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THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE: A STUDY OF DURBAN WORKER POETRY

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THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE: A STUDY OF DURBAN WORKER POETRY

Steve Kromberg

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

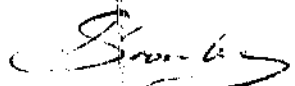
THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE: A STUDY OF DURBAN WORKER POETRY

Steve Kromberg, M.A. University of the Witwatersrand, 1993.

This dissertation shows how both poets and their audiences have played a central role in the emergence of Durban worker poetry. A review of critical responses to worker poetry concludes that insufficient attention has been paid to questions of audience. Performances of worker poetry are analysed, highlighting the conventions used by the audience when participating in and evaluating the poetry. Social, political and literary factors which have influenced the audience of worker poetry are explored, as are the factors which led to the emergence of worker poetry. In discussing the influence of the Zulu izibongo (praise poetry) on worker poetry, particular attention is paid to formal and performative qualities. The ways in which worker poetry has been utilised by both poets and audience as a powerful intellectual resource are debated. Finally, the implications of publishing worker poetry via the media of print, audio-cassettes and video-cassettes are discussed.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University, nor has it been prepared under the aegis or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



Steve Kromberg

14th day of June, 1993.

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Finally, I remember the poets whose voices have been silenced in the Natal wars.

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INTRODUCTION

Initiated by a small group of workers involved in The Dunlop Play, worker poetry has arguably the largest audience of any modern poetry in South Africa - with perhaps the single exception of Mzwakhe Mbuli's protest poetry.[1] At the time this research was conducted, in 1989, worker poetry was constantly expanding its boundaries. The poets enthusiastically engaged in stylistic innovation and reached out to embrace new audiences. They took their poetry beyond the labour movement, performing at mass rallies held in the name of the United Democratic Front and the African National Congress. Their poetry increasingly reflected this shift as they addressed broader political issues. Although the poetry had been published before, new journals and anthologies which actively catered for their work began to appear and the worker poets were invited to submit their work to international journals. Local video crews focused their cameras on the performances, sound engineers offered their skills and sophisticated equipment to record the poems and the poetry began to find its way into university curricula.

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1. With the exception of a few national rallies and cultural festivals, the Durban worker poets have generally been limited to local and regional audiences. Mbuli's work, as will be discussed later, has reached a more national audience through virtually every possible medium.

When I first read Black Mamba Rising, the first collection of worker poetry, I sensed that this poetry had the potential to form the base of a strong poetic and literary movement.[2] Prior to its emergence, writers like Es'kia Mphahlele were wondering if the poetry of the late seventies had not begun to "run out of gas".[3] At the time I speculated that worker poetry, alongside other cultural forms more firmly rooted in community and labour organisations, had the potential to outlast its predecessors.[4] Its organisational base, I assumed, would keep the poets close to their audience and ensure the continued growth and development of the poetry.

Before beginning my research I was innocent of the lively performance context, having only seen one performance of the poetry. Nevertheless, it struck me as being passionate and energetic, combining as it did condemnation, lamentation, celebration and critical reflection. In what was apparently the first worker poem to be performed and published, "Praise Poem to Fosatu", Alfred Temba Qabula speaks about a worker "consoling others/ Wiping their tears from their eyes" (Sitas Black Mamba Rising 8). Using the metaphor of a forest to describe the refuge

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2. A. Sitas, ed., Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle (Durban: Culture and Working Life Publications, 1989).

3. Personal interview, 18 December 1986.

4. S. Kromberg, "A Review of the African Literature Division at the University of the Witwatersrand", diss., U of Witwatersrand, January 1987.

trade unions provided to workers, he says: "Deep in the forest they hid themselves and/ When they came out they were free from fear". Similarly, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) is described as, among other things, a "Hen with wide wings" that "Knoweth no discrimination". He appeals to Fosatu to use these wings to "Protect us too so that we gain wisdom". Qabula goes on to celebrate the union federation's active interventions: "Militant are your sons and daughters/ One wonders what kind of muti they use" and to satirise the employers, their spies and government officials bent on frustrating the worker's cause. Not content to simply admire the federation and castigate his opposition, he also reflects that union leaders in the past have not been without fault: "Time and time again we have been electing leaders/...People who knew all our sufferings/...But to our dismay/ After we had appointed them, we placed them on the/ Top of the mountain, /And they turned against us". He calls on Fosatu to teach workers about "past organisations/ Before we came/ Tell us about their mistakes so that we may not fall foul of their mistakes".

"Praise Poem to Fosatu" is an exceptional work in the breadth of its scope and the nuances of its message but many of these themes are repeated in his other works and those by other poets. Hlatswayo's "The Black Mamba Rises" is also in essence a praise poem to the labor movement, although more focused on the Dunlop strike and the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) (8). He first performed it for striking Dunlop workers at the hall

where they gathered every day.[5] Less broad-ranging than "Praise Poem for Fosatu", Hlatswayo's praises impress with their rich imagery and are more reminiscent of Zulu izibongo. The union is metonomically named as a "builder of nests", an ant-eater which deserts, a "dangabane flower" that dies and resurrects itself; while the workers are likened to a "woman who married without any lobolo" who is "busy boiling foreigners'/ Pots" while her own are "lying cold"; a "humble bride affianced with only the bridegroom's consent" The Black Mamba Rises" is less self-critical than "Praise Poem for Fosatu" and more inclined to rely on celebration and condemnation. Hlatswayo's imagery (especially in the Zulu) is well balanced and its rhythmic composition is far from the simple sloganeering more "literary" poets accused it of being.[6]

Nise Malange's poetry is more literal and she speaks in the first person, naming her own (and others') experiences as a woman and a worker in clearer, more everyday language and imagery.[7] Slower, quieter and more deliberate, she creates an atmosphere in which her personal suffering and pain speak for other individuals in similar positions. She uses less dense imagery than Qabula and Hlatswayo, relying on simpler images which are nevertheless

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5. The events of the strike are recounted in Alfred Qabula A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief (Durban: CWLP, 1989).

6. Critical responses to the poetry are discussed in detail in Chapter One.

7. See, for example, her poems in Black Mamba Rising.

powerfully evocative. For example, in "I, the unemployed" she speaks as an unemployed person who is "living in thinning light", whose "freedom is nailed to a tree", who spits at the blazing sun (51). Some of the images may be rather mundane & clichéd, such as "living in a match box", "dying of hunger", "white collars", but they nevertheless communicate emotions which, to her audience of people like herself, are profound because of the intensity of the experience they refer to. She relies heavily on repetition and juxtaposition, which do sometimes appear sloganistic on paper but which work more powerfully in performance (especially at the kind of intimate occasions she prefers).[8]

As I read further and immersed myself in the context in which the performances took place, it became apparent that the imaginary world of the composed word, whether in song or poetry, also provided the worker poets (and, as I will argue, their audiences) with a place of refuge, from which they launched forays against those social forces which attempted to relegate black workers to the harsh world of the factories and the townships. As Hlatswayo evocatively puts it in "The Black Mamba/ Rises": "The black mamba that shelters in the songs/ Yet others shelter in the trees". Qabula, in an oft-quoted passage from his autobiography, tells of how:

> There, on my forklift, most of the time isolated from the world, I would spend my working hours composing songs about our situation. I suppose it was my little resistance

---

8. Malange's preference for smaller, more intimate performance venues is discussed in Chapter Two.

> struggle in my head, zooming up and down to the Baser Stores and back. When the tunes rolled fast I would work like a maniac, driving my co-workers insane because the materials would pile up fast in front of them. When the songs were slower then I suppose life improved for them (Qabula A Working Life 68).

Importantly, the poetry appeared to constitute a set of powerful intellectual resources with which the poets could contribute to the contest of ideas and, more concretely, to the making of a political movement.

The wells from which the poets drew were many and diverse (some would say contradictory) in character. They combined ideas and poetic forms from a range of sources, including indigenous forms and imagery; working class ideology of various hues; religious ideas, values and rituals (especially syncretic merges of indigenous and Christian mythologies and practices); nationalist ideas and rhetoric; and occasionally even ideas and ways of performing that challenged gender stereotyping. Using "Praise Poem to Fosatu" again as an example, Qabula talks about "muti", "ancestors" "Mvelingqangi", a "Sangoma" at the same time as "prayer", "Moses", "Canaan" and ideas of "elected representatives", "parliament" and "organisations". Formally there are passages that clearly draw on the conventions of indigenous izibongo (praise poetry), dramatic dialogue reminiscent of the worker plays, sermonising and storytelling.[9]

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9. Given that a number of Zulu words appear frequently throughout this study, I will not underline these words, translations of which will be given as they arise.

In response to claims that such diversity amounts to ideological and poetic confusion, one could quote the following lines from one of Blade Nzimande's poems:

> What are these thorns really?
> Is it you or is it the exploiters?
> Why do you prick some and leave others?
> Through my confusion it becomes clear to me.
>
> Because my confusion is the stream
> From which I draw my wisdom,
> So the mirage is removed from before my eyes,
> Now I have seen and understood,
> Who really causes my wounds.[10]

The poetry, it seemed to me, was significant precisely because of its ability to draw together different strands of workers' identities into textual form.

Although these facets of the poetry are most obviously of broader social and literary significance, at the same time the act of composition and public performance is deeply meaningful at an intimate and personal level. Qabula is quoted in the introduction to Black Mamba Rising as saying: "I would see something that hurts, that causes me pain and then I would spend the working day making a song about it" (3). But he would not only compose songs. In his autobiography A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief, Qabula describes how he was one of the first workers to invite the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) to form a branch at the Dunlop factory in Durban. He was elected as a shop steward and soon became one of the workers most actively

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10. B. Nzimande, "A World of Thorns," Izinsingizi: Loudhailer Lives (Durban: CWLP, 1989): 128.

fighting for improved living conditions. His poems, songs and dramatic activities added textures and dimensions to his own life that significantly improved its quality, in spite of the "cruelty" of his working and living conditions.

Despite the multi-faceted nature of the poetry (in form, content and media via which it reached its audience), worker poetry had required an identity as a specific, although emergent, genre. While the term 'Durban worker poetry' therefore describes a set of poems which differ stylistically and thematically, its usefulness lies in the fact that the poets have emerged from within trade unions affiliated to the non-racial labour federation Cosatu (the Congress of South African Trade Unions).

Structure of discussion

The main impetus for this study was the apparent discrepancy between critical responses to worker poetry in print and the responses of audiences at rallies where the poetry was performed. These responses form the subject of discussion in Chapter One.

Much of the criticism was formulated in response to the publication of the first collection of self-proclaimed worker poetry Black Mamba Rising, published by the Culture and Working Life Project (CWLP) and edited by Ari Sitas. The slim volume contained poetry by worker poets Mi Hlatswayo, Nise Malange and Alfred Temba Qabula. What struck me was the stark contrast

between the thunderous applause which greeted the oral performances and Lionel Abraham's and Farouk Asvat's assertion that the poetry consisted of little more than sloganeering.[11] My initial intention was therefore to investigate and attempt to describe the interpretive strategies used by worker audiences in responding to the poetry. At the most basic level, my research was designed to establish to what extent the audience was simply responding to poems as a set of slogans or whether there was indeed, as I suspected, more to their responses than met Lionel Abraham's and Farouk Asvat's eyes.

While various academic critics of worker poetry have gone much further in acknowledging both the social and literary significance of the poetry, few have done so in a way that gives due recognition to the fact that literature achieves its poetic and political efficacy through its reception by its audience. While in theory they may reject a crude base-superstructure model in which literature reflects society, their critical efforts are often hamstrung by their limited focus on the dynamic ways in which the poetry enters the lives of their audience.

Underlying my approach is the argument that a comprehensive appreciation of worker poetry must be rooted not only in a detailed understanding of the aesthetic and thematic qualities of the poetry itself, but also in a clear explication of the social, ideological and aesthetic terrain on which the poets are

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11. L. Abrahams, letter, Weekly Mail Apr. (1987); F. Asvat, letter, Weekly Mail Apr. (1987).

practicing their craft, and into which they seek to intervene. It is a decidedly interdisciplinary approach, and one which shies away from the narrow foci often dictated by set critical paradigms.

The critical responses detailed in Chapter One were of course formulated within a specific critical context. My discussion is therefore also a response to the silences that have marked the shifting borders of academic discourse.

More than a decade ago Isabel Hofmeyr commented that:

> Many critics have been happy to slot into preconceived and erroneous ideas about South African literature, its genesis and development. There is already an established 'tradition'... [which] quite staggeringly ignores the culture and literary endeavours of the majority of the people in this country.[12]

In the intervening years substantially more critical attention has been paid to the "literary endeavours" of the majority. Unfortunately this has seldom translated into attempts to research what literature is in fact read and heard by the same people. While a few surveys of black readership patterns had been conducted, questions of readership and audience have largely ignored by literary critics.

Such issues have been dealt with implicitly in debates about poetry and literature by black South Africans. For example, David Maughan Brown has argued that:

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12. I. Hofmeyr, "The State of South African Literary Criticism," English in Africa 6 (1979): 39.

> The existence of different cultural modes of perception makes the establishment of black criticism as well as black literature essential.[13]

His assertion echoes the views of many black writers and poets. In 1981 Sipho Sepamla expressed this view:

> It appears [the critics] have not understood the meaning of black consciousness, like Miriam [Tlali] says. We have to go to the people. It is the man in the street... that I feel we must listen to, rather than people who'll come with the jargon that they've picked up from American magazines.[14]

On the other hand, Kelwyn Sole has condemned this approach for being over-simplistic and obscuring real class divisions that exist between black South Africans:

> The immediacy and relevance of [black writers'] condemnation of racism has found an enthusiastic hearing in the townships, and their striving more recently to reach 'the masses' has gone some way to closing the gap that existed between them and their audiences. But they will not solve the problem of reaching lower class audiences by pretending that the aspirations and viewpoints of all blacks, of whatever class, are identical.[15]

Sole's exploration of the relationship between black writers and their audiences is only one facet of his overall project, which is to construct a sophisticated Marxist reading of black literature. Apart from his observations on social class, therefore, he does not delve into the nature and extent of audience responses.

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13. D. Maughan Brown, "Black Criticism and Black Aesthetics," Contrast 48 (1979): 86-95.

14. M. Tlali, S. Sepamla, M. Mutloatse and J. Seroke. "Black Writers in South Africa," Staffrider 4.3 (1981): 43.

15. K. Sole, "Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions," English in Africa 10.1 (1983): 50.

In general, references to readership have unfortunately remained at the level of rather sweeping generalisations and assertions, as exemplified by Maughan Brown's reference to "different cultural modes of perception". I argue in Chapter One that previous critical appraisals of worker poetry in general (and worker 'izibongo' in particular) have failed to acknowledge important facets of its social role, its aesthetic function and value and the factors which facilitated its emergence. A central reason for this failure has been that the relevant critics have not placed sufficient weight on the role of the audience, at a micro level in the performance and at a macro level in mediating the emergence of transformed poetic forms and ideological messages.

The emphasis in the rest of the thesis naturally reflects my evaluation of the critical debates around worker poetry. My focus is on analysing the nature of audience responses to live performances (Chapter Two); conceptual discussion of audience studies (Chapter Three); the process through which the appropriate social and aesthetic context for worker poetry was created (Chapter Four); the specific factors which gave rise to worker poetry (Chapter Five); the extent to which worker poetry can be seen as the transformation of indigenous praise poetry (Chapter Six); and finally, the ways in which worker poetry has functioned - for the poets, their audience and the political movements they are embedded in - as a powerful intellectual resource (Chapter Seven).

Certain readers may lament the lack of detailed discussion of specific texts. In essence, my evaluation of the critical work

done thus far is that detailed textual analysis is in fact the ground already most adequately covered. My focus is therefore on understanding how these texts live, and how they breathe life into the society of which they are an integral part. This is not merely intended as an elaborate exercise in providing a sense of social context. Rather it is aimed at equipping future readers of worker poetry with a detailed understanding of the aesthetic, social and political environment in which worker poetry has thrived.

As Karin Barber has argued, oral performances are often both a reflection of, and action in, society.[16] She has shown how such performances often take everyday discourse and place it on display, thus foregrounding certain ideas which are frequently not visible in other, more official (and often written) forms of discourse. In such a view the analytical distinctions between form and function, or between ideology and aesthetics lose their usefulness. As has been noted by a number of writers, it is precisely the formal qualities that make the communication of ideology possible.[17] In other words the audience's familiarity with aesthetic conventions enables their engagement with political and ideological "content". It is precisely the

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16. K. Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 1991).

17. For an interesting overview of such scholarship, see R. Bauman and C. Briggs "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," Annual Review of Anthropology 19 (1990): 59-88.

aesthetic resonance of the worker poets' performances that I will argue gives the poetry its power as poetry and as a communicative act.

In Chapter Two, therefore, I record my observations of audience responses to the poetry in performance. I map out the types of events in which the poetry has been performed and I extrapolate from my observations the criteria that the audiences appeared to be using in responding to the poetry. It will become clear that these criteria include both aesthetic and ideological elements, and that the poetry should primarily be regarded as a performance which draws its power from the aesthetic and social experiences of both performers and audience. I argue that the aesthetic conventions used by the audience in responding to worker poetry are drawn, in no small measure, from the Zulu izibongo.

Some would argue that interpretations are necessarily idiosyncratic and that individuals interpret texts differently. Initial observations of the events where worker poetry is performed suggested, however, that while not everyone responded in exactly the same way, there appeared to be a dominant response, which conformed to certain patterns. The variety of poetic styles, mentioned above, were clearly apparent. What was necessary was a sophisticated method of analysis that would allow for the exploration of the interpretive strategies being applied by the audience in a way that acknowledged convergences and divergences and, as far as possible, could begin to explain them.

In oral studies, the term "audience" is most frequently used to describe those physically present during a performance. Similarly, the term "readership" in discussions of written literature often refers to those who actually read the work. One could use the term "actual audience" to describe this type of audience. Such an audience may or may not be representative of a broader society or a particular grouping. When a poet performs to an audience and receives a standing ovation, this does not automatically imply widespread appreciation of that poet's work in his/her society.

Another common approach is to hypothesize a reader or an audience for the purpose of describing the process of reception. Critics using this approach construct an abstract reader who does not exist in reality but who is simply a model for the critic's theory of the reading process.[18]

A third category is the target audience of a work. This term can be used to describe the audience which the performer intends the work to reach. This is similar to the "mock reader" whose identity is determined by the writer's idea of who he or she is aiming their work at.[19] This sense of target audience frequently influences the text and/or the performance. No artist is likely to reach the entire target audience and the term therefore

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18. For examples of this approach, see W. Gibson, G. Prince and W. Iser in J.P. Tompkins, Reader-Response Criticism (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1980): 1-6; 7-25; 50-69.

19. See Gibson in Tompkins Reader-Response Criticism.

encompasses even those who do not see, hear, read or experience it in any other way.

While the second and third categories of audience are important and will be referred to in this study, the primary aim of this study was to establish the nature and extent of the actual audience's responses.

In Chapter Three I explore different ways of conceptualising the problem of audience, drawing on a wide range of sources from within the study of both oral and written literature. I propose that a useful way of appreciating the poetry is to view it as a social and cultural activity that takes place within an "interpretive community". Interpretive communities are not simply ideological groups but social and cultural coalitions of people who both experience similar material conditions of life and forge "defensive combinations" in response to (but not determined by) ideological interpellations from above by various competing social institutions.[20] In other words, interpretive communities do not simply exist at the level of ideas, or only insofar as they share aesthetic and interpretive conventions, but are socially organised groups of people who have coalesced at certain points in history into particular places in society. They are not

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20. This approach is deeply indebted to Ari Sitas' work on the significance of cultural formations in ideological contests. For example, see his "Class, Nation, Ethnicity in Natal's Black Working Class," The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Collected Seminar Papers, Institute of Commonwealth Studies 15.38 (1990): 257-278.

closed sets of such people but should rather be seen as overlapping coalitions which are contested in ongoing social processes, as part of the historical contest for control over society.

Durban has been the site of the most heated and often violent political conflict in South Africa. And yet that has not always been the case. The student uprisings in the 1970s are widely regarded as marking the beginning of the intense political contests that have culminated in the Nationalist's government's admission that apartheid was unworkable. In Natal, however, the 1970s were relatively quiet years. By the mid-1980s, though, Durban and the surrounding countryside was fast being turned into one of the bloodiest battlefields in South Africa. This has widely been ascribed to the developing conflict between the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Inkatha, with the state playing no small role in adding fuel to the fire.

No discussion of Durban worker poetry can take place without a detailed understanding of these events. My focus in conducting this discussion is on the ways in which the political conflict lead to the polarisation of the Durban working class. Significantly, this polarisation necessarily entailed a process of coalition, as local political groupings coalesced into two mutually exclusive groupings. This process I have called "the making of an interpretive community" for the reason that, despite significant differences within the two movements, each managed to create significant levels of ideological and organisational

coherence. On the one hand, this interpretive community provided a base within which worker poetry emerged, and on the other hand worker poetry played a significant role in its expansion and consolidation.

In Chapter Five I argue that the audience has played a central role in the emergence and recognition of worker poetry, and that this illustrates how the poetry is both embedded in and constitutive of the interpretive community discussed in Chapter Four. The emergence of worker poetry was predicated on the prior existence of this interpretive community and relied on its organisational infrastructure and ideological coherence. While the specific interventions of various individuals and institutions are acknowledged as key factors in the emergence of worker poetry, the significance of the audience is explained. Positive audience responses encouraged its early exponents to continue and other working class poets to follow their example. The live performance gave members of the audience the opportunity to encourage or discourage certain styles and messages, thereby influencing the composition of the poetry itself. The poets' concern to provoke an appreciative response enhanced the audience's influence in this regard. More significantly, the poets' "use-value" to the organisers of the events was predicated on their popularity with the audience, which led to the official authorisation of the poetry by the institutions around which the interpretive community was organised. At the very least the poets were used as 'light relief' before speeches and played a role in

building up the spirit of the audience to the level where less aesthetically pleasing speeches are received with suitable enthusiasm. The audience was therefore the measure of the poets' success or failure and played an active role in determining their future prospects. The labour and political institutions not only provided platforms from which the poets could perform but also published worker poetry on paper, audio-cassette and, to a lesser extent, on video-cassette. Therefore, I will show that while the individual poets certainly played a critical role in the introduction and composition of the poetry, it is also to a significant (and hitherto unexplored) extent a product of the audience's reception of the poetry.

I argue that to understand the above one needs to analyse the poetry not simply as text, not even only as oral performances with token recognition of audience, but as a form of cultural activity in which the audience plays a central role in 'scripting' the emergent form - and the identities it represents.

While I argue in Chapter Two that poetic conventions associated with the izibongo are central to the audience's responses, I also note that it would misleading to assume that all worker poetry is unproblematically based on the izibongo. In Chapter Six I outline the key features of the izibongo, as identified by various scholars and then discuss the extent to which the poetry itself appears to draw on these conventions.

These poetic conventions constitute important cultural and intellectual resources, which workers - poets and audience alike

- have utilised to play a role as active agents in the process of building a political movement that they believed expressed their material interests and political aspirations. This is the substance of the discussion in Chapter Seven. The audience, through its responses to the poetry, recognises and can affirm or negate both ideological and poetic propositions embodied in the poetry. It gives them a significant channel for self-expression and self-assertion, thus enabling a meaningful contribution to ideological debate and political contests.

This intimate dialogue through poetry places the worker poets in a privileged position in relation to their fellow workers. Through their performances they jump the queue of organisational hierarchies and gain allocations of space and time on platforms at rallies normally only granted to senior leadership figures. It is for this reason that certain commentators have regarded the poets as organic intellectuals who play a significant role in translating what Bozzoli has termed the incoherent mass of popular ideas into ideology.[21] The worker poets do not always play the role, however, of ideological innovators and organisers as they frequently place existing ideas on display. What is significant about their role is that they do so in a form which is organic to workers' experience.

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21. Bozzoli argues that in the study of popular consciousness it is important to recognise that the balance between structure and agency is determined by power relations. The poor have very few opportunities to develop ideologies out of what she argues is often an "incoherent mass of ideas and attitudes". B. Bozzoli, Women of Phokeng (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991): 2.

Worker poets have been crucial in a number of ways for the development of competing political movements in Durban. At one level, as has been argued by Elizabeth Gunner, the cultural activities which the poetry forms part of can be said to reflect an adaptation of indigenous cultural forms to the contemporary context. In this sense they reflect broader processes. But at another level they have been part of the process of forming essentially new identities, new practices, new forms of social organisation and new ways of resisting and forming alternatives to imposed social controls.

Chapter Seven focuses on the ideas and values that are communicated in and through worker poetry. At the base of my argument is the notion that the form itself is highly symbolic and that its appropriation - in certain contexts - itself carries meaning. I extend this idea to discuss how the meaning of the poetry is significantly mediated by the medium through which the poetry is made public, whether this be through performance at political rallies, publication in print, or recording, reproduction and distribution of audio- or video-cassettes.

This approach does not seek to dismiss all previous analyses of worker poetry nor can it claim to improve significantly on the important work done on the Zulu izibongo. Instead it intends to shift the focal point of the critic's vision and hopefully illuminate aspects of the poetry which have been underplayed in the past. In this way I hope that the present work will make a small but significant contribution to our understanding of social and cultural transformations.

Research Methodology

The method I used to research the above was multifaceted. The research took place in 1989 and early 1990, during which time I was based in the Culture and Working Life Project (CWLP) in Durban.[22] I attended many of the events where the poetry was performed, observing the performances and the audience responses; video-taping the events; on occasion performing poetry myself (and thus experiencing audience response 'first hand'). I was later able to review the video-tapes at my leisure, analysing the events in greater depth and in my own time.

The CWLP also conducted a broad-based survey of workers' leisure time, providing valuable statistics on their cultural activities. I included specific questions pertaining to worker poetry in the questionnaires. I also conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample of workers who had attended the events in order to test some of the conclusions I had drawn in analysing audience responses at the events themselves.

A number of the poets kindly agreed to be interviewed and, because I spent a year working with them, I was also able to have many informal discussions with them about their work.

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22. The following is a summary of my research methodology. More detailed dicussion of the specific strategies used is included at appropriate moments in the thesis.

Finally, working in the CWLP, I was able to trace the ways in which the distribution of the poetry occurred, in print, on audio cassettes, videotape and through live performances.

I focused on the Durban industrial area for the following reasons: the CWLP had done considerable work in the sphere of popular culture and was willing to make their resources available to me; the Cosatu Cultural Unit was based in Durban and was also prepared to co-operate; and finally it was not practically possible to conduct in-depth research in more than one area. In the interviews and the leisure time study I concentrated on Cosatu membership for the reason that they had the easiest access to the poetry I was studying - there was no point in interviewing people who had not been exposed to the poetry. As is discussed further in Chapter Three, I was attempting to establish whether one could meaningfully talk about an "interpretive community" and this narrowness of focus was therefore appropriate. Having identified this target audience, I had to establish a few important statistics: how many people had been exposed to the poetry, where the exposure took place; in what form it took place (reading or performance). This I did via the CWLP leisure time survey. The survey also provided me with a sense of what other factors could have influenced responses to the poetry.

Language was of course a key problem I had to confront. I acquired a rudimentary grasp of Zulu by attending formal classes throughout the year, practicing on my fellow workers at the CWLP and sitting in many meetings where Zulu was the only language used. For the rest I relied on translators and interpreters to

assist me. As is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, I conducted most of my interviews in English, although I invariably had an interpreter at hand to translate where necessary. My listening abilities developed more rapidly than my ability to speak Zulu but were still not adequate to the rapid pace of delivery and the depth of the language often used in performances. I attempted to overcome this problem by video-taping performances. Many of the performances were transcribed and translated in my presence and we (the translators and I) discussed difficulties of nuance as we proceeded. I also engaged the translators and the poets in discussion, while viewing the videos, about what they thought the audience was responding to, which significantly helped sharpen my ability to analyse audience responses.

Some time after completing my fieldwork, I presented and then published an article which contained the essence of my conclusions about audience responses.[23] This was discussed with members of the CWLP, including Nise Malange, Alfred Qabula and Ari Sitas, who concurred with my conclusions. Before submitting the paper for publication in the conference proceedings, I was also fortunate enough to discuss it with Ruth Finnegan and Elizabeth Gunner, whose comments and suggestions were much appreciated. The manner in which I dealt with (or neglected to

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23. S. Kromberg, "The Role of Audience in the Emergence of Worker Poetry," New Wine in Old Bottles: Oral Tradition and Innovation Eds. E. Seinart, N. Bell and M. Lewis (Durban: Centre for Oral Documentation and Research, 1991): 180-203.

deal with) their comments was of course my own responsibility and none of the above people can in any way be held liable for flaws in the final product.

As I have already mentioned, this thesis was initially motivated by what some of my critics have (always orally) dismissed as a "populist", or "anti-intellectual" desire to provide a voice to those whose interpretations are most firmly and rapidly silenced in the lunge and parry of academic discourse. I was always aware, though, that my own efforts would in fact be a product of my own interpretations of these interpretations and that I could not and should not make any pretense at transparency. At this study's heart, then, was my desire to see cultural and intellectual production as a process which has no beginning and no end but which is simply frozen at particular points by particular people in order to enable their (often highly self-interested) aims and objectives.

My research led to me becoming intimately involved in the processes through which the poetry was being being produced and then reproduced in various forms. I also became emotionally involved in the subject matter, in the cut and thrust of Natal politics as well as the sometimes fierce debate of the academic fora in which I tested my ideas. Frequently I found the internal conflicts that these different (and mostly contradictory) involvements produced in me somewhat debilitating. At other times I found them exciting and rewarding. In spite of considerable pressure from my academic peers and mentors (and my own survival instinct) I was never completely able to disengage myself

completely from the intense feelings created in me by the deaths of so many people.

Writing up this research has therefore often been a painful process. Frequently I did not know where to start, what to include, what to leave out and where to go to. I have, of course, tried to create as much critical distance between myself and the subject of my investigation as possible. I am therefore extremely grateful to the many people who helped me "zoom out" and re-examine my own work critically, just as I am to the many people who dragged me so deeply into the subject matter that at time I thought I would not be able to return to a more critical perspective. The points at which I have frozen the cultural process may relate as much to the specificities of my own involvements as to the outcome of a disinterested and academically rigorous enquiry. I am sure that, in spite of much editing and rewriting, the human dimension of my research will still stand out, for better or for worse. Despite this, I am confident that this study will usefully refocus the interpretive strategies of those readers who are, by virtue of their own locations and perspectives, too distanced from the poetry itself to be able to appreciate its full significance.

CHAPTER ONE

Critical Responses to Worker Poetry

The debate about Black Mamba Rising was initiated by radical critic and former political prisoner Jeremy Cronin, who reviewed the collection in the Weekly Mail, under the headline "Elitist pastime finds mass roots".[24] The Weekly Mail, an 'alternative' weekly newspaper started by former journalists of the defunct Rand Daily Mail, was one of the few newspapers to recognise the significance of the collection. Cronin's review elicited a number of critical responses in the letters pages of the Weekly Mail. While the debate unfortunately consisted of short articles lacking analytical depth, the arguments reflected a significant divergence of critical opinion. The spate of letters was cut short by the editors of the Weekly Mail, before the poets themselves could respond in print.

Cronin's review begins by challenging certain aesthetic preconceptions:

> We were once taught to think of poetry as obscure and elite. In the last decade, however, poetry has been marching in the front ranks of the mass struggles that have rolled through our land.
>
> It was the township student and youth organisations that began to integrate militant, oral poetry into their

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24. J. Cronin, "Elitist pastime finds mass roots," Weekly Mail 13 Mar. (1987).

> activities. Now, in recent years, oral performance poetry has also taken root within the progressive trade union movement....
>
> The poems in this collection were all originally performed at collective gatherings, at May Day rallies and at services for fallen workers in soccer stadiums, hostels and township halls.

Although he asserts the 'mass roots' of the poetry, Cronin does not expand on the issue of readership and audience, leaving his assertions rather tenuously posed. He notes briefly that "the poems have travelled to us from Xhosa and Zulu."

> What we have on the page, then, are second, even third-hand echoes.
>
> Never mind, these poems are powerful enough to make the jump from voice to page, from one language to another.

These are, for Cronin, not the most important issues. He leaves them in favour of political and ideological questions.

> Perhaps the greatest service this slim volume can render is to undermine that lazy contrast so frequent in commentaries on the progressive trade union movement. How often are we told that the big debate is between "workerism" and "populism"?...
>
> Read these poems and you will see that the poets, in their different ways, all uphold a militant working class perspective, but precisely in and through an equally militant nationalism.

Cronin's conclusions were forcefully challenged. The attack came from another angle, however. In his letter to the editors, Poet Lionel Abrahams labels Cronin's assertion that "we were once taught to think of poetry as obscure and elite" as a "simplistic distortion":

> Its intent, perhaps, was to disarm objections to the patronisingly high praise he goes on to bestow on passages of very minor achievement.
>
> This kind of thing does harm - not least to black poets, both accomplished and aspirant. Its main message to them is: "The best is not for you".

Farouk Asvat's response to Cronin contains three major strands. He criticises Cronin for ignoring the fact that poetry has been

part of mass activity since the late sixties and not just for the 'past decade'. He goes on to challenges Cronin's evaluation of the aesthetic merits of the poetry.

> If Cronin, and many like him (both black and white), would lead us to believe that the mere mouthing of political slogans and rhetoric is sufficient to make anything written by blacks or workers poetry, then they must have a serious re-think, if they have the advancement of our people in mind.
>
> The examples that Cronin quotes are nothing more than praise poems to selected organisations, like the praise poems of old that sang out to monarchs in blind faith, in spite of their injustices.

Although apparently recognising that the aesthetic roots of the poetry lie in the izibongo (praise poem), Asvat's view that the izibongo are "blindly" uncritical is a rather jaundiced one.[25] He goes on to argue that the poetry has not retained the best aspects of this 'tradition':

> There seems to be nothing of the "popular traditions, old symbols, incanted formulations" in these poems.

He also takes issue with the poets' portrayal of history.

> The uprisings and suppressions of the last two-and-a-half years especially, and of the past 16 years, and of the entire history of his nation, did not begin with the workers. It took its terrible toll on the fathers and babies and grandmothers and children.
>
> When even writers begin to deny their own history, and become selective in their portrayals, then we as a nation face a terrible tragedy; now and in the future.

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25. That izibongo are not necessarily uncritical has been well established in the literature. For example, see L. Vail and L. White, Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (London: James Currey, 1991). See also my Introduction, in which I discuss self-criticism in Qabula's poetry. This issue will also be discussed further in later chapters.

For Asvat and Abrahams the poems did not break significantly new ground, nor are they of noteworthy quality. Cronin is misguided in applauding the poets and their works. In Abrahams' words: "ideology seems to have turned his thinking inside out".

As mentioned above, Qabula attempted to challenge Asvat and Abrahams, although his letter has remained unpublished. I have therefore included a large extract from his response, which is bitter, sarcastic and assertive.

> I would like to apologise to Mr. Lionel Abrahams and Mr. Farouk Asvat for having the audacity to think that I could be a poet of their quality and standing....
>
> I also worry that I needed help to understand their letters, and to try and understand why so much contempt was being showered on us. And why racist slurs on the izimbongi tradition were aired, I still don't understand. What I could read behind your criticism of Cronin was a total contempt for what we do, we believe in and strive to achieve....
>
> You can deny me, as educated people, the right to be called a poet but do not falsify my plight: I praise no chiefs, I only praise rough hands that hold the plough, in rough words and with a heavy tongue.
>
> But one thing you must grant me: the fundamental right to communicate with my fellow human beings, to tell others that I am still alive and that I can still sing despite oppression, and that I can demand in whatever form, as a migrant, the right to share a life with my beloved without her or me having to earn it by working in the kitchens of a Mr. Abrahams or a Mr. Asvat. To also say this without needing certificates of poetry from anyone. We have not arrived here to collect crumbs from any tables.[26]

What becomes the central issue of the debate is aesthetic criteria: who determines what constitutes good poetry? Central to Qabula's aesthetic is his assertion of his right to perform and that this is part of a broader process of political resistance.

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26. The full text of this unpublished letter is provided in Appendix A.

We are not left much enlightened by these rather circular debates. While we know that there is dissent about what criteria should be used to evaluate contemporary South African poetry, these reviewers have not explained what criteria they would use, let alone justified their choice. It is difficult to tell whether they have even read the poems closely, or whether they have heard them in performance. Underlying all of these views, however, are assumptions about 'mass' audience responses which are left unstated. Cronin's brief sketch of the performance context is left behind as the more 'serious' questions of ideology and rarefied aesthetics assume centre stage.

The lengthier academic responses published in various journals shift the terrain of debate significantly. None of these develop Asvat's or Abrahams' positions. In general, their concern is to explore the role of oral literature in contemporary South African society. They seek not so much to evaluate and critique the work as to analyse the conditions of its emergence, to explain some of the techniques used and the role of the poetry in the contemporary labour movement.

The editor of Black Mamba Rising, Ari Sitas, was the first to conduct a detailed investigation into the poetry. Sitas has been a central figure in Natal worker culture since its inception. In his 1984 article on Qabula, he is decidedly (and unashamedly) partisan. His article consists of a detailed analysis of the genesis of Qabula's earlier work. Sitas argues that Qabula represents:

> A grassroots response that uses well rooted forms, organically linked to working class cultures and infuses them with new contents: now the contents of the factory experience, and the contents of a worker militant's beliefs...
>
> The well of song and performing traditions that he draws from is too deep for simple countryside and urban divisions.[27]

It is, however, Sitas' later discussion of Mi Hlatswayo's work that begins to address the questions posed by the Weekly Mail debate. There he analyses in some detail the poetic technique at play - showing how Hlatswayo draws on the oral tradition in his poetry.

> [Hlatswayo's poems are both] a revival and a transformation of the [Nguni imbongi] tradition and, over and above their political substance, offer an interesting formal mutation of imbongi poetry.[28]

He traces how Hlatswayo came to poetry via the church, where "the lay preachers... had integrated the imbongi tradition of poetry into their religious sermons". He explains Hlatswayo's complex use of paradox, metaphor, simile, metonymy and "words with many literal and metaphoric meanings", pointing out the continuities and discontinuities between Hlatswayo's poetry and traditional imbongi poetry.

Sitas' analysis provides important keys to understanding Hlatswayo's technique. But more importantly it begins to provide access to the aesthetic that underpins the poetry; and therefore

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27. A. Sitas, "A. T. Qabula - a working class poet," South African Labour Bulletin 9.7 (1984): 26.

28. A. Sitas, "Black Mamba Rising: an introduction to Mi S'Dumo Hlathswayo's poetry," Transformation 2 (1986): 50.

begins to develop appropriate criteria for evaluating Qabula's poetry on its own terms. In doing so it renders impotent Asvat's accusation that the poetry is mere "mouthing of political slogans and rhetoric".

Kelwyn Sole's review of Black Mamba Rising drags the debate back to the issues raised by Cronin.[29] Sole describes the collection as "a modern, radically transformed oral poetry", which draws on praise poetry "to some extent in both manner of delivery and style" (108). He cites 'devices' such as "exhortation, repetition, various forms of linguistic parallelism" and "political commentary couched in allusions and symbolism". Usefully, he reminds us of previous 'transformations' of the izibongo, for example in the 1930s, when Hlongwe praised Champion and the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU). Sole is keenly aware of the inadequacies of print for the reproduction of performance poetry but focuses his discussion on its ideological and political significance. Sole's review is essentially of the poetry as found in print. His conclusion that "this book is well worth reading and pondering on" symbolises his distance from the poetry in performance (114). He ends with an appeal for workers reading the South African Labour Bulletin "not only to use oral but also written means of communication" (115).

Sole is particularly adept at unpacking the poems for their contribution to the cause of "democratic socialism". He is

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29. K. Sole, "New Words Rising," South African Labour Bulletin 12.2 (1987): 107-116.

concerned that worker culture relies too heavily on "the transformative power of traditional symbols" (112). He fears that poets and politicians cannot predetermine the audience's appropriation of such symbols:

> It is far too easy to let a militant nationalism - at this time present in black workers as well as other classes - overcome the unique demands of the working class.

Although he praises the 'earlier poems' for their demonstration of the poets' working class consciousness, he warns that in the later poems "the class specificities in some of these poems begin to slip away". He argues that worker plays are perhaps better suited to the tasks he advocates. Nevertheless he concludes that creative writing does have its uses.

> Alongside the other educational organs of the trade union movement, such as literacy and higher educational classes, creative writing can perhaps serve to instill readers and audience with a sense of history, with the tools to forge their own opinions about political and other events, and with some knowledge of the problems that beset not only capitalist countries, but those countries that call themselves socialist too (114).

Although Sole was writing for a journal aimed at providing a forum for exactly such concerns, his focus precludes a more nuanced discussion of the poetry's political and cultural context. My concern is not, however, to take issue with his particular "democratic socialist" perspective (as others have done); his often sensitive and penetrating analysis; or his suggested priorities for worker movements.

Sole's approach does not assist the reader in overcoming the leap from stage to page. He does not address the questions that underpin Qabula's response to Abrahams and Asvat. The latter's attack and Qabula's response represent a key site of the struggle

over interpretation. Surely the task of the critic concerned with the empowerment of the working class, as Sole implies is his main concern, goes beyond ensuring that the words of the workers are heard. It is insufficient to assert that their interests (as coded in particular political ideologies) should be clearly articulated. The critic should also play a role in sharpening readers' ability to appreciate their poetic artistry. In Qabula's words, as cited by Sole, "the voice of the workers must be heard" [my emphasis]. Interpreting this "voice" (or more appropriately, these voices) also necessitates the exploration and depiction of the textures of performance and the aesthetic qualities which give the poems their rhetorical force.

It should be apparent by now that the Zulu izibongo is an important key to unlocking these qualities. Elizabeth Gunner, in her article "A Dying Tradition? African Oral Literature in a Contemporary Context", elaborates on the role of the poet in contemporary political activity and on the significance of oral literature's ability to adapt to changing contexts.[30]

She asserts that both Zulu and Xhosa oral poetry appeal directly to their listeners' emotions and attitudes:

> They intrinsically combine political and aesthetic appeal and perhaps for this reason they represent valuable 'property' in any ideological struggle (33).

Because Gunner approaches the works of various Nguni izimbongi (praise poets) as oral literature, she sees the importance of

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30. E.A.W. Gunner, "A Dying Tradition? African Oral Literature in a Contemporary Context," Social Dynamics 12.2 (1986): 31-38.

both politics and aesthetics. She explores the work of worker poets Qabula, Hlatswayo and Madlinyoka Ntanzi, primarily seeking to explain the role of the imbongi in the labour movement.

Gunner refers briefly to the audience response these poets generate, commenting on Qabula's performance before "four to five thousand" workers at the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (Mawu) Annual General Meeting in 1984:

> Throughout the performance there were interjections and climatic moments which testified to the high degree of audience participation and involvement in the poet's performance (35).

She identifies a number of key characteristics of the modern worker izibongo which are inherited from the traditional forms such as: the "heroic ethos"; the "formulaic praise names"; the "allusions to the action[s] of leaders and ordinary members"; the "compressed and oblique, allusive style" [of praising]. She argues that "Qabula's kind of praise poetry is innovative yet it also expresses continuity".

Gunner concludes that the poems indicate:

> How a working class culture can show inheritance of, rather than dispossession from, those nationalist and popular symbols so vital to a people's contemporary self-image (37).

Gunner's focus precludes a more detailed discussion of the audience's role. While she notes that the political and aesthetic components are complementary, she does not explain whether the audience's apparently positive response is inspired by one or the other.

In a later paper, Gunner focuses on the question of orality and literacy.[31] She traces the genesis of worker izibongo, noting Qabula's emergence within the labour movement and his "rapturous" reception by his audience, who "must have recognised the complex linguistic and paralingual cues and the familiar heroic canvas packed with details of action" (51). She quotes Qabula speaking about the importance of print "as an essential medium for the propagation of the new work" (51) and as a medium for recording poetic traditions that he fears might otherwise be lost. She discusses how this poetry should be analysed and understood, arguing that fidelity of translation is one key component of this task. Unfortunately Gunner does not mobilise her considerable knowledge of the performance of izibongo in other contexts to sketch a fuller picture of the performance context. She does, however, warn that "an over-reliance on the resources of print could reduce [the dialogue with oral forms] to silence" (55).

Peter Horn, in a review of Mzwakhe Mbuli's collection Before Dawn, also recognises the limitations of the textual form.[32] Although it is argued in the next chapter that Mbuli's poetry represents a style which in fact competes with the izibongo, Horn's critical approach has merit in both cases. He identifies

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31. E.A.W. Gunner, "Orality and Literacy: Dialogue and Silence," Discourse and its Disguises: the Interpretation of African Oral Texts, Eds. K. Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias. (Birmingham: Birmingham U African Studies Series 1, 1989): 49-58.

32. P. Horn, "Before Dawn by Mzwakhe Mbuli," Staffrider 8.3&4 (1989).

certain poetic devices employed by Mbuli such as the "traditional metaphors and similes of a rural community"; the "evangelical rhetoric"; "the anaphora" (repetition of a word or phrase in successive clauses - he also calls this "insistent repetition"); the "formulaic intensity of biblical invocation"; the "imbongi incantation" and the "hammering refrains". But he admits he cannot go further:

> The poetics of the imbongi has not yet been written, despite some useful prolegomena, and this critic does not pretend that he is capable of the task (5).

Horn argues that the printed version of Mzwakhe's poetry should be seen as similar to written lyrics for a song.

> [The word 'lyrics'] is a healthy reminder that verse in the history of literature always had a much wider range than the narrow definition given to poetry in the period of the Romantics (1).

In so doing he makes the important distinction between the poetry in performance and the printed version, leading him to recognise the significance of the audience. He argues, for example:

> Of course, the guardians of the Queen's English will have endless problems with the volume, because it constantly flouts "correct" English usage, because it bends the language to the tongue, the ear and the thinking of the township, the mass democratic movement, the street committee, the trade union meeting, rather than the polite syllables of the Houghton tea party, or the introspective discourse of angst and existential crisis created at our universities....
>
> It needs to be translated for the non-participant in his culture, his township abbreviations need the interpolation of commentary to make them mean[ingful] to those outside. At the very least it needs a conscious effort to free oneself from the shackles of the standard (2).

Horn is aware that the appreciation of performed poetry is best facilitated by an intimate knowledge of the audience for which it is performed and the context in which the performance takes

place. Horn goes on to critique Abraham's and Asvat's dismissal of Black Mamba Rising:

> One assumes that Lionel Abrahams has in mind a yardstick according to which he knows what the best is, not only in relation to his own cultural background, but in relation to the culture of an emerging democratic South Africa. What is the unreflected yardstick according to which he or others can be so sure they can measure oral poetry, especially if one assumes they have only seen it in translation and in print, not in performance.
>
> Criticism of this kind attempts to destroy that which resists its interrogation based on an aesthetic legality that is judicial rather than theoretical and to remake what the poet has made in its own image (6).

It is a pity that Horn stops there, for it would seem logical for him to either call for, or begin the work of defining the "aesthetic yardstick" that could be correctly applied to Black Mamba Rising. His article is important nonetheless because it points in that direction and at least acknowledges his own inability to provide sufficient "interpolation of commentary to make them mean[ingful] to those outside".

It is appropriate at this point to return to the work of Ari Sitas. In an article on "Peoples' Poetry in Natal", Sitas sets himself a very ambitious target. He expands on the theme of orality and literacy.

> We have... been reeling from collisions between two poetic traditions: a scripted one in search of an audience; an oral one in search of script. Both traditions have been colliding in the context of political and labour initiatives in the area....
>
> The two primordial poles of the "oral" and the "written" stand opposite each other drenched in prejudice: after all, a hundred years of work in plantations, in sugarmills, on the docks and inside factories have torn the traditions apart leaving but little room for interaction.[33]

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33. A. Sitas, "People's in Poetry Natal," Writers' Notebook 1.1 (1989): 37.

He sets out to explore those different traditions, arguing that an understanding of these 'territories' is crucial to an informed discussion of the poetry according to "its own internal criteria of excellence". Unfortunately Sitas does not really get to grips adequately with those criteria, despite useful exploratory comments. In fact he argues that his work is a prior necessity to doing that.

Sitas argues that the works of earlier poets working in Zulu such as Dhlomo, Kunene and Gwala are more than just "the poetry of angry commitment". They are also an event "in and through" language, an "imagined oral communication" which cannot escape the printed text. The poets, attempting to "assume the mantle of the imbongi... orate through writing". Their work suffers the frustration of being alienated from their target audience, although that is what their chosen poetic heritage demands.

> The tragedy is that they remain "unread" by the people. Or better - there is a double-tragedy - they will not be "read unless their works become "orally" accessible, and the people will not "read" until conditions that make reading possible prevail in their lifetime (47).

Sitas then goes on to explore the 'oral' poetry of Vilane, Zondi, Qabula and Hlatswayo. He observes, at the outset, that:

> The oral traditions of poetry have had their own complex trajectory of experiences which cannot be fully addressed here either; suffice it to say that in polite dashiki-clad society they are seen as the domain of two social forces - of traditionalists (and therefore uneducated) and of the black underclasses (and therefore uneducated) - they are a fragment of tribalist survivals (47).

According to Sitas, oral poetry has not only become the domain of the "traditionalists and tribalists", it has also survived and thrived in the everyday life of the working people - through, for

example, church sermonising and family rites. Black working class life "continued to subsist on oral modes of communication and celebration". Thus, he argues, Qabula's orations unleashed an "untapped source of popular energy which, without warning, exploded everywhere in Natal".

> Ordinary black workers with performing and rhetorical power began orating their poetry in Zulu, using all the elements they could gather from their cultural formations to express a new sense of self-identity.... The distance between this poetry and what the izimbongi of the scripted word have unleashed is great (47).

He notes that some of these poets composed first in writing, while others performed spontaneously.

Sitas's treatment of the poetic elements is unfortunately limited to general references to "call and response" patterns; the metaphoric and symbolic qualities of the language used and the "performance qualities". For example, referring to Vilane, he says:

> He attempts to describe, explain and educate using the elevated language of the imbongi, interspersed with call and response sequences, songs and chants. The power of his poetry lies also in his performing skills and the vibrant rapport he creates between his words and any mass-gathering. He is in the words of Gwala, "resurrecting oral poetry from the tombs of the past" and he is beginning to construct a robust Lazarus (49).

He cites Debbie Bonnin's description of Zondi:

> His style of oration is spontaneous, an event or a word unleashes him. Grabbing a stick, he strides up and down, words pouring out. He calls up images of Zulu culture, past experiences and struggles of the Sarmcol workers, but also of other struggles against oppression; his style is a mixture of the traditional imbongi and the lay preacher (50).

Speaking of Hlatswayo, he writes of a "powerful combination of the imbongi's craft with a toyi-toyi subterranean rhythm to produce a tribute to Dunlop workers, the 'Workers' Trail'".

Sitas notes that, since the war in Natal has escalated and poets like Qabula found themselves on death lists, "the cautious triumphalism of Qabula's earlier poems declined and praise-poetry grew leaner in its imaginative symbolism". Themes of "death and redemption" began to find their way into his poetry, while stylistically they moved away from the izibongo.

> Qabula is also beginning to enhance the everyday speech-genres of ordinary people through his lines and to work more on the theatricality of his poetry, on its dialogues and discussions (55).

Sitas's discussion reflects his intimacy with and knowledge of the poets' concerns, themes and performance techniques. But they also reflect his less adequate focus on other elements of their "internal criteria of excellence". It is disappointing that Sitas does not pursue the poetics and aesthetics of these poets' work more fully. If any critic is well placed to do so, it is Sitas, who has been intimately involved in its development. He does make it difficult, however, for the more dismissive Abrahams and Asvat to sustain their arguments (ironically or intentionally without referring to them once).

These critical works are essential in helping us to understand the development of the Black Mamba Rising poets; their social and political role and significance. They also begin to show how the poetry is far from a series of slogans - how it draws on and transforms the aesthetics of complex forms of oral poetry.

The academic studies move significantly beyond Cronin's telegraphic claims and Abraham's and Asvat's rather simplistic

assertions by elaborating the socio-political significance of the poems and, to some extent, by exploring the oral and performance nature of the poems. They do not, however, manage to explore the latter aspects in sufficient detail. Neither do they begin to analyse the nature and significance of the audience or its reception of the poetry. We are not given a sense of how broad the impact of these poems is. Surely one cannot speak of either the socio-political functions or the aesthetic value of literature without serious consideration of the ways in which it enters social life via the act of interpretation.

The voices that are most clearly missing from the critical debate are those of the worker audiences for whom the poetry is primarily intended. This is not to argue that the poetry in print is not "the real thing". As Gunner's discussion shows, there is a significant dialogue between the oral and the written.

The point is more that, as Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs have argued:

> To decontextualize and recontextualize a text is an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise of such control the issue of social power arises.[34]

The above critics all exercise that particular form of power. In "recontextualising" Black Mamba Rising, many critics fall victim to what Bauman and Briggs refer to as "the problem of false objectivity".

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34. R. Bauman and C. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," Annual Review of Anthropology 19 (1990): 76.

> Since it is obviously impossible to point to all aspects of the context, the researcher becomes the judge of what merits inclusion (68).

In privileging their particular interpretations of the poetry, the critics enter into the struggle on the terrain of interpretation, sometimes in conflict with the audience's own appreciation (or otherwise) of the performances.

According to the logic of Sole's argument that "the voice of the workers must be heard", the critic should acknowledge his/her position in relation to the performance. Those who are writing without experiencing the events are unable to give due recognition to the popular reception of the poetry by worker audiences, neither can they see the complex forms of dialogue between the performers and their audiences. While some of the other critics acknowledge the audience's responses in broad and general terms, none of them have attempted to explore the inner textures thereof. Without listening to these 'voices', arguments such as Sole's (warning against the dangers of the co-option of traditional symbols by forces antipathetic to the interests of the working class) or Asvat's and Abrahams (that the poetry has little aesthetic merit) are based on conjecture.

CHAPTER TWO

Worker Poetry in Performance

Very few workers read worker poetry. Regardless of whether the poetry is composed orally or in writing, it has primarily been 'published' via the oral medium. Questions I included in the 1989 CWLP survey on Durban workers' use of their leisure time provided solid statistical evidence of this.[35]

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35. A. Sitas and D. Bonnin, "The struggle over leisure: Durban workers culture and education," (Durban: CWLP, 1990).
    The study contained three survey components, as outlined elsewhere by Sitas and Bonnin:
    > Firstly, surveys that were undertaken in 1986/7 with shop-stewards to identify the problems and crisis of leadership in Natal's trade unions; secondly, time-charts that were collected of working weeks by workers who worked shifts for a shift-work pilot study and time-charts that were collected from workers who work normal working hours - these were to form a basis for the distribution of leisure-time; thirdly, and this is the heart of the study, a proportionally large sample of workers in the Durban area about the relationship between their leisure time and material culture (3).

    For the third component of the survey (which was the one I participated in), survey questionnaires were distributed on a proportional basis to the different industries in Durban. The distribution was conducted according to the 'snowball method' but proportional distribution to gender and urban/migrant populations was ensured. Questionnaires were handed out through union structures and distributed by shop stewards on a first-come-first-served basis.
    Unions in all sectors except those organised by the National Union of Metal workers of South Africa (Numsa) co-operated, which biased the survey towards women respondents.
    The return rate was 244 out of 735 (out of which 590 reached workers), which was within acceptable limits (generally set at 20-20 percent for self-administered questionnaires). 48 were filled in incorrectly and the reliable return-rate was therefore 29 percent.

While Black Mamba Rising was read by a fair number of respondents (5.8 percent), it is still lower than those who voluntarily cited James Hadley Chase (7.9 percent) or the Bible (13.7 percent). The statistics on attendance at rallies and cultural activities were more revealing.

> 37.8 percent of workers have heard about worker plays, 33.7 percent have seen worker plays and 18.3 percent have read about worker plays. Of those who have heard of worker plays the trade union and the workplace is their source of information - 27.3 percent heard from other workers and 26 percent from shop stewards compared to 8.4 percent from the community. There is also a high attendance at workers rallies (49.7 percent) where cultural events are performed as well as 29.5 percent who attend cultural events in the community.

The figures for exposure to worker poetry in performance would be similar to those cited for workers' rallies (given the frequency with which worker poets appear at these rallies) and higher than those for worker plays.

Even a cursory glance at the book trade in Durban shows that a limited range of printed literature is available to workers. All the formal bookshops are located in the central business district and the white suburbs and there are few, if any, outlets easily accessible to workers who live and work outside of these areas. It is clear from the CWLP survey that most of the literature read by workers is made available through schools, churches or general stores. The only significant exceptions are those forms of media and literature distributed through community and labour organisations (for example, union newspapers and to a lesser extent books such as Black Mamba Rising).

Worker poetry has been published in three main types of publications: union newspapers, journals aimed at workers and

collections of poetry. The journals include the Natal journal of the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) Writers' Notebook and the Zulu language journal Iniula. With a limited circulation (3 000 to 4 000 copies), these were launched subsequent to the CWLP survey and therefore do not feature in its results. Although a limited number of copies of Black Mamba Rising were distributed through bookshops, these were probably purchased by people who fall outside of the focus of this study. The majority of copies were sold directly to workers, either through union structures or at mass rallies. CWLP gives total distribution figures of 3 000 English editions and 1 000 Zulu editions. This is starkly contrasted against the fact that mass rallies have attendance figures which on occasion exceeded 100 000.[36] I am inclined to discount this for the reason that no comprehensive records exist of actual sales and many copies may still be sitting in boxes throughout Natal. Furthermore sales of 3 000 out of a population counted in the millions does not constitute mass exposure.

The fact that performance events are the dominant medium through which workers are exposed to worker poetry demanded appropriate research methods. During the period of my research I assisted in the recording of, and had access to, video-tapes of a

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36. According to Susan Joubert's survey of the South African publishing, sales of 3000 copies of a novel - let alone a collection of poetry - would classify Black Mamba Rising as a best seller.
S. Joubert, "Publishing in Another South Africa: Problems and Projections," diss., U of Sterling, 1990: 12.

number of cultural events;[37] attended numerous such events; spent many hours talking to poets (informally at work, in meetings, in workshops and in formal interviews); spoke informally to members of the audiences; and watched video footage with poets, discussing the nature of the audiences' responses. The poets spoke to me about the feedback they had received from individual members after events and some reported people criticising or discussing the meaning of their poetry. I also conducted a small number of individual interviews with workers towards the end of my research.[38] In conducting these interviews I had limited and specific objectives. I wanted to test, in a more formal interview situation, the conclusions I had been led towards during my fieldwork. The interviews are discussed in more detail below.

Detailed investigation of poetry in performance, and more specifically of Zulu izibongo, was of course not without precedent. Elizabeth Gunner's impressive research into Zulu izibongo proved to be an extremely useful resource in my deliberations. In her unpublished thesis, "Ukubonga Nezibongo", she argues that Zulu izibongo can be divided into two broad

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37. Sitas notes that the CWLP (where I was based for a year during my research) has aproximately 180 hours of such documentary footage.
A. Sitas, "Voice and Gesture in South Africa's Revolution: A Study of Worker Gatherings and Performance Genres in Natal." unpublished paper, History Workshop Conference, U of Witwatersrand, 1990.

38. These interviews were conducted in January and April of 1990 and are detailed in my bibliography.

categories of performance: Mode A and Mode B.[39] The first includes skilled performance in a formal situation, with an imbongi generally dominating the situation and a major focus on verbal and vocal skill. The person being praised is often not physically present. Mode B, on the other hand, refers to non-specialist performances in a communal setting that combine praising with speech, chant, dance and song. The person being praised is generally present and usually part of the performance, if not at its centre.

Worker poetry, as will be seen in later discussion, emerged into the already defined context of trade union meetings, mass rallies and cultural evenings. Although one can draw few direct parallels between the two modes of performance described by Gunner and the 'modes of performance' used by worker poets, the worker performances generally fitted into her Mode A, in that they involved specialist performers praising organisations and leaders which or who may or may not have been present.[40]

The live performances I attended took place in a range of venues. These varied from, on the one extreme, poetry workshops in which small numbers of poets performed and discussed their

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39. E.A.W. Gunner, "Ukubonga Nezibongo: Zulu Praising and Praises," diss. U of London, 1984.

40. A similar point is made by Gunner and Mafika Gwala in their introduction to Musho! Zulu Popular Poetry, although the categories they use are a modification of those mentioned here.
E.A.W. Gunner and M. Gwala, Musho! Zulu Popular Praises (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1991).

poetry to on the other, the largest mass rally in Durban's recent history (held to welcome Nelson Mandela after his release from prison).[41] I have focused my attention on three main categories of events where worker poetry is performed: small workshops and cultural events where the audience consisted primarily of other performers (Type I); cultural events which attracted a larger audience but still focused on performances (Type II); mass rallies where the main item on the agenda was speeches by leadership figures (Type III). In what follows I discuss the general attributes of these different types of performance, as well as analysing more specific factors which influenced the nature of the performance event.

Audience responses at all three kinds of events were similar and exhibited consistent criteria being applied by the audiences in their appreciation, or otherwise, of the poetry. It is, however, worth noting a few important differences. The poetry performed at these different events was usually the same, unlike the case of Gunner's modes of performance. Some poets, such as Nise Malange, found the smaller, more intimate venues more appropriate for their more personal poems which, they were aware, did not meet the requirements of performances in larger rallies.

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41. I also attended performances in Johannesburg where the Durban poets performed before national audiences, firstly of workers at the Cosatu Cultural Festival and secondly of a broader cross-section at the Welcome Home Rally for the first batch of high profile Robben Island prisoners at First National Bank Stadium. I was able to observe at first hand the audiences' responses and, perhaps more importantly, organise that the performances be recorded on video-tape.

Other poets, like Qabula, used smaller venues for more experimental work which required a different and more directed form of audience participation.[42] The venue was therefore significant insofar as it had an effect on the size and nature of the audience and the distance of the audience from the performer.

Type I Events

A number of 'workshops' took place during my research, in Durban, Pinetown, Newcastle and Empangeni. Attendance ranged from 10 (a rehearsal for the May Day Culture Week in Durban) to 150 (at Empangeni). They often started with a talk on culture accompanied by a purpose-made CWLP video. This invariably entailed an argument comparing "elitist" or "dominant" culture (such as opera, ballet, cinema, tourist-oriented "traditional" culture) with "popular" culture (including various popular practices and traditions). It was stressed to those present that they should not feel constrained to produce cultural acts within the aesthetic and ideological parameters taught at school and popularised by the commercial mass media. Examples were shown on video of workers and youth producing cultural acts that drew on their everyday life experiences.

After discussion, workshop participants broke into smaller discipline-specific groups (usually choir, poetry and drama).

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42. For example, in one sung poem he performed at the Howard College May Day Cultural Evening, he had the audience sing a drum beat while he sang.

Different workshop facilitators worked with the participants in producing performances. After these sessions, the participants returned to perform for the larger group.

While these events included both speeches and performances, the speeches were different to those given at mass rallies. The more experienced performers and workshop facilitators held the reigns. While the audience was generally united by broad political conviction, the emphasis was on their common interest in teaching and learning specific performance skills. The audience in such events consisted of aspirant performers who had been through much discussion by the time the performances took place. Audience responses often showed both enthusiastic support for younger performers and appreciations of more experienced performers. Frequently the audience purposefully imitated a larger audience, with individuals ululating or calling encouraging responses (such as "musho"). The criteria of response were similar to those discussed below, although they were more self-consciously employed. It was as if the experienced performers simulated the larger audience in order to encourage the performers and to give them a sense of the kinds of audience responses they might expect. It also illustrated their intimate knowledge of the kinds of conventions their audiences use in responding to their poetry.

Type II Events

These events were carefully (though not always fluently) stage-managed sequences of cultural events. Such events occurred,

during my research, at Durban University, Clairwood Trade Union and Cultural Centre, and the Pinetown Sached offices (which was where the Pinetown Cultural Local was based).

The audience consisted of active organisational membership, predominantly trade union shop stewards and youth group organisers, as the events were advertised at union offices and only occasionally in the factories and townships. They were usually evening events, making it necessary to provide transport home (buses and trains were not available after 7pm in Durban and travel after dark was dangerous). The composition of the audience depended very much on the location of the venue and the accessibility of transport. For example, the Pinetown events were held at a venue which was across the road from a taxi rank. The organisers were on friendly terms with the taxi drivers, some of whom were asked to wait for th event to finish. The audience here was unquestionably larger and more predominantly working class than that at Durban University (from where there was no public transport at night).

The audience at such events was presented with the cultural performances only, with perhaps a short talk on culture at the beginning. Once again these talks usually focused on the theme of workers taking control of their cultural activities, and the idea that indigenous and syncretic forms were not signs of backwardness.

The worst venue I experienced during my research was the Howard College Theatre at the University of Natal. The event was a "cultural evening" which formed part of the CWLP May Day

Culture Week in 1989. The focus was on cultural performances by a range of individuals and groups, including Madlinyoka Ntanzi, Qabula, Die Bafanas (a dance and song troupe from Pietermaritzburg) and a group of Pondo women traditional dancers. The audience was small and obviously felt as inhibited as the performers themselves. The fixed seats prevented mingling and individualised the audience so that they felt self-conscious - often expressing opinions by whispering into each others ears, rather than shouting them out as is usually the case. The performers were also self-conscious and never really got into their stride, despite some enthusiastic encouragement from a small section of the audience. The self-consciousness of both performers and audience may have been a result of the session being video-taped. One camera focused on the audience and another on the performers and bright spotlights shone in both directions. Although similar arrangements for documenting the events were used at other events, the small size of the audience made the cameras more conspicuous.

A more successful event of the same type was the cultural evening at the Pinetown Sached hall, organised by the Pinetown Cultural Local. A range of local performers, drawing on a variety of performance styles (ranging from performing poets to gospel choirs) were enthusiastically received by the audience. The audience consisted mainly of shop stewards were invited to stay on after a meeting and assured that taxis would wait for them. The seating was loose and informal and the audience joined in by dancing and cheering. A number of men from the audience performed inspired dances.

Type III Events

In this final category of events the audience was drawn to the rally as a whole, which was an explicitly political form of mobilisation. Here, the performances were seen by the organisers as a functional part of that mobilisation.[43]

The people who set the agenda and controlled the platform were generally not cultural workers but political activists. Their main aim was to stage an event that mobilised and united organisational supporters, usually around a particular issue. This lent impetus to campaigns, carried significant propaganda value (via the press and word-of-mouth reports of the event) and asserted the organisations' presence in the area. It often aimed to persuade the audience of the organisation's point of view on an issue, or (where consensus has not been reached between leaders) allowed for competing views to be articulated.

Usually such events began at about 10am with a cultural programme, including poetry and music, until midday when the speeches began. These continued for a number of hours,

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43. See Sitas, "Voice and Gesture", for discussion of the place of poetry within the worker gatherings. He argues that there are three main "modes" within these gatherings, "each one with its own laws of participations and limits". Poetry fits within a "defiant and heroic mode" in which the audience is asked to 'enjoy' performances that assert "the performance vitality of popular culture". To this I would add that the audience was invited not only to enjoy these performances but also to participate in them, mainly through singing freedom songs that were frequently (though not always) led from the stage.

interspersed with more poetry and singing (the latter often led from the stage but involving the whole audience).

One such event was the rally held by the African National Congress (ANC) in early 1990 to welcome Nelson Mandela after his release from prison. Mandela's speech, containing an impassioned plea for peace in Natal, was broadcast throughout the world. What the viewers did not see on their television screens was the large number of performances included in the build-up to his speech and after his departure. This body of performers - invited by the Natal region of the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) - included an array of poets, choirs and bands. Like the audience, they represented a cross-section of Natal's population, predominantly African youth and workers but including people from diverse communities throughout Natal. While the audience of approximately 100 000 was enthusiastic and responsive, the venue had its limitations. The performers were swallowed up by a massive scaffold around the stage that hid their dress and gestures, which are (as I will argue later) important elements of the performance. Performances were rendered more static by microphones. The distance between performer and audience, and the distortions of the sound system, also appeared to make it more difficult for the audience to hear and comprehend complex imagery.

The audience contributed substantially to the cultural elements and events of the day; singing songs and chanting slogans from the time they boarded buses and trains in the townships and rural areas, throughout the day and until they

disembarked at their homes. The local level mobilisation of people attending the rally was conducted by ANC and Cosatu branches. The audience grew from about 50 000 at the start of the proceedings to its largest at midday when Mandela arrived by helicopter. People were excited, jubilant and at times almost beyond the control of the 2 000 marshals inside and around the stadium. There was a highly receptive but slightly impatient mood as they awaited the appearance of ANC leader Mandela.

To illustrate the range of competing poetic styles I have chosen to discuss the Mandela rally in detail. As mentioned above representatives of all the major poetics styles which together constitute worker poetry were present. The rally can therefore be seen as an arena in which these poetic styles were performed to the largest possible audience, in a way competing with each other for attention and appreciation.

Arguably the most powerful oral poet, drawing on the izibongo for inspiration, was Ntanzi. At the Mandela Rally, when he stepped onto the stage, clad in animal skins and a khaki peaked cap and car-tyre sandals, many people in the audience could hardly see him in the cage that was the second floor of the stage - the third (and uppermost) floor being reserved for speakers.

Ntanzi established an instant rapport with the audience with a revolutionary song. He lead and they responded in the manner

common to these songs throughout South Africa.[44] He brought the song to a close with the customary slogans and then launched into a revamped version of his praise poem "Buya Mandela" (Return Mandela). It was, as is his usual practice, updated to accommodate the fact that Mandela was doing exactly that and included biting criticism of Mandela's opposition, the South African government and its perceived allies.[45]

The audience responded instantaneously and consistently throughout his performance. A video camera panning across the audience recorded a sea of raised arms as they took their cues to respond verbally and physically, jumping up with their fists held high.[46] By the time Ntanzi ended his poem, again with the customary slogans, the audience could no longer stay seated and he received what was probably one of the most vocal and sustained rounds of applause of the day.

Ntanzi was not the only imbongi-style poet who received a positive response at the Mandela rally, neither was he the only izibongo-style performer. Gladman Ngubo and Qabula both received similar, though marginally less enthusiastic responses to their Zulu poems.

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44. For discussion of freedom songs see Veit Erlmann's unpublished paper, "Black Political Song in South Africa - Some Research Perspectives", 1983.

45. Gunner and Gwala cite this as evidence that Ntanzi is one the only performers who fully bridges the gap between the old and the new, the rural and the urban.

46. The idea of the izibongo containing cues for audience reponse is referred to below and discussed in later chapters.

The other powerful current in Natal poetry is that which has emerged from the many youth congresses. These groups developed out of the militant Congress of South African Students (Cosas) branches based in the schools. Since Cosas was banned in the mid-1980s and during the intensification of the war these organisations have been at the forefront of struggle in the townships. Unquestionably members of Natal's working class, they were fiercely loyal to the ANC and those who do not end up unemployed frequently move into the unions.[47] In some areas there were tensions between them and union structures, while in other areas close alliances have been forged. Their poets and poetry usually formed part of a larger cultural effort, generally centered around choirs.[48]

In these cases the poets stepped forward during a choral performance to recite poetry drawing strongly on the rhythms and imagery of Mzwakhe Mbuli's work, often in English but sometimes in Zulu. The choir sang a choral accompaniment to their highly political verses.[49] Other youth poets performed similar poetry but without the choral backing.

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47. The role of students and youth in Natal politics is discussed further in Chapter Four.

48 Sitas, in "Voice and Gesture" describes how these choirs often developed from school choirs.

49. The Chesterville Youth Group are arguably one of the best examples of this current. Their songs and poetry have published on the audio-cassette Music for Liberation (Durban: CWLP, 1990).

At the Mandela rally, Bongani Zindela and Purity Shangase represented this strand of poetry. Although relatively weak examples, their poetic themes and styles were typical of youth poetry. Bongani Zindela performed in the khaki uniform of the ANC, with Kessie Govender accompanying his poetry on the flute. His poem began with the slogan, "Viva Congress of South African Writers". He then launched into a poem "dedicated to the stalwarts of the people". "Stalwarts" is a term that has been used by Mbuli in his dedication to political prisoners. Zindela recited the story of them being "betrayed by Rivonia", "swallowed by Robben Island" and then "vomited back into the ghettos". He then recited a list of African countries which had been liberated "through defeat". The audience response was muted, either because the poetry was not appreciated or because the flute accompaniment gave none of the usual opportunities for inter-stanza applause.

Purity Shangase began with a number of slogans. Her poem consisted of a "statement from the dock", peppered with quotes from Mandela's own well-known statement. Although recited in rhythms akin to those of the izibongo, the poem contained no other apparent poetic qualities. Applause was not given during the poem but its ending was greeted with whistling and cheering.

Both of the above performed in English, as did Mbuli, who received one of most enthusiastic responses. Mbuli was, in Natal as well as other areas of the country, something of a cult figure.[50]

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50. Mbuli's poetry is discussed by Peter Horn, as cited in Chapter One.

Also worth mentioning are those non-worker poets who performed more literary poetry based on Western, mainly free verse, poetic conventions. These included Sana Naidoo, Ari Sitas and myself. Naidoo's poem was hardly heard by the audience, who carried on talking and moving around during her performance. This was in spite of her poem being overtly political, about the education crisis. This was a clear example of the performance not fitting into the expectations of the audience. Ari Sitas and myself, having experienced similar rejection before, experimented by including various types of repetition which would either be familiar to the audience (Sitas used as a refrain a line from a freedom song) or which would be picked up quickly (I used slogans between verses, rhyming couplets and regular metre to create a rhythmic base). Interestingly, it was those features which elicited a response from the audience. The more 'alien' sections of our poems appeared, however, to lose the audience. Sitas' refrains, in particular, received a warm response.

From detailed observations of events such as this, I compiled a list of indicators which appeared to be reliable barometers of audience appreciation. I then extracted the following analysis of the audiences' horizons of expectations.

Slogans, which were used to frame the poems, invariably elicited an enthusiastic response from the audience.[51] In

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51. For discussion of studies of framing (and other facets of performance) see Bauman and Briggs.

Qabula's words these slogans "put [the audience's] minds together" and "build them".[52] Weaker poets (or less oral poets) took advantage of this and relied on slogans as a substitute for effective poetry.[53] Such performances were detectable as the audience only responded to recognisable slogans with conventional responses.

The least popular performances were marked by the audience 'switching off', talking and walking around.[54] More substantial appreciation could be measured via two major indicators. Most obviously there was the volume of applause, chants (such as "musho" which means literally "hear him") and ululation. Also worth noting were the precise moments at which applause occurred. As I will discuss later, the unifying function of the rallies meant that the audience was 'polite' in providing at least a minimum level of applause for anyone who stood on the stage and tried their best. The most limited form of 'polite' applause occurred at the end of the performance (as long as the audience could guess that the poem had ended - which was sometimes not the

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52. A. Qabula, personal interview, October 1989.

53. As Isabel Hofmeyr has suggested to me, slogan chanting is in itself a minor art form, as can be seen by the various responses to different styles of chanting.

54. Liz Gunner made the useful point to me that there is a difference between 'intent listening' and 'switching off' which can be easily detected either through visual observation or by matching silence with other indicators discussed here.

case).[55] A more substantial form of this kind of applause was generally only given to poets that succeeded in developing a dynamic 'dialogue' or rapport with the audience. In the izibongo, each 'stanza' ends with a cadence and a pause, the cue for the audience to encourage the performer to continue (a common phrase is 'musho'). When a cadence was detected, even in a weaker performance, at least some members of the audience complied with the convention. In stronger, more popular performances, however, the volume increased as more members of the audience participated in the response and some stood up and waved or began to ululate. A more specific gesture of approval (used when the audience could get close enough to the stage) was to 'fan' the performer, showing how 'hot' the member of the audience thought the poet was. The best indicator of a highly appreciated performance came when the audience responded in between cadences (interrupting the stanzas) by erupting into cheering, ululating, whistling and dancing. This was also much louder than polite applause.

Using these indicators, assisted by the statements by interviewees and poets, I extracted the following criteria that the audience appeared to use in their appreciation of performances.

There was a minimum requirement in relation to the 'energy' (or as an interviewee put it, the "oomph") of a performance.[56] In

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55. Sana Naidoo, for example, truncated her poem when she realised that the audience was not paying attention. If all else failed the concluding slogans would signal the end of the performance.

56. Interviewee 1, personal interview, January 1993.

Qabula's words, "one must never fall asleep listening to the izibongo".[57] 'Energy' is a composite term that can refer to dress, gesture, rhythm, tone and use of language. In other words, the poem first and foremost had be an exciting performance. In this regard the conventions of the izibongo were undoubtedly preferred by the audience; for example the relatively high, sustained tone and rapid rhythm of delivery, the use of cadences, the use of arm and leg movements and unusual, usually symbolic, dress.

Ntanzi came closest to the traditional style of dress when he performed in animal skins. This identified him as an imbongi of some standing and lent an air of intensity and ferocity to his performance. He added to the skins a khaki peaked cap, apparently a symbol of the guerrilla or freedom fighter. This odd combination symbolised the transformation of the traditional style and set him apart from his predecessors. More recently he has performed in the khaki uniform of the ANC, since his skins were stolen.[58] Qabula, on the other hand had taken on a combination of torn clothes and a carefully crafted black shirt fringed with coloured rags. Although his shirt had no collar, he wore a tie. He told me this dress symbolised someone who was once

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57. A.T. Qabula, personal interview, October 1990.

58. According to popular rumour, it was stolen by the security police to render him less powerful.

rich but who had been reduced to destitution.[59] As was highlighted in the cover design of a collection of Natal poetry, the shirt also resembled the feathers of an insingizi bird (the Common Ground Hornbill in English), known as a prophet of rainstorms and therefore used as a metaphor for the poet.[60] Ngubo dressed in the urban 'uniform' of the Cosatu shop steward, an 'American' peaked cap and a Cosatu tracksuit top. There were other poets who wore the full khaki outfit associated with the ANC or, in one case, a formal suit.

These forms of dress appeared to be effective in establishing the poet with a particular identity. They lift him/her above the crowd (as do the platform and the microphone) and signify that this was someone 'special', or more directly identified him/her as an imbongi.

While dress appeared to be important in capturing the audience's attention, gesture was one of the important elements holding their attention throughout the performance. Ngubo, for example, argued to me that people should be able to 'see' what the poet is saying:

> Your actions must be equal. Even if someone can't understand your language they can see you are talking about something

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59. Russel Kaschula received the same explanation from Qabula. See his "Iimbongi in Context: An Analysis of the Contrasting Power Bases of Three South African Iimbongi," unpublished paper (Umtata: Bureau for African Research and Documentation, U of Transkei, 1991).

60. See Izinsingizi: Loud Hailer Lives (Durban: Culture and Working Life Publications, 1989).

> sad. If you just stand there the audience will also become bored.[61]

The worker poets moved constantly during their performances (although, as mentioned, this was restricted by microphones), acting out the message or simply moving their bodies 'in time' to the rhythms of the performance.

Language was also a factor, with Zulu poems generally receiving more enthusiastic responses. Certain performers, like Mbuli, were able to transcend this and appeared to be appreciated even by those who didn't understand English. This issue is discussed in further detail below.

Related to this is the need for the worker poet to achieve a fine balance between figurative and literal language. As mentioned above larger audiences appeared to need more literal language as they could not hear as clearly as in a smaller, more intimate, venue. This may also have been related to the regional specificity of certain metaphors and images. What is so common as to be almost denotative in one area may be a foreign connotation in another area. Larger rallies brought the audience together from a wide range of places and the poet had to be sensitive to this.[62] Interesting in this regard was the way in which old

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61. G. Ngubo, personal interview, April 1990.

62. Stuart Hall has challenged the distinction between denotation and connotation, arguing that a denotative meaning is usually only regarded as such because it is so widely held as to appear 'natural'.
S. Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," Culture, Media, Language ed. S.Hall (London: U of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980): 128-138.

images and meanings have been revived by certain poets and adopted by others. For example the mole (mvukuzane) was first used by Qabula to describe the union's 'infiltration' of a factory and was later used by at least two other poets. Ngubo adopted (and is widely known by) the praise name Mvukuzane for his poetic performances.

The poets who were well received also "built up" (Qabula's words) their audiences by using the 'additive effect' common to the izibongo. Images and metaphors were not necessarily developed in 'logical sequence' but were sometimes heaped onto each other in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. This was more common among the more oral poets (by which I mean those poets, such as Ntanzi, who tended to compose orally, either before or during performance). Military imagery was common, given the level of violence, and the ANC's 'traditional weapons' (the AK47, the bazooka, the Scorpion machine pistol) were frequently invoked to symbolise power and struggle. Their advantage for the poets was that within their audience, given the extent of the violence, these were practically universal symbols. It was interesting that Ntanzi used these images in his performance of "Buya Mandela" in Johannesburg but dropped them and used more colloquial expressions in his performance of the same poem in Durban.

Perhaps most importantly, agreement with the ideas communicated through the poems was undoubtedly a criteria of appreciation. This was evidenced by the huge cheers awarded to crafty insults directed at the ANC's and Cosatu's opponents. For example, Ntanzi's description of "collaborators" shivering with

fear and filling the streets with diarrhoea received an enthusiastic response. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, this must be seen in the context of the function of the rallies as a form of resistance and an assertion of identity. As discussed below, while ideological agreement appears to be necessary for appreciation, it is certainly not sufficient.

It was obvious that the orality of a performance was extremely significant. A written poem was generally only acceptable to the audience if the written text was 'invisible' and the performance worked orally. In cases where poets read their poem this often interfered with the performance and marred the relationship with the audience. Reciting from memory was not necessarily a problem, as Ngubo showed in his very lively performances. The audience was also reasonably forgiving when a poet stumbled or stuttered - as long as the rhythm and energy of the performance was maintained.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, once Qabula had been published and moved from the factory to the university he became more text-bound. Usually he overcame this problem by memorising his poems but there were occasions where he read his poems, to their detriment. A good example of this was his performance of "Madelakufa", at a rally to welcome released ANC prisoners. He finished writing the poem the night before and was not confident enough to perform it from memory. His reading lacked the vitality and rhythm that had previously characterised his work, and the audience's response was far less enthusiastic than on other occasions. The organisers cut him short, before he

had completed his lengthy poem. Although this was supposedly due to time constraints, it is unlikely that they would have attempted the same with N . i, whose performance was far too vigorous to allow anyone to tap him on the shoulder.

My research confirms Gunner's reservations about an over-reliance on writing, mentioned in the previous chapter. One of Ntanzi's strengths, from an audience perspective, is his orality and his ability to adapt his poems to suit the context of the perfo mance. I have three d ferent versions of Ntanzi's "Buya Mandela" recorded on videotape, all of which are significantly different and which were modified to address the specific issues around which the occasion was organised. This relates to the fact that relevance and immediacy appeared to be an important criteria by which the audience judges the poetry.

It is one thing, however, to describe the performance events and the audience's observable responses to the poetry in general terms. It is, however, far more difficult to tease out the complexities of individual responses. While it is not the intention of this study to exhaustively describe or analyse what lies underneath the surface - and indeed I would argue that is virtually impossible - it is necessary, by way of example, to explore at least some of the more significant undercurrents.

Through the personal interviews and informal discussions mentioned above, I attempted to test and further clarify the above observations. In addition to the well-documented dynamics

and difficulties of the personal interview, a number of specific problems and challenges were posed by my research focus.[63]

In many senses the attempt to establish the individual's response in a mass situation is a contradiction in terms. It has to be done after the event, when the individual is alone again and many of the event's effects are lost. In my interviews, therefore, I had to try to reproduce the performance situation for individual workers.

The most effective strategy was to show video footage of previous events and discuss the poetry contained therein. Watching a video-taped performance, however, is very different to participating in a rally. Some of the reasons for this relate to the nature of the interview situation and others to the televisual medium. The latter will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. It is sufficient here to note that while the video recording approximates facets of the visual and aural detail (depending on the quality of the recording), it does not provide

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63. I do not claim that the admittedly small sample was representative of workers in the greater Durban area. This was partly due to the fact that I had difficulty in gaining access to sufficient individuals to balance and bolster the sample. In spite of the relevant Cosatu structures agreeing to cooperate with me, access to workers for the purposes of conducting lengthy interviews proved difficult. The interviews had to be conducted after hours, in venues away from the conflict ridden areas where workers lived. This was due to problems such as public transport being risky in Durban after 7pm; the predominance of male and resident (non-migrant) workers in the organisational structures that facilitated the interviews; and my own shortage of time. I also reached a point when I concluded that I was receiving little new information. I found the informal forms of contact described above more fruitful.

the same sense of occasion; it loses the audience's emotional involvement in the event itself, the relationship between the audience members, and the dialogue between them and the performers.

Although it was essential to, as far as possible, interview individuals alone, this tended to lend the occasion a rather formal air. The interview was an event I, as the researcher, had created, was in control of, and which had none of the subjective qualities ascribed (by members of the audience) to the mass political rally. The interviewee's responses rarely contained the levels of enthusiasm visible when groups of people watched the videos in less formal situations (let alone those found in a mass rally). A stark example of this was an occasion when I visited the Pinetown National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa, previously Mawu) office. I had been invited to do so because a youth meeting was taking place and a shop steward suggested I might find someone to interview. A young woman was released from the meeting and when the interview was over participants in the meeting asked to see the footage.[64] Their responses to the videos I had brought with me were markedly different to the young woman's and more closely approximated responses at live events. On the other hand, I learned things through the interview that I could never have simply observed by watching the audience.

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64. Interviewee 9, personal interview, April 1990.

Most of the interviews were conducted in English, although a translator was always available. I decided that it was preferable, given Natal's intense political conflict, to be able to reassure the interviewees that their comments would be treated confidentially. As the only translators available to me were members of unions and political organisations, I was concerned that the interviewees should not feel obliged to respond with politically acceptable statements.[65] Unfortunately the use of English had the disadvantage of precluding the use of any specialised vocabulary that the interviewees may have had, although I made it clear at the outset of each interview that they should feel free to use Zulu words at any point in the discussion.

A more specific problem that I confronted was the fact that interpretive strategies are rarely consciously employed. Although many people have fairly definite criteria by which they judge artistic works, these are rarely verbalised. This also applies to the performers themselves. As is mentioned later, when I asked Qabula what and how he would teach an aspiring imbongi, he replied that he would tell them to go and listen to an experienced imbongi (personal interview). Similarly, he found it difficult to list the criteria he would use when judging another poet's work. Some interviewees were reluctant to be judgmental or

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65. For this reason I have also imposed anonymity on my interviewees. I recorded names and biographical details on paper but left the tape recorder off during this part of the interview.

to favour one poet above the other. A common argument, which I heard on many occasions and in many interviews, was that different poets were just that - different - and not better or worse than each other.

I found two strategies worked best to elicit this kind of information in the interviews. The first was to show the interviewees two different poets performing and ask them to compare their work. The second was to ask the interviewee, after they had seen a performance, whether they thought the performer was talented. The interviewees seemed to feel more comfortable answering this kind of question.

While information gained from the personal interviews contributed to the conclusions I drew, I am keenly aware of their limitations. In essence, these were that my sample was not as representative as I would have liked and that the information and attitudes given by my informants could not be taken as a true reflection of their attitudes and responses to the poetry in a live performance situation. The information gathered in this way was therefore subordinated to that gained via other research methods, as described above.

In general, individuals outside the context of the rally expressed a more critical appreciation of the poetry than was discernible in mass responses. While most responded positively to a wide range of performance styles, in asking them to compare different poets' performances, it became clear that certain styles and statements were preferred.

Dress, movement and gesture were often cited by members of the audience as important components of the performance. Those I

interviewed did not identify the symbolism of Qabula's dress (as explained above) but the symbolism of Ntanzi's dress was more clearly understood. Qabula's dress relies on relatively obscure symbolism that is not embedded in the conventions with which the audience members were familiar. A youth in a workshop said that Ntanzi's attire "grabs your attention and makes you think", and another pointed out movement and gesture as significant. Some movements carry specific symbolism. For example, when Ntanzi once fell backward onto the floor of the stage between stanzas (as the audience shouted their approval), a member of audience standing next to me pointed it out as a deliberate and recognised symbol of inspiration derived from traditional dance.

A number of people commented on appreciation across language barriers, asserting that it was possible and often citing Mbuli as an example.[66] A youth in a workshop said that even though he couldn't understand Mbuli's words he could "see sadness and joy in his performance" and could identify with that. Another person I spoke to suggested it was because of Mbuli's powerful presence and his sensual voice.[67] I interpreted such comments as evidence of the significance of the dramatic elements of the performance. They also substantiate the observation made above about 'energy' being a central criteria of popular evaluation, as did a comment

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66. Interviewee 10, personal interview, April 1990.

67. This was not in a formal interview situation.

by an interviewee that Ntanzi's "Buya Mandela" was weak because it did not have enough 'oomph'.[68]

Related to this was the apparent significance of spontaneity - which was confirmed in a number of my interviews.[69] The related questions of orality and literacy have been discussed above.

It was on more general questions of poetic style (which I see as encapsulating both performance and content) that differences seemed to exist. These fell primarily along the lines of age and attitudes towards (or involvement in) traditional forms of culture. One interviewee said that she, like most young people she knew, preferred Mbuli's style to Ntanzi's but regarded both as izibongo, arguing that izibongo should be kept alive.[70] Interviewees expressed different opinions about what worker poetry could be termed izibongo. One argued that Ntanzi was not performing izibongo but that Mbuli was.[71]

It appears that where the izibongo was still in use in the daily lives of the audience, acceptance of an izibongo-styled performance was facilitated by familiarity with the conventions.

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68. Interviewee 2, personal interview, January 1990.

69. Dumisane Ntshangase suggested to me in informal conversation that this may be due to the importance of an appearance of spontaneity in the izibongo. Perhaps spontaneity is taken as an indicator of inspiration.

70. Interview 9, April 1990.

71. Interviewee 2 said he thought this was because Ntanzi was "a Xhosa", while Mzwakhe was "a Zulu". Interviewee 10 said that Mzwakhe was performing izibongo, "it's just that he's using his second language".

In these cases the transformations required to appreciate the emergent form primarily involved ideological identification. This 'pole' of audience response included people in the more 'rural areas' of Natal and older people in the urban areas. Youth at a workshop in Empangeni expressed concern that if Ntanzi (who comes from that area) died there are no other such poets emerging to take his place.

On the other hand, where people have been more alienated from the oral tradition, appreciation not only involved agreement at the level of ideas but also an acceptance of, and identification with the symbolic value of, poetic style.[72] This latter group would include younger people who have grown up in an urban environment and whose interpretive expectations have been formed via popular urban culture. Among the urbanised youth Mbuli's reggae-based poetry is apparently preferred to the izibongo of Qabula and Ntanzi.[73]

Differences were noted in the 'messages' of different poets. One interviewee remarked that the difference between Mbuli and Qabula was that the former spoke about events in the townships while the latter spoke more about Cosatu (Interviewee 1). Another said he was not interested in the poems they were given at school, which included Zulu izibongo. This was partly because

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72. The notion of different poetic styles or forms carrying symbolic value is discussed in Chapter Seven.

73. This was confirmed by everyone I spoke to about this question, including youth and people with other preferences.

they were read and not performed, but also because he liked poems that were about what was happening around him (Interviewee 2). He first became interested in poetry when he started hearing it at political meetings during his high school days.

That a poet spoke 'the truth' was frequently mentioned as important, for example that Ntanzi spoke the truth about Mandela. In the Empangeni workshop poets were praised because "they talk about our experience"; "they encourage us to look at what is going on around us"; they "make our lives come alive like video" and because they "inspire us and awaken our own talents". One participant said he "switches off like a T.V." when he hears poem praising leaders of Inkatha on the radio. This suggests that, for many people, ideological considerations may override all others.[74] Interviewees often began discussion of a poem by referring to the 'message'.

Members of the audience, however, insisted on the distinction between poetry and slogans, citing originality as one characteristic that differentiated the two. Further evidence of this was the fact that the question of talent was viewed differently. Some interviewees were of the opinion that anyone could perform if they tried, including themselves, while others thought it was a special gift.

Outside of the performance event, then, individual members of the audience tended to exhibit more critical responses to the

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74. Which is different to saying that poetic considerations do not matter at all.

poetry than those observable in the performance situation. Their responses were based on a range of poetic and ideological expectations, some of which appear to be common and others which vary according to the individual's prior experiences.[75]

The above analysis has important implications for the way in which we view worker poetry. At the most basic level, it goes a long way towards countering claims that worker audiences simply respond to the poems as artless political slogans. The fact that the aesthetic criteria employed by the audience appear to be closely related to the izibongo reinforces the view that much worker poetry represents an adaption and reinvention of the izibongo. It is also clear that the poetry is deeply embedded in the broader context, which I have not yet discussed in any detail. Thus far the focus has been on the specific context in which the poetry has been performed, that is the performance events. These in turn require further contextualisation.

Before moving on to this task, there are a number of conceptual issues that require clarification. In the next chapter, therefore, I take a look at a number of critical concepts central to the later discussion. There is a

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75. The danger in 'reading' aggregate responses of a live audience and 'anthologising' these into a proposed hierarchy is therefore that it can reduce highly complex processes into apparently simple ones. I have tried to indicate that there are a range of poetic styles and messages competing for the audience's approval. While I am convinced the above general trends are accurate, it is likely that further research could usefully highlight further complexities and divergences.

considerable, though diverse, body of literature that can help clarify some of the key questions that arose in the course of this study. I explore different ways of conceptualising and researching the significance of audience and readership. I argue in later chapters that the intimate dialogue that we have observed between the poets and their audiences is enabled by their situation within a broad interpretive community. The rationale for this approach is debated in the following chapter.

This discussion leads me to approach contextualisation at two levels. In Chapter Four I define and discuss the socio-political context out of which the poets and their audiences have emerged. The mass rallies are situated as a specific form of mobilisation within the broader development of a political movement. This is followed, in the same chapter, by a discussion of the persistence of the izibongo within the major constituency of this political movement (Durban's African working class). This chapter establishes both the organisational processes through which the audience was likely to arrive at the performance events, and the key cultural and intellectual resources the audience brought with it. In Chapter Five I look at the more specific context of the emergence of worker poetry within the labour movement. What factors explain the precise nature of the poetry that has come to exist? Was it a conscious invention by the political leadership of a powerful means of mobilising people and influencing popular sentiment? Or is it something that has bubbled up from below? How was it that the poets began to perform in the style of the izibongo and who exactly initiated this style

of performance? In the final two chapters I return to discuss aspects of the poetry itself, and the kinds of ideas communicated in and through the poetry.

CHAPTER THREE

Understanding Audience, Researching Audiences

In a recent discussion of poetics and performance, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs point out that the changing emphases in the study of performance stress the importance of detailed studies of audience responses:

> The movement from context to contextualization and related concerns enables us to recognize the sophisticated way that performers and audiences use poetic patterning in interpreting the structure and significance of their own discourse. Researchers can accordingly ground their analysis in the participants' interpretive efforts.(70)

They observe that the distinction between 'text' and 'context' is being redefined, and the notions of "entextualization" and "contextualization" are gaining currency, thus shifting "the emphasis from product to process" (67). This approach not only allows for integrated discussion of both the aesthetic and the ideological in performed works but indeed stresses the necessity of this. They do not, however, propose a conceptual framework appropriate for the detailed discussion of audiences.

The following discussion aims to develop such a conceptual framework that can guide my investigation of the factors which I will argue are central to an understanding of worker poetry. While I have centered my exploration around concepts drawn predominantly from Reader-Response criticism, an attempt is made to synthesize these with relevant insights from oral studies.

Although problems of readership and audience have been debated by various theorists and critics, their arguments tend to relate specifically to either written or oral literature. Durban worker poetry, as has been noted, is distributed in both oral and printed form. The recipients include people across the entire oral/literate spectrum. While significant differences do exist between readership (and the act of reading) and audience (and the reception of an oral performance), there is clearly a need for a critical theory of audience that can guide research into literary forms that span both oral and written forms of expression.

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature. Instead, I attempt to develop appropriate concepts by drawing extensively on the ideas of a wide range of writers whose discussions illuminate the key issues under discussion. In the field of written literature alone, there are a number of comprehensive surveys of Reader-Response Criticism, each of which runs to between 180 and 500 pages. Even these end up being sketchy and under-emphasise certain trends within the relevant body of theory. As the editor of one such collection, Susan R. Suleiman, says:

> Audience-oriented criticism is not one field but many, not a single widely trodden path but a multiplicity of crisscrossing, often divergent tracks that cover a vast area of the critical landscape in a pattern whose complexity dismays the brave and confounds the faint of heart.[76]

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76. S. R. Suleiman and I. Crosman, The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980): 6.

On the other hand, in the study of oral literature, audience response and participation have of necessity been given more consistent attention. Many discussions of orature incorporate at least some comment on the nature and role of the audience. This has not, however, often resulted in oral works being explicitly studied from an audience perspective. Furthermore there is no body of work pertinent to orature that parallels Reader-Response criticism in its specific focus on readers and the act of reading. A survey of the various approaches to audience in the case of orature would therefore be an even more difficult and unwieldy undertaking than a review of Reader-Response criticism.

An example of the diverse nature of oral audiences can be found in one of the few discussions of orature which focuses on the question of audience. Ruth Finnegan argues for the importance of the audience in the study of oral poetry.[77] She notes that different genres and traditions of oral poetry carry with them different audiences within distinct compositions and roles. Furthermore, the same work may be performed under different circumstances and for different reasons, with different audiences (or none at all). Within a single audience, different members of the audience may respond differently. Enjoyment and aesthetic appreciation, she speculates, "must often be the primary interest of the audience" (230). While these observations are important in alerting the student of orature to the danger of simplistic

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77. R. Finnegan, Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context. (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

generalisations, they tend towards a shapeless relativism, as a result of which her discussion provides little more than a sense of the range of possible audiences.

While acknowledging the diverse nature of audiences, it is my contention that a more conceptually rigorous approach to the study of audience can be woven out of a range of different sources.

The discussion in the previous chapter centres on the apparent existence of common criteria of appreciation among the various audience members. In contrast to this view and, implicit in some of the critical comments noted in the first chapter, is an outdated notion of the crowd as 'rabble', as a group of people at worst unable or at best unwilling to discriminate between poetry and slogans. While my analysis of performance events asserts the existence of both aesthetic and ideological criteria of appreciation, it does not address the problem of the integrity of individual responses in detail. There are a number of conceptual issues in this regard which should be clarified. The first is the notion of 'de-individuation'.

Over the last century (at least) psychologists have offered various contending definitions of crowds. Early theorists focused on the extent of de-individuation that takes places within a crowd. Individuals in a crowd were likened to people hypnotised, who were said to act without any individuality as their intellectual capabilities were significantly reduced or numbed. This view held that a crowd was generally destructive. Later

theorists have put forward at least two points in rebutting this position. Crowds, they asserted, can be both heroic and destructive. More importantly, they differentiated between organised and spontaneous crowds. The organised crowd can be a highly potent pooling of energy in which the nature of events is determined not by a hypnotic trance but by the nature of the organisation.

> Formerly the masses were seen as the outcome of a disintegration and splintering of society's normal framework; in times of institutional collapse, of revolution and revolt they would pour forth like a river in flood. Crowds were nothing but chaos and disorder, similar to the molecules of a gas. But now we know that they are the very material that, when modified, constitutes social and political institutions.[78]

Following this argument, when analysing audiences it is important to seek out the cultural and organisational forms which underpin their constitution and behaviour - instead of taking for granted the amorphous, hypnotic, de-individuated nature of a crowd.[79] The audience can thus be viewed as an association of individuals (and of smaller groups) and therefore as a social construct that exists for specific reasons at a particular point.

It is here that Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities proves useful. One of his main concerns was to defend

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78. C.F. Graumann and S. Moscovici, eds., Changing Conceptions of Crowd Mind Behaviour (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986): 24.

79. See Sitas "Class, Nation, Ethnicity" for an interesting, if cursory, example of the former. In this article he conducts a detailed investigation into the ways in which an Inkatha rally was constructed, including fascinating insights into the methods used to bring people to the rally.

Reader-Response criticism against arguments put forward by the New Critics who asserted "that the variability of readers renders any investigation of their responses relativistic and ad-hoc".[80]

> An infinite plurality of meanings would be a fear only if sentences existed in a state in which they are not already embedded in, and had come into view as a function of, some situation or other. ... Within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible (307).

He maintains that meanings are inscribed in "systems of intelligibility":

> Communication occurs only within such a system (or context, or situation, or interpretive community) and... the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines (304).

These 'systems' inhere in institutional structures, which make ideological discourses available to the individual. An individual's consciousness can only move along certain 'paths', determined by the prior availability of ideology. Interpretations can therefore be directly related to social institutions.

> The public and constituting norms (of language and understanding)... are not embedded in the language (where they may be read out by anyone with sufficiently clear, that is, unbiased, eyes) but inhere in an institutional structure within which one hears utterances as already organised with reference to certain assumed purposes and goals (306).

Different interpretive strategies are derived from a "shared agreement" among the members of a particular institution. He calls this "institutional nesting". He does not define this rigorously but gives us some clues as to what he means:

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80. S. Fish, "Is there a text in this class?" Critical Theory since 1965, Eds. H. Adams and L. Searle (Gainesville: U P of Florida, 1986): 344.

> While no institution is so universally in force and so perdurable that the meanings that it enables will be normal for ever, some institutions or forms of life are so widely lived in that for a great number of people the meanings they enable seem "naturally" available and it takes a special effort to see that they are the products of circumstance (309).

Fish's use of the terms "institutions", "forms of life", "systems of intelligibility", "context", "situation" and "interpretive community" reflects a confusing lack of rigour and an inconsistency in terminology that weakens his case considerably. In "Interpreting the 'Variorum'" Fish defines an interpretive community more clearly:

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions...(407).

Interpretive communities are not fixed, however, as individuals move between them and their boundaries shift and change over time. Nevertheless the alignments which constitute them are "always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battle to go on".

Edward Said has raised an important question about Fish's concept:

> If, as we have been recently told by Stanley Fish, every act of interpretation is made possible and given force by an interpretive community, then we must go a great deal further in showing what situation, what historical and social configuration, what political interests are concretely entailed by the very existence of interpretive communities.[81]

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81. E. Said, "Secular Criticism," Critical Theory since 1965. Eds. H. Adams and L. Searle. Gainesville: U P of Florida, 1986): 619.

A similar question has been raised by Jane P. Tompkins in the collection of articles on Reader-Response criticism she edited:

> The questions that propose themselves within this critical framework therefore concern, broadly the relations of discourse and power. What makes one set of perceptual strategies or literary conventions win out over another? If the world is the product of interpretation, then who or what determines which interpretive system will prevail?.[82]

According to these views, interpretation can be seen as a contested terrain, with various forces attempting (directly or indirectly) to influence the interpretations of works. Stuart Hall refers to this as the "class struggle in language", which reflects and reproduces broader conflicts and power struggles in society.[83]

> Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the 'structure of discourse in dominance' is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into dominant or preferred meanings....
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> We say 'dominant' and not 'determined', because it is always possible to order, classify, assign and decode an event with more than one 'mapping'. But we say 'dominant' because there

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82. J.P. Tompkins, Reader-Response Criticism, (London: John Hopkins U P, 1980): 226.

83. In the field of media studies the question of readership has been of greater concern for a longer period of time, as the problem of 'influence' has long been a central question. It makes sense that literary studies, coming belatedly onto this terrain, should draw on the work that has been done in media studies. Not in order to subsume 'literary studies' into 'media studies' but to see how similar questions have been answered.

> exists a pattern of 'preferred readings'; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalised....
>
> Thus to clarify a 'misunderstanding' at the connotative level, we must refer, through the codes, to the orders of social life, of economic and political power and of ideology.[84]

While the producers of a work may prefer a particular interpretation, and this may be implied or demanded by the work (via content and/or form), an interpreter will not necessarily experience or accept that interpretation. The interpreter could disagree with, or fail to arrive at, the preferred interpretation. That this is the case among at least certain sections of South African workers is hinted at in a recent survey of Cosatu shop stewards which, using Hall's concepts, found that "black workers' struggles and cultural formations forge an oppositional code that resists the dominant images and codes".[85]

While the implication is that literary works are not determinant or authoritative in the creation of meaning, neither is the interpreter. Just as a work does not inscribe itself onto the blank slate of the interpreter's brain, neither does the interpreter crudely impose an interpretation onto the work. The meaning of a work is derived in the interaction between the interpreter and the work. The nature of the work sets the limits

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84. S. Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," Culture, Media, Language, ed. Stuart Hall (London: U of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980): 134.

85. S.M. Pityana and M. Orkin, Beyond the Factory Floor (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1992): 43.

to its interpreters' possible responses and it is possible (though by no means guaranteed) that an interpreter will apply different interpretive strategies to a work, arrive at a range of possible interpretations and consciously choose to accept a particular interpretation. The range of interpretations chosen from will, of course, have been derived from prior experience. The degree to which a interpreter chooses freely is therefore a function of his/her prior experience and learning.

Following the logic of such an approach, one cannot expect the common criteria of appreciation I observed to be solely traceable to specific social institutions. Simply exploring the origin of the interpretive strategies would not be sufficient to understand their specific utilisation in the events under discussion.

Fish's discussion also tends to focus on the ideological dimension, neglecting the aesthetic and textual strategies which I argued were central to the audience's response, and which Baumann and Briggs have placed at the heart of their approach.

Jonathan Culler approaches the question of interpretation from a slightly different point of view. Although he does not address the problems posed above directly, his discussion does provide key conceptual tools which are useful bridgeheads into the discussion of textual or formal qualities. Arguing against Norman Holland's attempt to explain different readings with reference to readers' personalities, Culler hypothesises that different readings are the result of the application of different interpretive conventions.

> Mr. Holland fails to study reading as a process with its own operations and goals. He leaps from text to reader, calling on a simplified notion of personal identity that is much more problematic than the notion of thematic unity which he thought over simplified literature.... A person is a place of intersecting roles, forces, languages, none of which belong to him alone, all of which are interpersonal.[86]

Rather than asking why different readers read as they do, Culler asks how they read (62). He maintains that the critic should "focus on public interpretive processes". It becomes clear, though, that his concentration on recorded interpretations is somewhat limiting. He contends that one need only consult "the spectrum of interpretations that literary history records", thus in his view ensuring an awareness of the entire range of possible interpretations (57). Culler does not explicitly entertain the investigation of popular responses.

Culler's notion of interpretive conventions, however, has much to recommend it, especially when viewed in conjunction with useful insights from oral studies. W.F. Hanks, in a recent discussion on text and textuality, adds an interesting perspective to the debate, paying particular attention to the "verbal text".[87] Poetic devices such as parallelism, rhythm, "metrical and phonological integration", "the structure of deictic terms, such as 'this', 'here', 'I', 'you', and 'now'" and

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86. J. Culler, "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation, eds. S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1980): 56.

87. W.F. Hanks, "Text and Textuality," Annual Review of Anthropology 18 (1989): 95-127.

intertextual reference all contribute to the interpretation of text.

> Thus even though any strip of text can be multiply interpreted (through alternative centerings) the range of possibilities is never open-ended in the real social world. Rather it is partly inscribed in textual form, and partly contested by actors (which may be more or less than individuals) (107).

Hanks stresses the importance of metalanguage in influencing the audience's reception of texts. This consists of "textual elements that refer to, describe, or otherwise characterise text itself". He cites research which points at other factors.

> Discourse analysts have identified a number of other devices that codetermine textual interpretation. Of particular note are various kinds of schematic structures known as frames, schemata, scripts, scenarios and mental models... [T]hese fixed data structures are definitionally selective and therefore incomplete (109).

Hanks asserts that text is in fact "a way of reading". In this view, interpretive strategies are encoded into the text and not just applied to texts. Many of the qualities of worker poetry discussed in the previous chapter (such as the slogans framing the performance, the dress codes, the rhythms and imagery derived from the izibongo) could be argued to fulfill precisely this function. They provide clues for interpreting both the meaning and the aesthetics of the performance.

Useful additional insights on the formal qualities of texts can be gained from the article, cited above, by Bauman and Briggs. Discussing ways of conceptualising formal qualities in performances, they have said:

> The relationship between formal features and communicative functions has generally been treated as one of means to ends, such that form becomes meaningful insofar as it is connected with some type of content or function... [I]t is

> apparent that reifying form as a collection of empty containers waiting to receive small dollops of referential content or illocutionary force impoverishes our understanding of performance and of communication (65).

The stylistic conventions that the audience uses to 'appreciate' the poetry do not just function at another level to ideological concerns. They are an integral part of the communicative act. They argue that "performers and audiences use poetic patterning in interpreting the structure and significance of their own discourse" (70). The so-called "formal" conventions of the poetry are engaged by the interpretive strategies of the audience in such a way that facilitates their critical engagement with the ideological "content" structured in it. In this way the audience's reception of the poetry, as discussed before, does not have to differentiate between content and form. A good poet, in the eyes of the audience, "speaks the truth" in a pleasing style, which is one they recognise, know exactly how to decode, and can thus appreciate. As Baumann and Briggs put it:

> Performance puts the act of speaking on display - objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience (73).

A poem can therefore serve as a form of dialogue between the poet and the listener precisely because of the conventions they have in common. Similarly, Hanks suggests that such forms are, in themselves, important intellectual resources.

A fascinating discussion of the intimate relationship between audience and performer can be found in Harold Scheub's The Xhosa Ntsomi. He argues, for example, that:

> The creator of an ntsomi must... bring the attention and imagination of the audience into total involvement in the production, with the artist firmly and constantly in

> control. Once this is achieved, she can make the fullest artistic use of her many-faceted art form. The tension that exists between performer and her audience may well continue throughout the performance; an able performer will make effective use of this tension, and convert what could become a disruptive force into an aesthetic value.[88]

He also notes the significance of the performative elements. The audience is, he argues, "composed almost entirely of performers and potential performers" and is able to participate actively in the stories because of their familiarity with its conventions (58). Thus the audience is also performer, playing more or less active roles at appropriate moments in the story.

These conventions should not, however, be seen as a static set of rules. Reader-Response critic Hans Robert Jauss explores the changing and dynamic nature of readers' responses.[89] He has used the term "horizons of expectations" to describe the interpretive strategies readers bring to bear on literary texts. These strategies are derived both from prior literary exposure and broader experiences of life. It is the text's ability to remain influential and challenging to future generations that determines whether it will 'survive' as a 'classic' or die as 'culinary' or mere 'entertainment art':

> The "verdict of the ages" on a literary work is ...the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualized in the stages of its historical reception (30).

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88. R. Scheub, The Xhosa Ntsomi (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1975): 15.

89. H.R. Jauss, Towards an Aesthetic of Reception (Sussex: Harvester, 1982).

> ...[The text] could open up new ways of seeing things and preform new experiences that only in historical distance - in the recognition of what is now familiar - give rise to the appearance that a timeless truth expresses itself in the work of art (31).

Jauss emphasises the relationship between texts in history, arguing that one has to "discover the evolutionary alternating relationship of functions and forms" (33). As this "evolution" is mediated by audience, survival depends on more than simple innovation.

> The new is thus not only an aesthetic category. It is not absorbed into the factors of innovation, surprise, surpassing, rearrangement or alienation, to which Formalist theory assigned exclusive importance. The new also becomes a historical category when the diachronic analysis of literature is pushed further to ask which historical moments are really the ones that first make new that which is new in a literary phenomenon (35).

It is the responses of audiences, critics and future producers that determine the influence of a text on future horizons of expectation.

Therefore, he argues, literary history cannot simply be reduced to social history:

> The task of literary history is only completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as 'special history' in its own unique relationship to 'general history'....
>
> The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, preforms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behaviour (39).

Drawing on the above discussion, we could define an interpretive community as a group of interpreters that share a significant number of interpretive conventions or strategies, which include

both ideological and aesthetic elements. A single interpreter will not "belong" to only one interpretive community, just as no person belongs to any single social institution. People exist (and move around) in a complex matrix of social relations. So interpreters are bombarded by a number of works which implicitly or explicitly prefer certain interpretations. As Fish has pointed out, interpreters can move from one interpretive community to another, adopting or rejecting interpretive strategies as they (consciously or unconsciously) are influenced by different, competing, institutions.

In analysing any particular set of interpreters, therefore, we can expect to see both similarities and dissimilarities in interpretation. Importantly, however, we can also expect to see significant clusterings and trends emerge. The term "interpretive communities" is useful for describing these clusterings or trends. Hall's argument suggests that interpretive strategies also exist at different 'levels'. He draws the important distinction between strategies or conventions that are so common as to appear natural or universal and those strategies or conventions more obviously a result of what he terms "situational ideologies".

Interpretive strategies consist of rules for decoding a work. They include: grammatical 'rules' or conventions for interpreting the structure of language; semantic conventions for interpretation the meaning of words, phrases, symbols, idioms, metaphors; aesthetic conventions for the appreciation of the works, or what Hans Robert Jauss has called the "familiar norms

or the imminent poetics of the genre" (24). These conventions are not natural or universal; they are socially constructed and modified. Interpretive strategies are not only applied to works, but are also constituted by works (among other forms of communication) via the act of interpretation.

Interpretive strategies do not exist as isolated entities within the interpreter's mind, to be dragged into operation when a interpreter interprets and thereafter returned to the closet. They must (and do) interact with other ideological elements. An interpreter's interpretive strategies will not, therefore, be solely determined by their previous literary experience but also by their other experiences.

The adoption of interpretive strategies is therefore not simply influenced by the proximity of a group of interpreters in space and time, or by their influence on each other and by negotiations between them, but also by the influence of various social institutions on interpreters and the very nature of the performance event itself.

Writers (and composers) are also interpreters. The works they produce not only influence the interpretive strategies of their audience but also reflect and embody interpretive strategies they themselves have adopted. Both interpreters and writers are, in this sense, simultaneousl, social agents in their own right and sites of struggle between social institutions. Poetic performances therefore function, as Barber has described, as social acts in which both poet and performer play an important role.

'Influence', in this context does not imply a crude determinism. Just as the work, in Raymond Williams' words, "sets limits" on possible responses, so do the interpreter's experience, ideas and attitudes.[90] Within these limits, however, both interpreters and writers perform ideological work on the raw material they have absorbed. This work may be either conscious or unconscious. It may involve, as suggested above, the selection of a particular interpretative strategy or the (coherent or contradictory) merging of various strategies. It is indeed likely, given the number of interpretive strategies, that a particular interpreter is likely to experience (or be taught) that the failure to do this work will result in a highly confused (and contradictory) interpretation.

The fact that the audiences discussed in the previous chapter appear to prefer poems performed in the izibongo style is therefore more than just a question of taste. Their preference is a statement, as mentioned above, of identity and their familiarity with the conventions constitutes a form of power. Gunner and Gwala, discussing Zulu royal praises, say that:

> [They] have, like the epic, the capacity to offer a kind of stability and a sense of swift communication with the past; they can be used to reflect on the present in a number of ways and can become part of radically different, clashing ideologies (13).

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90. R. Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1978).

One of the sub-texts implicit in the preference of the izibongo and related styles is the assertion of the validity of indigenous cultural forms; it is implicitly (and for some of the poets explicitly) a refusal to concede that this cultural form can only be mobilised into what Sitas terms the "authoritarian populism" of Inkatha's narrow ethnicity ("Class, Nation, Ethnicity"). The youth who, as mentioned in the previous chapter, prefer the "urban rhythms" of Mbuli's poetry are making a statement about the cultural styles and values that they have come to identify with. Perhaps their preferences are also an act of rebellion against conventions which were imposed from above in school and which have become to closely associated with Inkatha. As one interviewee put it, apartheid has caused many people to reject the izibongo as "belonging" to Inkatha.[91]

From this point of view, it is interesting that aesthetics are not an arena that union and ANC leadership appear concerned to contest; I did not hear of a case where they suggested that a poet's performance was not artistically appropriate for their rallies. This only makes sense if, as appears to be the case, the leadership regard the poetry simply as light entertainment which warms- and wakes-up the audience up for the reception of the 'real thing', that is the speeches.

One could therefore argue that the performance genres are situated, in the mass rally, as more than just one means of

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91. Interviewee 1. This point is explored further in subsequent chapters.

articulating and popularising certain ideas and values. They are a means of producing those ideas and airing them in public. In this they must compete with other oral forms of communication; the oratory and polemics of the leadership who are the only other competitors allowed onto the platform.[92] Worker poetry is, in Barber's words, "at once action in society and reflection upon society... not of course as in a mirror image, but in a mediated and refracted discourse".[93] Similarly, Gunner and Gwala show how the izibongo in their collection serve to "map contemporary black experience" (Musholi 24). In its popular form the izibongo is used by people "to catch and hold their lives and personalities" (11). In worker poetry this serves to situate and confirm people in particular identities, with individual and collective dimensions. In the poetry the personal and the political merge in a complex sense of self.

To simply speak of de-individuation is, in this context, to deny the extent to which both poets and audience act as agents. This was evident in the interviews and in group discussions where I asked the participants to explain the significance of worker poetry. A workshop of aspirant performers said that poetry was able to unite people, and that this was important because if they

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92. See Barber (2) for a succinct discussion of this function of literary texts, which she sees as inclusive of oral performances.

93. K. Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 1991): 2.

learn each other's culture, "then people are stronger when demanding things". Unity is seen as the antithesis of forced segregation. Unity does not mean a denial of differences but a process of bringing together different people: "It is better to know about our tradition, to use it and improve it. It makes it easier for our people to appreciate our message. We can use it to express our feelings and frustrations". Ari Sitas believes that the individual's response is in itself a form of resistance: "your response is your defiance".[94]

It is clear that in order to fully comprehend the complex nature of the performance and reception of worker poetry, we need to understand not simply a reified, "objective" context within which they take place. Rather, following Baumann and Briggs, my aim is to explore various facets of the ways in which the decontextualisation and contextualisation of these performances have been achieved. In other words, what is the ideological and aesthetic baggage that the audience brings into the performance events? How does the poetry utilise poetic conventions to enable the audience to reflect upon, affirm, or contradict a particular set of ideas? What are those ideas and how have they emerged? Can we speak of an interpretive community which shares an horizon of expectations comprised of certain specifiable interpretive conventions or strategies? To what can we ascribe the existence of this community? Is worker poetry simply a reflection of this

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94. A. Sitas, personal interview, April 1990.

community or has it played a role in its constitution? And has the audience been an active or a passive part of these processes?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Making of an Interpretive Community

The audience at the Mandela rally discussed in Chapter Two was not an arbitrary gathering of people interested in hearing and seeing Mandela speak for the first time since his release. Neither were they simply responding to the advertised presence of a range of poets and musicians. Those present, like those who attended the other types of events described in Chapter Two, arrived there as a result of multiple processes of localised mobilisations and identity formation. It has already been established that the members of this and other similar audiences exhibited a range of common responses to the poetry that went significantly beyond simply applauding political slogans.

The central argument of the previous chapter was that the reception of literary works can best be understood as being located within a broad interpretive community. This chapter aims to investigate how such a community came into being and to explore some of its defining characteristics. There are two central strands to the argument. First, that increasing social and political polarisation and the concomitant growth of labour and political movements has led to a process of ideological and cultural coalescence. Second, that the izibongo has persisted to a significant extent among the African working class in Durban.

In spite of significant countervailing tendencies, these two factors led to the existence of a loosely organised interpretive community - of people who shared a set of broadly similar ideas (while being otherwise ideologically heterogeneous) and who were familiar with the basic poetic conventions of the izibongo. Thus the potential was created for the use of the izibongo as an intellectual resource. In the next chapter, I proceed to discuss how this potential was realised as worker poetry emerged within the labour movement.

Urbanisation and conflict

The creation of an urban working class in Durban has been the subject of much scholarship, which this study does not attempt to summarize.[95] As has been noted in numerous of these studies, the

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95. For more detailed discussion, see:
I. Edwards, "Swing the Assegai Peacefully? 'New Africa', Mkhumbane, the Co-operative Movement and Attempts to Transform Durban Society in the Late 1940s," Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in 19th and 20th Century South Africa, eds. P. Bonner, I. Hofmeyr, D. James and T. Lodge (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand U P and Ravan, 1989): 59-104;
J. Guy, "Debating Ethnicity in South Africa," paper, Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, U of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 Sept. 1992;
M. De Haas, "Ethnicity, Identity and Political Conflict," paper, Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, U of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 Sept. 1992;
M. Kentridge, The Unofficial War: Inside the Conflict in Pietermaritzburg (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990);
P. La Hause, "Drinking in a Cage: The Durban System and the 1929 Beer Hall Riots," Africa Perspective 20 (1982): 63-75;
----------, "The Message of the Warriors: The ICU, the Labouring Poor and the Making of a Popular Political Culture Durban, 1925-1930," Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in 19th and 20th Century South

process of proletarianisation and class formation has not been the sole determinant of the ideological and cultural characteristics of the resultant urban proletariat. Cultural factors have played a significant role in influencing the precise ways in which workers have negotiated the crises of identity and culture that such massive social upheavals thrust upon them.

Durban has been the recipient of one of the most intense processes of urbanisation in South African history.[96] In 1901 the African population numbered only 15 000 (La Hause 64). Until 1958, when the first houses in Kwa Mashu were built, most

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Africa, eds. P. Bonner, I. Hofmeyr, D. James and T. Lodge (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand U P and Ravan, 1989): 19-58;

S. Marks, "Inkatha and Contemporary Politics," n.p., n.d.;

M. Morris and D. Hindson, "The Disintegration of Apartheid: From Violence to Reconstruction," South African Review 6: From 'Red Friday' to Codesa (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1992): 152-170;

L. Piper, S. Shange and V. Wedekind, "Ethnicity and the contest over meaning: Considerations on ethnicity based on a case study of school-going youth in the greater Pietermaritzburg area," paper, Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, U of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 Sept. 1992;

J. Seekings, "The United Democratic Front and the Changing Politics of Opposition in Natal, 1983-85," paper, Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, U of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 Sept. 1992;

A. Sitas, "Class, Nation, Ethnicity";

D.V. Soni, "Socio-spatial Segregation and Urban Conflict in Durban," paper, Conference on Ethnicity, Society and Conflict in Natal, U of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg, 14-16 Sept. 1992.

96. Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, the Durban press often claim that Durban is the second fastest growing city in the world.

Africans in Durban lived in Mkhumbane (or Cato Manor) on land leased from Indians.[97] A total of 125 000 Indians, Africans and "a few thousand whites" lived in Cato Manor. By 1986 it was estimated that over one million African people lived in Durban and its environs, of which just over half (508 973) resided in 'informal settlements'.[98] The African population ranged from a small but politically significant and relatively affluent African petty bourgeoisie, to a newly urbanised and largely unemployed squatter population.[99] The working class has not only had to deal with a repressive state and the social inequities of apartheid but also with internal conflict between different strata. However, in 1980 only 1 982 African people earned more than R12 000 per annum (Sitas "Class, Nation and Ethnicity"). So while material differences were not insignificant, they are often more a question of degree than fundamental class divides.

Social stratification has not automatically led to different strata aligning themselves with one side or the other in the conflict. Sitas maintains that Inkatha and UDF-Cosatu have appealed to different sectors of both the working class and the

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97. T. Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa since 1945 (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983): 148.

98. A. Sitas, "Inanda, August 1985: Where Wealth and Power and Blood Reign Worshipped Gods," South African Labour Bulletin 11.4 (1986): 118.

99. For detailed discussion of this, see D.V. Soni "Socio-spatial segregation".

petty bourgeoisie.[100] At the same time, Mike Morris and Doug Hindson have provided compelling arguments that:

> Often violent conflict between contending political organisations and ideologies within the urban black population, has been accompanied by antagonisms within particular residential communities, clashes between residents of shantytowns and neighbouring residents of formal townships, and discord between a unionised working class, the emergent black middle class and the ever-growing black underclasses (156).

Morris and Hindson argue that the roots of the recent violence can be found in the collapse of apartheid forms of social control and intensified conflict over resources.

Other sources, discussed by Morris and Hindson, have attributed the violent nature of political conflict to a range of factors, including the mobilisation of ethnicity; political power struggles; the destabilising activities of the state security forces, a shadowy 'third force' and the 'legacy of apartheid'. Such analyses have in the common the view that political polarisation within the working class was not an inevitable consequence of proletarianisation. While the conflict is so widespread and complex that it is often difficult to pinpoint any single causal factor, what the abovementioned analyses often fail to take cognisance of is the precise ways in which the contest over political loyalties has taken place. We can take as given that there are multiple material factors underpinning the outbreaks of violence. What requires further elaboration,

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100. Similarly, questions of cultural continuity and change cannot be neatly explained in terms of social stratification. I will return to this point later.

however, is the cultural and politics methods used to mobilise different individuals into different 'camps' - and the resources people have drawn upon in formulating and communicating their own views on the political conflict.

In a recent challenge to structuralist accounts of ideological formation in a nascent working class, Ari Sitas has argued that:

> Workers do not 'adjust' to systems of dominant interpellations; rather... they react by forming 'defensive combinations' which spring up 'proto-communities' or cultural formations (Class, Nation, Ethnicity" 269).

Sitas centres his discussion around different conceptions of "Zulu-ness" among black workers in Natal. He shows that there is no single appropriation of "Zulu-ness" as a form of "ethnic self-identification", that it "registers different experiences and comradeships from area to area" (273). He calls on historians to "show whether this differs over time" and to "enrich our understanding of local histories". Similarly, in a review of three studies of Inkatha, Shula Marks notes that inadequate attention has been paid to "the nature of the subjectivity and political consciousness of [Inkatha's] adherents and the psychological rewards the movement offers" ("Inkatha and Contemporary Politics" 186).

In discussing political developments in the 1940s in Durban, Ian Edwards has claimed that:

> To study the lives of ordinary Africans in the city through analysing some of the organisations which claimed their adherence is insufficient. This can often lead to a narrow institutional history. Furthermore, the history of the Durban African proletariat's political expression during the 1940s is mainly concerned with essentially proletarian populist movements rather than with highly structured

> organisations. Such movements always had an ambivalent relationship to the then established organisations.(60)

In such a view, the study of urban social and political movements cannot simply focus on the efforts of politicians to mobilise popular sentiment "from above". Crucially, it must entail the detailed study of the ways in which the contest over identity and political loyalty takes place at local levels. And it must provide insights into the way in which "ordinary people" act as agents in the formation of such movements and the construction of ideology.

Of course this approach poses problems for a study such as the current one. It could be argued that the notion of an interpretive community assumes a larger, and possibly more coherent, unity of identity than the above arguments allow for. However, while the focus of the following discussion is on those factors which have resulted in the coalescence of local cultural formations and identities, it does not seek to obfuscate the very real differences which undoubtedly do exist. On the contrary, the thrust of this argument is that, as Fish has pointed out, the concept of an interpretive community is useful precisely in that it describes a fragile coalition of interpretive strategies. The position that certain factors have lead to the construction of such a convergence therefore takes as its starting point the varied and diverse nature of popular consciousness.

It should be recalled here that the initial spur for my study was precisely a reaction to assertions that worker audiences simply appreciated the poetry as political slogans. I have shown that implicit in such arguments is a notion of the

audience as an unsophisticated, undifferentiated mass unable to distinguish between sloganeering and poetry and incapable of responding critically to the political ideology expressed through the poetry. My approach also seeks to challenge the idea of popular consciousness as a response to interpellations from above. Although intellectuals and politicians have unquestionably attempted to mobilise popular support through certain appeals to workers' sense of self-identity, this thesis seeks to explore the ways in which both poets and their audiences have played an active role as social agents in constituting such an interpretive community.

Explaining how worker poetry has come to be received so positively by such large audiences requires an understanding of the different roads down which members of these audiences have travelled on their way to such events. One means of sketching such a picture is by analysing the ways in which the labour movement and the ANC has evolved over the past two decades. What I attempt to provide below is a broad overview of the development of unions and other ANC-aligned organisations, whose members constituted the audience of worker poetry. I have included a brief discussion of Inkatha in order to develop our understanding of how it and the ANC, which shared platforms as recently as two decades ago (both claim to have originated in the ANC before it was banned), ended up dividing up Durban's African working class and setting it at war against itself. As will be seen, the answer is primarily to be found in the conflicting strategies which the organisations adopted to oppose apartheid and win political power

for themselves and their (often common) constituency. For the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on developments since the early 1970s.

Through such a discussion it is hoped that a picture will begin to emerge of how individuals have become 'involved' in the organisational structures of the parties at various levels and therefore of how the interpretive c[illegible]nity has emerged. While acknowledging the limitations of 'institutional' histories, it is ultimately the organisations that have led to the existence, no matter how tentatively, of an interpretive community.

The re-emergence of the trade union movement

As Edwards has illustrated, political and labour movements were relatively insignificant in the 1940s. By the mid-1980s, however, this situation had changed dramatically and the labour movement had become the central organisational force among the African working class. When, in 1986, Cosatu called a stay-away to mark the centenary of May Day, the Labour Monitoring Group estimated that 60 percent of Natal's work force heeded the call.[101] In March 1990, after the Mandela Rally discussed in Chapter Two, a stay-away was called protesting police action in the townships. Although opposed by Buthelezi and Inkatha, the response to the call in the greater Durban area ranged from 60-90 percent (426).

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101. J. Baskin, Striking Back: A History of Cosatu (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991): 124.

This change in the nature and extent of working class organisation was heralded in the 1970s by the wave of strikes which began in Durban and then spread to other parts of South Africa. According to Jeremy Baskin, "the first three months of 1973 saw 61 000 workers on strike - more than the total for the previous eight years" (18). Spurred on by rising prices, stagnant wages and increasing levels of unemployment, the strikes were followed by a burst of trade union activity.[102] By 1976 the Trade Union Advisory Co-ordinating Council (Tuacc), established as a central body to facilitate the growth of the unions in Durban, claimed that its unions had 14 000 members (19).

The growth of the union movement did not initially entail significant changes in political consciousness. In 1975 Eddie Webster conducted a survey of union members which found that 87 percent saw Buthelezi as their leader.[103] For some years Inkatha and Buthelezi called for "the extension of trade union rights to Africans" and, according to both Mare and Baskin, even intervened in labour disputes on the side of workers.[104] As recently as 1980 Buthelezi was an invited speaker at the launch of Fosatu affiliates (330).

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102. Meer, S. "Community and Unions in Natal," South African Labour Bulletin. 13.3 March 1988, 77.

103. G. Mare, Brothers Born of Warrior Blood: Politics and Ethnicity in South Africa (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1992): 89.

104. G. Mare, "Education in a liberated zone," Critical Arts 4.4&5 (1988): 127.

The Tuacc unions pinned their strategy on strong shopfloor organisation and the election of leaders by workers (21). They remained politically inactive for strategic reasons, arguing that the unions had to protect the space they had created by avoiding confrontation. They would utilise this space, they argued, to build solid organisation and the time for explicit politics would come later.

In 1976 the government banned a number of key unionists throughout the country and attempted to defuse the momentum by encouraging the introduction of liaison and works committees as alternatives to unions (24). Shamim Meer's interviews with shop stewards provide interesting details of their experience of these committees and of workers' caution in joining unions.[105] In 1977, a commission under Professor Nic Wiehahn was appointed to investigate South African labour law. Although the commission aimed to co-opt and control the emerging unions, it did allow for the official recognition of black trade unions. In April 1979 Fosatu was formed, uniting unions from Tuacc and a number of other unions. Fosatu adopted a similar strategic perspective to that of Tuacc, arguing for direct worker control and stressing the building of strong organisational structures. In the early 1980s Fosatu also began to build shop stewards' local councils, which drew together elected worker officials from factories in a

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105. "Community and Unions" 79. See also the second part of her article: "Conflict in the community and in the factories," South African Labour Bulletin 13.4&5 (1988): 66-89.

particular area. It was these structures that began to take on the embryonic form of a workers' movement. These "locals" were later to take up community issues and facilitate the formation of cultural structures (as is discussed in the next chapter). Although they also allowed for relationships with student and other community organisations, these did not develop significantly until the late 1980s.

Inkatha, KwaZulu and resistance to incorporation

The history and politics of Inkatha have been extensively discussed by a range of commentators and researchers. No understanding of Durban working class political life can be complete without at least some discussion of the key features of Inkatha's activities during the period under discussion.

Inkatha started out as a cultural movement, ostensibly with the blessing of the ANC. Inkatha's whole-hearted participation in the homeland structures and politics, however, set it on a collision course with other organisations rooted in the African working class population.

In 1972 the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly was formed under the Homelands Constitution Act. In 1977 KwaZulu was granted 'phase two' self-government. From this point on, Inkatha the political movement became almost indistinguishable from the KwaZulu government. KwaZulu has effectively been run as a one-party state, giving Inkatha total control over and unlimited access to the resources of the homeland government. Inkatha is organised hierarchically, operating through Kwazulu government

structures (both bureaucratic and military), a plethora of local branch structures and a trade union, the United Workers Union of South Africa (Uwusa). Its power base is predominantly located outside the metropolitan areas of Durban. The ideological 'cement' binding Inkatha's organisational strategies was an attempt to revive, or reinvent, the historically potent force of Zulu nationalism, combined with varying degrees of Christianity and capitalism.[106]

Inkatha has also spread its influence beyond KwaZulu territory through the organisation of branches and through its participation in township administration via community councils and advisory boards.

Inkatha broke ties with the ANC in 1979 after Buthelezi's failed visit to London.[107] Thereafter the relations between the two degenerated from hostile rhetoric to open warfare. By extension, Inkatha has also come into conflict with the United Democratic Front (UDF), which Buthelezi labelled a front for the "ANC mission in exile".[108] Although Inkatha collaborated with the

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106. The social construction of 'Zuluness' has been the subject of much debate and is dealt with by many of the writers cited in this chapter.

107. For detailed discussion of these events see G. Mare and G. Hamilton, An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi's Inkatha and the Politics of 'Loyal Resistance' (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987).

108. G. Mare, "Inkatha - by the grace of the Nationalist Party? Part Two," South African Labour Bulletin 13.3 (1988): 69.

government by utilising its structures, it nevertheless claimed to oppose apartheid and was obviously interested in playing a more central role in regional and national politics.

One of the first markers in the history of ANC-Inkatha conflict was the proposed incorporation of a number of townships into Kwazulu, which would place them firmly under Inkatha's control. The state and Inkatha responded to the resistance which met the proposal with repression and violence. This generated a wave of counter-violence.

This set the tone for the violent conflict which was to follow. As numerous commentators have pointed out, Inkatha has regarded Natal as its territory and has reacted violently to any form of organisation which does not fall under its control. As mentioned above, Inkatha initially supported the emerging labour movement until it became apparent that the unions and their federations would resist any attempts by outside bodies to dictate to them. Even before Fosatu became Cosatu, drawing the unions into a close alliance with ANC aligned organisations, Fosatu's emphasis on worker control contradicted Inkatha's emphasis on central control.

There is no doubt that at the time of Inkatha's break with the ANC that it commanded widespread support. Prior to this it had received almost unqualified support from ANC supporters. Inkatha consciously evoked the ANC's symbols and claimed to have inherited the mantle of the ANC's leadership after the latter was banned. Inkatha's increasingly violent response to various forms of working class protest, whether strikes, school protests, rent

or bus boycotts, has however forced many of its former supporters to reconsider their allegiances.

Reliable figures about the extent of Inkatha's support at the close of the 1980s are hard to come by, as different surveys show widely varying levels of support for Buthelezi and Inkatha (ranging from 41 percent to 87 percent).

School boycotts and the student movement

In 1978 the KwaZulu authorities announced that it was taking control of education. The 1976 uprisings had not significantly affected Natal schools and in 1979 Inkatha claimed that there was no evidence of "unrest relating to political factors" in the schools (Mare "Education in a Liberated Zone" 128).

Under the homeland system the Kwazulu authorities did not have enough money to establish a substantially different education system. Mare points out that there were in fact protests in many schools at problems in the system (129). In the 1980s these isolated protests gave way to more systematic resistance, especially after the Congress of South African Students (Cosas) began to organise in the schools.

Inkatha took a dim view of Cosas, which was rapidly banned by the Kwazulu authorities. Reports of harassment and assassinations of Cosas members followed. Mare recounts how members of Kwazulu Legislative Assembly were "sent home to restore the respect for and authority of the elders" ("Inkatha - by the grace of the Nationalist Party? Part Two" 65). One member "phoned his apologies for his absence at the Legislative Assembly

as he had a pupil in the boot of his car!". Kwa Mashu and University of Zululand students in particular suffered. In May 1980, 200 armed Inkatha supporters attacked protesting students in Kwa Mashu and in October 1983 Inkatha supporters killed five students and injured 113 at the University of Zululand.[109] In 1984 student boycotts in protest against the tri cameral elections forced the closure of all secondary schools in Lamontville and students in KwaMashu boycotted classes in protest against enforced Inkatha lessons.[110]

The banning of Cosas in KwaZulu and then, in 1985 in South Africa as a whole, did not cause a subsidence in student and youth activity. In late 1985 students campaigned for Students Representative Councils (SRCs) and then established 'township SRCs' which represented SRCs from all schools in a particular township.[111] The boycotts and protests which swept through the schools during 1985 were vigorously opposed by Inkatha, whose vigilantes attacked protesting students. KwaZulu school principals, all members of Inkatha, were informed that all students should be Inkatha members ("Natal students").

Former student leaders also formed youth congresses in many townships throughout Durban, which by 1986 "were undoubtedly the

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109. "Inkatha battles with anyone who stands in its way," Saspu National 5.1 March 1984, 24.

110. "Countrywide protest '84," Saspu National 5.7 December 1984, 10-11.

111. "Natal students are on the move," State of the Nation October 1985, 10.

most active, organised and largest UDF affiliates in the townships" (Mare and Hamilton An Appetite for Power 201).

The UDF in the 1980s

Prior to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) the main community organisation in the African townships, the Joint Rent Action Committee (Jorac), spearheaded resistance to rent and transport increases and to the incorporation of certain townships into KwaZulu (Meer "Community and Unions" 82). Jorac existed in Lamontville, Chesterville, Shakaville and Hambanathi. This opposition to increasing rents led to increasing conflict with Inkatha councils (75). Harrison Dube, a Jorac organiser in Lamontville, was assassinated in 1983 and, when Inkatha invaded Hambanathi in 1985, ten houses were burned down and a number of people were killed.

In contrast to opposition to Inkatha, the UDF remained outside of Kwazulu and Natal local and regional structures. What was to become the support base of the ANC was developed through a network of student, youth, women's and civic organisations affiliated to the UDF. By early 1984 the following UDF affiliates were listed in Natal: 8 student, 15 youth, 5 unions, 3 women's, 28 civics, 4 religious, 11 political and 7 other.[112] The ideology underpinning the UDF was premised on a broad "non-racialism", incorporating various ideological strands ranging from the

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112. M. Swilling, "The United Democratic Front and Township Revolt," Work in Progress 49 (1987): 26.

orthodox communism of the South African Communist Party (SACP), to a less revolutionary liberal social democracy.

Despite various localised conflicts, Durban initially remained relatively quiet, "while the popular insurrection raged in other parts of South Africa" (Meer "Community and Unions in Natal" 75).

By late 1985, however, all major townships in and around Durban "were aflame as youth and Inkatha-supporting amabutho battled it out in the streets" ("Conflict in the community and in the factories" 66).[113] Meer cites Sitas' estimate that 75 people were killed and over 1 000 injured in these battles (66).

The trigger for this outburst was the assassination of Victoria Mxenge in August 1985 (67). Schoolchildren and unemployed youth in Umlazi, KwaMashu, Clermont and Lamontville boycotted classes and marched in protest against the murder. They attacked the homes of councillors, schools and shops. In Inanda, youth attacked Indian residents, burning their properties to the ground. Mxenge's funeral was attacked by Inkatha supporters from Lindelani, leaving 17 people dead.

The fledgeling community organisations were unable to control events as youth turned to burn down the homes and shops of known Inkatha officials. Inkatha began to forcibly recruit township residents into their impis.

These events caused major tensions within Fosatu unions, with shop stewards having to mediate the conflicts (72). Shop

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113. Amabutho was the popular term for vigilantes.

stewards variously blamed the violence on Mxenge's assassination, apartheid, general socio-economic conditions, and a lack of grassroots organisation. They identified the "Inkatha amabutho", various traders, councillors, shacklords and the SADF as collaborating with each other. The rank and file union membership, however, were deeply divided, with a number of workers fighting on the side of the Inkatha-supporting amabutho. In many areas shop stewards attempted to establish meetings of youth and workers to discuss the conflict and to persuade other workers not to fight for Inkatha (74). But many were not equipped to play this role because Fosatu's policy of steering clear of politics had distanced them from community organisations (where they existed). As one shop-steward said at the time, they "were not organised into structures" which could respond to community issues (74). Another called for "more education" to equip them for this role.

Another problem was, as Jeremy Seekings has shown, that the United Democratic Front had failed to develop a coherent organisational presence in Durban's African townships in the early 1980s. Leaders of township organisations claimed at the time that the UDF leadership had neglected the development of organisations in these areas. As mentioned above, it was often school students, initially through Cosas and later through the various youth congresses, that constituted the backbone of political organisation in the townships.

A critical determinant of the violent form the conflict between the UDF and Inkatha took was the lack of democratic

institutions through which the parties could campaign for support. The extremely circumscribed form of democratic politics represented in the local authorities and homeland structures were widely boycotted by supporters of the UDF and Cosatu. Although ANC-aligned candidates had contested these elections on a handful of occasions in previous decades, this strategy was abandoned in the 1980s.[114] Instead the UDF attempted to introduce its own form of democracy via its community based organisations. These "organs of peoples power", as they were dubbed, relied on building alternative structures to those imposed by the state and on isolating township and homeland structures.

The conflict was therefore unresolvable within the parameters of apartheid institutions and the contest rapidly escalated into both localised and generalised conflict. The scale of the conflict left little room for individuals to remain outside of the conflict.[115] A violent stalemate began to emerge in the late 1980s. Neither UDF-affiliated organisations, the state or Inkatha could impose their institutions as the sites within which politics should take place. This led to the increasing use of force on all sides: the state declared a state of emergency and brought the SADF into the townships, the police

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114. The internal debates within the UDF around participation in local authority structures is extensively dealt with by Seekings.

115. It has been frequently noted that in many areas, support for either the ANC or Inkatha was influenced by where one lived and who controlled the area.

detained many leading UDF activists and hit-squads began systematically assassinating others.

Military and quasi-military strategies became the order of the day. Inkatha, the Kwazulu police and the government's 'security forces' were accused of colluding with each other while UDF and ANC members were accused of carrying out armed attacks on policemen, soldiers and local authorities.

From Fosatu to Cosatu

Although Fosatu attempted for many years to remain outside of the developing conflict between the UDF and Inkatha, the polarisation of the communities in which its members lived soon led to it being pulled irrevocably into an alliance with the UDF.

In November 1985, when Fosatu merged with other unions to become Cosatu, those arguing for political affiliation were in the majority. Cosatu, while not affiliating to the UDF, adopted the Freedom Charter and aligned itself with the ANC. The members of Cosatu's affiliated trade unions became increasingly involved in community politics and Cosatu, along with youth organisations, became the organisational backbone of the UDF-Cosatu alliance. In 1986 a Durban Cosatu official argued that:

> It has become imperative to consider defence in the townships. Shop stewards and progressive youth have found themselves natural allies in the bid to protect their families and themselves in the townships.[116]

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116. "Warning Away Inkatha's Base," Work in Progress 45 (1986): 31.

Commentators seem to agree that Cosatu blundered when, at its launch, national president Elijah Barayi attacked Buthelezi and Inkatha.[117] This provided the pretext for the formation of Uwusa, which soon developed a reputation for disrupting Cosatu's activities. Increasingly Inkatha saw Cosatu as the enemy and vice versa. This tendency was accelerated by the ongoing violence and by the late 1980s Cosatu was firmly entrenched in an alliance with the UDF.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s rallies under the auspices of labour organisations and broader rallies under the banner of 'national democratic' community based organisations tended to become indistinguishable. The worker poets reflected this shift in emphasis in their poetry, which increasingly became characterised by 'national democratic' as opposed to 'worker' content.[118]

At the time of my research, few gatherings outside of formal meetings of Cosatu structures could be characterised as 'purely' worker occasions. Given that the vast majority of African people in Durban are working class, the class character of the audiences did not change significantly. What did change, however, was that the rallies began to include larger numbers of working class

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117. See Baskin, Mare and Hamilton for detailed discussion of this incident.

118. For example, compare Qabula's earlier work published in Black Mamba Rising with his recent poems in Cosaw Writers Notebook. Kelwyn Sole makes a similar observation in his review article "New Words Rising".

youth (students, unemployed youth and young workers).[119] Although in the early 1980s it may have been possible to argue that their outlook was more militant and radical than that of workers, the scale of violence has politicised workers to the extent that it is now difficult to make such generalisations.[120]

As noted in Chapter Two, the 1989 CWLP survey of worker's culture time provides a useful profile of the workers organised into Cosatu. It is these workers who, for reasons discussed further below, formed the core of the interpretive community. As could be expected, the majority spoke Zulu, with 11.8 percent speaking English and 5.3 percent Xhosa. Although a large number of people are known to be living in informal settlements, the authors noted "the absence of significant [numbers of] informal sector residents" in their survey (5). They attributed this to the fact that few people living in informals settlements are employed in the formal manufacturing sector. However, 32 percent of respondents were migrants, most of whom stayed in rooms in townships (as opposed to the hostels). The workers surveyed were also relatively privileged in terms of income and education. 81 percent had passed standard six or above, 49.1 percent had

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119. At the rally celebrating Mandela's release, at least half of the organising committee were unionists.

120. It is therefore still appropriate, I would argue, to label the poetry as worker poetry, although a few of the performers and their poems would have to be excluded from this category (for example, when Ari Sitas and I performed at the rally celebrating Nelson Mandela's release).

standard eight or above and 14.2 had standard ten or above. 42 percent of women and 53 percent of men had less than standard seven. Only 13 percent of the work force earned less than R100 per week and 33 percent earned over R150 a week.

One could expect to see higher proportions of women and youth in a sample taken at the rallies discussed in Chapter Two. The range of 'leisure time' activities reflected in the survey also give important indicators as to the diverse cultural practices of this group. This will be discussed in more detail below.

Ethnicity, consciousness and multiple identities

While the above brief overview of organisational developments gives important insights into the increasing polarisation of the African working class, it does not provide much clarity about the ways in which this intersected with ordinary workers' daily lives. Neither does it tell us very much about popular culture in the Durban townships and the ways in which the working class has negotiated the crises of identity which the violence must have thrown up. Much as such a perspective would enhance the present study, there is unfortunately very little written about popular culture in the Durban townships during the period under discussion.

In the commercial media, representations of the effects of the conflict on ordinary people's lives focused on violent clashes, death and dislocation, presumably because these made for more sensational reading material and visual footage. What would

be an important area for further exploration is in fact the polar opposites of these. What about the people who have lived through the violence, who have managed to stay on in the townships? How have they coped with the daily stresses and demands of living in such a climate? It seems that few people have remained untouched by the conflict and many families have members involved in one or another organisation. People have to live and work despite the turmoil around them and what is needed is a detailed picture of what Sitas has called the "defensive combinations" or "cultural formations" which have provided the immediate social and cultural homes for people living in the townships.

The CWLP leisure time survey provides interesting insights into the daily activities of union members. Their leisure time (not spent sleeping, travelling to and at work) is divided as follows:

> 28 percent of the time in socialising, visiting, drinking, 20 percent of the time fixing, mending in the household, about 15 percent of the time watching live or listening to sport. 11 percent of their time listening to the radio (although the radio is on most of the time). About 8 percent of the time reading, 6 percent of the time attending church, 5 percent of the time attending union meetings, 3 percent attending cultural events, 2 percent of the time watching television (this excludes sport) and 2 percent at funerals and weddings.
>
> Women workers spend about 37 percent of their time fixing and mending in the household, i.e. doing "women's work". Only 18 percent of their time is spent socialising. In both cases this "socialising" is not what the myth of the vibrant township implies; rather friends and kin gather in a constant bustle of interactions. Their participation in out-going type of activities is less (save church going) (4).

The article points out that shop stewards utilise far more time than others on Cosatu business (about 60 percent). The rest is spent on community meetings (10 percent), funerals and funeral

arrangements (10 percent), household chores and socialising (20 percent). They sleep less than other workers, thus stretching their leisure time.

The survey establishes that the following "items of material culture" are commonly owned: radios (52.7 percent), television sets (45.5 percent) and music systems (37.8 percent). Up to a quarter of workers also own a variety of household and gardening equipment. 14.8 percent own running shoes and 3.5 percent a soccer ball. 1.7 percent own a musical instrument.

In general relatively little time is spent utilising this equipment. Of those who own television sets 26.6 percent spend less than an hour a day watching them. 36 percent listen to the radio in the morning and 31.3 percent only in the evenings. Radio programmes listened to include music (63.7 percent), sport (47.8 percent), stories (42 percent), news (40,5 percent), announcements (27.5 percent) and religion (20.2 percent). The survey also concludes that Radio Zulu "is losing out to stations like Capital Radio and 702". Television programmes include: news (57.3 percent), music (51.3 percent), films (33 percent), sports (31.3 percent) and religion (8.6 percent).

30.7 percent of workers read books (roughly the same percentage of men and women). Some of the statistics for readership of particular books are given in Chapter Two. It is worth noting, however, that the most common books are the bible, those prescribed in schools and various popular Zulu and English novels. A slightly higher percentage (36 percent) read magazines, including Bona (50.5 percent), Drum (31.7 percent), Pace (29.4

percent), Learn and Teach (4.7 percent), Labour Bulletin (2.3 percent) and Injula (1.1 percent).

Newspapers are far more widely read (78.6 percent). These include Ilanga (58 percent), trade union newspapers (41.2 percent), Umafrika (40 percent), City Press (36.4 percent), The Daily News (35.2 percent), The Natal Mercury (28.5 percent), The New Nation (18.8 percent), The Weekly Mail (9.7 percent) and Sowetan (9 percent).

Involvement in cultural activities includes choirs (13 percent), dance (8.2 percent), drama (6.5 percent), music (5.9 percent) and poetry (3.5 percent). Of those involved in cultural activities a high proportion are migrants: choirs (40.9 percent), music (70 percent), dance (42.8 percent), poetry (33 percent) and drama (63.6 percent). As mentioned in Chapter Two, however, a higher percentage (47 percent) attend workers' rallies (where culture is often included in the programme) and cultural events in the community (29.5 percent). Although few workers play sport (19.5 percent), most follow sporting events.

Unfortunately, while these statistics do give us a sense of the variety of workers' leisure time activities, they do not provide significantly detailed insights into the nature of workers' identities. Further research needs to be directed at establishing the qualitative details of these activities. As mentioned above, surveys into political attitudes give conflicting results and often appear to be influenced by the agencies conducting them.

The question of workers' multiple identities has, however, been given some scholarly attention. The developing political

movement represented by the ANC-aligned organisations did not eradicate pre-existing cultural forms and identities. Each household in the vast area under discussion has developed its own way of sustaining various indigenous rituals or replacing them with others - depending on both individual choices and force of circumstance. Indigenous cultural practices have either persisted or died depending on their ability to adjust to the demands of these new situations. According to Vitas the specific nature of urbanisation in Durban has encouraged continuities in popular culture ("Class, Nation, Ethnicity"). One of the factors he takes into account is the role played by four "formidable urban movements" this century in reinventing the traditions and ideas associated with 'Zulu-ness'. He also cites a survey that found that as many as 75 percent of the township population still have active links with the countryside.

A national survey was conducted in September 1991 into shop stewards' views on a range of issues (Pityana and Orkin Beyond the Factory Floor). Shop stewards, as has been noted above, form the core of the labour movement. They are more highly politicised, more militant and spend far more time engaged in labour and political activities. The survey concluded that a minority of shop stewards (18 percent) in Southern Natal see themselves in ethnic terms.[121] 46 percent of the national total,

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121. The question included the options "ethnic", "ethnic plus South African" or "South African". The 18 percent opted for either of the first two options.

however, felt that the rights of minorities should be protected in parliament - and this figure was higher in Natal.

The survey results are somewhat misleading. As has been noted, shop stewards are more highly politicised than most workers and would be more inclined to see their answer to the question as a statement of political allegiances. A different question, such as the one about minority rights, would probably have elicited a very different response. An example of this was a discussion I had with two shop stewards about "traditional practices". While they initially insisted that they were "civilised Christians" and did not indulge in any "traditional" rituals, further discussion provided evidence to the contrary. They agreed that "muti" did work in protecting people against bullets. One claimed to have seen it working. They also acknowledged the importance of communicating with their ancestors through various rituals associated with birth, marriage and death.

A fascinating picture of a similar co-existence of identities is shown in a recent analysis of the attitudes of pupils attending a Pietermaritzburg school (Piper et al, "Ethnicity and the Contest over Meaning"). The study shows that 95 percent of the students saw themselves "as Zulus" and most of them supported a range of "traditional customs" such as lobola, initiation, traditional ceremonies, respect for and communication with the ancestors. At the same time 74 percent were either members of, or sympathetic to, the ANC.

The authors conclude that while many of the students surveyed "demonstrated ethnic moments to their identities", "this

does not imply that the students sampled could be termed 'ethnic' as commonly understood" (13). According to their definition,

> identity is 'ethnic' when the locus of the identity is a 'cultural' group, i.e. a social group characterised by certain meaning-giving features such as customs, language, history, symbols and so on...
>
> Ethnicity, the social phenomenon, requires a component of collective action, as it is prompted by a power crisis - more specifically an exclusion from power articulated in 'cultural' terms. This exclusion on 'cultural' grounds means the power crisis assumes an identity component. The ethnic group becomes the 'solution' to both problems of identity and collective action.

They argue that "the persistence of 'traditional culture' is not a sufficient or necessary condition for 'ethnic' consciousness". In their view, "the term 'ethnic consciousness' attempts to capture the sense of continuity over time that is associated with the common understanding of 'ethnic identity'".

Similarly Mike Morris and Doug Hindson have observed that in the Natal conflict,

> Although people are often mobilised using ethnic or cultural symbols, this ethnic basis often coincides with material divisions" (152).

Sitas argues that one can draw an important distinction between populist and popular democratic movements. A populist movement such as Inkatha "apart from effacing class contradictions, legitimates its right to rule through the establishment of a political mythology of origins" and "does not challenge existing cultural formations". On the other hand, popular democratic movements (such as the ANC/Cosatu):

> Are incapable of producing such a political founding mythology. Either they have to resort to an absurd pluralism of many ethnic units with their own political mythologies of origin, each one equal to the others, brought together as a multi-ethnic, poly-colour alliance, or they have to found

> their interpellations on a moment of general dispossession and on common attempts in struggle to forge a common identity ("Class, Nation, Ethnicity" 269).

These interpellations from above therefore cannot simply overwrite existing forms of identity and knowledge.

Sitas' view is that class position is a 'material fate' it sets certain limits on life experiences and therefore on culture and ideology (269). The process of proletarianisation gives rise to a range of defensive combinations (and cultural formations) through which people attempt to cope with their 'material fate', often by utilising cultural forms acquired from previous generations. Attempts made by political movements to form a class (or multi-class) ideology therefore necessarily involve the reorganisation of these cultural formations. Political movements attempt to create new, unifying identities which are not only 'written' from above but also 'composed' from below, primarily through oral forms of mobilisation.[122] In Durban, Sitas asserts, the bottom up (oral) process is more significant because of low levels of literacy.[123]

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122. I assume he is referring to forms such as the mass rally, the meeting, the march and the toyi-toyi, as well as to more informal means of oral communication.

123. Deborah Bonnin and Moses Ngoasheng have explored the role of worker poets as 'organic' (in the Gramscian sense) or 'grassroots' working class intellectuals. See: D. Bonnin, "We Went To Arm Ourselves at the Field of Suffering - Traditions, Experiences and Grassroots Intellectuals," unpublished paper, U of Natal (Durban), 1988; M. Ngoasheng, "'We Organise and Educate': Cultural Intellectual in the Labour Movement," Staffrider 8.3&4 (1989): 29-38.

The interpretive community under discussion therefore includes a wide spectrum of people, who have retained or abandoned 'traditional' cultural practices to varying degrees. The ANC has rejected the ostensibly "traditional" authority structures established by the South African and Kwazulu governments but it does not follow that its members have abandoned ethnic or traditional practices and identities altogether.[124] In reality the ANC's professed non-racial ideology has had to co-exist with traditional cultural conventions.

For some time that co-existence was primarily at an informal, or unofficial, level. While indigenous cultural forms did not find significant expression in the movement's public activities, they did occur in less formal ways, for example in spontaneous song and dance. It was only in the mid-1980's that elements within Fosatu began to develop an explicit cultural strategy.[125] It began with the worker plays, the first being "The

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124. The widespread use of traditional rituals by the ANC-supporting 'comrades' in the violence is testimony to this. In a conversation on this subject Qabula also told me he supported the continued existence of chieftanship, subject to the right of recall by their 'subjects'. The ANC-aligned Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) has attempted to organise chiefs into the ANC fold. For an interesting case study of the co-existence of ethnic identity and revolutionary ideology see Piper et al.

125. Fosatu had, however, encouraged worker choirs prior to this. These choirs were frequently 'official' choirs established under the auspices of various companies' managements, although they performed under different names in Fosatu gatherings. For further comments on worker choirs, see: Sitas, "Voice and Gesture"; V. Erlmann, "Fosatu Worker Choirs".

Dunlop Play". As is discussed in detail in the following chapter, this led to the formation of the Durban Worker's Cultural Local, which was responsible for the introduction of worker poetry in the mould of the izibongo.

As was noted in Chapter One, various writers have examined how the izibongo has been successfully adapted to the new context. As the different political and ideological forces have entered the contest for popular loyalty, cultural forms such as the izibongo became both a means of pursuing these aims and a site of contest. The "unofficial" appropriation of militaristic cultural forms has lent ideological legitimacy and organisational cogency to the warring parties on both sides. Inkatha and UDF militants have used traditional songs, poetry, 'muti', quasi-military fighting formations and weapons to pursue the war.

This is one of the key ways in which workers themselves have been able to assert their ideas and values, drawing on a store of resources which they have acquired and transferring these into the contemporary situation. This has provided them with necessary resources to withstand, and participate in, social conflict and change.

The events discussed in the Chapter Two should therefore be seen as a part of the oral mobilisation of different cultural formations and individuals into a broader interpretive community, which forms the basis of a political movement. The rallies explicitly function to express common interests and create a sense of unity among disparate social groupings and individuals.

This search for unity is consciously expressed in and through the range of cultural forms to be found at the rallies, including slogans, songs, speeches and poetry.

The persistence of the izibongo

Implicit in the above discussion is an assumption that the poetic conventions of the izibongo have persisted at a relatively broad level among the African working class. Although there is no clear way of establishing the extent to which this is the case, there are a number of useful indicators which support this assumption.

Comparative evidence of the "multiple identity" thesis can be found in Gunner's research on the use of the izibongo in Shembe's Zionist Church. She shows that it reflects a strong desire to integrate the Christian and the traditional into a single world view and a single set of cultural practices. Other forms of Christianity often force people to choose between the two lifestyles.[126] In these cases it appears to be common for traditional practices not be discontinued but to be "driven underground", as it were. Among even highly active Christians in Durban it is common practice to have at least two wedding ceremonies, the first being almost completely Christian in content and the second involving traditional rituals. The second is generally a more low key affair, involving only the families. At this latter ceremony at least some elements of the traditional

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126. Gunner gives examples of this in "Ukubonga Nezibongo: Zulu Praising and Praises," diss. U of London, 1984.

rituals are performed, away from the sanctions of the church body. It also here where the izibongo are most likely to be heard, although this is not always the case.

Elizabeth Gunner's research into Zulu praising and praises has given us perhaps the clearest picture to date of contemporary practices. Her research was, however, largely limited to the rural areas of Natal and she focuses on people who are still intimately involved in traditional culture. In addition her study was conducted in 1975-6 and one can expect significant changes to have taken place in the interim.

Given the lack of detailed research on the subject, the best sources of evidence which point to the persistence of the izibongo are the various social institutions which impact significantly on the daily life of Zulu people in Durban. The CWLP survey of worker's leisure time informs us that workers in fact have very little time outside of work, that their lives centre around the following major poles: work, home, church or other cultural gathering points (such as shebeens, sporting events) and in some cases political and union activity. During their youth this can be extended to include school and related activities. There is evidence of the izibongo in one form or another in most of these arenas, suggesting strongly that it is still a living tradition.[127]

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127. In searching for this evidence, I have taken into account the entire range of Zulu praising, from the most basic naming conventions (such as izithakazelo) through the rudimentary (and flexible) praises accumulated by individuals (such as izihasho) to the relativedly fixed, highly crafted izibongo of historical figures and political leaders.

The first and most obvious place where the izibongo can still to be found is in the activities of the Kwazulu authorities, the royal house and Inkatha. Although the focus of my fieldwork prohibited me from investigating these izimbongi directly, it is common knowledge that Kwazulu and Inkatha leadership utilise izimbongi to sing their praises.[128] There are few available statistics on attendance at gatherings held under the auspices of the Kwazulu authorities or Inkatha itself. Sitas records that

70 000 people attended the rally on May Day in 1986, to launch the Inkatha union Uwusa ("Class, Nation and Ethnicity" 257). Almost half of those present were bused in from outside Durban. There have been other similar rallies, prominent among which are the annual Shaka day rallies, which have increasingly mobilised only Inkatha supporters.

A number of people I spoke to had direct experience of these izimbongi. Because of their affiliation to Cosatu, however, most indicated that in recent years they had ceased to attend those gatherings where these izimbongi would have appeared. It seems safe to assume that a relatively large number of Durban's inhabitants have attended such occasions at some point in their lives, especially before the war between Inkatha and the UDF-

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128. For a recent unpublished transcription and translation of King Zwelithini's izibongo, see: T.C. Dlamini, "Re-creation and Adaptation in Oral Tradition: An Analytical Study of King Zwelithini's 'Izibongo'," diss., U of Witwatersrand, 1992.

Cosatu alliance assumed its current proportions in the early 1980s.

What is less clear is the extent to which such exposure is mirrored at a more local level. Although many community councillors in the African townships are active members of Inkatha, it is doubtful that they exercise anywhere near as much influence over the people under their jurisdiction as rural chiefs do. This view is reinforced by the extent of opposition to the councils during the mid- and late-1980s. It appears that they do not surround themselves with the traditional ritual without which the imbongi would not have an appropriate context for performance. Many councillors are businesspeople or intellectuals and are undoubtedly as urban in their orientation as the workers who live in their areas.

A further factor which should be taken into account and which was raised by my informants is the tension within Inkatha itself between its traditional and Christian identities. This is indeed a tension that permeates the lives of most African urban residents of Durban. While Inkatha invokes traditional rituals and culture it is also an avowedly Christian (and pro-capitalist) movement. A number of my informants said that Inkatha's commitment to the preservation of traditional cultural forms was not a deep one, especially in the urban areas. One must expect that this would vary from place to place.

It is clear that the izibongo is fairly well represented in the schools. The people I interviewed, however, suggested that izibongo are predominantly taught as a text, with students

memorising them from a text book and reciting them for marks. Shaka's izibongo is part of the Zulu syllabus, whether the school falls under (the South African) Department of Education's control or under the Kwazulu education authorities. Many of my interviewees, however, said that they had learned to dislike all forms of poetry at school because of the punitive system through which it was taught. Some said they were encouraged to perform at school 'rallies' while others said they were only recited in the classroom. In the latter case the means through which pupils were exposed to the poetry was not dissimilar to that applied to European and Afrikaans poetry. This would account for the lower levels of enthusiasm for izibongo-style poetry I observed among the youth (noted in Chapter Two). Gunner and Gwala discuss in some detail the problematic process through which royal and chiefly praises were established as the canon. Much of this process took place through the compilation of school textbooks (35).

At least one interviewee said that while Inkatha controlled the schools, this did not always mean that traditional forms such as the izibongo were privileged in the education system. In fact, he said that in his experience the Christian side of Inkatha's ideology was emphasised at school. Again it is difficult to draw any general conclusions as it appeared that different teachers and different schools take different approaches to the teaching of izibongo.

The traditional izibongo is rooted in the extended family and the clan. One can expect therefore that the family would

remain a key site of transmission. Of course urbanisation and the spread of Christianity has modified traditional practices considerably, though unevenly. This is the area where it is most difficult to draw out any generalisations, save for the fact that in most families the youngest children are the furthest removed from the izibongo as a living tradition and the elderly are the most in touch. My interviews were most instructive in this regard. I questioned the interviewees closely on the extent to which any aspect of the naming or praising traditions had survived. I discovered that even those who initially insisted that their families practiced no traditional rituals at all, readily conceded that they had at least some exposure to naming in one of its 'poetic' forms. This included, for example, nicknames given to children by their grandparents, a familiarity with the families izithakazelo, and an ability to recite the izibongo of an ancestor. One interviewee initially insisted that his family were devout Catholics and did not practice any form of praising but later recalled that his father had given him a praise in English, "the white duck who will not get dirt unless he has five thousand dollars".[129]

Obviously the urban household provides fewer inspirations for praising. As has been noted by most scholars of the izibongo, in the rural setting young boys would praise their cattle, animals would have praise names and people would 'award' each

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129. Interviewee 4, personal interview, January 1990.

other praises. In the township dwelling, few of these opportunities exist. Noleen Turner's research into contemporary izihasho shows that satirical personal praises are still commonly used. One also sees other innovative uses of praising, such as the common name for the kombi-taxi, "Zola Budd", which refers to its (awe-inspiring) speed.

The izibongo has been incorporated into mass media to a limited but significant extent. Izimbongi can be heard performing on Radio Zulu and have occasionally been show on television. Although the izibongo has not per se been commercially exploited in the form of records or tapes,[130] Elizabeth Gunner has shown how the fluid boundaries between different forms of popular culture has allowed the izibongo to infiltrate music.

> Praise poetry - in the form of the izibongo - has moved media in this way, appearing on popular singles on LPs, recited with an abaqanga-type backing by singers such as Ernest Shelembe in 1981; Tisha (Themba Nzuza) included Shaka's izibongo on his 1986 LP, UThembe Mina (Trust Me) and a group called AmaDayisi - Mzikayifani Buthelezi and Clive - included Shaka's izibongo on a 1985 LP. Perhaps izibongo in this new medium take with them into the new medium something of the power and potency of the historical figure being praised, but they also become part of a new expression of urban consciousness ("Mixing the Discourses" 71).

Similarly the izibongo has travelled into contemporary sporting activities. Gunner and Gwala mention izibongo being performed for particular soccer teams.

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130. The Culture and Working Life Project has recorded worker poetry and examples of this have been included along with freedom songs on a tape called <u>People Must Share</u> performed by the Pinetown Culture Group. The distribution of this tape is negligible when compared with the sales of popular musical forms.

The factory floor is not, in most instances, conducive to performances of any sort. In the case of the hostel, where workers have the opportunity to gather together, it is clear that the izibongo has survived to some extent. A.T. Wainwright has described the imbongi on the mines on the Transvaal and it would appear that there is a similar 'tradition' in Durban hostels.

Alfred Qabula, it has been noted elsewhere (and he confirmed this to me), used to compose 'songs' in his head while he drove his forklift truck (A Working Life). This internal realm of the worker is the subject of a recent (incomplete) investigation by Ari Sitas but is not quantifiable. One of my respondents said that the giving of praise names does occur at work, though not frequently. From my interviews and discussions I think it is safe to conclude that, once again, the izibongo is not widely used at the workplace.

As mentioned above, Sitas estimates that 75 percent of Durban workers have ongoing links with the countryside. The CWLP leisure time survey found that 32 percent of respondents were migrants and that a high proportion of those involved in cultural activities are migrants. These statistics suggest that Qabula's experience as a migrant is by no means an isolated one.[131] The widespread use of the izibongo that Gunner cites is therefore likely to continually be fed back into the urban areas,

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131. A number of my interviewees who were residents of the urban areas at the time of my research nevertheless mentioned spending time in the countryside as youth.

especially given the abovementioned finding that most migrant workers in fact live in rooms in township houses and not in hostels. These indicators suggest that while people in the urban areas in and around Durban have been exposed to the izibongo, it is probably not as intense as their rural counterparts discussed in Gunner's research.

It seems clear that, for the purposes of this study, one can assume that most Zulu speaking people in Durban are, at the very least, well versed in the basic conventions of the izibongo. Younger people who have grown up in the urban areas may well lack the detailed knowledge of the izibongo possessed by the older generation and those who still live in the rural areas. We can also assume that a significant number have a high level of exposure to and therefore a very good grasp of the izibongo. The extent of such exposure is, however, uneven and is dependent on very specific factors such as a particular family's adoption of Christianity or a particular teacher's approach to teaching the izibongo. It is therefore difficult to identify certain geographical areas as sites of particularly intense reproduction.

Thus one can begin to see some the complexities involved in the formation of an interpretive communities. Ideological and cultural similarities may be manifested in (and transmitted through) organisational forms such as a church congregation, a community organisation or trade union. And the differences may cut through the 'vertical' lines of family and clan. Within a single household one often finds parents eschewing political

involvement while the children are involved in a militant youth group or a trade union. The children may acquire a familiarity with the conventions of the cultural practices of the parents (such as the Izibongo or choral singing) and either reject them or employ them in their 'new' organisational home. So, for example, the Chesterville Youth Choir and the Hammersdale Gospel Choir started off singing church hymns and gradually transformed themselves into militant youth choirs singing ANC political songs.

As I argued (following Fish) in Chapter Three people can shift and change from one interpretive community to another - taking some of the baggage from the old into the new and in the process linking the old and expanding the new. What has happened at the micro level is that individuals have made choices - as agents of change or conservation - and influenced others. So we will see in the next chapter, when Qabula and his comrades made the intervention that drew the Izibongo into praising the trade unions, he influenced others to follow suite.

In the next chapter I trace in more detail the specific details of the emergence of worker izibongo. The discussion will be based on the assumption that a significant number or African workers have a basic familiarity with the conventions of the Izibongo that was available for mobilisation during the performances of the worker imbongi.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Emergence of the Worker Poetry

As was noted in Chapter One, those critics who have acknowledged the influence of the Zulu izibongo on worker poetry tend to focus on the extent to which the worker izibongo can be seen as a continuation and extension of the broader genre of praising. In the previous chapter it was argued that the izibongo has indeed persisted among the working class through a range of institutions. What requires further explanation, however, is why worker poetry emerged when and where it did. This chapter aims to explore in more detail the precise factors that facilitated the emergence of worker poetry within the labour movement. In the following chapter the links between worker poetry and the izibongo are explored in more detail.

There are four factors that need to be taken into account in discussing the emergence of worker poetry. These are: the official introduction of worker culture via the medium of the worker play; the introduction of the izibongo by worker dramatists; the existence of appropriate interpretive conventions in the audience; and the official authorisation of the worker izibongo by the unions and later by the broader "national democratic movement". While the first two and the last factor were important and perhaps even decisive, the third factor was

arguably most significant because it created the conditions for the poetry to have a significant impact. The existence of these conditions has been established in the previous chapter.

The discussion that follows also investigates how the worker izibongo came to occupy a broader space than that provided by the labour movement, discussing the reasons for and consequences of the gradual move from worker poetry to popular poetry.

In the final sections of this chapter I take a closer look at Qabula, by all accounts the first poet to use the worker izibongo and, by way of contrast, at Ngubo, a more recent worker poet living in Pinetown who was inspired to perform by Qabula.

The Durban Workers Cultural Local (DWCL) played a central role in the introduction of worker izibongo. It was this association that produced the poets and the poetry printed in Black Mamba Rising. The text itself contains some information on the processes that led to its publication but a more useful source is Astrid von Kotze's account of the Natal workers theatre movement.[132]

The first worker play to be made in Durban was "The Dunlop Play". Inspired by similar plays produced in Johannesburg, Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) organiser Geoff Schreiner encouraged Ari Sitas and Astrid von Kotze to meet with a group of shop stewards from the Mawu branch at the Dunlop factory in Durban. Qabula was one of these shop stewards. First performed in

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132. A. von Kotze, Organise and Act (Durban: CWLP, 1988).

July 1983, "The Dunlop Play" led directly to the formation of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local (DWCL).

Workers and intellectuals involved in the play started the association in order to maintain its momentum. The DWCL did not focus narrowly on worker theatre but also attempted to win acceptance of cultural activities in the labour movement, campaigning for rehearsal spaces, performance venues, audiences and for recognition of the importance of culture by union officials.[133] One of the DWCL's stated aims was to create space for cultural activities in general.

In a position paper the DWCL prepared for the Fosatu Education Workshop in 1985 they said:

> We have come here in all shades from all shadows of life to say YES - we are ready to fight for better living conditions, for better wages and to end injustice and exploitation. But we have also gathered here to begin giving shape to a world we would like to live in: a world without exploitation, without discrimination and fear. In this struggle cultural work has a crucial role to play (Sitas Black Mamba Rising 58).

Although this has been the guiding principle behind their work, it must also be remembered that this statement was prepared for a specific audience. It was designed to convince union officials and shop stewards to encourage and facilitate cultural activities. It was an important first step in their quest to access their target audience.

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133. For a more detailed discussion of the DWCL see Von Kotze Organise and Act and Kelwyn Sole's critical review of the same: Rev. of Organise and Act, Staffrider 8.3&4 (1989): 204-210.

The DWCL explicitly attempted to utilise a variety of cultural resources in building and popularising the labour movement. Von Kotze's account makes it clear that the worker theatre movement facilitated the emergence of the worker izibongo. She says that in January 1984, the worker actors decided something was missing from their dramatic performances. Qabula explained to me that he came up with the idea of using the izibongo form to praise Fosatu while they rehearsed and performed their plays. Qabula asked for and was given a "mandate" by the other actors to perform a praise poem. He was very nervous, he told me, because he did not know how the audience would respond. Fortunately, he said, the audience (at the 1984 Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union annual general meeting) "loved it":

> I was nervous but the nervous tension was soon removed by the warm, encouraging response from the audience that ululated in excitement. Another form of expression had been discovered.[134]

Qabula says the workers present responded well because they had never heard "their tradition" being used to praise the union before, that they had thought it was only for praising chiefs.[135] He was clear that this was not his aim.

> I made a resolution that I was not going to praise the state, rulers, chiefs and kings. My themes were going to be

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134. A. Qabula, "A Life Cruel Beyond Belief," Writer's Notebook: Cosaw Natal Journal 1.2 (1990): 2. This interview was conducted by myself and Zithulele Mahaye, translated and edited by Mahaye.

135. Ari Sitas confirmed this in my 1990 interview with him: "The response was overwhelming and for the rest of the year he was invited to perform at events throughout Natal".

> worker militancy, the most noble role of people who are the actual producers of the means of life, and other progressive movements. However I adopted the style of presentation that is used by traditional bards who praise kings and rulers.

As will be illustrated in the next chapter, one of the key functions of the izibongo is to establish the identity of the person being praised. This entails celebrating their personal qualities and recording their remarkable deeds. It was easy for Qabula to personify the labour movement (and its constituent parts) and, drawing on the techniques of the izibongo, praise its history and its advantages for workers. This is exactly what Qabula set out to do in "Praise Poem to Fosatu" (Black Mamba Rising).

By all accounts Qabula's intervention led to a wave of worker poetry. Most worker poets I spoke to cited Qabula as their inspiration.[136] Audience members I interviewed frequently remembered his performances as the first progressive izibongo they had heard. Von Kotze tells how Mi Hlatswayo, later to become national culture co-ordinator for Cosatu, began to perform after hearing Qabula perform (Organise and Act 52).

The use of the izibongo to praise Fosatu was therefore a calculated intervention. The workers involved in the play had discussed the role of culture in "furthering the workers' struggle" beyond the use of plays. However the intervention

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136. This included Gladman Ngubo, Madlinyoka Ntanzi, Dumisani Zungu and Mi Hlatswayo.

clearly resonated among workers familiar with the izibongo's conventions.

Once the workers had been organised into cultural activity (via the play) it seems inevitable that the izibongo would feature sooner or later. Had this not been the case it is unlikely that Qabula would have proceeded beyond the first performance. Prior to Qabula's intervention, Ari Sitas pointed out to me, there had been what he termed "spontaneous praising" at various small union meetings. Kelwyn Sole has noted the use of the izibongo in praising the leadership of the labour movement as far back as 1930 ("New Words Rising" 198). Sitas suggested to me that these informal praises were in fact the "true inheritors" of the oral tradition (personal interview). They did not succeed at larger meetings and rallies, he argued, because they tended to rely on "very specific metaphors" and an intimate relationship with the audience. Neither of these worked in gatherings with a diverse audience and in which the performer was distanced from the audience by the stage and the booming sound system.

The success of Qabula's intervention was exemplified by his being elected to represent Durban workers at the Fosatu National Education Workshop in 1984. A gathering of workers, asked to select a play, overwhelmingly voted for Qabula. Those who argued that Qabula's poetry did not constitute a play were defeated.[137]

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137. This also confirms my observation that the poetry is appreciated as a performance by worker audiences.

It was this chain of events that led to the official authorisation of the form.

There is, of course, a stark contrast between worker plays - started at the initiative of a leadership figure - and worker poetry in the style of the izibongo - which was initiated by the actors themselves. Official authorisation was nevertheless a decisive factor in influencing the precise way in which the worker izibongo emerged. Similarly, audience approval and official sanction were, in the longer run, mutually dependent. Had the union officials not decided to encourage the use of culture in general, and the izibongo in particular, it is unlikely that the emergent form would have achieved the currency that it did. The officials controlled the meetings via which the poetry had to reach its mass audience, and performing at events dedicated to cultural events would have provided a far more limited audience. Official authorisation meant that poets often occupied the same space at rallies as the leadership. The cultural programme at a mass rally was frequently longer than the speech-making. Worker plays, on the other hand, were eventually abandoned at mass rallies when it became apparent that the distance between audience and performers was too great for facial expressions and gestures to be seen.[138]

The audience may also have been less enthusiastic about the poetry had the officials spoken out against it. This was not

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138. For further commentary on the problems of plays at mass gatherings see Sitas, "Voice and Gesture".

inconceivable as the poets did not limit themselves to praising and could have been perceived as a threat in a climate of heightened, often vociferous, internal debate in the federation.

On balance, though, it made sense for union officials to recognise and nurture the emergent form. The main function of the poetry was, after all, to praise the union. Perhaps more importantly it praised the union in a form with which workers were familiar. To be praised in an izibongo was far more significant that simply to be praised in speech.[139] It accompanied other forms of traditional culture, such as the giya and toyi-toyi dances which also carried which them a celebratory and mobilising function. Equally importantly, in praising the union the poets often praised the members of the union - who were often stressed by the poets as being the backbone of the union. Poetry had the added advantage of being a flexible and effective audience-inspirer. Poetry was used to fill in the gaps between speeches, wake up the audience and build a sense of community among those present. It allowed for more active audience participation at the larger meetings than speaking and the audience was able to claim the performance, and by extension the event, as their own. The poets could be called up at the organisers' whim and as sometime happened, they could also be dropped from the agenda to save time.[140]

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139. Gunner makes a similar point in "Orality and Literacy" 49.

140. See Sitas, "Voice and Gesture" for a detailed discussion of these issues.

Official authorisation also led to the publication of the poetry. Qabula's "Praise Poem to Fosatu" ("Izibongo ZikaFosatu") was first published in Fosatu Worker News, at the time it gave a boost to the status of the poet and the poetry. Since then worker izibongo have been published and distributed in print, on audio cassette and video cassette.[141]

As Von Kotze mentions, the DWCL was given space to rehearse at the Gale street Fosatu offices and later at the Clairwood Trade Union and Cultural Centre. In 1985 Cosatu was launched in Durban at the Kings Park Stadium and the DWCL participated actively in the programme. From its inception, then, Cosatu recognised the importance of cultural activity.

By mid-1986, "cultural locals" had been formed by interested workers in Ladysmith, Hammarsdale, Howick, Port Shepstone, Pinetown and Newcastle. This was done in line with formal Cosatu policy and represented the rapid growth of cultural activity in the federation At the local level there were, at the time of my research, a number of active culture locals, though not as many as the Culture Unit's earlier statements predicted or hoped for. It is significant that the poets were invariably key figures in these initiatives. Cosatu established the Cosatu National Cultural Unit and employed Mi Hlatswayo, a worker poet and veteran of the Dunlop Play, to work full-time building local and

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141. See Appendix B: Index of Poems for a comprehensive list of these "publications".

national cultural structures. A number of national gatherings were devoted to culture and cultural activities had a firm place on the agenda of other national gatherings.

At the time of writing Cosatu was debating ways of streamlining their culture structures, many of which had either failed to initiate activity, collapsed or become bogged down in bureaucracy. The number of worker poets had undoubtedly increased but it was unclear whether this was as a result of the local structure strategy or more simply a snowball effect caused by the exposure of the poetry at various meetings and rallies.

Worker poetry has achieved a significant level of recognition both in South African publications and on numerous stages around the country. The interpretive community discussed in the previous chapter emerged in tandem with the set of organisational structures which gave rise to worker poetry, authorised it and facilitated its growth and recognition. Officials saw the poetry's potential as a means of consolidating and expanding the interpretive community. Individual poets played a critical role in this process, not only in introducing the new form but also in creating structures specifically designed to ensure its recognition and expansion.

The ability of worker poets to rapidly reach beyond the trade union audience was a further significant step in the development of the worker izibongo. Their popularity with audiences soon led to their being incorporated on the agendas of political rallies. The highlight of this process was the predominance of worker poets at the Mandela Welcome Rally

discussed in Chapter Two. At a local level similar processes occurred as worker poets began performing at local community rallies and often ended up as the dominant cultural item on the agenda. One may therefore ask why worker izibongo emerged in the labour movement and not in community organisations and what implications this had for the emerging form?

One possible view is that it was an accident of history. The conventions were, after all, widely available throughout the urban African community. Elsewhere in the country, analogous forms of praise poetry were evident at rallies to celebrate the release of political prisoners.

Perhaps the answer is that the factors mentioned above were not all as readily available outside of the union movement in the Durban area. I have already argued that izibongo did not emerge earlier in the labour movement because the four factors did exist prior to late 1983. These factors took longer to arise in the community organisations for a number of reasons. Perhaps most significantly, community-based political organisations were notoriously weak and continuously under siege in most African areas of Durban, only gaining impetus in the late 1980s.[142] By this time worker izibongo had already been firmly established in the unions. A further reason could be that after 1985 the State of Emergency made it difficult to organise meetings other than small union meetings. Repression therefore prevented the

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142. See the previous chapter and Seeking's article on the UDF for discussion of the reasons for t 's.

spontaneous growth of various cultural activities that relied on such gatherings for an audience.

Trade unions are a particular kind of institution, centered as they are on the factory floor - to which workers return five or six days a week. This provides a level of consistency that is necessary for the successful production of plays and choirs. Although there were choirs and stage plays in the communities these were largely limited to the churches and the schools, also institutions that provide a basis for regular meetings and practices. Youth groups did produce poetry but tended to focus on more contemporary styles, imitating the poetry of Mzwakhe Mbuli and the Black Consciousness poets of the 1970s. These poems were also less worker-oriented, in the sense that they tended to deal with broader liberation politics.

Ari Sitas also suggested to me that the leadership of community organisations generally had more formal schooling and were therefore alienated from traditional oral forms (personal interview). It may be no coincidence that Qabula, who played such a central role in initiating worker poetry, was a migrant.

There were three main factors which led to the rapid expansion of the worker izibongo beyond the labour movement. The first was that worker poets were also resident in the communities and were increasingly drawn into community politics. As discussed in the previous chapter, Cosatu's predecessor (Fosatu) had a policy of attempting to recruit both Inkatha and UDF members into their ranks. At its most extreme, in some of the unions, this meant that union members were discouraged from being involved in

community politics. With the formation of Cosatu this policy changed and the federation was drawn into an explicit alliance with the UDF (and later with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP)). Cosatu policy was that unions should encourage their workers to participate in and strengthen community formations and Cosatu Locals were briefed to facilitate this process. Community structures did not always take off and at local level the alliance often consisted only of the Cosatu Local and youth organisations, with women's and students organisations where these existed.

Secondly, the worker poets were always in search of audiences. The trade unions probably did not satisfy their desire for performance opportunities and their success in that realm rapidly led to welcome invitations to perform on other platforms. Often the worker poets became leading organisers in their townships, which of course facilitated such invitations.

Thirdly, I have mentioned that community organisations began to emerge more forcefully in the late-1980s.

The occasions at which worker poetry was performed have already been discussed. It was often difficult to differentiate between 'worker' gatherings and 'popular democratic' gatherings for a number of reasons. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Durban townships are predominantly working class. A gathering organised by a trade union was only guaranteed to be exclusively attended by workers if it was a closed meeting, either at a factory or as a union meeting. There were also many other gatherings organised by the unions which were attended by non-

workers (although in most cases, as argued before, they were members of the working class). For this reason, to debate the precise class composition of these gatherings appears to me to be an unnecessary exercise.

Of greater significance in relation to the audience is the question of who convened the gathering and how they structured the agenda. A union-organised meeting was more likely to explicitly raise questions of class and worker issues, that is, the dominant discourse was likely to be worker-centered The speeches and the cultural elements (slogans, songs, poetry) were more likely to refer to such concerns. This did not mean that the cultural activity would necessarily conform to this discourse. Neither did it mean that the audience would forget about their broader (popular democratic or nationalist) concerns. In my experience of these meetings there was an increasing tendency to slide from one discourse to the other, as trade union speakers were increasingly required to address overtly political questions.

The fact that worker poetry emerged in the labour movement in Durban initially meant that the message was largely, though not exclusively, centered around issues of immediate concern to workers. The Durban Workers Cultural Local had an explicit emphasis on worker culture and this is reflected in the poetry of Black Mamba Rising. At the same time questions of national oppression and class exploitation are integrally linked in a

worker's life.[143] The "working class content" contained in the poems was often a question of emphasis and the worker poets represented in Black Mamba Rising have shown an ability to move from 'liberation politics' to 'worker politics' with great ease, frequently asserting the primacy of workers' interests within the liberation struggle.[144]

Given the abovementioned significance of interventions made by particular poets, it is instructive to take a closer look at some examples. Qabula's place in the process has been clearly established and, for this reason alone, he merits further discussion. The second poet I discuss, Ngubo, is significant in that he represents the 'second generation' of poets who followed Qabula's example and in that he took the poetry to a new audience in Pinetown. His style also differs from Qabula's, representing a different combination of available conventions. He also represents more clearly the shift towards popular poetry that characterises the current worker poets.

Qabula has outlined how he became involved in the union and aspects of his development as a poet are noted in his autobiography (A Working Life). He has also been the subject of

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143. For a clear example of this see A.T. Qabula's autobiography A Working Life.

144. This is particularly marked in Qabula's poem "Amadelakufa' ("Death Defiers") published in Writers Notebook. See Sole "New Words Rising" for a detailed discussion of these questions.

numerous interviews, articles and reviews, some of which have already been discussed. A number of points pertinent to this st dy deserve to be highlighted.

The first relates to his origins. In his autobiography, he describes his journey from his home in Flagstaff, Transkei, via the Carltonville hostels in Johannesburg to Durban, where he has lived and worked as a migrant worker. His first language is Xhosa and his main exposure wa.: to the Xhosa izibongo. He claims that this is sufficiently similar to the Zulu izibongo for the audience to recognise and appreciate his poetic conventions. He has hinted at the fact that even his exposure to Xhosa izibongo was limited.

> Besides my rejection of praise poetry that glorifies kings, the other factor that would not allow me to learn the traditional praise poetry was that we as the youth could not learn from our elders because of a generation gap; that could be seen in the lack of direct communication between the youth and the adults (Qabula "A Life Cruel" 3).

Qabula does not however ignore the significance of his exposure to other Xhosa poetic forms part of the izibongo "family", such as the less formal praises and praise names given to people and animals.

> Back in my village people do not have to be highly skilled to be poets. During the seasons of ploughing you may hear a person singing poetry to a span of oxen. The oxen are being praised and encouraged for their good work. In this way the poet is expressing happiness about the good results of the span at work. Not everyone, however, is a good poet who could sing for the good work of the span.

He refers to his experience of 'praising' in the mine hostels.

> Oral poetry was sung in the queues about observations, it might be about the way the kitchen workers behaved or it might be about women whom they left behind.

He also speaks of workers taking home cultural forms picked up on the mines.

His exposure to various cultural forms was therefore relatively broad. It is not surprising, therefore, that Qabula's repertoire goes well beyond the re-interpretation of the izibongo. Not all of Qabula's poems are rooted in the izibongo style. His "Migrant's Lament" is listed in Black Mamba Rising as a song and reflects Qabula's strong interest in music. He has played an active role in training some of the choirs in the Durban area and has been experimenting, in recent years, with combinations of music and poetry. He has also been active, as mentioned above, in assisting various dramatic groups around Durban.

Qabula's origins in the Transkei and his experience of various forms of cultural activity suggest that he should not be regarded unproblematically as organic to, or representative of, his audience. It does appear, though, that he has successfully narrowed the potential distance between himself and his audience. In fact, this experience has given him the ability to explore forms which are new and exciting to some of those in his audience.

The second area of Qabula's development that merits discussion is the gradual shift in his poetry from the oral to the literate, especially insofar as it has affected his relationship with his audience. In viewing videos of his performances (texts are obviously of limited value in this regard), one can see a significant change taking place. In a

number of recent performances Qabula performed with the written poem in hand. His own statements on this issue are worth presenting in full.

> My poetry is also different from that, say, of Madlinyoka Ntanzi and Dumisani Zungu, who have taken on my style of presentation and composition - which is part of militant culture. However they are more oral, they do not rely on writing as much as I do these days. I advised Madlinyoka to note down his poetry to achieve some consistency. It is important not to confuse your themes and ideas.
>
> I know that [oral composition] is the traditional practice but today it is difficult to stick to the same wording like the old bards used to without reducing your composition to writing. The current moods may always affect your terminology, so to avoid different words in the poem you need to write your poetry.

Gunner also quotes Qabula arguing that writing the poems down and publishing them in print is an important means of ensuring the continuation of the izibongo ("Orality and Literacy" 51). She warns that an over emphasis on print may be damaging (55).

These statements suggest that Qabula sees the influence of writing as essentially a positive one. Tracing his poetry over the years one must agree that it has developed and one can speculate that certain changes have been facilitated by his increasing use of writing. In some of his more recent poetry, for example, he has started using lengthy extended metaphors, which lend these poems a degree of internal coherence not seen in his earlier works. But the impact of writing on his performance has not always been positive. The most extreme example of this is the fact that his increasing reliance on the text has on occasions come close to destroying his relationship with the audience. His rhythm and presentation are particularly affected in these instances, being less energetic and fluent than used to be the

case. Consequently the audience response has been far less enthusiastic than one has come to expect.

Qabula may set much store on literacy but he nevertheless experiences difficulty in reading and writing. His writing, which I have observed on many occasions, is slow and painstaking. While he is able to read various kinds of texts, his reading is slow. This may partly explain the problems which arise for him when performing by reading from the text (as opposed to reciting from memory).

It is not my intention here to conduct a 'formula analysis' of Qabula's poetry in order to ascertain the extent of his 'orality'. This kind of analysis may yield interesting results but it is not necessary for the current discussion. Because we are dealing with contemporary poetry it is possible to observe it at first hand. Whether he can still compose orally and perform spontaneously is not the key point, in my opinion. It is, in fact, unlikely that he ever composed in performance. He does not always perform exactly the same version of a poem but this is often due to pressure from the organisers to cut his performance short. When he forgets his words he improvises but such performances are marked by occasional stuttering. These days Qabula, in my experience, is rarely a fluent performer.

Qabula has been profoundly affected by the war. This has compounded his negative experience of migrancy, which in itself extracts a severe toll. Soon after he began performing poetry, a

friend of his was killed.[145] Qabula soon learned that he too was on a death-list and he was forced to go into hiding. Subsequent to these events he left Dunlop and was employed by the CWLP. This has distanced him, to some extent, from the life of a worker and from the workers themselves but he has never become totally alienated from that experience. He still travels from place to place while in Durban, and spends on average one weekend a month in Flagstaff.[146]

I have mentioned these factors in order to illustrate the different influences on Qabula's poetry. His current leaning towards literacy is perfectly explicable in terms of his involvement in a world where the printed word is often pervasive and one's ability to survive often depends on literacy. This stress, combined with that of being hunted, having friends killed, not being able to live at home with his family, has probably resulted in his less energetic oral performances. It has also led to a more personal style of poetry, often more anguished and less exciting for the audience. In other words, what at times seems to be an increasing loss of rapport with the audience is not just due to an increasing commitment to the written text but also a result of these other factors. Neither can it be simply ascribed to the increasing size of the audiences, the powerful

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145. This incident and the poem it inspired are contained in Qabula's autobiography.

146. Qabula also recently spent three months at Iowa University, participating in their international writers' programme.

sound systems and the massive stages that lift the performer up and away from the audience. He does, as do other poets, occasionally manage to overcome these obstacles.

Qabula is therefore not the same poet as he was five or six years ago. He has also, it seems, begun to move away from the izibongo and has been experimenting with other artistic forms, such as music.

It is also useful to focus on some of Qabula's statements about the art of performing poetry and his understanding of his audience.[147] In a discussion on these issues, he identified three key elements in a performance that affect its reception. Firstly, he says that the message should not be put 'straight' but should be 'hidden'. By this he is referring to those poetic devices such as symbol, metaphor and so on, which are characteristic of poetic language. He points out that the failure to do this, to 'hide' the message, can bore the audience. A 'hidden' message, on the other hand, gives the audience something to do and the audience must themselves make sense of the poetic statement. An added advantage of such techniques, he points out, is that the poet is able to say things that could not otherwise be said. However, he says, if one 'hides' the message too much the audience will not understand what you are saying. One must therefore "hide it but keep it simple" at the same time. In other words the poet must

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147. Most of the following statements are taken from my lengthy, mostly informal, discussions with Qabula and one focused interview in 1990.

use figurative language to challenge the audience without becoming obscure and esoteric.

He also maintains that 'movement' and 'energy' are necessary for a performance to be appreciated. He claims that even if the message of a poem is not understood, movement and energy are sufficient to guarantee a positive reception. He cites the example of people who can't speak English but who enjoy Mbuli's poetry because of his formidable stage presence, captivating voice and body movements. A related factor that he mentioned on another occasion is dress, which is important because it identifies the poet for the audience.

The poet, Qabula asserts, must use words to 'build up' the audience. He refers to the development that takes place in a poem, including the accumulation of meaning and symbolism, as well as increasing excitement of the senses by the sequence of statements and images. The poet must "take the audience with him, not leave them behind" and must "take you from the chair where you are sitting and put you somewhere else"

These three points are unlikely to represent the entirety of Qabula's knowledge or opinions on the subject. It is characteristic of many oral poets that they find it difficult, or are reluctant, to spell out the poetics of their work. An ability to analyse and verbalise art does not always translate into an ability to produce it, and vice versa.

Ngubo is one of the more popular emerging poets in the Durban area. He lives in Clermont, outside Pinetown, and has a strong

following in this area. He started off his current involvement in performance poetry through the Pinetown Cosatu Culture Local (in 1987) but has rapidly become known beyond the union movement, through his involvement in community politics and his performances at local events.

The following discussion is based on my observation of Ngubo's performances and his development over the period of study. It also draws on a long discussion I recorded with Ngubo about his poetry and the responses of Durban audiences to other worker poets (personal interview).

Ngubo falls into a very different category to Qabula. He hails from Cato Manor in Durban, his home language is Zulu and he has spent most of his life in the urban and semi-urban areas. His early experiences of performance and poetry were in school and Sunday school. In the latter he acted in "sketches from the Bible" and recited psalms. Of those days, he says:

> I was interested in dramas as well. In such a way that I thought that maybe one day I'd be playing in the bioscopes... such as James Bond and all those guys (personal interview).

At school he was taught both Western and Zulu poetry in written form. He recalls poems such as "The Daffodil" (sic) by William Wordsworth and "the praises of the old kings, such as Shaka, etcetera".

> At school we were writing essays. I also wrote poetries but I didn't know that they were poetries by the way I was writing them - the essays - because I was putting some idiomatic expressions - just to call things by the other names....
>
> They didn't teach us, only to give us the poetries from the western countries just to read them and to keep them in memory so that we can recite them....
>
> I also believed I'll write them but I thought that maybe writing poetries or short stories is just for

> intellectuals because most of them were written by professors.

He says that at the time he preferred the Zulu izibongo, even though he never heard them being performed by an imbongi. The pupils used to perform izibongo in class and at school rallies. The first time he heard a worker imbongi was when Qabula arrived in Pinetown to talk to the workers about the importance of culture.

Like many in his audience, Ngubo has an awareness of the basic conventions of the izibongo but was not, in his youth, exposed to frequent performances by skilled practitioners of the art. He is typical of the younger generation of Durban poets. Born and schooled in the urban areas, they have nevertheless been exposed to the izibongo in a limited way, often in printed form. He has also been exposed to Western poetry and the rhythms and techniques of contemporary musical forms. He argues for the importance of retaining "Zulu culture" through transforming it to meet the demands of contemporary society.

Far more so than Qabula, Ngubo's process of becoming a poet has been a process of unlearning much of what was taught to him at school. His recent involvement in worker culture began when Qabula arrived to speak to the Pinetown Cosatu Local.

> He showed us the videos, how other poets are reciting and acting. Therefore I saw that it's easy, even myself maybe I can start doing something.

Ngubo emphasises the importance of speaking about everyday events and politics in his poetry.

> I'm just reciting them to the audience because I'm just vomiting out what's inside my heart and then I don't know how the audience feel but by the way the audience listened at me, clapping hands, encouraged me.

This is something he respects in other poets as well.

> They made me to be too much interested because they were reciting about the incidents which are daily occurring here in our lives. And they are encouraging us how we must achieve our goals because most of them are on the struggle....
>
> Most of the western poetry is written about just simple things, not things that can encourage the people, as you know they are all struggling at this point in time. They don't make any sense, I can say, its just to recite.

Although Ngubo's poetry does not draw extensively on the izibongo for inspiration, there is no doubt that the imbongi performance style has influenced his own performance. He is also aware of the debates around the izibongo. Talking about the politicisation of the izibongo he says:

> It depends to what organisation you belong. I think those of Inkatha are praising Inkatha, Me because I belong to Cosatu and all the progressive organisations that is why I am reciting, praising those organisations. Maybe those who belong to the Inkatha are praising Inkatha to make Inkatha survive.

In his view the izibongo has not always been a political art form, nor will it always be as political as it has become:

> You can even perform in the funerals by writing a poetry related to that one who has passed away.... You can even praise the cattle but at this point in time we haven't got that time to focus at the nature that is why in one of my poems I say "From childhood to manhood I didn't take time to focus at the nature, the beauty of the world" because at this point of time we are struggling, now we haven't got time to look at the sea, to look at the sky but we could do so if we have time....
>
> I would like to do so but I think that I won't do it because even during the post-apartheid period it will be the time to strengthen and to encourage the people. Maybe the next generation who will be born after apartheid will have time to look at the gold mines, everything, the nature, the grass, the trees then they will start writing poems.

According to activists in Pinetown he is very well known and popular as a poet and a musician. He is widely respected as a

leadership figure in local community and labour organisations. For Ngubo, his identities as poet and as activist are inseparable. While Qabula has been lifted out of the work place into the CWLP, Ngubo has remained a worker, active in the union and in community organisations. This is reflected in his professed inability to 'focus on nature' and his determination to speak about everyday events and "the struggle". The latter, for Ngubo, goes beyond the factory floor. His poems reflect an overarching interest in broader liberation politics. In spite of the centrality of the trade unions to his emergence as a poet, they do not occupy a central position in his poetic message.

In addition to his emphasis on politics and struggle, Ngubo is keenly aware of the demands of his craft. The following are extracts from our conversation about poetic techniques.

> When you are reciting a poetry, it must be a big poetry which can impress or attract the people so that they must actually listen at what you are saying....
>
> People must be able to understand the whole story of what you are speaking about although you are not mentioning exactly what you are saying. But the images, symbols and expressions too you must draw their attention to the audience....
>
> Even action too because it is just like when you are feeling sad even someone who don't understand your language but can see now that you are talking about something which you doesn't like or you are feeling sad, you are cross....
>
> To make your poetry powerful when you are reciting your actions too must be equal. You mustn't just stand as if you are delivering a speech....
>
> To deliver a speech is just to address people of what has happened or what we must done and now with a poetry you are just emphasising and even your actions too are just encouraging people and even when you are looking at them by the way you are looking at them - it draws attention to the people....
>
> You must be fast - maybe there are some who can be slow but this makes the audience to feel slow too....
>
> Yes [your volume must be loud], because now by the time when the others are saying please, please, be quiet, be quiet - by that time you are carrying on now they've missed something....

> I think your tone mustn't be too high or too low but it must be powerful....
>
> When someone is reciting his voice is changing a bit by the way his spirit is revolting inside rather than by the way he is talking to the people just standing around....
>
> You can even criticise by the way your poetry is written - you can even use the same idiomatic expressions which are related to your criticism... If so and so is bad you call him a snake - I've hidden my criticism but the people will see it - I can call you by a lion now the people will know that you are someone who is powerful....

In other words, Ngubo has a set of fairly specific criteria by which he composes and judges poetic performance. He was reluctant, however, to pass judgement on other poets. Asked why certain critics say worker poetry is weak, he says:

> I think it's because they have been much westernised and now when you are doing izibongo it is something you are just creating with yourself. Now they want that you must be taught at school, everything which you are doing or reciting must be from school not from yourself. That is what had already abolished our talents....
>
> I think they understand the poetries but they don't want someone to be more important than them....
>
> I can praise Qabula a lot because he taught me that all I want to convey to the people I must write it as it is.... Now it will seem as if they are a little clever than me whereas they don't know what was my feeling by the time I was writing my poem.

Ngubo is insistent that the audience does understand the difference between slogans and poetry:

> When you are shouting slogans they are also shouting too by the time you are reciting [poetry] they are listening at you....
>
> They also know the slogans. When you are reciting a poetry you are reciting something new to them although you are reciting about the incidents they know.

On the question of the frequent 'borrowing' of images he says it is important to write new poetry but that "its very important to mix with others poets - that's why the seminars and workshops are much important because that's where you get everything, how to write and all those sorts of things".

Ngubo insists that the audience has "definitely not" influenced his poetry. In discussing the responses he has received from the audience, however, he reveals that there have been pressures on him to write more Zulu poems.

> Audience have demanded me that - by the way I have got a Zulu poem but it's only one, the rest of them are in English - but they like that one very much in such a way that most of them are asking me to record the cassette and then they are urging that through thick and thin they will buy those cassette because they want to listen. Some of them are saying that they want to listen at my voice, some of them are saying they want to listen at the message of the poem.

Although Ngubo performs in both English and Zulu, members of his audience have requested that he perform more frequently in Zulu. Like Mzwakhe, he operates across the oral-literate spectrum. He writes and memorises his poetry but performs it orally to a mixed audience. He 'hides' the text by performing fluently from memory, without any visible text to prompt him, giving it an air of spontaneity. His audience demands his poetry on cassette, preferring it to printed poetry.

Ngubo has also written a novel in Zulu (as yet unpublished) and a number of short stories which have been published by the CWLP. The extent of the audience for his writing is unclear, although he lives in an urban area where the literacy rate is probably relatively high.

Comparing Mbuli's poetry with Qabula's, Ngubo says:

> Qabula is using a traditional style I can say, like an old imbongi. Mzwakhe is using a western style although his poets are not written in the western style but the way he is reciting them [is more western] but his voice is powerful....
>
> His poems are a little bit westernised because there are some which he is reciting them... accompanied by his band and he is using the rhythm that his poetry must suite his band but Qabula is just reciting, as an imbongi.

Ngubo agrees that Mbuli is more popular with those urban youth who haven't had as much exposure to the izibongo, whereas the older people prefer Qabula's traditional style. He finds it difficult, however to expand on this and to say which style the Durban audiences prefer:

> Here in the Durban area it comes to the question of that people are a little bit different. Most of Qabula's poems are in Zulu and some of the people like Zulu poems and Mzwakhe's poems are in English and most of the people like to hear him, a lot of them just like to hear his voice by the way his voice is powerful. I can't say the difference.

Nevertheless, Ngubo is convinced the izibongo will continue to be used as long as the poets make a conscious effort.

> I think if we can follow Qabula's direction there are many Qabulas who can follow Qabula - it can survive because it is vitally important that we must always keep our culture or we mustn't forget it.

The above case studies illustrate a number of important points about these poets and their poetry. While the political role of their works are a central part of their identities as poets, they are keenly aware of the craft through which this occurs. They self-consciously utilise a sophisticated set of poetic conventions in order to act as political agents. They have clear ideas about their audiences and how both style and message are important for a successful performance.

The latter is important, for it is only if the poets are concerned about their audience that they will allow themselves to be influenced by them. Most poets I spoke to agreed that the audience "is the final judge" of their poetry. A poet from the Transvaal, discussing a very 'literary' and rather obscure poem

that I had written, said that "the audience would boo us off the stage if we did poems like that".[148] While this attitude was also prevalent in Durban, in my experience it is unlikely that the audience would boo. Their rejection would more likely take the form of silence or a conversation with another member of the audience. For a poet appearing before thousands of people, both a distracted buzz from the audience and a deathly silence are profound indictments of one's performance.

I have therefore concluded that the audience's preferences do have a significant impact on the poets' compositions. Many poets I spoke to (from a wide range of backgrounds) admitted that they had modified their poetry in order to fit their perception of the audience's expectations. When I asked whether this was not tantamount to succumbing to the tyranny of the audience they agreed that it was, but argued that it was unavoidable if one was to perform oral poetry before a live audience.[149]

The dialogue between audience and performer has been a powerful force in ensuring the growing popularity of worker poetry. While worker plays were introduced from above by union officials, worker poetry 'bubbled up' from below, initiated by certain workers and wholeheartedly endorsed by their audiences. At the

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148. This was stated by a Transvaal poet, Morakabe Seakhoa, but was agreed to by a number of Natal poets present at the time.

149. This informal conversation took place at a gathering of the Congress of South African Writers in 1991.

same time as worker plays have receded in prominence, especially at mass gatherings, worker poetry has continued to proliferate. Perhaps it is the organic roots of the poetry that has led to its popularity. It may also be that the poetry is one of the few avenues which a young worker can use to mount the platform and give full vent to his ideas and feelings. A young poet from the Orange Free State, Gilbert [illegible], expressed this strongly in a workshop, calling his poetry a "sickness". He would go mad if he could not perform, he said. Some of the poets I encountered were indeed obsessive in their quest to perform and it was not uncommon for young poets to become aggressive when refused a platform. Sometimes this insistence reflected a disregard for the audience, stemming from the urgent desire to be heard. This enthusiasm, I would argue, is a manifestation of the poets' need to affirm their identity through speaking out against the conditions of their lives. Ngubo's comment (that the privileging of certain styles and forms had "abolished" his talents) suggests that, for worker poets the act of performing poems based in their "own" styles and experiences is not merely a form of resistance. It is also a momentary but precious victory for both poet and audience.

CHAPTER SIX

Worker Poe[illegible]s Izibongo: Formal and Performative Qualities

The izibongo, as I have already argued, has exercised a powerful influence on both poets and audience in the composition and reception of worker poetry. I have also noted that the worker poets draw on a wide range of performance styles and that it would be misleading to see all worker poetry as being cast in the mould of the izibongo. In the discussion that follows, I discuss the key features of the izibongo and examine examples of worker poetry in order to establish the precise extent to which the izibongo's formal and performative conventions are evident.

Outlining the key features of the izibongo is not a task to be undertaken lightly. Although a number of writers have attempted to describe the form, there are problems in the way they have conceptualised this task. Furthermore, despite these attempts it is still not clear exactly what conventions underpin its composition and reception. A compounding problem is that many izimbongi are hard to pin down on the aesthetics of their poetry, as was evident in my discussion of Qabula and Ntuba.[150] Asked to

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150. Jeff Opland makes a similar point in Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983) 81.

describe the process through which someone becomes an imbongi, researchers (and no doubt many an aspirant imbongi) are frequently told that it is through practising and performing. Unlike the poet schooled in written poetry, the oral poet does not learn by reading about the poetics of his/her predecessors.

Perhaps more importantly, the izibongo is not a monolithic 'tradition' but is dynamic, adapting over time and space, according to its context. Opland warns that any analysis must be both 'differentiated' and 'dynamic' and must be conducted along both synchronic and diachronic axes.[151] The izibongo has always

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151. The following discussion is centred on the following texts:
Opland Xhosa Oral Poetry;
A.T. Cope, Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1968);
Gunner, "Ukubonga Nezibongo";
Gunner and M. Gwala, Musho! Zulu Popular Praises.
While acknowledging the difference noted by these writers between Xhosa and Zulu izibongo, I will concentrate on the similarities. No thorough comparative study has been undertaken into the two 'traditions' and, until proven otherwise, it is safe to assume that differences are relative rather than absolute. For an interesting perspective on this question see Gunner and Gwala (3).
Other articles consulted include:
Cope, "Literacy and the Oral Tradition: The Zulu Evidence," Oral Tradition and Literacy: Changing Visions of the World, eds. R Whitaker and E. Sienaert (Durban: Natal U Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1986): 151-161;
H.I.E. Dhlomo, "Zulu Folk Poetry," Native Teachers Journal 27 (1947-8): 5-7; 46-50; 84-87;
Gunner, "Forgotten Men: Zulu Bards and Praising at the Time of the Zulu Kings," African Languages 2 (1976): 71-89;
"Songs of Innocence and Experience: Women as Composers and Performers of Izibongo, Zulu Praise Poetry," Research in African Literatures 10.2 (1979): 239-267;
"New Wine in Old Bottles: Imagery in the Izibongo of the Zulu Zionist Prophet, Isaiah Shembe," Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford 13 (1982): 99-108;
"A Dying Tradition? African Oral Literature in a Contemporary Context," Social Dynamics 12.2 (1986): 31-38;
"Orality and Literacy: Dialogue and Silence," Discourse and its Disguises: the Interpretation of African Oral Texts, eds. K. Barber and P.F. de Moraes Farias

been an integral part of a complex social fabric - while it is an artistic form of expression, it also forms a crucial component of social and cultural rituals and customs. Among other functions, it has played a central role in reproducing the hierarchies and power relations in society. Thus it would be difficult and misleading to study literary conventions alone in order to

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(Birmingham: Birmingham U African Studies Series 1 (1989): 49-58;
"Mixing the Discourses";
R.H. Kaschula, "Iimbongi in Context: An Analysis of the Contrasting Power Bases of Three South African Iimbongi," unpublished paper, Umtata: Bureau for African Research and Documentation, U of Transkei, 1991;
A. Mafeje, "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community," Journal of African Languages 6.3 (1967): 193-223;
C.T. Msimang, "Factors that Influence the Composition of a Praise Poem in Zulu," Third African Languages Congress of Unisa, ed. P. Wentzel (Pretoria: Unisa, 1980): 220-238;
D.M. Mzolo, "Zulu Clan Praises. Structural and Functional Aspects," Oral Tradition and Literacy: Changing Visions of the World, eds. R. Whitaker and E. Sienaert (Durban: Natal U Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1986): 206-221;
A. Nyamende, "Oral Praise Poetry of the Clans: Its Continued Survival within the Ambience of Learning," Catching Winged Words: Oral Tradition and Education, eds. E. Sienaert and A.N. Bell (Durban: Natal U Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1988): 219-229.
Opland, "The Isolation of the Xhosa Oral Poet" Literature and Society, eds. L. White and T. Couzens (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1984): 175-195;
"The Bones of Mfanta: A Xhosa Oral Poet's Response to Context in South Africa," Research in African Literatures 18.1 (1987): 36-50;
L. Vail and L. White, Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (London: James Currey, 1991);
A.T. Wainright, "The Xhosa Imbongi at Home and on the Mines," Third African Languages Congress of Unisa, ed. P. Wentzel (Pretoria: Unisa, 1980): n.p.

discover the poetics and aesthetics of the genre.

In Opland's Xhosa Oral Poetry, he deals with aesthetics and poetics in an unfortunately scattered fashion. Although he has a chapter entitled "Oral Poetics and Oral Noetics" this is stitched together around the theoretical debates on spontaneous composition sparked by Albert B. Lord and Walter J. Ong. In his words, he concentrates on "the formula, the theme and the effect of writing on the oral tradition". This is useful insofar as it highlights the necessity of certain poetic elements (such as thematic formulae) in a spontaneously composed work. It does not, however, attempt to identify those qualities that differentiate izibongo from other oral forms. Neither does he include any significant comment on the reception (and appreciation) of the poetry. In addition, spontaneous composition appears to differ from one imbongi to another; it may well be more a question of ability than convention. However, Trevor Cope's treatment of formal qualities is more substantial, as is Gunner's impressive work .

While Cope tends to dismiss everyday praises as "primitive", Gunner places them at the centre of her analysis. She investigates the social context, the development of performers and the art of the performers. She includes substantial discussion of stylistic techniques and the content of the praises. An impressive collection of praises is attached to her thesis, which forms the basis of Mushoi, which she co-edited with Gwala. In addition, Mushoi includes a substantial introduction

which challenges much conventional wisdom about izibongo. Gunner and Gwala do not spend much time on discussing poetics as they focus their attention primarily on what are here discussed as contextual features.

Opland uses three headings under which to discuss various aspects of the izibongo: textual, textural (or performative), contextual (and functional). As Cope's and Gunner's material on Zulu izibongo can also be fitted into these three categories I will use them as a framework for my discussion of their work.

Contextual

All four writers draw the important distinction between 'chiefly' izimbongi and izibongo and ordinary people's boasts, praises and clan praises. The chiefly izibongo represents the most formal and arguably the most highly developed branch of verbal art. Praises often provide the verbal accompaniment to social activities and, in the past, were virtually as common as names. Their functions include: entertainment, establishing the reputation and identity of a person, communicating with the ancestral shades in both the everyday context and in important social rituals, practices and education. Cope argues that the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'chiefly' praises can be seen primarily in the more complex structure of the izibongo and the development of praises into stanzas.

Because izibongo are an important means of legitimising social structures and hierarchies of power, changes in social organisation and relations affect both content and form.

Inevitably this also means that izibongo are a terrain where power relations are contested. Gunner and Gwala point out that this has lead, in the past, to a misreading of the genre as "the preserve of the powerful" and as being inextricably bound up with militarism.

Izibongo are also important in establishing identity for ordinary people:

> The act of praising focuses on identifying a person, embodying his or her personality through the process of naming and also in essence providing a link with his and her community, lineage and origins. Also the naming is a process of objectifying, so that once a name has been given, or self-given, it is in a way outside the power of the individual to remove it or contest it (3).

Both Opland and Gunner discuss the increasing isolation of the 'chiefly' izimbongi from their audience, as changing social relations (under colonialism and apartheid) have pulled them away from their position as mediator between chief and ordinary people. Gunner argues that social resistance to the institution of chieftainship has been less marked among Zulu speaking people than among Xhosa speaking people, and that the Zulu imbongi is apparently less alienated than his/her Xhosa counterpart.

Textural or Performative

Opland's definition of textural is "those features that an audience would see and hear but that would not be evident from an examination of the transcribed text of the performance" (Xhosa Oral Poetry 248). Opland writes about various performative elements, such as pace, tone, volume of delivery, dress and gesture. The first three aspects are dealt with below, as they

belong properly in a discussion of rhythm and intonation. In this section I focus on dress and gesture.

Opland, Cope and Gunner all ascribe great symbolic importance to dress. Opland observes that the imbongi often wore (and wears) certain animal skins that are usually reserved for the chiefs, thus emphasising the link between the two. He quotes Hammond-Tooke's comments on the use of animal skins:

> These animal pelts are royal insignia and represent essentially the mystical aspect of chieftainship rather than the executive, for, while Cape Nguni chiefs play little active part in decision-making, they possess the quality of isithunzi (shadow), an aura of fearsomeness and malevolent charisma, that sets them apart from ordinary people (251).

Opland speculates about the symbolism behind the izimbongi carrying sticks and/or spears:

> No modern imbongi can offer me an explanation of why he wears skins or why he carries spears.... The spears... might well signify the connection between his poetry and the cult of the ancestors (254).

Cope simply states that dress is significant but does not explore its symbolism in detail. He draws a parallel between the imbongi and the sangoma (herbalist):

> Just as the latter is the intermediary between man and the supernatural world of magic and the ancestral spirits, so the former is in a sense the intermediary between the chief and his subjects, for, when he presents the chief to the people in his recitation, he is also representing the opinion of the people to the chief (Izibongo 28).

On the issue of gesture, Cope says:

> It is a convention of praise poem recitation that the praiser never stands still. Even when the head of the family, who is not a professional praiser, recites the praises of his ancestors on an occasion of importance to his family, such as a wedding, he walks up and down as he does so. The professional praiser at court accompanies his recitation of the chief's praises not only by walking but by leaping about with gesticulations as the excitement increases. He suits the actions to the words, the words to

> the actions; the performance is indeed dramatic. Movement, both visible and audible, is the essence of praise-poem recitation (29).

Movement and gesture are important aspects of the imbongi's craft, skillfully employed to enhance the poetic and dramatic effect of the poems, and to engage the audience in the performance. Gunner notes how the modern stage often compels the contemporary imbongi to stand still - either because of a standing microphone or because of the increased Westernised formality of the occasion.

Gunner also points out that within the contemporary performance she observed, different types of dress and gesture are 'optional' creative elements that are used to varying degrees by different izimbongi.

None of the above discuss in sufficient detail the significance of beliefs associated with the ancestors for the nature of the performance, although Gunner suggests that praising the dead is a far more solemn affair. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the 'shivering' often seen in both the performance of izibongo and the ukugiya (war dance) that sometimes accompanies it, is said to be symbolic of communication with the ancestors and therefore often elicits an excited audience response.

Gunner and Gwala stress the close links between izibongo and other forms of popular culture:

> Izibongo are also closely related to dance, particularly but not only ukugiya, "the war dance". In popular performance, the three activities of praising, dancing and calling out izigiyo ["songs to go with the war dance"] fuse together.

Textual

Under this heading Opland deals with structure, content, stylistic traits (such as the various forms of repetition), imagery and metaphor. Unfortunately when it comes to the analysis of rhythm and meter, he does little more than admit his inability to discuss these elements. Cope's and Gunner's analyses are fortunately more adequate.

While covering a wide range of genres, certain characteristics nevertheless define izibongo as verbal art. As Gunner and Gwala point out, there are "certain conventions that mark them off from ordinary speech and give the language a rich, varied denseness" (4). They suggest that the defining characteristics of the izibongo often include: condensed language and yet particular forms of expansion (including those discussed by Cope); a narrower range of tenses; balanced structure of lines; 'front-placed metaphors'; allusions; linking; parallelism and other forms of repetition. They emphasise that:

> The formal qualities of izibongo are the product and expression of working conventions of a genre of oral poetry which has circulated widely for generations among Zulu speakers north and south of the Thukela River. Izibongo have responded to shifting emphases of time and dynamic cultural and social pressures but have still remained a recognisable genre.

Structure and Content

Opland begins by looking broadly at how content is structured into the poems, drawing out the similarities between Xhosa praise poetry and Greek funeral eulogies. He argues that there are usually six structural components, which would most often appear roughly in this order:

1) Statement of intention and salutation;

2) Praise of physical and moral qualities;

3) Praise of achievements;

4) The social context of the performance;

5) Genealogical references;

6) Exhortation of the audience.

The second, third and fifth components are often deemed to be the core of the praise poem and many recorders and transcribers have neglected the first, fourth and sixth as embellishments. This is probably because the core components are often relatively fixed in both form and content (especially when praising the deceased), although different poets perform praises in different orders. The other components are context specific and therefore are seen as less important.

Both Opland and Gunner recognise that without these components the poetry will not have the same effect. They introduce the performer and establish their relationship with the audience. They encourage the audience to participate in the poem through appropriate verbal responses and bring the audience into the rhythm of the performance. Contemporary oral poets performing within praise poem conventions begin their performances by leading songs and chanting call-and-response slogans. Only once the audience is sufficiently aroused do they launch into their performance. The performance continues to be punctuated by audience participation, for example at the end of every stanza.

The six components referred to above provide the framework for izibongo delivered in praise (and sometimes criticism) of

chiefs. However, not all components are always present and they would not necessarily be present in all izibongo. The key point is that praises deal with moral and physical qualities; genealogy; history and current events. They also enable the imbongi to criticise any negative qualities obliquely (by subtle statement or simply by omission) as well as to exhort either the person being praised or the audience to act in a certain way. Lastly the framework allows for references to current events and thus for comment on contemporary social and political processes - as long as these are referred back to the subject being praised.

Opland fails to develop a more specific analysis of poetic structure. Cope, on the other hand deals extensively and thoroughly with the core components; the praises and the genealogies. The internal structuring of the these sections of the praise poem has, he observes, changed over time, arriving at a complex stanzaic formula. I will not deal extensively with his treatment of the earlier period (which he calls the "pre-Shakan" and "most primitive" examples) but will focus on what he terms the Shakan and post-Shakan developments. It is worth noting, however, that Cope refers to the structure of "primitive" praise poems as consisting of loosely defined "sections". These sections could contain a number of different praises listing images one after the other in order to accumulate noteworthy characteristics of the subject. Opland cites the following example:

> Bushman son of Makhabane
> An elephant with an overgrown foot
> A puff adder with a beard
> The offspring of the daughter of Mzanywa
> Up the Fish River this side of the Ngqumteshe (38).

Perhaps this is more usefully seen as an example of an "ordinary man's boast", as distinct from a chiefly praise-poem, which would normally be more sophisticated and more highly structured. Cope argues that:

> The most primitive type of praise-poem is simply a collection of praises. This is the type of praise-poem of the common man, who although he may have achieved a degree of fame, has not yet attained a position of political prominence.
>
> The praise-poem of a chief or politically prominent person (even a woman who combines royal blood with an outstanding personality) shows the operation of poetic art upon the basic simple praises, particularly in the use of alliteration and parallelism to give structural formality. In the royal praise-poems of the eighteenth century these praises are expanded into couplets and triplets, and in the royal praise-poems of the nineteenth century they are expanded into stanzas (27).

The main achievement of the Shakan praise poets was the introduction of the stanza, according to Cope. The stanza consists of "statement plus extension, development and conclusion". He gives the following example:

> Uteku lwabafazi bakwa NomGabhi
> Betekula behlez emlovini,
> Beth, uShaka kakubusa kakuba nkosi,
> Kanti unyak' uShaka ezakunethezeka.
>
> Statement: The joke of the women of Nomgabhi,
> Extension: Joking as they sat in a sheltered spot,
> Development: Saying that Shaka would not rule, he would not become chief,
> Conclusion: Whereas it was the year in which Shaka was about to prosper (54).

He argues that:

> The conclusion is the most characteristic feature of the Shakan praise-stanza. It gives a contrary twist to the story, introduced by the conjunction "kanti" [in this instance]... or sometimes the twist consists of a comment.

Various techniques are used to link extension, statement, development and conclusion to each other, the most common being parallelism of one form or another.

The stanza consists of a "single, well-developed praise" with a definite "unity of content". The end of each stanza is marked by what Cope calls a "final cadence", although there may be "non-final cadences" within the stanza (see below). Final cadences are "more exaggerated" than non-final cadences and are followed by a longer pause. He defines a stanza as "a praise constituting a compulsory unit (a unit terminating compulsorily in a final cadence) within the total structure", acknowledging that it is "difficult to determine" which praises are compulsory units. In performance the audience most often recognises the end of a stanza and contributes shouts of approval such as "musho, musho" (literally "say him, say him").

Imagery and Metaphor

On imagery and metaphor Opland and Cope are in agreement. Animal imagery dominates praise poetry, with cattle being the most common animal used. They cite examples where the following animals are used: python, cuckoo, monkey, vulture, Egyptian kite, hartebeest, parrot, honeysucker, elephant, horse, dog, mouse, swallows, buffaloes, lions, monitors, hyenas, owls, raven, hawk, rabbit, wolf, jackal and puff adders. Inanimate objects are also used, such as: river, moon, shield, bush, grass, wall, branch, fortress, ship, pot, letter and bullet. Various stereotypical humans also appear, such as soldiers, drunken men and laughing women.

The metaphors and images used are often qualified to allude to specified qualities, although many have commonly understood

qualities, derived from mythology and folklore. So, for example, Senzangaknona is "the gate post of the kraal"; Shaka is "the axe of Senzangakhona", "the fire of the long dry grass", "the wind of the south" and "a pile of rocks" (39). As mentioned above the stanzaic structure encourages the development and extension of a metaphor or statement, often by means of various forms of parallelism (discussed further below).

Opland argues that animal imagery is less current in contemporary works, in fact that metaphors in general are less frequently used:

> Although my examination of texts for this feature is far from exhaustive, I suspect that metaphor and in particular the animal metaphor is no longer as widespread in izibongo as it once was, that is a feature that is passing from the tradition though by no means obsolete yet. The decline in popularity of the animal metaphor might be ascribed to the fact that wild animals no longer roam freely and hence are less useful as poetic metaphors; or, if the animal imagery derived from totemic beliefs, the imagery might disappear from poetry in a society that no longer supported such beliefs. But these explanations would not account for the apparent decline of the metaphoric eulogy itself. What Daniel Kunene terms a deverbative eulogy, a praise whose 'structural core is a verb', seems to remain popular, imbuing contemporary poetry with an air of greater realism, a more matter-of-fact tone. I suspect that an explanation might well lie in the decreasing currency of the praises that formed the basis of earlier izibongo.

Cope argues that "Zulu praise-poems abound with imagery of great effectiveness". He argues that repetition complements such imagery and its use in some detail.

Repetition

Repetition occurs in a number of different ways. First, whole sentences or phrases may be repeated, either within one poem, or in a number of poems. Opland refers to one category of this type

of repetition as 'formula' and argues that formulae are especially useful during spontaneous performances, when they can be used to give the poet time to think of forthcoming lines. Opland's primary concern here is to contribute to the debate conducted by Walter J. Ong and Albert B. Lord, among others. According to Lord, the oral performer needs formulae but the literate writer does not.

> Formula analysis... is, therefore able to indicate whether any given text is oral or 'literary'. An 'oral' text will yield a predominance of clearly demonstrable formulas, with the bulk of the remainder 'formulaic'. A 'literary' text will show a predominance of non-formulaic expressions, with some formulaic expressions and very few clear formulas.[152]

Lord uses the term 'formulaic' to refer to the technique whereby the performer uses a formula as a basis for constructing phrases with different content but which are similar in form. Opland analyses some izibongo for formulae and concludes that roughly 75 percent of a spontaneous poem consists of phrases used elsewhere.

The concept of a 'formula' is useful to us insofar as it highlights the link between the method of composition and the end product. On the other hand, unless one is researching the specific effect of literacy on poetry, this debate can detract from a thorough analysis of the poetry itself. This is certainly the case with Opland, who consequently fails to conduct any close readings of whole poems from any other perspective. The term 'formula' becomes rather too general when one is dealing with a poetic form that obviously employs more specific rules of

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152. Cited in Opland Xhosa Oral Poetry 155.

composition. Cope's work on the stanzaic structure is more useful, in that it explains the rules behind the composition of a stanza and when and why they are (or are not) used.

The second type of repetition is that employed for poetic effect within the structure of a single poem. Cope comments that, "repetition in itself is monotonous, and so it prefers to appear in disguise". This argument appears to ignore the effective use of repetition in the introductory section of the poem (the "statement of intention and salutation") and in the concluding section (the "exhortation"). He does acknowledge, however, that repetition "sometimes occurs effectively in praise poems just as it is".

Cope focuses on parallelism as the most common form of repetition. He investigates the use of "perfect parallelism"; "parallelism by linking" (initial and final) and "parallelism by simile":

> Perfect parallelism repeats the idea with different words, whereas parallelism by linking advances the idea by means of an identical word or stem or root. The simplest type of parallelism, and the least important poetically, is parallelism by simile (41).

Cope cites various examples of these types of parallelism.

Finally, Cope looks at alliteration (consonant harmony) and assonance (vowel harmony) which are, he says, "well represented in Zulu poetry". He explains how alliteration is inherent in the Nguni system of grammatical agreement.

Rhythm and Intonation

Here we have a problem. Opland comments, halfway through his discussion of formulae, that:

> The meter of Xhosa izibongo awaits definition. It may... be melodically based as David Rycroft has demonstrated some Zulu izibongo to be.... It is too soon to know whether these suggestions will prove relevant to an apprehension of a metrical principle in the performance of Xhosa izibongo (159).

He quotes Rycroft:

> The situation here is not altogether unlike the rendering of Anglican chants, where, in fitting unmetrical texts (like the Psalms and canticles) to metrical music, the device employed is to render only the last few syllables of each line metrically, while the varying number of syllables preceding these are rendered in free rhythm to a single prolonged note known as the 'reciting note'.

Cope is more categorical on the issue of meter:

> Rhyme and meter are not to be found in Zulu poetry. There is a certain regularity of rhythm, however in that each verse has roughly the same number of stresses (40).

In his treatment of the stanza, however, Cope provides some pointers. As mentioned above, he deals with what he calls "final and non-final cadences", which determine whether or not a praise constitutes a stanza.

While izibongo may not contain meter in the classical sense of the word (regular, roughly equal units in the rhythm), it is clear from all accounts that there are definite rhythmic patterns. Like much Western free verse, however, the patterns are not consistent throughout a single poem, alternating to suit the content. It is also obvious that the rhythms of izibongo are more complex than described by Rycroft above.

Opland argues that:

> Izibongo must have been shouted out if, as Kopf asserts, cattle were incited by their izibongo during races.... The modern imbongi in general still performs in a loud voice, since he must be heard by a milling throng.... When the modern imbongi performs before a microphone he does not have to raise his voice and must stand rooted in one spot (250).

Cope makes a similar comment, adding that the imbongi performs "as fast as possible". This, he says, "create[s] an emotional excitement in the audience as well as the praiser himself, whose voice often rises in pitch, volume and speed as he progresses" (29). Both Cope and Opland seem to ignore the possibility that volume, pitch and speed may be a poetic devices firmly under the control of a skilled imbongi. In my experience izibongi adjust their volume, pitch and speed not only in relation to circumstances of their delivery but also to complement what is being said. Certain words are uttered slowly, at a relatively soft volume and at a very low pitch, when that effect is required. Gunner also cites the example of an imbongi who very consciously va. as his speed, volume and tone of delivery.

Cope observes that the imbongi eliminates 'downdrift intonation':

> The effect is a sense of seriousness and occasion, but it is no accompanied by a sense of serenity in the case of the Zulu praise-poems, for they are not recited smoothly and quietly but shouted with great gusto, so that the accompaniment to the sense of seriousness and occasion is emotional uplift and excitement (29).

Cope goes on to say that downdrift intonation is used, with "penultimate vowel lengthening" to signify the end of a stanza, this he terms a "final cadence". He also mentions the use of "the short break or caesura which may mark the middle of a verse, and the vowel lengthening which may mark the initial vowel of a verse":

> The latter can occur only when the verse begins with a praise-name, to which it gives prominence and dramatic effect. The former can occur only in the middle of a verse, which may or may not be a likely place for a grammatical break (30).

It is the cadence with its downdrift intonation which marks the opportunity for the audience to respond.

The above discussion highlights the complex nature of the izibongo. As Gunner and Gwala point out:

> The formal qualities of the izibongo are the product and the expression of working conventions of a genre of oral poetry which has circulated widely for generations among Zulu speakers north and south of the Thukela River. Izibongo have responded to shifting emphases of time and dynamic cultural and social pressures but have still remained a recognisable genre (7).

They do identify a number of qualities that mark izibongo off from ordinary speech: condensed, compact language; cryptic and aphoristic expression; the highly allusive nature of praise names; the tension between economic use of words and expansion (such as semantically redundant repetition); and linking. However, these qualities would not all be present in every poem. Perhaps the only formal quality that can be identified as common to all izibongo is the basic convention of naming in a way that attributes specific qualities to the object of "praise".

An overly formalist approach to defining the izibongo can therefore be problematic. A narrow definition which emphasises the formal qualities of royal izibongo can obscure the more popular variants of the genre. Perhaps a more useful approach is to defines the izibongo primarily in terms of its emphasis on performative qualities. These include, as discussed above, the relatively high, sustained tone and rapid rhythm of delivery, the use of cadences, the use of arm and leg movements and atypical, usually symbolic, dress. Hlatswayo gives such a definition of the

izibongo in accounting for audience responses to worker poetry:

> [Our poetry in the traditional form] was done in the imbongi style. And once the person stood there and paced the stage, raised his voice, lowered his voice, screeched, pounded the air, immediately people recognised it - hey this is poetry let us listen! ("The work of poetry", 2).

Although one cannot ignore more formalistic definitions altogether, the wide variation of these qualities between the "ordinary man's boast" and the chiefly izibongo suggests that the performative elements are at the heart of the izibongo.

The elements identified by Gunner and Gwala can also be identified as of great significance in the performance of izibongo. As they argue, these qualities mark the izibongo off from everyday speech. They are rooted in the oral nature of the genre and allow for the imbongi to tread the fine line between figurative and literal speech discussed in Chapter Two. The audience is thus able to recognise the izibongo as "poetry" and is challenged and stimulated by the allusive, symbolic language and the rhythm introduced by elements such as repetition and linking.

It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to identify the extent to which worker poetry draws on the izibongo through formal analyses of transcribed texts alone. The approach I have taken is to place the broadly defined performative elements at the centre of my analysis, while also seeking out evidence of other stylistic qualities discussed above. Another key indicator I used was the extent to which the audience appeared to recognise the izibongo conventions by employing conventional responses, such as "musho!".

As is discussed in the previous chapters, Qabula is widely acknowledged as the first worker poet to introduce the izibongo style. It is also argued that he has not restricted himself to this style of poetry, drawing as he does on a wide range of performance genres: "traditional", contemporary and experimental. This also applies to poets such as Hlatswayo and Ngubo but less so to Ntanzi. It is nevertheless useful to examine a few of the more frequently performed poems for evidence of the izibongo's influence.

Molly Bill has conducted a tentative textual analysis of Qabula's first poem "Izibongo zikaFosatu".[153] She notes that this is made more difficult by a number of flaws in the transcription and typography of the poems in Black Mamba Rising. Structurally, a number of key elements are drawn from the izibongo. The poem is "framed" by two opening verse lines and five concluding lines "made up of final exhortations and acclamations" (3). The opening lines are clearer in the Zulu than in the English translation:

> Nguye wavela!
> Basho bonke bathi wavela!

Bill points out that, as in the "traditional" izibongo, each stanza is introduced by a praise name or phrase, followed by a number of lines or stanzas which elaborate the name or phrase. Narrative is used extensively in these sections, and dialogue is

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153. M. Bill, "An initial exploration of the emergent nature of Natal worker poetry," lecture notes, U of Witwatersrand, 1991.

also used, though less frequently.[154] This extensive use of narrative leads to a less dense use of allusive and symbolic imagery than in "traditional izibongo". Qabula's imagery, she argues is less metaphorical. Forms of repetition such as linking and parallelism are also relatively absent. There are also fewer "vocative forms" as there are fewer direct eulogies.

A purely textual analysis of the transcribed poem therefore suggests that while Qabula does draw on key elements of the izibongo, he does, in his own words, modify it "to suit the modern audience and the nowadays themes" ("Tribute to Alfred Temba Qabula" 3). Investigating the performances shows a similarly ambiguous relationship, with Qabula on various occasions moving closer to and further away from the izibongo.[155] In the video recording of "Praise Poem to Fosatu" his tone, rhythm and gesture are all typical of the izibongo. His dress, as noted in Chapter Two, is typical only insofar as it is highly symbolic and differentiated from ordinary clothing. Audience response is enthusiastic and contains celebratory elements that are typically used in izibongo performances but which are not strictly tied to the izibongo. Elements such as ululating are common to many other styles and modes within the broader

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154. Bill cites commentators who have pointed out that Cope's analysis tends to under-estimate the significance (and frequency) of narrative sections in of the poems.

155. The impact of writing and literacy on Qabula's performance has already been noted.

performing culture, such as the ukugiya which Gunner and Gwala have argued is closely related to izibongo.

During the same performance, Qabula performed "The Migrants Lament".[156] This is, as noted in the collection, a song and differs substantially from the izibongo. Qabula has always had a particular affinity for song, although this has more frequently been expressed in his contributions to theatrical and choral groups in Natal.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Ntanzi is possibly the closest to the conventional imbongi in performance. For example, in the Mandela Rally version of "Buya Mandela", he uses parallelism and linking frequently. For example,

> Inkunzi ebhonge eRobben Island
> Yabhonga kwazamazama iRobben Island
>
> The bull that roared at Robben Island
> Its roaring shook Robben Island

He relies heavily on the praise name "Inkunzi" (the bull), developing it through a number of stanzas. His imagery is, however, more sparse than in the conventional izibongo in the sense that he has a more restricted repertoire of images and praise names. Audience response to Ntanzi's work is also most characteristic of the izibongo, frequently including the "musho" response discussed before. On one occasion, when he performed in the Transvaal, he brought along a friend who, dressed in skins, attempted to lead the audience by responding at specific points in the performance.

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156. Transcribed and translated in Black Mamba Rising.

Ngubo's poetry, as noted in the previous chapter, does not draw heavily on the izibongo. Praise names are used infrequently and where they are used they are often drawn from Qabula and Hlatswayo's poetry. For example, he has used the images of the mole and the black mamba. In performance, however, he invokes the familiar tone, relying heavily on final cadences even when performing in English.

Hlatswayo varies his poetry even more substantially than Qabula. While in his earlier poetry the influence of the izibongo was clear, his more recent work shows less evidence of the qualities discussed above. Although in his earlier performances he did utilise the performative qualities, he performed infrequently during the period in which my fieldwork took place. This has much to do with the nature of his work as the national co-ordinator of the Cosatu Culture Unit. In his own words :

> To be creative though becomes difficult when you are an office-bearer of a movement. Yes, its very problematic, because as a co-ordinator I have to worry about funds, facilities, resources.[157]

He goes on to complain that helping other people find creative outlets has sapped him of time and energy for his own creative work. He has continued to compose but his poetry has become more literary, obviously written in-between meetings with less of an eye on the performance situation.

> I have play books and play scripts sitting around which I don't have time to work on.

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157. M. Hlatswayo, "The work of poetry," Writers Notebook 1.5 (1991): 3.

The influence of writing and literacy on Hlatswayo has been more far reaching than on Qabula, possibly because Hlatswayo has had less time in which to involve himself in performances.

Malange's poetry has never drawn significantly on izibongo. As is evident in her poems in Black Mamba Rising, her themes are more private and her performance style less exuberant. She has, on occasion, performed with Qabula and others in poetic medleys in which she has performed work which, at least in its performance qualities, more closely resembles the izibongo. In general, though, Malange has tended to avoid the mass rallies for the reasons outlined in Chapter Two.

Apart from the rare occasions where Malange performed with other poets, I did not see women performing in the izibongo style. Most of the performing women were part of the youth groups which utilised Mbuli's style of poetry. Gunner notes that women's izibongo are often performed only among women and this may lead to an assumption that "official" izimbongi should be men. While she does record instances of women performing general izibongo, these cases seem to be the exception rather than the rule. It may also be that the male izibongo is more closely linked to militarism and warfare - and therefore have more in common with the recurrent theme of political conflict. In general though, the predominance of male performers seems to be linked more closely to the broader issue of male domination of public life than to a specific and institutionalised gendering in the sphere of the performing arts. At the workshops I attended women were

encouraged by poets such as Qabula and Malange to compose and perform poetry.

The tendency for poets based in the youth groups to draw on the Mzwakhe style has already been discussed in some detail. At this point it should be noted that many of these poets are working class but have not emerged through the unions. The dividing line between poets such as Ngubo and these youth poets is a fine one but I rarely saw youth poets drawing heavily on the izibongo.

In conclusion, it is useful to return to Gunner and Gwala's point on formal qualities. Their argument that "the formal qualities of the izibongo are the product and the expression of working conventions of a genre of oral poetry" seems particularly appropriate in the discussion of worker poetry. The point is that such conventions are not, as the formalists seem to imply, strict rules which can be used to classify poetry into various genre types. Rather they are "working conventions" that will and do change over time and are easily changed by other influences and innovation.

The worker poets do see themselves as drawing on the izibongo but do not see its conventions as immutable. At times it seems as if they utilise these conventions for purely pragmatic reasons, as Hlatswayo has said:

> People like comrade Qabula... made me realise that it is important to find a form that is acceptable to people in that environment. When we tried this, it caught on, because people could understand that this was poetry (2).

The poets are aware that the audience's intimacy with the izibongo's poetic conventions can enhance their poetry's affective power. Similarly, Hlatswayo, points out how other "traditional forms" have been utilised:

> Once you are oppressed you want to use everything to advance yourself - there's no limit: whether it's an AK, literature or education. The youths in our area have come out with war chants; even these are war chants which have been used over the centuries - the rhythm - just the message has changed.

At other times the poets seem to see their use of the izibongo more as a statement of their own integrity in the face of various forms of oppression. In Hlatswayo's words:

> We all know how the system has continued to oppress and weaken the working class. But we forget that it also does so in subtle ways: it always tells us that our history is of no value; what happened then has no bearing as to what happens now. In this way your humanity, your traditions, are taken out of you. Once that happens, you are vulnerable, you are weak, you can never gather enough emotional power to resist (1).

The formal and performative qualities of the izibongo are at one level simply seen as an intellectual resource. At another level, however, they are seen by the poets as symbolic of their resistance to what they see as a multi-faceted history of oppression.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Worker Poetry as Intellectual Resource

A number of critics have viewed worker poetry as an intellectual resource but in significantly different ways. Bonnin and Ngoasheng, for example, have explored the role of what Ngoasheng calls "core cultural activists" as "organic intellectuals" (in the Gramscian sense of the word).[158] As noted in Chapter One, many critics have treated worker izibongo as "the transformation of a tradition". Qabula himself has referred to his poetry as a "weapon" at the level of ideas, a means of educating fellow workers.

The discussion in this chapter attempts to tackle these issues in a way that may appear strange to some readers. I take as my starting point the concluding point of Chapter Six, which noted that the izibongo, as poetic form, is in itself symbolic and carries meaning. Central to my argument is the notion that the izibongo is not just an empty vessel, that as a distinct cultural form it is symbolically laden, in that it is deeply embedded in ideas of ethnicity. It is therefore problematic to make absolute distinctions between "form" and "content" in the

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158. Ngoasheng "We organise and Educate"; Bonnin "We Went To Arm Ourselves".

discussion of the meaning of worker poetry. In what follows, I therefore address three issues which may initially appear unrelated. I begin by examining some of the central ideas that were being transmitted in and through the izibongo. I proceed to discuss the related question of the extent to which the poets' "praising" incorporates a critical dimension.

Finally, in a less obviously related exercise, I discuss the media via which worker poetry has reached its audience. Attempts to record (and therefore reproduce) the poetry have entailed serious consequences for both the "form" and the "content" of the poetry. If formal and stylistic qualities can be seen as carrying and influencing meaning, the "medium" via which the poetry reaches its audience becomes an essential component of the discussion of the dialogue between performer and audience. For example, print takes a performance and transforms it into a set of typographic symbols arranged on a page according to certain conventions. Nearly all the elements I identified in the preceding chapters (especially Chapter Two) as being crucial to the audience's response evaporate in the wake of this process. In fact the audience evaporates and a new, imagined, audience is created. The text, by virtue of the way in which published texts are sold, dissipates into a readership that is almost impossible to trace. This, one might say, is not a new argument. In the light of an audience-centered analysis, however, the significance of these transformations takes on new meaning.

In Chapter Four I noted that studies of ethnicity among workers in Natal tend to show the widespread existence of "ethnic moments

of identity" within the multiple layers of identity. Kelwyn Sole, discussing the multi-faceted symbolism of the poetry, has observed how this is evident in the poetry:

> The poems in Black Mamba Rising exhibit clearly the way in which layers of class, ethnic, religious, nationalist and sexual identities are enmeshed in the minds of both these poets and the wider audience of black workers ("New Words Rising" 110).

Sole is concerned about "whether or not (and to what extent) one's class consciousness is mixed with and transforms the other modes of identity present". He expresses concern that the poets are "placing too much faith in the transformative power of traditional symbols alone" (111). Although Sole is obviously mindful of the poetic conventions employed by the poets, his focus is primarily on content; he speaks mainly of "symbols". The "layers of identity" he correctly identifies are represented, though, not only in what the poets say but also in how they say it.

That the izibongo has been appropriated in the service of many different causes does not, as mentioned above, make it a transparent or neutral medium. While it may be difficult to separate the Zulu izibongo from the broader genre of Southern African praise poetry, in Natal its use has always been closely linked to ideas of "Zulu-ness". Its ability to reinvent the past - to transfer and transform historical knowledge - has been recognised and exploited by many Zulu nationalists. As Gunner and Gwala have shown, the recording, publication, canonisation and teaching of the izibongo have all been wrapped up in Zulu nationalism of one sort or another (Mushol 34). With regard to

the teaching of izibongo as published in school text books, they argue that:

> The emphasis on the royal praises... seems to have become part of the attempt to create a sense of a national Zulu literature and therefore a distinctively Zulu high culture (35).

They point out that this link with authority has unfortunately "tended to hide [the izibongo's] broader social base" (9). They do not, however, show that the broader genre has less significant links with ideas of Zuluness.

It is precisely the close associations that have been created between the izibongo and Zulu nationalism that have led a number of youth to prefer the reggae-based poetry popularised by Mzwakhe Mbuli. However, youth I spoke to (and whose responses I observed at live performances) did not reject the izibongo outright. They "preferred" the Mzwakhe-style but they still appreciated the izibongo and are certainly still familiar with its basic conventions. One youth remarked to me, talking about Ntanzi (who was performing in skins), that although he preferred Mbuli's poetry to Madlinyoka's, it was good "that people like him were involved in the struggle".[159]

In a statement prepared for a Fosatu Education Workshop in 1985 (also cited in Chapter Five), the DWCL said:

> We also discovered that we had to overcome our hatreds of each other: amakholwa against traditionalist; Christian of the official churches against the Zionist; Moslem against Hindu; Pondo against Zulu; Zulu royalist against Zibhebhu's offspring; migrant against urban; Zulu against Indian; black

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159. This was not in a formal interview situation.

> against... oh, and this is difficult, very difficult in South Africa - black against white (Sitas Black Mamba Rising 58).

They argued that differences should not prevent their uniting against their "common oppression as workers":

> Our fate as workers and our needs as human beings bound us together, but language, cultural chauvinism and divisions tore us apart. We discovered that it is only through our unity that our strength and dignity could be enlarged.

These statements were, not surprisingly, in line with union (and ANC) policy at the time. They did not challenge the existence of such divisions but argued that their cultural interventions should serve to overcome, not underpin, them. Their view of ethnicity is thus substantially different to, and counterpoised against, that of Inkatha or the Nationalist Party, which until recently explicitly claimed to represent specific ethnic groups.[160]

As has been noted, however, a number of the poets have ambiguous attitudes towards "tradition". Qabula, for example, argues that this is at least partly because of the historical role chiefs have played:

> In most instances in the past the kings and rulers proved themselves most willing to be co-opted by the colonial rulers at the expense of their subjects. ("Tribute: Alfred Qabula" 3).

He has, however, also argued to me that chiefs should play an active role in a future system of government. Ngubo, in a

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160. Both of these parties also argued for political representation along ethnic lines. Recent events have seen changes in these arguments in favour of federalism which still has a strong ethnic flavour.

discussion with me, after initially insisting that he was "civilized" and did not indulge in traditional rituals, conceded the importance of certain rituals in ensuring a healthy relationship with his ancestors. As mentioned above, he also claimed to have muti effectively protecting someone from an enemy's bullets. In fact, as far as I could see respect for ancestors was universal among the poets I spoke to.

As has already been discussed, in drawing on the izibongo and referring to themselves as izimbongi (praise poets), the poets have made it clear that they saw their performances as part of a broader task of keeping "traditional forms" alive in the face of, what they perceived as, the imposition of western cultural forms.

Qabula has argued that "at school we did poetry but totally useless stuff" ("A Life Cruel" 3). He claims to have adopted the style of the izibongo "to a certain extent" but that it "had to be modified to suit the modern audience and the nowadays themes". Ngubo's comment that western poetry was "written about simple things" and therefore did not make sense is cited in Chapter Five. One of his poems begins with a comment on this:

> From childhood to manhood
> I didn't obtain time
> To focus at the nature
> And the beauty of the world,
> Created by the Almighty.[161]

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161. G. Ngubo, "Parliament in My Head," Writers Notebook 1.3&4 (1990): 26.

Qabula said that prior to his use of the izibongo in praise of Fosatu, many people associated the izibongo with chiefs and Inkatha. Hlatswayo remembers the debates:

> When we started reciting poetry using traditional forms of oral poetry (which was in the past linked to praising chiefs, that is the ruling classes of that day), there was a storm because people felt we were turning the clock back, that this was not part of progressive culture. They could not understand that we were joining the past to the present and the future (1).

Qabula referred to his poetry as one of many "weapons":

> A traditional fighter would carry a knobstick, together with a spear, a bayonet and a shield but he would use one item at a time. He would first use a stick but if the stick was not doing a good job he would turn to his knobstick and the rest of his weapons. So all forms of media are important; music and newspapers are also important but poetry is the most effective ("A Life Cruel" 5).

Ambiguous titudes to ethnic identities are also apparent in the poems. There is much evidence of the poets' awareness of their ancestors. In "Izibongo zikaFosatu" (Praise poem to Fosatu), Qabula speaks of Fosatu as an answer to prayer (to the "traditional" supreme being, Mvelingqangi, and the ancestors).

> Prayed we did to our Mvelingqangi
> And the ancestors have answered us,
> And sent us Fosatu... (Black Mamba Rising 11).

He also suggests his ancestors spoke to him through his dreams.

> I dreamed I am a Sangoma
> You have come to me so that I can tell all about you
> I have thrown my bones and called on my abalozi.
> My bones and my abalozi are telling me this...

For Qabula, Africa consists of many "nations" and "populations" (17). Similarly, Hlatswayo calls on the "ancestors of Africa" to rejoice at the workers' struggle in "The Black Mamba Rises" (25). In "Workers' Lamentation for Ancient Africa", Hlatswayo calls on

his audience to recall "the harvest ceremonies" and "the marriage ceremonies" (30).

This apparent contradiction (between the rejection of ethnic divisions and a strong commitment to ideas and forms that are an integral component of Zulu ethnicity) can only partly be explained by the fact that indigenous ideas and practices commonly associated with ethnicity constitute powerful intellectual resources. Many people are reluctant to sacrifice these entirely on the altar of modernity and what is dubiously (but commonly) referred to as civilization. As Ngubo said to me, one should not throw away things that still work.

Also woven into the poems are Christian symbols and references to Christian practices such as Qabula's "praying". Qabula's sung poem "Migrant's Lament" addresses "Thixo" (Lord) and Hlatswayo refers to the "New Jerusalem" and "the workers of heaven". Malange's "Today" appropriates the notion of heroic and still present ancestors (in her words "Everyone who has died / Is here today") and combines it with messianic imagery:

> Neil Aggett
> Who died for the liberation of the workers
> Is here today
> Ephraim Shabalala
> Who died
> The systems victim
> Is here today
> Andries Raditsela
> Who died
> For us all
> Is here today,
> With us
> Sharing,
> This day with us (56).

"Today" becomes a judgement day, as "those who died as oppressors are here". Malange calls on them to leave, "Away oppressor / Away

traitor". In "Death", Qabula also evokes the idea of a judgement day,

> Woe unto you
> On that day
> The fires you stoke for others
> Shall haunt you
> The pain and suffering you fully inflicted
> On nature
> On nations
> Will descend on you. (21)

In some instances the narrator is a victim, as in "Migrants Lament", "Africa" and "Death". The emphasis is on retribution, where the "orphans/ those widowed,/ will turn out to be your judges".

While these lines give the impression of the poets relying on Christian and indigenous ideas of divine or ancestral retribution, a more active and direct militarism also pervades their own poems. This is not surprising, given the intense and often violent nature of political contests in Durban, and the harsh reality of workers' lives. As is to be expected, this is far less pronounced in the earlier poetry than in the poetry of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In "Izibongo zikaFosatu", Qabula portrays Fosatu as a "chicken with wide wings" but also as a roaring lion (8). Mawu is a ferocious boxer. Workers, Fosatu's "sons and daughters", are "militant" and the narrator "wonders what muti they use".

In an example of Qabula's later poetry, "Sthandwa", the narrator, a "singer" (symbolising a guerrilla), serenades his lover with stories of how, when he "played his guitar", oppressive regimes fell. In Ntanzi's 1990 version of "Buya Mandela" (Return Mandela), Mandela is a "bull with sharpened

horns" who reduces his opponents to shivering, confused men with diarrhoea.

Gunner and Gwala have noted that izibongo are often associated with militarism but that this can be misleading.

> The emphasis on war and an accompanying macho virility, which are still prominent features of men's izibongo, may well have been forced to the fore during the streamlining and building up of the regimental war machine under Shaka. This process could have "driven underground" the broader biographical and autobiographical thrusts of the izibongo (7).

Similarly, the current militarisation of Natal society is evident in (and arguably authorised by) contemporary worker poetry. What this has done to the "broader base" of praising would be a worthwhile area for further research.

The fact that the term "praise poetry" is often a misleading translation for the word "izibongo" has often been noted. Gunner and Gwala, for example, point out that:

> What izibongo are primarily concerned with is naming, identifying and therefore giving substance to the named person or object (2).

While worker poets do generally refrain from contentious issues, these are often included by carefully phrasing problems to stress the importance of overcoming differences. In "Izibongo zikaFosatu", Qabula refers to political leaders that have betrayed their constituencies and gently poses the question as to whether Fosatu will do the same.

> FOSATU, we have chosen you to lead us
> Time and time again we have been electing leaders,
> Electing people with whom we were born and
> With whom we grew up.
> People who knew all our sufferings,
> Together with whom we were enslaved.

We had elected them because we believed they were
A lamp to brighten our way to freedom

But to our dismay,
After we had appointed them, we placed them on the
Top of the mountain
And they turned against us (10).

As has been noted above, both the poets and their audiences are keenly aware of their role in "building unity". This emphasis on unity also operates through the 'insider-outsider' phenomenon, with its emphasis on criticism of opponents and praise of leaders being rewarded by the audience. Similarly, Gunner and Gwala claim that one of the ways izibongo function to validate power is through inclusion and exclusion (7). They note that the izibongo in their collection are often anchored in a "matrix of combat and conflict", which is also a characteristic of worker poetry (24).

Thus Madlinyoka Ntanzi speaks of "sellouts" trembling and filling the streets with diarrhoea:

Even the intestines of young men boiled
I saw them with diarrhoea filling the street when Madiba entered
You will see him![162].

Given the emphasis on solidarity and unity, the apparent absence of criticism of the poetry or, in the poetry, the limited criticism of leadership figures during the rallies is therefore not surprising. The very nature of the mass rally does not encourage the voicing of criticism "from the floor". The excitement generated by this sense of unity also tends to overwhelm expressions of criticism which may be there (because

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162. Personal collection.

criticism of the poets or their ideas is often expressed by silence or by 'polite applause', it is also difficult to measure).

Within any expression of unity, however, must always be sought the disunity, the sources of potential schism and rupture. At the Mandela rally, for example, such tensions were obvious to 'insiders'. In the process of organising the rally different tendencies within the ANC vied to set the agenda and define the content of the rally. A certain group of activists wrote Mandela's speech, in which there was a radical call for all ANC activists to "throw their guns into the sea". This emphasis led to considerable discontent - an audible buzz arose in the audience and a small group of youth walked out. This criticism was, however, followed by a more vocal wave of criticism which surfaced after the event, through organisational structures. Almost all the ANC members I spoke to afterwards criticised Mandela (and those who wrote his speech), saying his call was tantamount to calling for mass suicide as ANC members would lose their capacity to defend themselves. Ntanzi's criticism of the political opposition, in the same rally, stood in stark opposition to the ideas Mandela later put forward in his speech. Ntanzi's severe criticism of Buthelezi and Inkatha - ironically in his praise poem to Mandela - received louder applause than Mandela's own speech. After the rally I overheard some of the organisers suggesting that he should not have been so militant and that his poetry should conform more to the "peace effort". I did not hear this being suggested to him directly but it does



illustrate a tension between the poet's attempt to express himself and the leadership's desire to impose theis own ideas. It also shows the potential for intervention and perhaps even censorship.

What is clear, however, is that the worker poets do, as Karin Barber shows is the case with Yoruba oriki (praise poems), "reveal connections and hidden faces in society that would not otherwise be accessible" (I Could Speak Until Tomorrow 2).

Gunner and Gwala suggest that one of the ways in which 'royal' izibongo achieve their power is through the distance created between them and more popular izibongo.

> The praises of royalty have been used as means of social control and those in positions of power have distanced their praises from those of their subordinates by exploiting status and hierarchy and linking this to occasion of performance (34).

Taking what appears to be a contrary view, Leroy Vail and Landeg White utilise the notion of 'poetic license', which they say is a key component of the aesthetic popularly associated with praise poetry. One of the qualifications they suggest is necessary when considering the notion of 'poetic license' is that "historically, praise poets have not always acted as the autonomous spokesmen of the people" (55), stressing historical shifts in the role and nature of praise poetry.

They point to a tension, between the use of izibongo as a means of social control and as means of expressing criticism, that parallels the tension between unity and criticism in worker poetry. Vail and White partly explain this with reference to Max Gluckman's distinction between rebellion and revolution:

> African societies contained within themselves a process of constant rebellion but not revolution. (46)

This distinction is pertinent in the case of worker poetry. Although the worker poets are not praising people who wield state power, the subjects of their attention are powerful within their context. The poetic license they exercise is not often directed against the leaders of their movement but mostly against the state and its allies. That the leaders of the movement should grant the poets the license to criticise their opponents is not surprising, especially when this criticism is combined with tireless praise of themselves. The example cited above, while exhibiting the potential tension, is atypical. A more typical example would be Qabula, who has directed himself to the organisations and their leaders critically, but more in a tone of 'comradely advice' than one of antagonistic criticism.

Vail and White are also careful to point out that it is not the performer who is licensed but the performance (outside of the performance event, the individual poets do not carry greater "license" than ordinary people). They do tend, however, to focus on the granting of the license by those in power. Similarly Gunner and Gwala's argument refers to the "exploitation of status and hierarchy" by those in power. What needs to be asserted is that there is also what could be termed an "assumption of license" by the performers themselves, which is reinforced by the audience. Whether the performance is granted this poetic license or is used as means of social control is not simply dictated by those in power but also involves the participation of performers and audience. In addition to the 'license' being embedded in the

event itself, it is therefore also necessarily embedded within interpretive communities that implicitly and indirectly negotiate the terms of that license. While such negotiations may involve a degree of coercion or persuasion from above, without the consent of both parties the dialogue between audience and performer will be broken down, rendering the poetry ineffectual as a means of dialogue and, ultimately, as a means of exercising control. The negotiation is therefore more likely to take the form of a dynamic tension between contradictory tendencies, towards closure and away from it. As discussed previously, the terrain of interpretation is a constant site of struggle and its boundaries are never fixed indefinitely. The unity described above is thus a dialectical one, the terms of which are constantly under challenge, negotiation and reinvention.

The example of Ntanzi's performance at the Mandela rally also illustrates how it is impossible to comprehend the intensity of feeling at a mass rally without acknowledging the effect of the violence in Natal on members of the audience. The poetry is performed in an atmosphere dominated by pain, anger, revenge and sometimes hope; it is simultaneously held together and pulled apart by strongly felt political convictions and identities.

It is partly because of this fact that the distinction between "worker poetry" and "popular poetry" has become extremely blurred. If the poetry is to be classified, more meaningful distinctions can be made at the level of performance style and ideological positioning than can be found in the class origins of the individual poets. The worker poets are, generally speaking,

close to the grassroots membership and tend, in Natal, to be among the more militant activists. The poets are not always as conciliatory as the leadership might like them to be.[163]

There are other distinctions that may become more pertinent in the future. Malange told me that (in 1992) workers and youth in some areas have begun to debate whether culture should be used to unite the different sides in the war.[164] It is far from clear that this is a widely held conviction, but were it to be widely adopted by the poets, it could present the political leadership with a reason to reaffirm their commitment to providing them with space on their platforms. It would also present a challenge to the poets to compose poems which focus less on criticism of 'the enemy' and more on reconciling people who have been dragged through one of the most violent periods in South Africa's recent past. Should such shifts in strategy cause more serious fragmentation of different factions in the ANC and Cosatu, it could also highlight the fragile nature of the interpretive

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163. In general, I would argue that worker poets are part of a militant mass culture that, in recent months, has been encouraged less than in the past. The politics of negotiation have had the effect of de-emphasising mass mobilisation. The Cosatu Cultural Unit was, in late 1991, separated from Cosatu to form the South African Workers' Culture Unit (Sawcu) which is struggling to set up independent structures nationally. Its attempts to be broader-based than Cosatu do not yet seem to have borne fruit. This may be part of a sophisticated strategy to erect a 'civil society' but it could also symbolise waning enthusiasm among union leadership for worker culture.

164. She cites, for example, the Alusaf non-sectarian cultural rights campaign and a gathering of school children "from both sides" in Northern Natal.

community, consequently bearing serious implications for the performance and reception of worker poetry.

As discussed above, insofar as worker poetry serves to exhibit and either reinforce or intervene in the layered identities of the poets and their audiences, it does so through both "form" and "content". This raises, however, the important question of "media". If, as has frequently been noted, oral (or performance) poetry suffers when transformed through transcription, translation and typesetting, does it lose those very (formal, performative and contextual) qualities which enable its reception and its value as an intellectual resource? By extension, what are the inadequacies (and potential) of audio and video recordings as recording and publication media? We can also ask what roles different means of publishing and distributing poetry have played in the formation and consolidation of the interpretative community.

It is tempting to argue that the printed texts are insignificant because few people read worker poetry (see Chapter Two) and because so much is lost in transcription and translation. There are, however, many indications that the printed texts have indeed played an important role in the "life" of the poetry - if not in the interpretive community. Similarly, while video is able to reproduce more of the performance than any other recording medium, it is expensive and the most significant means of production and distribution are, controlled by an antipathetic government. Also, while many video recordings of the

poetry exist, hardly any are of broadcast quality and few have been widely viewed.

Before going on to look at the various media, there are a couple of general points that need to be made about those facets of oral performances that cannot be effectively recorded or reproduced in any medium.

Any introductory course on the philosophy of art (and literature) raises the question of the ontological status of the work of art. Implicit in much of what has been said already is the idea that, in the case of worker poetry, the performance itself should be regarded as the work of art. The performance is not only the textures, shapes and sounds of the poets' words but also the symbolisms, significances and aesthetics brought to bear on their works by the audience. In addition to this, as Bauman and Briggs have argued:

> A given performance is tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it (past performances, readings of texts, negotiations, rehearsals, gossip, reports, critiques, challenges, subsequent performances, and the like). An adequate analysis of a single performance thus requires sensitive ethnographic study of how its forms and meaning index a broad range of discourse types, some of which are not framed as performance (60).

Similarly, in Chapter Two Hans Robert Jauss was cited as arguing that aesthetic judgments are also rooted in particular moments of history:

> The new becomes an historical category when the diachronic analysis of literature is pushed further to ask which historical moments are really the ones that first make new that which is new in a literary phenomenon (35).

As argued in Chapter Three, the assumption is that audience responses are both historically specific (rooted in time) and

geographically specific (rooted in space). For Stanley Fish, as I have already argued, they are also rooted in specific interpretive communities and particular situations. The fullest appreciation of a performance is therefore enabled by the recipient both witnessing and being a part of the actual event. This entails more than physically attending the event. If one is not "inside" the interpretive community, that is familiar with the common interpretive strategies which constitute it as such, it will not be possible to undergo the same experience.

While it may seem to be labouring the point to argue that both context and audience response (for example) are part of the works under discussion, there is a no doubt that separation from these destroys important facets of the poems. In debating ways to record worker poetry (in CWLP), it was a commonly held view that - at very least - the audience also has to be audible and visible wherever possible. Ideally, one audio channel would be taken off the public address system (or microphones were positioned so that the entire stage was 'live') and another microphone would be placed in (or pointing towards) the audience. The people operating television cameras were requested to film the audience as often as possible (here the ideal was to dedicate one camera to filming the audience).[165] In transcribing the performance, it

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165. That even the best planned strategies for recording performances can backfire, is evident in my discussion in Chapter Two of the dampening effect of a camera facing the audience is smaller venues.

was requested that the audience's (often very particular) responses should be noted.

As I became aware during my research, while it is difficult enough to include the responses of the audience in a recording, it is quite impossible to record all the complex (and frequently contradictory) elements that constitute the work. A possible counter argument is that a recording of a work need not contain those elements, that the problem only exists if one confuses the recording with the work itself. Identifying and recording these constitutive elements, according to this argument, does not have to be done within the processed work itself, but can be achieved through complementary forms, such as introductions, footnotes, reviews and extended commentaries such as this thesis. While this is obviously the most pragmatic approach, reading about these elements is entirely different to experiencing them and therefore does not necessarily help the 'outsider' to respond to the work of art in the same way as the audience would.

Another way in which a "decontextualised" poem may be more fully appreciated is if the recipient brings with him/her a host of imaginative resources which are used to recreate the original performance imaginatively. It could be argued that this task (of "completing" the text) is an important component of any poetry; that the pleasure of poetry lies exactly in the reader or the listener being able to complete the puzzle, decode the metaphor, recognise the rhythm. To a certain extent the pleasure of poetry does lie in the challenge (and affirmation) of recognition, of making sense of apparent disjuncture. This need not only be

argued at formal and performative levels but also at the level of ideas and identities. If the recipient has these imaginative resources then the experience can be rendered more complete but if they do not, it could be argued that virtually nothing will ever make it so. Such an argument suggests that no medium is inherently effective or defective.

While this position has its merits, in its crude form it negates the fact that there are better and worse ways of recording performance poetry, and that there are limits to what the imagination can fill in. For example, it cannot be disputed that, while much does depend on the specific recording techniques used, video has the ability to record more facets of the performance event than transcription onto paper.

The most obvious resources the recipient must provide (in order for the work to be fully appreciated) are the deep cultural meanings and symbols which must be recognised in the poem. These include metaphors, idioms and historical allusions, as well as poetic conventions and the kinds of symbolism discussed above. Although these are embedded in the poetic form and carried in the language, they are best seen as 'nesting' in interpretive communities. Someone who knows the Zulu language superficially will not necessarily recognise or be able to interpret certain symbols.

There are also the losses caused by the "mortality" of both the event and its socio-political context - these elements by definition cannot be recorded and have to be reconstructed. Significant here are the political contexts described in previous

chapters; the additive effect of previous performances (on the day and in previous events) and the thrill of seeing popular cultural forms transformed for new purposes. Related to this are the effects on a recipient of the responses of other members of the audience and the additive effect of previous performances on the day and in previous events.

Bauman and Briggs approach the question from an interesting angle. Turning the debate on its head, they ask what enables the performance to be contextualised:

> What factors loosen the ties between performed discourse and its context? (73).

They argue that the nature of performance itself makes it possible for the text to be decontextualised.

> A text, then, from this vantage point, is discourse rendered decontextualizable. Entextualization may well incorporate aspects of context, such that the resultant text carries elements of its history of use within it...
>
> Reflexive capacity is manifested most directly in the metalingual and poetic functions. The metalingual (or metadiscursive) function objectifies discourse by making discourse its own topic; the poetic function manipulates the formal features [of] the discourse to call attention to the formal structures by which the discourse is organised...
>
> By its very nature, then, performance potentiates decontextualization.

"Recontextualisation", according to them, is the process whereby the "decontextualised" text is appropriated and "recentered"; that is imbued with a newly constructed context.

> We must now determine what the recontextualized text brings with it from its earlier context and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered.

This necessarily brings into play questions of power.

> To decontextualize and recontextualize a text is thus an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise on such control the issue of social power arises...

They outline the different facets of such power: access, legitimacy, competence and values which "organize the relative status of texts and their uses into a hierarchy of preference".

> None of these factors is a social or cultural given, for each may be subject to negotiation as part of the process.

This approach enables us to expand the previous discussion on the role of the performances in the establishment and consolidation of an interpretive community beyond the performance itself; to encompass subsequent productions of the poems. The discussion of medium therefore goes beyond the question of aesthetic losses to include the issue of the power wielded by "third parties" in control of those productions.

As noted before, many commentators have discussed the losses incurred in translation. The present discussion will avoid repeating what has been adequately covered elsewhere. It must also be noted that losses are suffered even when the poem is printed in Zulu. In the Zulu edition of Black Mamba Rising (of which few copies have been sold) the poetry is also crippled, reinforcing the agument that it is transcription that results in the most serious losses.[166] Among the more obvious of these are: the dramatic elements, the rhythms of the performance, the tone of voice and the performer's visible relationship with the audience.

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166. Although no hard evidence exists, members of the CWLP argued that serious typographical errors contributed substantially to the poor sales of the Zulu edition.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that print has played an important part in the emergence and recognition of worker poetry. It is the cheapest and easiest form of publication (other than the live performance) and no doubt has made the poetry available to those workers who do read the union newspapers and cultural journals where the poetry has also been published. It is also utilised in various ways by the poets themselves, even if they don't read it during a performance.[167]

As mentioned above, the written text also has the potential for fairly substantial "re-entextualisation". Black Mamba Rising, for example, has basic information about the political context of the poems, details of where and when the performances took place are noted and the text is available in two languages. While there is much information left out of the text, this is due to the specific details of its production and not due to any inherent quality of printed text. So, for example, the book could have included more photographs of the events and more detailed explanations of context.

Gunner and Gwala, in an illuminating discussion of the use of text to 'canonise' the izibongo and create a 'great tradition' of 'Zulu national literature', suggest that this process has both obscured the popular forms of the izibongo and co-opted the izibongo into the achieving the aims of what Sitas called 'authoritarian populism'. Even the 'Mass Democratic Movement'

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167. See Chapter Five for a discussion of this.

collections such as Black Mamba Rising and Izinsingizi (a more recent col. ction) suffer from similar problems:

> These izibongo are seen as being part of a wider performance culture with a base that is both rural and urban and one that is not specifically and tightly Zulu but rather cross-ethnic It too, though, does not make clear the links of these izibongo with the wider performing tradition of ordinary men's and women's praises. (36)

These points highlights the question of power referred to earlier. The texts have the ability to represent and or misrepresent, in ways that fit into different political and aesthetic agenda, the performance poetry.

There is a wide range of people, both inside and outside of the immediate interpretive community, who utilise and give value to the printed text. These include academics, literary critics and organisational leadership - people who wield certain forms of power and can mobilise or withhold resources.[168] The written text can - as in the case of Black Mamba Rising's winning of the Norwegian Literature Award - prompt international recognition, which in turn brings both short term financial gain and improves prospects for medium term funding of cultural organisations. Such funding has had a significant effect on the availability of the works, for example it has resulted in audio and video recordings being made available for publication.[169]

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168. See Chapter Five for a discusion of the significance of official authorisation.

169. This is not necessarily of benefit to the individual poets.

We can also recall Qabula's belief that the text is important in recording and reproducing traditions that he fears may otherwise be lost; and in further legitimising and popularising the poetry.[170]

One can therefore conclude that the publication and distribution of worker poetry in written form has indeed been significant. Although this significance is limited to specific categories of readers, mostly outside of the immediate interpretive community, the printed text has nevertheless been central to the poetry's emergence.

During the course of my research, I was struck by the number of people who said they had heard the poetry of Mbuli. Usually they had heard it in on an audio cassette belonging to themselves or a friend. In the late 1980s, Mbuli was promoted far more actively by various political organisations than any other poet. However this was more marked in the Transvaal than in Natal. It would appear that his widespread exposure and popularity has much to do with the formal and informal (official and through pirating) distribution of the audio cassette.

Audio tape has the advantages of retaining some of the performative/dramatic elements; rhythms and intonations; and the specific timbre and 'personality' of the performer. On the other hand it does not record the visual dimension of the performance.

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170. Gunner has discussed this issue in some detail. See: "Orality and Literacy".

Apart from the obvious spectacle of the event, with its banners, T-shirts, posters, the huge crowd and the imposing stage; the listener also knows that he is not being addressed directly. As watching a pre-recorded sports event is not the same as being at the event because the result has been already determined, the knowledge that the event is gone impairs one's appreciation of the poem.

The essential difference between print and audio recordings is that the listener is at least given a fairly accurate reproduction of the sound of the performance. The imagination still has to be used for the listener to complete the performance context but to a lesser extent than in the case of print.

Publishing on audio cassette is clearly the most practical and popular medium at present. My personal experience of selling books and tapes at mass rallies suggests that tapes outsell books by a factor of roughly four or five (even though tapes are much more expensive). Their higher perceived value must be a function of the more effective reproduction of the event. Surprisingly, publishing tapes is not much more expensive than printing, and production runs can repeated more easily. The technology used is slightly more sophisticated but print publishing is also increasingly dependent on hi-tech photographic, computer and printing equipment. As can be seen in the CWLP survey, many people have tape recorders which have an added advantage in that someone can listen to them while being engaged in other activities - a distinct advantage for someone with severely limited leisure time. It must also be remembered that it is

increasingly cheap and easy to pirate audio cassettes, which damages sales but improves exposure.

The audio cassette is, of course, similar to radio, which, given the current political economy of broadcasting, has not been utilised for the distribution of worker poetry. There are moves afoot to change this situation and it will be interesting to observe the politics (in the broader sense) of this medium of reproduction.

As it stands there is no doubt that certain styles and messages have been privileged by the producers of audio cassettes. Shifty Records in Johannesburg has used their resources to record and distribute Mbuli but have failed to do the same for the worker izimbongi. The CWLP project has, on the other hand, tended to privilege izibongo-based poetry, although it has published the work of some of the youth poets. These biases would appear to be a result of a complex of factors, including the practical question of (regional) access but also centrally involving the value systems of those in control of the process.

The televisual medium has the massive advantage of reproducing both the visual and the aural effects of the performance. Even here, however, the visual impact of a figure on a small screen cannot be seriously be compared to that of the live figure on a massive stage, surrounded by colourful banners. The member of the live audience can also look around him/her at the massive crowd and be inspired by its sheer visual size. The televisual image is two dimensional and the viewer cannot see the

scale of the stage, nor have a sense of his/her own physical and symbolic location in the crowd.

The performance, in the live event, is preceded by speeches, sloganeering and probably a lengthy bus ride that usually entails getting up early in the morning, moving to a central collection point, singing and dancing on the bus and shouting out of the windows at symbols of authority. The viewer is forced to watch what the camera operator and the editor chose to select, whereas in the live performance the audience members can look in any direction they choose.

Similarly the sound reproduction leaves much to be desired. It is usually significantly softer and, like the visual image, comes at the viewer from only one direction. In the live performance the sound surrounds one, bouncing off the sides of the stadium, echoing and filling one's eardrums. The bass sounds often literally shake one's insides and the treble can hurt one's ears.

According to the CWLP survey 25.4 percent of their respondents own a colour television set and 20.1 percent own a black and white set - which makes for a total of 45.5 percent (similar to attendance at the rallies). Although the survey also points to low usage of these sets (26.6 percent watch for less than one hour per day), the potential is clearly there for television to be a far more significant medium than it was at the time of the survey. However, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has historically discriminated against oppositional culture. This may change in the near future and,

like radio, television could be the one of the most significant media for the "publication" of worker poetry in the future. At the time of my research, however, while cultural activists had relatively easy access to video cameras this did not apply to editing or broadcasting equipment. Those videos that were recorded largely remained in the offices, catalogued and stored on shelves, waiting for some future date when this source material could be edited and broadcast.

One of the more significant recordings is the Video News Service's documentary video on worker culture, Compelling Freedom. This illustrates the wide range of performance styles (from oral to written) and includes footage of the worker poets talking about their craft; performing at mass rallies. Interviews were conducted with Hlatswayo, then National Co-ordinator of the Cosatu Culture Unit and Frank Meintjies, then Publicity Officer for Cosatu, about the broader significance of worker culture. It is unlikely that this has been widely viewed, however, and the medium remains largely unexplored for its obvious potential as a means of reproducing and disseminating worker poetry.

A point that has often been missed is the extent to which the worker poets of the late 1980's rode to fame on a tidal wave, not only of mass mobilisation, buy also of foreign funding. It was an opportunity which is unlikely to be repeated for some time. In the 1980s the mass meetings, the books, the tapes, the workshops, in fact practically all of the activities discussed in this study, were funded by foreign organisations. In the 1990s

cultural organisations are trying to face up to the reality of donor fatigue and the different mode of politics forced by negotiations.

While these organisations were often weak on the technological front (relative to the state and business) they were even weaker at effective sales and distribution. While the poets received 'saturation coverage' at the mass rallies, they were unable to publish their material widely enough to create a truly national audience. Books were produced but they were hardly ever distributed effectively. Tapes were produced but they did not ever come close to rivaling the big bands or even the recordings of local maskanda musicians. The momentum of struggle poetry was almost entirely dictated by the pace of political mobilisation.

One possible exception to this is Mbuli who, through the successful marketing mentioned earlier, established an early advantage over his contemporaries (and competitors, though few would have conceded this at the time). The target market of his works, the urban youth, were reached effectively and bought his poetry avidly. It was therefore not surprising to discover youth in Durban modelling himself on him - to the point where some of them were frequently referred to by older poets as "the Mzwakhe clones".

Popular poetry is unlikely to ever be accorded the same saturation coverage again. Even though a change of government could provide greater access to state media (which could in turn lead to greater commercial possibilities), the forms that the

mass media are likely to take will probably not be as friendly to oral poetic performances as the mass rallies of the 1980s. Thus, even though cultural workers could try to emulate the multi-media effect described above, it is unlikely that they will have the same impact. The reasons for this relate not only to the inherent qualities of the mass media but also, and perhaps more importantly, to the gradual dispersal and fracturing of the interpretive community which was so united in its opposition to apartheid. Having hundreds of thousands (or even millions) viewing poetry on the national television network will not be the same as attending the rallies.

On the other hand, we can expect to see, as evidenced in the CWLP's current emphasis, cultural activity going back to its 'roots' - to the resilient popular forms that preceded organised 'struggle culture', such as makwaya, maskanda and so on.

In 1989 I attended a seminar in Zimbabwe on Culture and the Labour Movement. The Zimbabwe Independence Day celebrations, attended by myself and a group of worker performers, gave us what could pessimistically be considered a glimpse into the future. A soccer stadium, usually full for soccer matches, had approximately 5 000 people watching cultural events and listening to speeches by President Mugabe. Compared to the audiences back home, to say there was a distinct lack of enthusiasm would be a serious understatement. That night, back in the hotels, the Chimerenga music of the Bhundu Boys and Thomas Mapfumo entertained thousands of paying "consumers". The theatre of the Zimbabwe Theatre Alliance, apparently widely popular in the rural

areas, is highly critical of the politicians and has to both fund itself and find its own audiences. In this light the attempts by the rulers to keep resistance culture alive - in the name of Zimbabwean nationalism - seemed contrived and artificially imposed. Whether or not we see a similar retreat of what can now legitimately be regarded as mass popular resistance culture depends on what takes place in the broader political arena in the next few years.

It is clear from the above that, at present, while worker poetry is most significantly distributed and received through oral performances, other media have played a significant role. None of the poets have any real power over the technology of reproduction - it is negotiated by the editors and producers - who package their works in particular ways. While the questions about the significance of including audience response and discussion of context were discussed with some of the poets, these decisions were ultimately made by the producers. Few of the poets have the skills or the resources to package and market themselves. Neither are the different poets in equal positions of power - this too depends a number of factors. It is increased by their level of literacy. Ntanzi is powerful on the stage but has to rely on translators and editors to publish his work. Unable to speak English, he cannot even check the translations of his work.

Even in performance, when the poets do exercise control over what they say and how they say it, they do so only for brief moments and their performance is framed by forms of power

exercised by political leadership figures. The poets have little power over the place and time of the performances. None of the published collections were edited by worker poets themselves - although Hlatswayo did help collect the material for Ear to the Ground and the Staffrider Worker Culture edition,[171] and CWLP publications were of course produced in consultation with Malange and Qabula (as they work for CWLP). Apart from the trade union newspapers (which are themselves produced by the "official" strata within the labour movement) all the printed collections of worker poetry were published by Cosaw or CWLP, the tapes by CWLP, the video recordings were made by Video News Services, CWLP and Audio Visual Alternatives.

Therefore while the poets may be regarded by Ngoasheng as "organic intellectuals", the books, tapes and videos and even to an extent the performances are highly processed and not so simply "organic" ("We organize and educate"). Similarly Sitas argues that in the mass events "the relationship is not one of spontaneous self-communication in black communities; it is, rather embedded in power relations" ("Voice and gesture"). The published texts, cassettes and video tapes cannot therefore be taken as unproblematic expressions of "popular sentiment".

The "poetic license" that worker poets exercise is also therefore a highly mediated one. It is only in the broadest sense

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171. Ear to the Ground: Contemporary Worker Poets (Johannesburg: Cosaw, 1991); F. Meintjies and M. Hlatswayo, eds., Staffrider 8.3&4 (1989).

that one can argue, as I have, that the audience and the poets are willing agents in the consolidation and expansion of their interpretive community.

On the other hand, no-one can control the interpretation of the poetry. It is received and orally negotiated by members of the audience. Their 'votes' are not registered (nor can they be) and this study cannot claim to have exhaustively mapped out the precise terrains of ideological response. All I have done is to register the fact of the contests and attempted to explore the ways in which it takes place.

The ways in which worker poetry is used an intellectual resource are therefore highly complex and significantly mediated by a range of forces. The meanings communicated in and through the poetry are significantly affected by the media through which it reaches its audience.

Despite this, worker poetry has not been subjected to highly authoritarian methods of control. The power wielded by intellectuals and union officials has not been used to censor the poets or prescribe what they should say or how they should say it. Up to now the poets have had relative freedom to communicate ideas as they have seen fit and, as has previously been argued, they have enjoyed significant levels of support from their organisations and service organisations such as CWLP. In the future, however, this support may well dwindle as these organisations see their priorities changing. For example, the recent stress of negotiations has definitely lead to a scaling down of the mass rallies which have been so significant in

enabling the dialogue between the poets and their audiences.

CONCLUSION

When worker poetry was recorded and reduced to paper and various forms of magnetic tape, it was changed from a performance taking place within a specific (and more visible) context into a "decontextualised" form. Decontextualisation embodies the exercise of power, as does the consequent process of recontextualisation. A number of readers of these texts were incapable of imaginatively "completing" these recordings. Instead they applied a range of interpretive strategies and conventions to the poetry that led them to conclude that these texts could not be regarded as poetry. On the other hand, a number of critics have attempted, through their critical work, to "recontextualise" the texts in ways that provided insights in to the social and aesthetic contexts of the works.

In attempting to extend the reach of the latter category of critical readings, my research entailed exploring beyond the recorded text. My intention was to develop an understanding of the contexts in which the poetry was performed and the different responses which met the performances. I have tried to organise my insights into a particular conceptual framework which I believe helps to understand the complex ways in which worker poetry has both emerged from and entered into the lives of its performers and its audience. There are also, of course, many weaknesses and gaps in my understanding of the contexts and processes I have

attempted to describe. My own biases have obviously coloured the way in which I have discussed the poetry, as no-one is able to escape what Bauman and Briggs have called "false objectivity" (68). I have thus entered into the highly contested terrain of interpretation.

Looking at poetry from an audience perspective is, at one level, an impossible act of i[illegible]pretive suicide. In theory it entails suspending one's own interpretive strategies for long enough to see the poetry as it is seen by the audiences for whom it was primarily intended. In practice this often ends up simply modifying one's own perspective and necessitating the development of a new set of interpretive conventions.

Perhaps the most fundamental change in my understanding of worker poetry was my recognition that the art of this poetry essentially lay in its performance. And that, above all, the audience was looking for an artistic performance. I have therefore become increasingly aware of the consequences of seeing worker poetry as more than a set of printed texts. I no longer see worker poetry as "the base of a strong poetic and literary movement". I now see it as a powerful movement that has gained much of its poetic force from two major sources. The first was the fact that it was rooted in poetic conventions organic to its predominantly African audience. Equally important was the ways in which the poetry has articulated desires and concerns which are close to the hearts of this audience.

At the time of writing this conclusion, efforts to create peace in Natal were, to use a tragically well worn phrase,

balanced on a knife-edge. Although negotiations and peace-talks appeared to have succeeded in lowering the death toll, sporadic massacres still continued to punctuate the dialogue. In one particularly significant peace agreement, Inkatha and ANC leaders in Bithenia outside Port Shepstone dipped their hands - "locked in a firm handshake" - into a bucket filled with water and goat's blood.[172] The ritual was overseen by a local sangoma, Mpiyaka Nxasane, who encouraged ANC and Inkatha supporters to repeat the ritual. Not all did. About a week later ten ANC supporting refugees, who had returned home following the peace accord, were cut down by AK47 fire as they lay in their beds.

The peace ritual relied on the common Zulu identities of the warring parties. The (hopefully temporary) failure of the ritual and the agreement to achieve peace shows that those identities, as I have argued, coexist with other powerful and conflicting identities. Most often such rituals have been utilised to authorise war and encourage individuals to perform horrific acts of violence on their neighbours.

In recent years the izibongo has also been utilised as a means of authorising and extending the political contests. Worker poets, in drawing on the poetic conventions of the izibongo, have used this powerful intellectual resource in a way that has played a significant role in building the organisational strength and support of both the labour movement and the ANC. In doing so the

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172. F. Chothia, "Where Slaughter Means an End to the Killings," The Weekly Mail, 2 April 1993, 10.

poets were taking the political contest into their own hands and acting as agents in the ongoing conflict. Worker poetry has indeed been, as Qabula puts it, one of many weapons. Other poets have drawn on different poetic conventions with which they have become familiar and used these to speak to people who see the use of the izibongo, in Hlatswayo's interpretation of their sentiment, as turning the clock back.

Their use of these 'weapons' has not, however, been cynical or malicious. The poets I spoke to sincerely believed that the labour movement and the ANC represented their interests and that the organisations' victories would lead to peace and improved conditions of life. Their poetry has therefore been deeply embedded in and constitutive of the different interpretive communities which have emerged within and around the competing political parties. Neither has worker poetry consisted of simple political rhetoric and sloganeering. That there are slogans at the borders of their performances is not in question, nor is the fact that some of the poets have performed poetry which barely raises itself above the level of rhetoric. The majority of the worker poets, though, see themselves as artists. They take great care in composing their poetry and are, as discussed above, conscious of the demands of their craft. Their audiences do not participate in poetic performances in the same way that they do in songs, dances or speeches. They recognise the poetry as poetry and judge it according to the conventions which they have learned mark poetry as something different to other forms of communication. They do appreciate those poems which articulate

ideas and experiences which they can identify but this is not the same as enjoying bad poetry simply because it says the right things.

These audiences see themselves as part of a political movement aimed at improving thei way of life. Some may be more enthusiastic than others about the ideas, values and political strategies that the leadership espouses. There are, I have tried to reflect, significant differences and tensions within the labour movement, as there are within the ANC (and any political party for that matter). These tensions relate not only to the often invoked categories of race, class, gender and ethnicity but also to the specificities of political conflicts and numerous other factors which I have touched on (such as place of residence, exposure to various cultural forms, religious affiliation and so on). Those that attended the rallies were, however, on the whole united by their common (if tentative and temporary) allegiance to these organisations.

I have argued that the audience has played a significant part, not only in the emergence and recognition of worker poetry but also in shaping the specific forms the poems have taken. However, I have also asserted that neither the poets nor their audiences acted in isolation. They were, in turn, profoundly influenced by political and social developments. It is therefore tempting to argue that there is, in the definition of the emerging genre of worker poetry, a 'symbiotic relationship' between the poets, their audiences and the official stratum of the movements within which they function.

The idea of a 'symbiotic relationship' is, of course, problematic insofar as it masks the exercise of various forms of power. And the exercise of power by intellectuals has long been an important subject of academic discussion. I have attempted to map out some of the ways in which power has been exercised by the various parties, as well as the limits and extent of that power.

At one level, the poets have been influenced by the ideas which have reached them via their involvement in the unions and political organisations. But I never saw, or heard of, the leadership of these organisations actually instructing the poets what to say or how to say it. The poets are 'products' in that they draw on a range of ideas and forms which they have experienced in many different contexts but they are agents in that the ways in which they selectively draw upon and organise this 'raw material' is their own work. Worker poems are not 'workshopped' in the same ways that worker plays are. Although the poets do rehearse in each others' company, the individual poems are already composed and are not significantly modified as a result of feedback. Their poetic works have been multi-vocal in nature, reflecting the diversity of their origins, the complexity of their identities and the internal heterogeneity of the interpretive community.

Furthermore, the leadership of political organisations often have extremely limited authority over popular ideas. They can and do channel discourse in ways that suite their own agenda but they cannot determine the precise ways in which people appropriate and modify those ideas. That worker poetry is an eclectic mix of

different ideas and cultural influences is ample evidence of this.

The way in which the power of union and political leadership has been mostly significantly exercised is in defining the spaces through which the poets met their audiences. And the officials of cultural organisations - such as Cosaw and CWLP - have played a central role in organising the utilisation of these spaces. The latter have also actively sought to create new spaces - both for oral performance and for the distribution of the poetry in print and on video- and audio-cassettes. Publishing in any form is a capital- and technology-intensive activity, which has caused a disempowering reliance on organisational (both political and cultural) leadership. One of the most significant changes that has been taking place since I conducted my research has been in the shape and frequency of these spaces. Funding is drying up and mass rallies have, as I have already mentioned, are becoming both less frequent and less significant in influencing the directions taken by the political leadership.

Outside of the live performance, without an active audience, the poetry is crippled. As I experienced in my interviews, no recording and publishing technology is able to reproduce the dynamic relationship between poet and audience that the live performance can. Television allows us to see dress, gesture and to hear tone of voice but we, the viewers, are still largely insulated from other people. Theatres do provide the opportunity for interaction between audience and performer but in a more formal ambience than a huge open-air meeting. Of course,

indigenous oral forms have retained their energy and vitality through centuries of colonialism and through the post-colonial decades. They will remain important at the level of people's everyday lives, particularly in rural settings. It is, however, highly romantic to believe that oral forms will remain unaffected by, for example, mass literacy campaigns and the dominance of technologies which, whatever else their strengths, necessarily imply a degree of alienation of performer from audience. The new cultural gatekeepers, schooled in urban areas and weaned on mass media, may not appreciate the rich cultural pool that constitutes indigenous oral forms. Many still see literacy as a panacea and, conversely, 'illiteracy' as a disease that must be "stamped out".

The actual and anticipated diminishing of performance spaces situated in the political organisations has led many of the key figures in worker culture to dedicate increased energy to contesting the official bastions of culture. The performing arts councils and the SABC - which receive significant sums of state funding - are under increasing pressure to reconstitute themselves in more open and accessible ways. This contest for official spaces has taken over from previous attempts to struggle for spaces within the unions and political organisations. The previously intimate relationship between the latter and the performers is showing signs of extreme stress as different cultural organisations and institutions compete to establish who will control state resources allocated to culture.

The unity that was created by being part of an opposition movement is bound to disintegrate as the players move to become

part of the new government. Many of the poets who emerged during the period leading up to and during my research have now left the factory floor and are working in culture and media institutions. Some are heading into positions as part of the new cultural bureaucracy while others less well equipped with literacy and English language skills are sinking back into their working lives. Whether the former, the nascent officials, will open up further opportunities for the latter remains to be seen.

Worker poetry was a process that saw the poets (and their poems) riding the crest of a wave that will in time subside and change its form. The interpretive community that propelled them onto stages has shifted and changed as waves do when they meet other waves or embrace new obstacles. The contours of the interpretive community are rapidly being redefined and, although at present it appears that there is a significant level of chaos, a new wave form will emerge to propel new cultural forms into prominence. While it is impossible to speculate what these new forms will look like, we can be fairly certain that they will be mutations of the old, as was worker poetry.

The old "frozen moments" (as Sitas once called recordings of performances) will fade in prominence as editors, publishers, television producers and academic researchers scramble to freeze and thus commoditise the new. Some of these "gatekeepers" will inevitably compare the new with what has gone before. Hopefully they will be aided by efforts such as this study in seeing the past more clearly.

APPENDIX A

Qabula's unpublished reply to Abrahams and Asvat.

I would like to apologise to Mr Lionel Abrahams and Mr Farouk Asvat for having the audacity to think that I could be a poet of their quality and standing. I obviously do not make the grade. I would serve my class and community better I suppose by being what I really ought to be: a forklift driver in a rubber factory at which after ten years experience I am sure I can rank with the best, earning a decent wage.

And I agree with Abrahams that our lives like our poetry are simple and filled with minor achievements and the memories of "y -baas" shoe-shine boys, cane-cutters, waiters and miners who leave behind them few traces but debts.

nd I also worry that I needed help to understand their letters, id to tray and understand why so much contempt was being showered on us. And why racist slurs on the izimbongo tradition were aired, I still don't understand. What I could read behind your criticism of Cronin was a total contempt for what we do, we believe in and strive to achieve.

I know I am a simple man with little education, but I do have a history and my people have a history that spans many years and it is a history I have rarely seen in any of your learned books. haps we come from different worlds: I was there to hear the ries of my grandfather who was a transport-rider who refused bow down to wage-labour. He was wiped out by the railways. I was there to hear of stories from my father about the miners' strikes of 1946. I saw him dying spitting blood over one Xmas. I saw most of my uncles die of lung disease. I was there to witness our rebellion in Pondolano against the genocidal trusts, and ate roots and crickets in the forests singing Congress songs. And later I boarded the train to migrancy on the mines at Carletonville to eat sour porridge and later to Ethekwini to harvest sugar cane and to work at rubber. I struck, I got unionised, I led as a shop-steward, in FOSATU then in COSATU, I sung and recently orated words of struggle. Now I hear gunmen are looking for ways to send us to our ancestors upstairs. And the toll in bodies is increasig and people keep on asking me to stand up and orate, and I orate in the best way I can.

You can deny me, as educated people, the right to be called a poet but do not falsify my plight: I praise no chiefs, I only praise rough hands that hold the plough, in rough words and with a heavy tongue.

But one thing you must both grant me: the fundamental right to communicate with my fellow human beings, to communicate my experiences, to tell others that I am still alive and that I can

still sing despite oppression, and that I can demand in whatever form, as a migrant, the right to share a life with my beloved without her or me having to earn it by working for the kitchens of a Mr Abrahams or a Mr Asvat. To also say this without needing certificates of poetry from anyone. We have not arrived here to collect crumbs from any tables. Grant us that, and I will be content with my world.

Alfred Temba Qabula
Worker's Cultural Local
COSATU, Durban

APPENDIX B

Index of Natal Poetry

Abbreviations:

BMRE	Sitas, A., ed. Black Mamba Rising. English edition. Durban: CWLP, 1989.
BMRZ	Sitas, A., ed. Black Mamba Rising. Zulu edition. Durban: CWLP, 1989.
ETTG	Ear to the Ground: Contemporary Worker Poets. Johannesburg: Cosaw, 1991.
Izinsingizi	Izinsingizi: Loud Hailer Lives. Durban: CWLP, 1989.
PC	Personal collection.
SALB	South African Labour Bulletin.
Staff	Staffrider 8.3/4 (1989).
WNB	Writers Notebook.

Note: The reference numbers at the end of items recorded on audio-cassette refer to the tapes in my own collection. Recordings are referred to by the names of the events at which they were recorded. the date on which these events took place, the venue at which they took place and the name/s of the person/people who recorded the material. The master-recordings of all tapes referred to are housed at the CWLP, Sociology Department, University of Natal, Durban. See Appendix C for the Table of Contents of the selected audio-cassette and video-cassette recordings included with this thesis.

The poems listed include all poems referred to in this study and those recorded and/or published in the journals in which worker poetry normally appears. I have not attempted to differentiate between worker poetry and other categories of poetry.

Anonymous

1. "The Quiet Storm." WNB 1.1 (Sept. 1989): 31.
2. "Recessions of the Africans." WNB 1.1 (Sept. 1989): 32.

Blose, Nkululeko

3. "Facing a storming peril." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 79.
4. "Human Portions." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 79.

Cele, Bongani

5. "He was a child of the soil." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 71.
6. "Women of Africa." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 71.

Chesterville Youth Choir

7. Untitled. Video-cassette. Rec: Rally to welcome released political prisoners (Sisulu et al). n.d. First National Bank Stadium (Soccer City), Johannesburg. S. Kromberg, CWLP.

Clegg, Johnny

8. "Isikhiye." Video-cassette. Rec: Rally to welcome released political prisoners (Sisulu et al). n.d. First National Bank Stadium (Soccer City), Johannesburg. S. Kromberg, CWLP.

Gumbi, Nonhlanhla

9. "This time next week." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 71.

Gwala, Mondli

10. "A sad and angry poet - thinking aloud." WNB 1.3/4 (May 1990): 72.

Hlatswayo, Mi S'dumo

11. "Yavuka yagoqana Imamba Emnyama Kwalala Uyaca." BMRZ 33.
12. "The Black Mamba Rises." BMRE 25.
13. "Isililo Sabasebenzi." BMRZ 36.
14. "Workers' Lamentation for Ancient Africa." BMRE 29.
15. "Thina Basebenzi Singabakhathazekile." BMRZ 39.
16. "We Workers Are a Worried Lot." BMRE 32.
17. "Mphephetwa Khula." BMRZ 44.
18. "Sprout Further Jabulani Gwala." BMRE 35.
19. "Shwele Samson Cele." BMRZ 42.
20. "Tribute to Samson Cele." BMRE 37.
21. "Kmdunge Owaba Sezimpini Zombango." BMRZ 46.
22. "Tribute to Mdunge." BMRE 40.
23. "To you comrades P Sibiya, S Ngubane, F Mnikathi, A Nkibande." SALB 12.2 (Jan. 1987): 2.
24. "Ngungundlovu A Salutation." SALB 13.2 (Feb. 1988): 44.
25. "The Workers' Trail." Staff 106.
26. "Learning to Speak, Learning to Write, Learning to Float." WNB 1.1 (Sept. 1989): 29.
27. "Waiting for Ourselves." WNB 1.5 (Jan. 1991): 4.
28. "Isihlibhu." WNB 1.5 (Jan. 1991): 4.
29. "Solomon Mahlangu." WNB 1.5 (Jan. 1991): 5.
30. "Msebenzi Khuluma." WNB 1.5 (Jan. 1991): 6.
31. "Senganele." WNB 1.5 (Jan. 1991): 6.
32. "Phangisa Msebenzi." ETTG 39.
33. "Ukufa." ETTG 40.
34. "Isihlibhu." ETTG 41.

Hlatswayo, Mi S'dumo and Alfred Temba Qabula

35. "The Tears of a Creator." SALB 11.3 (Jan. 1986): 61.
36. "Izinyembezi Zomsebenzi." BMRZ 46.
37. "The Tears of a Creator." BMRE 43.

Hlatswayo, Mi S'Dumo; Alfred Qabula; Sipho Ndlovu

38. Untitled medley. Video-cassette. Rec. n.d. CWLP.

Kromberg, Steve

39. "An instant before the egg hit the ground." WNB 1.2 (Jan. 1990): 49.
40. "The Young Lions." Video-cassette. Rec. Mandela Rally. 26 Feb. 1990. King's Park Stadium. CWLP.

Majozi, M.Q.
41. "Fanyana." WNB 1.1 (Sept. 1989): 10, also. ETTG 63.
42. "Ukufika eThekwini." WNB 1.1 (Sept. 1989): 10.

Malange, Nise
43. "Mina Engingasebensi." BMRZ 57
44. "I, the Unemployed." BMRE 51.
45. "Umhla Wokugala KuMay 1985." BMRZ 59.
46. "First of May." BMRE 53.
47. "Lenkondlo Ingumnikelo Kumfowethu uRaditsela." BMRZ 60.
48. "Poem Dedicated to Brother Andries Raditsela." BMRE 55.
49. "Namuhla." BMRZ 64.
50. "Today." BMRE 56.
51. "A Time of Madness." Izinsingizi 14.
52. "Nightshift Mother." Izinsingizi 18.
53. "Long Live Women." Izinsingizi 20.
54. "Isimo Esibucayi." Izinsingizi 22.
55. "Isimo Esibucayi." Translation. Izinsingizi 24.
56. "So Now The Leaders." WNB 1.2 (Jan. 1990): 37.

Malange, Nise; Gladman Ngubo; Welile Nshasha; Madinyoka Ntanzi; S'Thembiso Zikhali
57. Untitled medley. Audio-cassette. Rec. A.N.C. 48th Conference Rally. 7 July 1991. King's Park Stadium, Durban. Jurgen Brauninger. 1.1.8

Mann, Chris
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59. Untitled. Video-cassette. Rec: Rally to welcome released political prisoners (Sisulu et al). n.d. First National Bank Stadium (Soccer City), Johannesburg. S. Kromberg, CWLP.

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60. "This Land." Video-cassette. Rec. Workers' Library Launch. n.d. CWLP

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61. Various. Mzwakhe Mbuli: The People's Poet. Prod. Video News Service, n.d.
62. "Who is in Lusaka/The Stalwarts." Video-cassette. Rec: Rally to welcome released political prisoners (Sisulu et al). n.d. First National Bank Stadium (Soccer City), Johannesburg. S. Kromberg, CWLP.
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152. "Impilo Ngumalalephenduka." Video-cassette. Rec. n.d. CWLP.
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19. **Ngubo, Gladman.** "Bandlululondini." People Must Share. Audio-cassette. Prod: CWLP, 1990. Rec. Studio. Sept. 1990. Music Department, U of Natal. Jurgen Brauninger.

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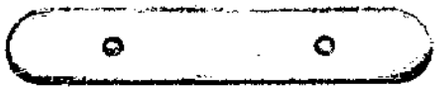
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