

Oral poetry and development ideology in South Africa's Eastern Cape

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Abstract

In rural and peri-urban areas of South Africa's Eastern Cape, iimbongi, or praise poets, are artists with a gift for both language and healing who play an important and varied role in contemporary society. Although the tradition is diverse and changing, the iimbongi's literary practice is widely understood to have spiritual and ritual functions, much like the practices of traditional healers. Iimbongi have much to offer South Africa's decolonization process, helping to heal communities struggling through the aftermath of historical violence by actively affirming indigenous agency, language, and identity.

Key Words

Iimbongi; development; spirituality; oral literature; poetry; South Africa; Eastern Cape; traditional healer

Introduction

The greatest problem we have on this continent is a deficit of imagination. We focus too much on feeding the belly, on the politics of the belly. We don't focus enough on the poetics of the belly. Because sometimes it's poetry that allows us to wake up the following day and say yes to existence.

~ Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Founder, Cassava Republic Press

Twenty years of democracy have done little to alter the uneven development embedded in South African geography and society by its segregationist and apartheid history. Instead, the country's long-anticipated transition to democracy ushered in a new era of neoliberal capitalism that has further deepened economic and social divisions and intensified crime and civil unrest.¹ In disenfranchised Black townships, purposely located at a remove from urban services and amenities, disruptions in water and electrical services are common; garbage disposal is irregular or non-existent; sewage oozes across the streets; and dogs, cows, and donkeys roam the boulevards, grazing on windblown trash. People's movements and daily activities are tightly circumscribed not only by the availability of public transit (or lack thereof) and the long distances that they are often compelled to commute, but also by

safety and security concerns, which vary from moderate to acute by zone, season, and time of day.² In rural areas, people continue to struggle against the legacies of dispossession, the forced removals and relocations of some 3.5 million people, and a notorious migrant labour system that extracted young, able-bodied men to fuel distant, White-owned industries.³ In both rural and township areas, these histories have resulted in poverty-stricken zones of social exclusion where social ills of all varieties are a daily norm. Poor health outcomes and epidemic levels of violent crime and rape point to the dangerous implications of inequality and the marginalisation of vulnerable populations.⁴

Faced with such circumstances, literature would not seem to be a development priority and has not been treated as such by either the apartheid or post-apartheid administrations. Yet literature is a valuable, if often underappreciated, means of redressing social imbalances and divisions; it played a notable role in apartheid resistance in South Africa and could offer an equally valuable resource for addressing contemporary challenges.⁵ The UN Human Development Index (HDI) offers a measure of development that emphasises three key elements of human wellbeing and capabilities: leading a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and having a decent standard of living.⁶ Among its leading indicators are education and literacy, which are clearly necessary components of a knowledgeable and inclusive society. However, the UNHDI offers no metric to measure access to literature, nor indices pertaining to the content of that literature, its authors, or the language it is written in, making it difficult to determine whether the majority of the population benefits from the country's printed literature. While the UNHDI suggests that the South African population is a reasonably well-educated and literate nation with an adult literacy rate of 94.3%, the accuracy of such figures is contested by scholars who cite highly uneven educational quality across the country and ambiguities associated with survey methods and literacy measures.⁷ Meanwhile, the inequalities associated with literacy and education are emphasised by contemporary writers who point to unequal access to cultural goods: 'The South African literary landscape is physically based in the cities, and in the white suburbs. That's where the publishers are. That's where the bookstores are. I grew up in a township and I grew up in a village. There are no bookstores there. Here, you've got all the literary activity; there, you've got absolutely none.'⁸ In South Africa, the geography of bookstores, libraries, and publishing houses reflects the post-apartheid landscape in general. Much like access to clean and healthy environments, access to many cultural goods is skewed to favour the middle and upper classes while the perspectives, life experiences, and languages of the poor majority remain marginal and undervalued.

Given the primacy of colonial languages and their attendant ideologies, there is also a danger that discussions of literacy in development prioritise secular Western norms of print media and printed literary forms.⁹ This orientation risks marginalising or erasing the rich literary history that South African peoples are heir to.¹⁰ Traditional oral literary genres—whether poetry, fiction, or theatre—are vibrant and complex art forms that more accurately reflect the social, cultural and spiritual realities of the communities that produce them than do literatures produced by mainstream or international publishing houses.¹¹ As well as speaking directly to the marginalised majority that are mainly responsible for producing it, oral literature is a living component of the cultural heritage of South Africa whose value and artistry is often overlooked by cultures that 'lay stress on the idea of literacy and written tradition.'¹² In making literature widely available in vernacular languages to people who lack access to books, oral literature has an important and underappreciated potential to contribute to

learning and social development in rural and urban contexts alike. This is particularly true given that traditional literary forms may be tightly conjoined with African spiritual understandings that give this literature added layers of meaning and resonance. This is certainly true of the poetry performed by iimbongi, praise poets of the amaXhosa people whose oral poetry holds profound spiritual significance and offers a rich potential for social awareness and healing (note that iimbongi is the plural form of the noun; imbongi is the singular).

The amaXhosa are a diverse group of isiXhosa-speaking kingdoms that includes, among others, the amaGcaleka and amaRharhabe, abaThembu, and amaMpondo people whose traditional lands cover most of South Africa's Eastern Cape Province.¹³ In this article, I draw on fieldwork in several communities to examine the spiritual significance of iimbongi and their literature in social development and decolonisation in contemporary South Africa. I argue that the on-going practice of spiritually rich literature has a profound effect on audiences, contributing directly to people's spiritual and emotional wellbeing and to the social development of their communities. In particular, I argue that in giving voice to marginalised languages, experiences, and spiritual understandings, the iimbongi's literature affirms Black agency, creativity, autonomy, and vision, helping to effect grassroots development that addresses community priorities and considers a full spectrum of human endeavour and wellbeing. Finally, I draw on interviews with community members to show how, despite the limitations imposed by current political and economic conditions, contemporary iimbongi play a vital social and cultural role. By acting as spiritual healers and by invigorating pride in African language and heritage, iimbongi have much to offer communities struggling through the difficult debris of a post-apartheid society.

Spirituality, literature and development in the Eastern Cape

One of the most vital and important aspects of poetry, particularly performed poetry, is its ability to elicit and encourage an emotional response. Much more than other forms of literature, poetry's affective power relies not only on the meaning of its content but also on the emotional force of its rhythm and form. Poetic devices—rhythm and metre, metaphor and allegory, parallelism, alliteration, and richly detailed vocabulary—are not merely a matter of aesthetics; in performance poetry especially, these features of poetry are physical undertakings that produce physical and emotional effects on their audiences.¹⁴ Increasingly, scholars are finding that emotional engagement with issues of oppression and injustice are fundamental to social movements and collective action that together address inequality and advance human wellbeing.¹⁵ Barford notes, 'Emotions are central to how people are positioned in relation to a topic or situation. Being emotionally engaged may amplify attitudes and provide an impetus for action. In contrast, denial of something being morally problematic may mean not feeling disturbed.'¹⁶ As an art form that is uniquely able to use language to encourage reflection, emotional engagement, and layered understanding, poetry has enormous potential to catalyse the emotional forces that lead to social change.

The ability to elicit an emotional response from audiences is one of the notable features of performances by iimbongi. Historically associated with chiefs and kings, iimbongi are oral poets who work in a panegyric poetic form common throughout much of South Africa. As performance artists, iimbongi are visible interlocutors with culture and power and are, at the same time, agents of sound,

enacting words as events that revive the power of orality and the weight and magic that traditionally inheres in the spoken word.¹⁷ The standard translation of iimbongi is ‘praise poets’ or ‘praise singers,’ and their poetic genre, izibongo (singular: isibongo), ‘praise poetry.’ In the amaXhosa context, these translations are misleading because izibongo are likely to be filled with barbs, praise, and criticism that together comprise a layered and nuanced truth-telling.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the English terms capture the spirit of the poems, which are traditionally a blend of artful critique and laudatory apostrophe, lofty in diction, rich in figurative language, and replete with references to historical characters and events. While there are many contemporary exceptions, izibongo are traditionally eulogistic in nature, rather than epic or narrative forms common to other oral traditions, and are spontaneously composed in direct response to the circumstances, events or people at hand.¹⁹

In amaXhosa society, the imbongi fulfils a complex role that spans literature, politics, social commentary, and spirituality.²⁰ As literary performers, iimbongi have the power to move and inspire audiences through their skilful and eloquent use of the isiXhosa language and through the particular message that their oratory contains. The political importance of the genre is well-documented, as is its role in representing social conditions and complexities.²¹ Less commonly acknowledged is the power vested in the poetry by the imbongi’s spiritual vocation. Like all creative arts, the imbongi’s literature flows from an unknown source; iimbongi are inspired by an umoya or thwasa, a holy or ancestral spirit, and their spontaneous compositions are held by many to be both visionary and capable of making things happen.²² With their spiritually significant messages, iimbongi are closely related to the amagqirha (singular, igqirha): traditional healers, diviners and herbalists. These various aspects and associations of the imbongi’s poetry combine to give their words an energising and transformative power: ‘One of the most important effects of the kind of address that defines praise poetry lies in the audience’s re-imagination of itself in terms of historical and potential identities, as well as in relation to other communities. It is this facet of the form that gives it both its affirmative potentials and its transformative capacities.’²³ The potentials and capacities of the imbongi’s literature can help catalyse social development originating in and driven by communities themselves.

Such grassroots paradigms can offer an alternative to growth-based development models that are vulnerable to ideologies and discourses rooted in capitalist economics. Development approaches in South Africa since 1994 have been complex and multifaceted, beginning with the African National Congress’ emphasis on social provision under its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) followed by a much-criticised shift to the right with its Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme unrolled in 1996.²⁴ Yet in the current climate of globalised neoliberal capitalism, an emphasis on economic growth and material goods has often led to the marginalisation of other development outcomes ‘whose human, social or sustainable connotations have become too much of a burden.’²⁵ Rather than improving the wellbeing of the poor, market deregulation has had the opposite effect, exacerbating inequality by enabling the concentration of wealth in the ruling classes, resulting in the sort of economic polarisation that is particularly evident in South Africa.²⁶ A development approach focused on economic growth can therefore be self-defeating, since ‘poverty is not a disease of capitalism of which it might one day be cured, but on the contrary stimulates accumulation and therefore represents a sign of good health within the existing system.’²⁷

Contesting a growth-based logic involves the recognition that development policy is not culturally neutral but rather involves systems of language and representation throughout the process of policy formulation. For example, growth-based development approaches tend to view culture as ‘a “luxury” to be indulged only by wealthy, post-materialist societies. The implication most often is that development policy needs to prioritise economic growth and, based on the West’s industrialisation experiences, recommend strategies that help fulfil people’s material needs first. Culture, then, is to be put aside until such time as developing countries can pay for it.’²⁸ The presumption that economic growth is a necessary precondition for the cultivation of other aspects of human wellbeing is particular to an ideology that views culture and spirituality as subsidiary to material needs, rather than being vital aspects of human existence that are central to public life in most societies.

Iimbongi in contemporary society: responses from the communities

From late 2015 to early 2016 I interviewed fifty isiXhosa-speaking people about their views on iimbongi. Twenty-five participants lived in the rural areas surrounding the town of Willowvale in the Mbashe Municipality, another twenty-five lived in the township adjoining the small city of Grahamstown. While rural and urban areas are distinct in many ways, in much of South Africa, they are characterized by a long history of human oscillation between the two realms that contributes to a cultural continuum between them. Township communities typically comprise a dynamic blend of multi-generational residents and newcomers drawn from the surrounding rural areas or regions farther afield. Lying beyond urban cores, the formally or informally constructed township environments range from densely suburban to hybrid peri-urban landscapes in which housing is interspersed with vacant brush or grasslands.

Participants within each subset were chosen purposively to reflect the demographics of the respective community, with each subset including, insofar as possible, a balanced blend of ages, genders and professions. These interviews were embedded within a four-year research project that involved archival research, literary analysis, several months of ethnographic fieldwork in the rural areas around Willowvale, attendance at official functions where iimbongi performed, and interviews with fourteen practicing iimbongi in the communities of Mthatha, Willowvale, Gompo, King William’s Town, Zwelitsha and Grahamstown. Interviews were conducted in either English or isiXhosa according to the participant’s preference. The responses included here were transcribed from interviews conducted in English. My research area spanned all three of the pre-1994 constituencies that now form the Eastern Cape: Cape Province, and the former Ciskei and Transkei Bantustan areas. Research in these former Bantustans was particularly revealing; although these jurisdictions are a reviled example of apartheid policies, they were also zones of cultural and political resistance that successfully challenged attempts to erase amaXhosa culture and practices.²⁹

In speaking with practicing iimbongi and members of their audiences and in analysing transcriptions of performances of izibongo, I found that despite the enormous political and social upheaval that has defined South Africa throughout its modern history, the tradition of the iimbongi and the ritual aspect of izibongo remain alive and well throughout the Eastern Cape. In the interviews conducted in the rural villages around Willowvale, I was immediately struck by the participants’ ubiquitous knowledge of the iimbongi tradition and their shared sense of its importance to their

communities and cultural identity. Participants felt that iimbongi encourage mutual support among community members, remind people of the beauty of their language and heritage, act as spiritual healers, and serve as upstanding role models for the youth in their communities. Asked whether the iimbongi remains an important tradition, participants were unanimous: ‘Kakhulu!’ Very important. Praise of the iimbongi was emphatic: ‘We love iimbongi,’ people said, ‘Iimbongi make us happy.’ At the same time, research participants conceded that iimbongi were uncommon and opportunities to see them perform were rare. Several participants, while appreciative of the tradition, had only attended performances by iimbongi a few times in their lives.

In the township, responses were more subdued. Numerous participants were ambivalent about the tradition while others voiced a strong sense of identification with it. Most participants spoke of having seen iimbongi on television (for example during Nelson Mandela’s funeral or the annual State of the Nation Address), however several participants had only ever seen iimbongi on television, never in live performance. As in the rural areas, participants in the township felt that iimbongi were generally scarce and that there were few opportunities to see them perform. However, as in the rural setting, an appreciation of the iimbongi was nearly universal among those familiar with the tradition. Many people expressed a desire for more opportunities to see live performances by iimbongi and felt that these opportunities would be beneficial for their community.

Overall, the interviews confirmed that a widespread awareness of and respect for the iimbongi tradition exists among the general isiXhosa-speaking public in the province. These findings differed from those of previous scholars. As well as writing extensively on the content, style, and structure of the izibongo genre, scholars have emphasised its role in social commentary and political critique.³⁰ Yet I did not find the same emphasis in today’s very different political context. Although the tradition is diverse and changing, on the whole, the participants that I spoke with emphasised and valued the spiritual aspects of iimbongi, pointing out their connection to amagqirha (singular: igqirha), spiritual healers.

Much has been written on amagqirha, traditional healers in the amaXhosa tradition, and associated spiritual beliefs.³¹ Yet apart from Opland’s (1983) work, I have found no research that offers a substantial discussion of the relationship between the iimbongi and igqirha vocations, despite the fact that iimbongi, amagqirha, and community members who I spoke with all noted the connection and discussed its importance. This scholarly omission may be due in part to a perception that ‘izibongo has lost its ritual connotation.’³² However, I found that this perception does not accurately reflect community sentiment in my research areas. In honouring their ancestral obligations, iimbongi play a healing and empowering role in communities, much like amagqirha, and offer a route to improved development outcomes through the active affirmation of African agency, language, and identity.

Poets as prophets and healers

Within the shifting culture of the Eastern Cape, shaped and informed as it is by both Western and indigenous influences, the tradition of the iimbongi is neither static nor uniform. While iimbongi are often conceived as spiritual figures, I found that spiritual understandings of iimbongi varied widely from one context to the next and from one individual to another. Generally, iimbongi are recognised as gifted individuals whose talent for language enables them to compose lengthy poems during

spontaneous oral performances at public gatherings ranging from meetings to funerals to royal ceremonies. One township resident who was particularly knowledgeable about the tradition offered an insightful summative remark:

Imbongi, I think it's someone who's been sent by the ancestors, if I may say so. To pass the message, the prophet, you know. They're kind of gifted. [There are] different kinds of iimbongi. There is imbongi zomthonyama, which is an imbongi that was appointed by the ancestors who does not write his or her message but it just comes spiritually. And when it's ready to burst, even if there's a ritual, then he or she can just come up and say things. That's imbongi zomthonyama.

Like most others, this participant distinguished between two types of iimbongi: iimbongi zomthonyama are spiritually motivated and compose their oral poems spontaneously according to custom; iimbongi zosiba, on the other hand, write their poetry according to western convention during periods of quiet or solitary reflection. Contemporary performers, often using rap, hip hop, or slam poetry styles, may combine oral and written methods and may adopt the title of imbongi. However, while writers and hip hop performers may have a respected knack for language and while there is certainly fluidity among genres, iimbongi zomthonyama are considered by many to be gifted and even prophetic public orators thanks to their connections to ancestral or holy spirits. Rather than writing or memorising poems ahead of time, they burst forth with a message that they deliver in verse composed on the spot. Their spontaneous poems are event-specific, often highlighting the genealogies, features and accomplishments of key figures present at the event.³³

The spiritual aspect of these performers is reflected in the 'zomthonyama' appellation. Historically, cattle and their enclosures (kraals) are particularly sacred spaces for amaXhosa peoples and elaborate patterns of behaviour governed human interactions with them. Umthonyama refers to the sacred centre of the kraal under which the household patriarch is buried, making the kraal the abode of the patriarch and his ancestors as well as of the living cattle who are closely associated with them.³⁴ Ritual sacrifices taking place in this kraal traditionally involve 'the recitation of the lineage and clan poems' that are 'the medium of communication with the ancestors.'³⁵ The slaughtered beast itself provides a further channel of communication; its bellow affirms the presence of the ancestors, while its movement between life and death during the ceremony links the world of the living with that of the ancestral shades.

Imbongi also spoke about this feature of their art, which is linked both to the spontaneous composition of the verse and to the communal aspect of its content, which expresses ties to lineage, homeland, clan, and community. Grahamstown imbongi Dumisa Mpupha stated,

For me [an imbongi is] someone who is being inspired by the spirit to say something or to advise people about something [...] Most of us as imbongis will see things before people can see them. Myself, I would say that iimbongi are the sons and daughters of the amagqirha. Because of the way they speak or because of the way they utter their lyrics, they resemble the amagqirha. Because the [...] amagqirha, they take inspiration from the place that the imbongis take theirs. The spirit is more or less the same between the amagqirhas and the imbongis.

Other participants familiar with the imbongi tradition also commented on the importance of the prophetic aspect of iimbongi, such as one man who remarked, ‘And what they’re saying, especially the one from the ancestors, he can foresee things from away, kind of a prophet, and warn if there is something bad or a misfortune that is coming your way.’ Others echoed the connection between iimbongi and traditional healers: ‘They’re kind of igqirhas, you know. Because igqirhas they can come and just sing, sing, sing. When that spirit comes it can just tell you something without expecting something from you.’

Understandings of the imbongi’s role and message

Like amagqirha, iimbongi zomthonyama were recognised by many participants as having the talent that they do as a result of the spiritual calling common to the amathwasa (singular: ithwasa), people who are called by the ancestors to perform a guiding and healing function in their communities. Individuals called to serve as amagqirha (singular: igqirha), or diviners, generally recognise their calling by the appearance of certain conditions symptomatic of ukuthwasa, meaning ‘to emerge or become new, as of the moon.’³⁶

Ukuthwasa commonly manifests as a litany of mysterious and untreatable afflictions along with vivid dreams that may include images of ancestors or symbolic animals.³⁷ A person afflicted in this way has been visited by ancestral or other spirits that interfere with mental and physical processes, making the candidate sensitive to the ancestral call. Accepting this call leads to a lengthy initiation in which the initiate moves through a period of severe physical and psychic distress or disarray under the guidance of a fully-initiated mentor, who facilitates the spiritual transformation and the emergence of the new personality. This inthwaso process, literally ‘spiritual emergence,’ culminates in the consecration of the new diviner and their calling through the ritual slaughter of a goat or a head of cattle. Once an igqirha is fully initiated, he or she is relieved of their afflictions and is henceforth able to maintain close communication with ancestral spirits. In doing so, igqirha are able to ‘provide for the spiritual wellbeing of the community.’³⁸ The physical and psychological wellbeing of diviners thus depends on their ability to recognise and accept their vocation, and to progress through the various stages necessary to become fully inducted into it.³⁹

A similar process may be experienced by iimbongi who begin their practice on finding themselves called to ukuthwasa. As with amagqirha, a network of associations links iimbongi to the ancestors; the special skill of both diviners and iimbongi lies in their ability to perceive and articulate these hidden connections, which is part of their healing arts. As messengers chosen by the ancestors, the amathwasa have a spiritual vocation and obligation to both receive and transmit information between the earthly and spiritual realms. In this capacity, iimbongi serve their communities as both as literary intellectuals and as prophetic visionaries able to perceive aspects of reality that the average person cannot.

Certainly, even imbongi zomthonyama may choose not to emphasise or participate in the spiritual or ritual connotations of their practice. Many iimbongi practicing in the traditional style enjoy literature and performance and find that they have a talent for these arts. In addition, many iimbongi and their audiences are devout Christians who, in accepting the ritual significance of the practice, are forced to reconcile two systems of belief. Although some Christian sects in South Africa have

incorporated traditional beliefs, others insist on closer adherence to particular readings of the scriptures, which can lead to spiritual conflict for those who feel the pull of ukuthwasa while holding these Christian beliefs. Several iimbongi I spoke with stated that their talent was God-given in a Christian sense; another devoutly Christian imbongi explained that although his talent was a result of ukuthwasa, the vocation must be a result of God's wishes. These Christian iimbongi, acting in the service of God, prayed to God for inspiration and guidance, yet accepted their talent and its demands on their lives.

The ancestral vocation of iimbongi endows them with a particular right to speech. Regardless of whether an imbongi's oratory has been prearranged or not, it remains a respected part of the proceedings at public events. As in former times, iimbongi perform at public gatherings and official functions where they may spontaneously interrupt the proceedings with their impromptu verse. Although this practice is less common in modern society, many participants discussed the fact that iimbongi are moved by forces beyond themselves and have licence to speak out; the audience, acknowledging with respect the importance of the message, must not interrupt.

Healing poetic practice and community wellbeing

The imbongi's spiritual function was demonstrated during an invitational event I attended in December 2015 at King Zwelonke's Great Place at Nqadu, a few kilometres from Willowvale. According to custom, the amaXhosa King was the final speaker on the program. As he rose to the podium, Thukela Poswayo, the imbongi designated to perform before him, took the microphone and stood on the grass below facing the King directly. Over the course of his five-minute performance, the volume and urgency of Poswayo's poem built to a crescendo, concluding rousingly to the applause and ululations of the gathered crowd. As the excerpt below clearly shows, Poswayo's poem is confident and eloquent, calling on the king to show leadership in both speech and action, to act boldly and generously to help heal a damaged nation and, through words and deeds, to inspire others to do likewise.

Thetha ke! Nasi isizwe sakokwenu	Speak then! Here is your nation.
Nang'amaGcaleka ka Khawuta.	Here are the Gcalekas of Khawuta. ¹
Nalusapho luka Zanzolo.	Here are the children of Zanzolo.
Nal'usapho luka Sarhili.	Here are the children of Sarhili. ²
Thetha ke nalo	So speak to them.
Ngoba kaloku okwakh'ukuthetha	For certainly your words
Ngekhe kulambathe	Will not be in vain
Ngoba kaloku uThix'uMdali, uQamata	Just as God the creator, Qamata ³
Woobawo mkhulu,	Of our forefathers,
Wakhomba ngomnwe wakhe	Pointed with his finger,
Wakhomb'indoda'emayi khokel'amanye amadoda,	Choosing a man to lead others,
Ke ngelakh'ilizwi uyakubeka indlebe.	So to your voice he turns his ear.

¹ Khawuta: The father of the ancestor Gcaleka, for whom an amaXhosa kingdom is named.

² Sarhili: Son of Hintsu and a major figure in amaXhosa history.

³ Qamata: The Nguni god (whereas the Christian god is uThixo).

Here Poswayo invokes ancestral presences by speaking the names of Zanzolo and Sarhili, helping to ensure their ‘protective sympathy’.⁴⁰ He acknowledges the hereditary authority of King Zwelonke, yet affirms the responsibility and obligations that inhere in the royal position, reminding his audience of the King’s place within a broader lineage and a social and spiritual assemblage to which he has significant responsibilities. This calling to account is of particular importance within the context of democratic South Africa where the new constitution has endowed traditional leadership with a set of powers that is often controversial.⁴¹

Like Poswayo, Mandlenkosi Dyakala, a young *iimbongi* who grew up in the rural community of Salem and now practices in Grahamstown, understands the ritual aspect of his artistic practice and has immense respect for the tradition he is part of.

Usually traditional healers, what they do is just heal you on the sickness that you have. But traditional praisers, their form of medicine is their mouth, their words. When they give out the words, what they say is a form of spirit, it’s a form of uplifting someone. [...] Because he’s using his voice to heal.

Three hundred kilometres away in Willowvale, Thokozani Ntshuntsha expressed the same sentiment:

We have a responsibility to heal people through words. We have that responsibility. We as *iimbongi*, although we deliver the message to people, people must be aware that some of the words that are coming from us are not coming from us. They are coming from somewhere else. No matter it’s God but there’s someone who’s driving the poet to speak. You understand? [...] We’re having that responsibility to take care of people.

Within township and rural environments alike, the need for healing is profound. Generations of exclusion and deprivation and the contemporary economic reality of mass poverty, unemployment and low levels of education have wrought harrowing social damage.⁴² These malignant conditions coupled with the enthusiastic public response to the healing properties of an *iimbongi*’s poetry indicate that greater attention to recognising, encouraging and cultivating literary talent is a worthwhile endeavour with far-reaching benefits.

While the response of research participants to *iimbongi* and their performances was overwhelmingly positive, it would be simplistic to state that the tradition and its practice is always unequivocally good. Oppressive political circumstances and a prevailing climate of censorship often prevent *iimbongi* from saying all that they would like to.⁴³ Worse, they may use their platform to advocate xenophobia, gender oppression, and other regressive politics. While all *iimbongi* I spoke with clearly acted with the best of intentions and stressed the importance of prayer and spiritual purity, being an upstanding citizen, and providing a role model in the community, these approaches are no guarantee of a liberal or egalitarian politics. Given their widely-acknowledged poetic licence to speak their minds and the weight and spiritual power of their words, there is clearly a potential for an abuse of power.

These dangers aside, research participants repeatedly claimed that *iimbongi* perform an important healing role in their communities and voiced their belief in the value of the *iimbongi*’s

performances to community upliftment, social cohesion, identity and pride. In the fraught social environments of contemporary South African townships, ‘imbongi give people hope,’ as one young man explained. In the words of a middle-aged man, ‘imbongi, they revive a spirit of ubuntu.’⁴ ‘They’ll teach you many things,’ said a twenty-five-year-old woman, ‘How you can communicate with other people, how you can respect your culture, whether you are black or white, rich or poor. To respect who you are.’ A twenty-six-year-old man claimed that there are many imbongi around the Grahamstown area. Although he wasn’t one of them, he liked to hear them, he ‘liked the sound.’ As he explained, ‘They heal us. Like when they talk isiXhosa, when they’re rhyming their words, they bring us a knowledge that comes from them to us. And how they feel, their emotions.’

This embodiment and expression of public emotion has a powerful effect on audiences. As a thirty-year old woman explained:

Some people they get inspired by imbongi. They show those emotions in different ways. Sometimes people will actually applaud by some sort of cries out [i.e., ululations]. I’m sure you’ve heard that. And some people actually will really be inspired to continue the legacy of their ancestors in terms of performing traditional rituals and ceremonies. [...] They give a lot of applaud to the imbongi and some people do actually cry. It actually makes them too emotional sometimes when the imbongi speaks.

One of the participants described the way the imbongi’s emotionally-charged praises worked on her in this way:

Participant: It’s so overwhelming hey? Because we’re all happy. We’ll look up and say wow! And they will clap their hands, they will be happy, you understand? Because he’s praising that someone. He’s praising you. Starting from your hair, the way your hair looks—nicely, in a Xhosa way. Starting from your face, the way you walk, the way you’re touching things. It’s so beautiful. Especially if you understand what the imbongi’s saying.

McGiffin: And the language they use has an effect on people?

Participant: It does have because when they’re speaking my language I feel like, wow! Because Xhosa’s my mother tongue. [...] Like for instance, if you’re saying you’re walking, uyahamba, and then they will say ‘uyanawuka,’ which is the same thing as uyahamba. You see? So that’s what I’m saying, it’s a deep Xhosa that we can say like, ‘Wow! My Xhosa is a beautiful language.’

The beauty of the isiXhosa language is too seldom celebrated in a society dominated by its colonial language and lingua franca, English, whose use and mastery is bound up in issues of class and economic security. Despite the recognition of eleven official languages in South Africa’s constitution, the oppression of African languages since the arrival of Europeans in South Africa has actively discouraged native speakers of these languages from taking pride in their beauty and expressiveness, thwarting the development of vernacular literary cultures.⁴⁴ The emphasis on English and neglect of the power and beauty of indigenous languages has profound implications for people’s cultural lives: ‘Critically, the masses of common people, who don’t speak or read European languages, are excluded

⁴ Translates loosely as ‘humanity.’

from the cultural and literary life of their country. Literature thus becomes a solely bourgeoisie activity, divorced from the daily life of common people'.⁴⁵ In celebrating their mother tongue, iimbongi draw on a linguistic and literary heritage that predates colonialism while resisting the cultural and linguistic hegemony that exists in South Africa. Rich and figurative language, ancient and often unfamiliar words, culturally resonant metaphors and historical subjects, together with the iimbongi's forthright and deeply personal and relevant messages combine to create a literature that elevates the marginalised language and identities of millions of people trapped in the painful reality of capitalist, post-apartheid space.

Concluding discussions

As spiritual figures accorded deep respect in their communities, iimbongi hold a unique and underappreciated potential to share knowledge and history with their audiences, and to inspire the pride, hope and humanity that are requisite components of meaningful development and progressive social and political change. Iimbongi counter the discursive practices of capitalist society and the development models that emanate from it with a fundamentally different language and worldview. Over the past two centuries for which documentation is available, iimbongi have actively engaged with tribal and colonial politics in both writing and performance, voicing a sustained, emphatic critique of the dispossession, segregation, corruption, racism, and economic injustice that have impinged so catastrophically on the development prospects of African peoples.⁴⁶ In the contemporary context, they continue to assert the value of African lifeways, worldviews, and cultural values. Thus, even where iimbongi do not directly dispute western hegemonies and imperialist practices, they destabilise capitalist ideologies and help shift the discursive space by giving voice to alternative views and embodying alternative beliefs.

Speaking from the margins, iimbongi place African literature and spirituality front and centre, affirming the wisdom and power of some of society's most marginal classes. Unlike many westerners, iimbongi have no doubts about the cultural sophistication of their audiences, which they know to be appreciative of the complex and densely metaphorical genre of izibongo. They simultaneously demonstrate and exercise the critical intelligence of their listeners, calling on people to remember and cherish African heritage and language and to undertake those development initiatives that are relevant to listeners' own lives and situations. Through their poetry, iimbongi challenge the pernicious notion that rural, poor, or otherwise marginal peoples are without literature or have suffered the loss of their cultures and traditions. On the contrary: iimbongi and their enthusiastic audiences proudly uphold cultural practices, literatures, and spiritualities that are very much alive, despite their marginalisation and erasure since colonial times. They offer a relevant and respected source of knowledge and spiritual expression that can help heal the lasting psychic trauma wrought by colonialism, apartheid and contemporary crime and unrest.

My interviews showed that spirituality plays a central role in contemporary izibongo and no doubt has done so historically as well. The people I spoke with valued the tradition, identity, and language that iimbongi represent, the iimbongi's ability to entertain and liven an event, their connection to God and ancestors, and their ability to provoke reflection and critical thought. While it is true that iimbongi, whether acting with good intentions or not, may also give voice to adverse sentiments that

simmer within communities, the iimbongi I spoke with take their responsibilities seriously and are driven not by self-interest but by their spiritual experiences and their desire to use their gifts to serve their communities. In doing so, these poets offer a deeper and much more nuanced version of literature and literacy that comprises culture, spirituality, healing, and human potential. They unsettle neocolonial paradigms that view development as a product to be delivered to the poor by an educated and articulate class of professionals. In contrast to the spiritual poverty of industrialised society, iimbongi speak about human actions, feelings and ideas within individual communities and call on listeners within those communities to draw on their ancestral strengths in becoming all that they can be.

While this research into the tradition and practice of the imbongi does not serve as empirical proof of the efficacy of literature in development, it does point toward strong arguments for giving spiritual and creative arts greater consideration in development research, as well as the value of actively supporting these arts through proactive development policies. Appreciation of the role of literature and the arts in scholarly knowledge production is growing, leading many researchers to embrace it as a way of gaining more nuanced understandings of social dynamics and suitable policy responses.⁴⁷

Much more than a form of cultural and knowledge production, however, the imbongi's poetry is a form of development in and of itself. Through its invocation of ancestral shades as well as its emotive and energising effects on audiences, an imbongi's poetry has the power to inspire people and make things happen. It also offers a means of enlivening the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives of people living in conditions of oppressive deprivation. While poetry may not remove these conditions, it creates channels for asserting agency and voice, contributing to the emergence of a new politics of equality and inclusivity.⁴⁸ Thus, iimbongi and their literature can make a valuable contribution not only to knowledge for and about development, but also to a development practice that strives to enable people to live full, healthy, and imaginative lives. Iimbongi animate African identities and languages for their audiences, they open spaces for discussion and decolonisation and, in a society so damaged by the horrors of its past and the environments of its present, their words offer the healing possibility of hope.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Demombynes and Özler, "Crime and Local Inequality"; Gibson, "Promised Land"; Gibson, *Fanonian Practices*; Hart, "The Provocations of Neoliberalism"; Bond, *Elite Transition*; Desai, *We Are the Poors*; and Bond and Ruiters, "Uneven Development and Scale Politics."
2. Kruger, "Crime and the Physical Environment."
3. Evans, "Resettlement"; Fairweather, *A Common Hunger*, Friedman, *Race, Class and Power*.
4. Richardson et al, "Forced Removals"; Shortt and Hammett, "Housing and Health"; Jewkes and Abrahams, "The Epidemiology of Rape"; and Buiten and Naidoo, "Framing the Problem of Rape."
5. Biko, *I write what I Like*; Mashige, "Mi Hlatshwayo and Temba Qabula," McGiffin "Yim'uthi Gomololo"; Sitas, "The moving black forest."
6. UNDP "Human Development Reports."
7. UNDP; Posel, "Adult Literacy Rates."
8. Mallinson, "Thando Mqgolozana."
9. Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*; Ngugi, *Decolonising*.
10. Seddon, "Written out, Writing in"; Brown, *Voicing the Text*.
11. For example, McGiffin "Imbongi of the Resistance," "Yim'uthi Gomololo."
12. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, 1.
13. For historical details, see Peires, *The House of Phalo*, and Mqhayi, *Abantu Besizwe*.
14. Eagleton, *How to Read*, 90; Attridge, *The Work of Literature*; Carper and Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*.
15. For example, Barford, "Emotional Responses to World Inequality"; Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements"; and Hercus, "Identity, Emotion."
16. Barford, 25.
17. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Furniss and Gunner, *Power, Marginality*; Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*.
18. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*.
19. Opland.
20. Kaschula and Diop, "Political Processes" and Nesor, *Stranger at Home*.
21. See, for example, Kaschula, *The Bones of the Ancestors* and Opland, *The Dassie and the Hunter*.
22. Furniss and Gunner.
23. Nesor, 14.
24. Tsheola, "Basic Needs"; Marais, "South Africa Pushed."
25. Rist, *The History of Development*, viii.
26. Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction"; Selwyn, *Global Development Crisis*; Smith, *Uneven Development*; and Biel, *The New Imperialism*.
27. Rist, 258.
28. Kapoor, *Postcolonial Politics of Development*, 19.
29. See for example Kepe and Ntsebeza, *Rural Resistance*; Mbeki, *The Peasants' Revolt*; Beinart, "Beyond homelands."
30. Opland, "Structural Patterns"; Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*; Opland, *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*; Kaschula "Role of the Xhosa Oral Poet"; d'Abdon, "Commercialization of Celebratory Poetry"; and Sitas "The Moving Black Forest."

31. For example, Hirst, "Dreams and Medicines"; Booie and Edwards, "Becoming a Xhosa Healer"; and Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets*.
32. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, 270
33. e.g., Kaschula and Mostert, "Analyzing, Digitizing and Technologizing" and Opland, *The Dassie and the Hunter*.
34. Mpupha, personal communication.
35. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, 126.
36. Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets*.
37. Booie and Edwards; Hirst.
38. Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets*, 379.
39. Discussed in detail in Mabona, *Diviners and Prophets*.
40. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry*, 264
41. For example, Fraser, "Land Reform," and Ainslie and Kepe, "Resurgence of Traditional Authorities."
42. Desai, *We are the Poors*; Wood and Jewkes, "'Dangerous' Love".
43. For a discussion on censorship in contemporary South Africa see Gumede, *The Poverty of Ideas*.
44. Opland, 1998, and Kaschula, "Oppression of IsiXhosa Literature."
45. Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*.
46. For example, Nxasana, "Nontsizi Mqgqetho"; Kaschula "Imbongi and Griot," "Myth and Reality."
47. Nyamnjoh, "Fiction and Reality of Mobility"; Sylvester, "Development Poetics"; Lewis et al., "The Fiction of Development".
48. Brown discusses aspects of citizen politics in *South Africa's Insurgent Citizens*.

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