed his uncle. Mbuli's case dragged on for two years, with witnesses disappearing on the days they were to testify.

The case finally came to an end when magistrate Isabel Mlaba acquitted Mbuli in the Germiston Magistrate's Court in April last year of all charges.

While Mbuli's name was cleared in court the poet "suffered humiliation" during the dragged-out case.

"It was a traumatic experience even psychologically. For two years I was going to court. It was very hard," Mbuli said.

He said the court process had severely affected his music career.

"Would you want to buy Jub Jub's CD while he is going to court for killing four children. Who would buy a CD of Mzwakhe Mbuli who is out on bail for kidnapping, pointing a firearm and assault," Mbuli said.

"Promoters think twice before calling you to concerts. Airplay is also affected (when you are still going to court)."

But what frustrates him is that since his uncle's death there had been little effort to find those who killed him.

"Police have not visited my uncle's widow, not even once, since my uncle was murdered," Mbuli said.

In 1997 Mbuli was sentenced in the Pretoria Regional Court to 13 years in jail for armed robbery. He spent five years in Leeuwkop Prison and was released on parole in November 2003.

Retrieved from <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/2012-01-09-mzwakhe-mbuli-fights-back/>

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