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Between the Lion and the Devil: The life and works of BW Vilakazi, 1906-1947[1]

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Introduction

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi can rightly be considered the "Father of Nguni literature". In a period of twelve years, 1935-1947, he was able to write three novels and two anthologies of his own poetry. Ontop of that he wrote both his theses for a Master's degree in 1938 and his D.litt in 1946 on literature. These two were the first academic works of such magnitude on African Languages literature. He also co-compiled the English-Zulu-English Dictionary with Prof CM Doke which was published post-humously in 1948. No other person in African languages literature in South Africa has been able to achieve what Vilakazi did. His influence on Zulu literature is till being felt even today. Nyembezi in 1959 observed that "some writers of Zulu poetry, for example, have taken Vilakazi as their model; but not only do they try to emulate his style; they even employ his expressions so that the end result is just another poem by Vilakazi" (Nyembezi, in Bantu Authors' Conference, 1959: 28). However, Vilakazi has ben regarded as second grade artist compared to his contemporaries, particularly those who wrote in English (e.g. HIE Dhlomo).

However, Vilakazi's life has been marginally documented and his works have always been put in the periphery of the African intellectual history. This is explicable in that the context of

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[1]. This paper is based on a work-in-progress PhD research "The life and works of BW Vilakazi, 1906-1947" for the University of Witwatersrand.

academic discourse in South African literature has always been biased towards those literatures written in English. This has largely to do with the language-ethnicity-race politics of the country such that writers in African languages were always in the periphery and treated as insignificant since not only African Languages but the speakers themselves were considered insignificant by the political superstructure. This is also evident is scholarly work. In fact, African literature in South Africa is defined as literature about Africans and by Africans written in English and the literature in African Languages is not African literature but "literature in indigenous African Languages".

Vilakazi was the first person to produce the first anthology of poetry in Zulu. His *Inkondlo kaZulu* (Zulu Horizons) (1935) was the first collection of poetry in Zulu. His first novel *Noma nini* (Whenever) (1935) was the first fiction in Zulu not based on the history of Zulu royalty in[2] or based on Zulu ethnography. This novel was also the first book ever written in an African Language in South Africa to win the literary award organised by the International Institute of African Languages and Culture, University of London.

His other novels were *UDingiswayo kaJobe* (Dingiswayo, the son of Jobe) (1939) and *Nje Nempela* (Indeed) (1944). His second anthology of his poetry, *Amal'ezulu,* was also the second anthology of Zulu poetry. Together with Doke, they produced the first major lexicographical work in an African Language and this dictionary even today stands as the most successful and comprehensive project in African Languages lexicography in South Africa. By the time of his death Vilakazi was the best Zulu poet and his poetry is still the best Zulu poetry by far.

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2. P Lamula's UZulu kaMalandela (Zulu, son of Malandela) was the first piece of fiction written by a Zulu (1924) and JL Dube's Insila kaShaka was the second (1930). The first book to written by a Zulu was Magema Fuze's Abantu abamnyama lapho abavela khona (1922) which was not a literary work.

However, Vilakazi's life, looked against his works, has always been full of controversy. When he was appointed Language Assistant (a modern day tutor) in the Bantu Studies Department (presently the Department of African Languages) at the University of Witwatersrand (which was an all-white English liberal university in South Africa) in 1935, he became an instant public figure. This made him the first African academic member of staff at that University. While this was seen as national achievement, ie. Vilakazi's appointment was taken to be the greatest achievement by an African, it was also seen by others as a collaborationist appointment. Throughout his life, Vilakazi's critics have always used this and his works against him.

This paper will analyse the works of Vilakazi collectively against his life and argue that his works reveal a man obsessed with a search for identity. I will also be discussing the politics Vilakazi shared and how these are reflected in his works. I will argue that our understanding of Vilakazi the person tells us so much about the African middle-class of his time. What I propose in this paper is that we cannot take the African middle class of Vilakazi's time as a homogenous group. What we have to do is to dissect this class and reveal its heterogeneity so as to understand the human and individual factor within it.

I will also identify one sector of the African middle class, ie. the African graduates. These range from actual university graduates (mainly from the University College of Fort Hare) and those associated with them (teachers, politicians, other professionals and writers). I single out this class because I do not believe that the general term "middle class" explains anything about the cultural engineers of this class and cleavages within the whole. The African graduates, small in number but very powerful in ideas, shaped the thinking of the middle class generally and advocated for the accomodation of the middle class and particularly the "educated Africans". Our understanding of class patterns within African communities has not been exhausted and unless we begin to explore the human factor within the whole

can we say that we have understood these communities.

In search of an unknown past: Vilakazi, African tradition and Christianity

In 1930, TD Mweli Skota, editor of *Umteteleli waBantu*, a newspaper funded by the Chamber of Mines and targeted at a Black readership, published an ambitious work bravely entitled *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in Africa.* Skota's book was a compilation of sample biographies of "important" Africans in the history of Africa and at the time. What is important about his work though is that it was consciously done so as to define this class and promote a national pride and history but also to appropriate prominent Africans of the pre-colonial era into this culturally engineered group.

In the whole book, Skota uses the words "progressive", "champion of his people", "Christian" and "friend of the Europeans" so frequently. These words describe even people like Shaka and Sekhukhune. What is symbolic about this is that Skota's work was an attempt to define the African middle class, give it some social history and progression and show "Europeans" that the African middle class should be trusted rather than despised. Through this book Skota wanted to sell the African middle class by showing that it was very necessary for the white superstructure to accommodate it because its interest was not to transform the South African socio-political order but to retain it and increase its size. For a detailed analysis of both books. see Couzens, 1985, New Africans: The life and work of HIE Dhlomo.

What is also very significant in this book is that prominent Africans who were Communists were excluded. John Mancoe's *The Bloemfontein Bantu and Coloured People's Directory* (1934) is basically like Skota's, though slightly more inclusive of politics and trade. Both books, and particularly Skota's, were meant to define the African middle class, give it some prominence

and sell as a package to the white superstructure. This was the beginning of a process of consolidating the African middle class. What is also significant about both books is the absence of the poor, radicals, farm labourers, miners and industrial workers, particularly so with Skota than with Mancoe. This absence is significant in the sense that it symbolises the social distance between those represented by the book and those not. It was a clear indication that class boundaries were drawn, this time not by the political superstructure but by those which it excluded.

Between the years 1930 and 1940, the African middle class was engaged in this process started, among others, by Skota. Whether they were responding to it or not is immaterial. What is pivotal is the meaning of their endeavour. It was clear that you could appropriate the African past and give it a present meaning. It is very necessary that we mention three books in relation to Skota and Mancoe's. Magema Fuze's, *Abantu abamnyama lapha bavela khona* (Black people and where they come from) (1922), JL Dube's *Isitha somuntu omnyama nguyena uqobo lwakhe* (The enemy of a Black person is himself) (1921) and SVH Mdhuli's *The Development of the African* (1933). These books, particularly Dube and Mdhluli's, were meant to define Africans im middle-class terms and "teach" the underclasses to change their traditional ways for Western ways. Fundamental to both books is the argument that Africans cannot do without Europeans. In both books there is a belief that Africans can only "grow" with the help and guidance of Europeans. This evolutionist and dependency belief also characterise the politics of the African Nationa Congress of the time.

The years 1935-1947 (and after) can be described in the history of African literature in South Africa as the Vilakazi-Dhlomo years (Nyembezi, 1972: xix). Herbert Dhlomo, RRR Dhlomo and BW Vilakazi between them produced works about almost all African leaders of the past from Shaka, Nongqause, Moshoeshoe to Bambatha and, notably, RRR Dhlomo and Vilakazi produces all of these in Zulu while HIE Dhlomo produced his in English while RRR

Dhlomo and Vilakazi produced theirs in Zulu[3]. This is quite striking in the sense that both these three writers were conscious of the language debate in African literature.

Nowhere was this language debate evident in Vilakazi's mind than when he was reviewing RRR Dhlomo's novel *UShaka*. Dhlomo wrote this novel in Zulu and Vilakazi in his review of this novel took the liberty of commenting on this debate when he wrote:

> "Zulu literature is very young. This does not mean to say that Zulu writers did not exist. Like the rest of the Bantu authors they have always suffered from the Bantu authors' fallacy: Prove your education by writing in a foreign language" (Vilakazi, 1937: 65).

This is crucial because what Vilakazi was saying was that he was conscious when writing in an African Language and was making a statement that you have to be proud of your language is order to see it grow. Sol Plaatje was also caught in this language debate when other critics suggested that he should have produced his celebrated novel Mhudi in Setswana. Among those were Clement Doke who acknowledged that "Mr Plaatje has done a good service in writing [this novel]" but it "was a great pity that for Bantu publications the demand is at present so small among the Bantu themselves that books such as this have to be weitten in English. **Mhudi** written in Chwana [sic] would have been a still greater contribution, and Chwana sadly needs such additions to its

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[3] Dhlomo, HIE, Ntsikana
Dingane
Cetshwayo
Moshoeshoe

Dhlomo, RRR, 1935, UShaka, Shuter & Shooter
1936, UDingane kaSenzangakhona, Shuter & Shooter
1942, UMpande kaSenzangakhona, Shuter & Shooter
1947, UNomalanga kaNdengezi, Shuter & Shooter
1952, UCetshwayo, Shuter & Shooter
1968, UDinizulu, Shuter & Shooter

present meagre literature" (1931: 86).

A careful analysis of these will reveal that these writers will show that this period represent in African literature a period when the first generation of African writers were re-visiting the African past and representing it the way they saw it[4]. There are two streams which characterise this representation, one stream represent those writers who cherished the African past and nostalgically portray it as a peaceful glorifies paradise and the other stream condemn the African past as being characterised by ignorance and vilified it as evil.

What is also very important about Vilakazi is that throughout his life, he was constantly caught between two opposing forces, class identity and the urban-rural identity. In Zulu Horizons Nyembezi wrote about Vilakazi:

> "He [Vilakazi] lived with African graduates who despised anyone who did not have a university degree. The young Vilakazi was deeply hurt by their scorn and his determination to climb to he top rungs of educational ladder, was probably motivated to some extent by a desire to rebuke those who had tried to belittle him. He achieved his first university degree by private study but there were those who ridiculed and disparaged what they contemptuously called 'candle-light' degrees. Their attitude inspired him to further effort and it was partly his determination to silence his detractors that drove him to seek the highest academic honours." (in L Friedman, 1972: xvii)

There are two things we can extrapolate from Nyembezi's comment.

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[4]. Other significant writers in African Languages at this period include Sol Plaatje, MS and NH Kitchin, JM Lekgetho and DP Moloto in Tswana, JL Dube and P Lamula in Zulu; DDT Jabavu, T Soga, JH Soga, WB Rubusana and JJR Jolobe in Xhosa; and TM Mofolo, EL Segoete, H Jankie, GCT Bereng, BM Khaketla and M Damane in Sesotho.

The first is that Vilakazi was marginal and marginalised by the dominant African middle class, particularly the African graduates. This has been confirmed by a number of sources. HIE Dhlomo testified to Vilakazi's contempt for the African elite when he described him as "often haughty, aloof, cold and deliberately rude to many highly-placed Africans against whom he had a grudge, although he was warm, sociable and friendly to the rank and file" (HIE Dhlomo, 1952: 30-31).

It is by no means easy to explain why Vilakazi was "rude" to the African middle class and "friendly" to the African underclass. Perhaps, this is not important to explain. What is important though is that he did. This has its roots in the second thing we can deduce from Nyembezi's comment. When Vilakazi was awarded the BA degree in the 1934 he had completed his studies by correspondence. This was very rare at the time considering that a majority of African graduates had received their degrees from full-time studies in Black university colleges, particularly the University College of Fort Hare. The attainment of a degree without lectures was considered as second grade and worthless. For the African underclass Vilakazi was as a symbol of success and yet his fellow graduates despised him. This attitude against Vilakazi stayed with him and shaped his social consciousness throughout his life.

Vilakazi's appointment as an academic at the University of Witwatersrand was also controversial. What is striking is not the white attitude against Vilakazi. Conservative whites from both the right and the centre were opposed to the idea that an African could lecture to white [European] students. It had never happened before in the history of South Africa then and those conservatives were intent of seeing it not happening[5]. What is striking though is the attitude of some Africans against Vilakazi's appointment. To some Africans, and particularly the graduates, Vilakazi's appointment was seen with scorn, ridicule

[5]. See Bantu World, 06 April 1935 and 25 May 1935.

and suspicion.

When Vilakazi was offered the post at the university, the then Principal of the University Prof HR Raikes, wrote Vilakazi a carefully planned letter of appointment. Vilakazi was made aware that he was going to be a junior academic staff member. He was also informed that he will look after the "Native library" and the needs of African students. It was made clear to him that his appointment was not "equivalent to the position of a lecturer, either in status and privileges or in emolument" nor will he be allowed to teach, grade or supervise white students but will assist them to learn Zulu only when they avail themselves to him (Letter to Vilakazi from HR Raikes, 14 March 1935, Wits Archives, also see BW, 23 March 1935).

It was clear that the conditions of service were politically motivated. The university wanted to show to Africans, on the one hand, that they were commited to some liberal political thinking and, on the other hand, to appease white fears, particularly the conservative white section and the state, that they were not bent on accepting Africans as equal partners in pursuit for knowledge.

To some African graduates these conditions could only be accepted by someone without a political conscience. In the Black newspapers there were numerous letters to the editor condemning Vilakazi for allowing himself to be used as a "boy" by "Europeans". Unfortunately for Vilakazi, these graduates were to be the people he had to associate with, not by choice but by design. HIE Dhlomo, though close to Vilakazi and not a graduate himself, was also one of the people who were critical of Vilakazi. Vilakazi was seen as an "Uncle Tom". RRR Dhlomo, in his satiric article "R Roamer Esq." in the Bantu World wrote:

> "How can we make it possible to have a gifted Xosa to be acclaimed as a gifted Xosa by other black races without them trying to do him down because he is only a Xosa?... How can a Zulu be appointed to a honoured post without

others saying it is just a cheap post, because a Zulu has been offered it?" (BW, 13 April 1935)

The above could be seen to refer to two things. Vilakazi's appointment did not only raise political objections on either side of the debate, but also raised ethnic concerns. When Vilakazi was appointed at the University of Witwatersrand, he was not the first nor the only person to be approached by Prof Doke. In 1934 Prof Doke wrote a letter to GH Welsh where he mentioned that he needed a Zulu speaker to be appointed in the Bantu Studies Department. In that letter he also mentioned that he was interested in appointing Paul Mosaka who was then teaching at Healdtown. Paul Mosaka was not yet was not yet aware that Doke was interested in offering him post (Letter to GH Welsh, Doke Files, Wits Archives 07\09\1934). It is now history that Vilakazi and not Mosaka was appointed in the department. It is possible to suggest that Vilakazi instead of Mosaka was appointed because of Mosaka's association with the African National Congress. If this is true, it then goes without saying that Vilakazi's political acquiescence was very important in him being considered. It was this political inactivity and apathy that was to constitute the largest criticism against Vilakazi.

In his creative works and his life Vilakazi showed an affinity to African tradition. Putting it more precisely, it was a bias specifically to Zulu tradition and history than it was to African tradition generally. This ethnic consciousness is nowhere better reflected than in his poetry. A statistical survey of Vilakazi's poetry shows that there are six poems to nature, seven poems on death and twelve poems on Zulu history and culture (there are only three poems on education). This statistical representation is so important in understanding the issues that concerned and caught the poet's imagination.

For Vilakazi Zulu history represented not only his past and his culture, but also a lack. Growing in a missionary station, Vilakazi was not exposed to Zulu culture and tradition than

people who grew outside missionary stations. It was this lack of an experienced culture and tradition and an inherited history that Vilakazi yearned for. In his poetry on Zulu history and tradition there is a clear nostalgia expressed by the poet. A nostalgia that was not lived.

Vilakazi portrays the Zulu history and culture as static and glorified it. The natural geography of Zululand is symbolic to the static being of Zulu culture (see in particular "Impophoma yeVictoria" (The Victoria Falls)). To him the comparison between the lived modern city life and the unlived Zulu past resemble the stark differences between the complete self and the shallow self. The poem "Woza Nonjinjikazi!" (Come, Monster of steel!) which is an allegory of industrialisation and migrancy in South African gold mines compares the peaceful untainted Zulu countryside to the alienating and exploitative city. For Vilakazi, the complete self can only be found in the culture and tradition, and culture and tradition can only be found in the countryside.

It was not necessarily only Vilakazi's affinity to Zulu tradition and culture that is significant but the ethnic undertone in his poetry. During his life Vilakazi was actively involved in Zulu affairs. He was an active member of the Catholic Church, President of the Catholic African Teacher's Federation, editor of the Catholic African Teacher's Review, Honorary President of the Transvaal African Student's Association, member of the school committee of Bantu High School at Western Native Township, member of the Carnegie Library at Germiston, Secretary of the Non-European University Student's Association, founder member of the Sons and Daughters of Zululand. He was a member of the Senate of the Pius XII University College at Roma, Lesotho. He even "refuse[d] the chairmanship of the Moroka Advisory Board when it was offered to him" (CM Doke, "Vilakazi Memorial Fund", NTJ, October 1948: 50).

What the above shows is that Vilakazi was never associated with organised politics but with the church and Zulu affairs.

This, to African graduates then, reflected a man so "oblivious of the grim tragedy, the struggle, the pathetic conditions and the call of his people" (HIE Dhlomo, ILN, 30 March 1946). Vilakazi's lack of association with organised politics may be explained from his lack of political judgement. It is indeed true that he should have realised the implications of his appointment at the university and understood the sentiments expressed by his fellow African graduates. Vilakazi was so overwhelmed by the appointment that his poem "Tell me, White man's son!" (Amal'ezulu) express his gratitude to Prof CM Doke for having brought him to the university and Johannesburg and how he has realised that his appointment was a calling to represent his people. The last stanza sums it up well:

Thus, as I gaze around in wonder,
I realise beyond all doubt
That I am lost! Yet well I know I came
To serve my own beloved people -
Aware of them always, I hear them cry:
"Take up your burden and be our voice!"

The last line is actually a direct quote from the words reputed to have been said to Vilakazi by Dr JL Dube when bidding him good-bye at the Ohlange Institute in Natal when Vilakazi left to become a lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand in 1935 (Friedman, 1972: 143, also see ILN, several issues between March and April 1935, also see BW, 06 April 1935).

Vilakazi's relationship with Prof Doke is crucial. The only thing Vilakazi wrote in linguistics was his Honours paper "The verb **thi** in Zulu" (1935). Since then he never wrote anything in linguistics. His interest has always been literature. However, a broader look at Vilakazi's relationship with Doke suggests that Doke treated him as his "boy" and Vilakazi always accepted the treatment and there is no evidence to suggest that he did question the master-servan relationship between him and Doke. This explains the political acquiescence in the man.

What is also significant about Vilakazi was the obvious influence of Christianity in his life and works. He was brought up as a Christian and died a Christian. However, it is significant to mention that Vilakazi changed denominations in his life. He grew up as a Protestant and in his thirties converted to Catholicism. It is still speculatory to suggest that Catholic and Protestant teachings are reflected in the political consciousness of its converts in South Africa. This was brought to my attention by Prof S Marks who suggested that there might be a relationship between political consciousnes and religious teachings among the converts in South Africa (S Marks, personal correspondence, 1994). While this observation may have some validity, until research is done on this can this assertion be usable. Prof Marks suggested that Catholicism produce subordinate Africans and Protestantism produce political radicals. If this is true, it may explain Vilakazi's politics.

Like all his contemporaries, Vilakazi did show a remarkable influence of Christianity. In all his works, even his verse and prose on Zulu history, Vilakazi makes reference to Christianity. To him, Christianity is the answer to all human misery. What is perculiar though is how Vilakazi sees the cohabitation of Christianity and African culture. In his works the underlying argument he makes is that Christianity has to exist with African culture.

The other important influence in Vilakazi's works was the English Romantic poets - particularly Wordsworth and Shelly. Vilakazi's use of the English form of poetry became a heated political debate. The structure of his poetry - his use of English rhyme and rhythmic patterns of poetry in Zulu - was seen as his acknowledgement of the superiority of Europeans over Africans. This is more akin to his first poems in Inkondlo kaZulu. He was constantly criticised for this. In his MA Thesis, Vilakazi defended his poetry by arguing that the English poetry was the foundation of modern poetry, in fact that all modern trends have their foundation on the West. This was a confirmation

of the criticism labelled against him.

It was this that made HIE Dhlomo say that Vilakazi "revealed the mind of a scholar obsessed with the idea of classicism [sic], an artist worshipping devoutly in the shrine of art for art's sake, a poet so enamoured of the beauty and music and meaning of Nature that he was oblivious of the grim tragedy, the struggle, the pathetic conditions and the call of his people" (ILN, 30 March 1946). However, his later poems and particularly those in Amal'ezulu reflect a person who has a better understanding and awareness of the plight of Africans and shows him abandoning the use of English structure to a more free-verse poetry. On his later poetry HIE Dhlomo said his poetry reflected a person who was "identifying himself with the struggles of his people [and by doing so he] gained in breadth, strength and stature" (ILN, 30 March, 1946).

Both Vilakazi's Master's and D.litt theses were on literature. The writing of African Languages literature by the time Vilakazi wrote his D.litt thesis was no more than twenty years in its fictional forms (there were translations of the Bible and other biblical texts and Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress but there were no original works of fiction before the 20th century). Both Vilakazi's MA and D.litt theses offered an analysis of African literature and show clearly Vilakazi's ackowledgement of English literature as the cornerstone of literary development. It was this belief that any literature should evolve from the influence of English literature which caused the political criticism against him. But what is important is that Vilakazi not only helped develop the creative literature of African Languages in South Africa, he also pioneered the academic understanding and analysis of these literatures.

Conclusion

On 16th of March 1946, with a thesis "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni", Vilakazi was awarded a D. Litt degree and became the first African to be awarded such a degree by the

University of Witwatersrand or any of the South African universities. This became the highest accolade in his life. This was celebrated in every newspaper, both Black and white. On January 24 1947 CM Doke wrote to the university Staffing and Promotions Department that "I feel that the time has now come for the ending of any discriminations in my department on grounds of race or colour and therefore requests that the status of Dr Vilakazi be changed to that of lecturer" (Letter to Staffing and Promotions, Wits Archives dated 24\01\1947). In that letter Doke stated that Vilakazi was still earning a meagre 600 pounds per annum. Vilakazi didd not receive the promotion nor did he receive an increase. What is also interesting is that he did not even fight for either, he simply gave up. Nine months later, on the On the morning of the 26th of October 1947, Vilakazi was hurried to the Coronation Hospital with meningitis and he died the same afternoon.

What is clear by now is that while Vilakazi achieved so many firsts in his life, he was dogged by contradiction. However, this controversy around class identity and ethnic identity was not peculiar to Vilakazi alone. It was a contradiction which characterised all Africans who were products of missionary and Christian background. In brief, it was a contradiction which characterised the *amakholwa* once they reach the city. It is this class of people which I call the "*amakholwa* in diaspora". Through people like Vilakazi, we are able to learn how the children of *amakholwa* who became the first generation of African urban professionals conceptualised their world.

The first generation of the African urban middle class cannot only be explained in material terms only. We cannot only use the land claims theory to explain this class. Previous scholars in social sciences have used a material explanation to describe this class (see Lebelo, 1988 or Lodge, 1984 for instance). What I am proposing here is that we should begin to explore some other explanatory ideas to explain this class together with the material terms. What I also argued in this

paper was that we cannot perceive the African middle class of the 1930's and 1940's as a homogenous class speaking with one voice. There were cleavages within this class both in material and consciousness terms, and Vilakazi represents not an anomaly in this class's culture but a visible sector of the class.

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