

Revisiting B.B. Mdllele's isiXhosa translation of *Macbeth* (1959): Prophecy, tragedy and history

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ABSTRACT

The isiXhosa translator of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, B.B. Mdllele, introduces the play as *intlekele* (a tragedy), and goes on to discuss characteristics of the genre; he cites Fate and Fortune as two forces that are vital ingredients of tragedy. The role of the witches' equivocal prophecies is key here. In Mdllele's Transkei (Eastern Cape), the issue of prophesying was taken very seriously – not least because of the prophets Makhanda, alias Nxele, and Nongqawuse, who plunged the region into untold disaster in the nineteenth century. This article also considers Mdllele's *UMacbeth* (1959) as a form of *intsomi* (fable or cautionary tale), both for schoolchildren and for older readers. Furthermore, it relates the supernatural elements in *Macbeth* to Mdllele's views as a Christian and to African cultural paradigms.

B.B. Mdllele translated three of Shakespeare's plays into isiXhosa: *Julius Caesar* (*UJulius Caesar*, 1956), *Macbeth* (*UMacbeth*, 1959) and *Twelfth Night* (*Ubusuku beshum'elinambini*, 1960).¹ In this article, I will be focusing on *UMacbeth*, situating the translation in the context of Mdllele's life and times, and paying particular attention to *Macbeth*'s encounters with the witches – which, I suggest, indicate the inevitability of the play's outcome as a tragedy. I will emphasise the cultural perspectives that would have shaped Mdllele's response to Shakespeare's play, and which thus lend a liveliness to his translation.

Apart from his Shakespeare translations, Mdllele also co-authored four other books in isiXhosa for schoolchildren. He is known for his varied activities in community development in the former Transkei, including agriculture, farming and education; most remarkable of all was the co-founding of a school in the small town of Cala in the Eastern Cape, later called B.B. Mdllele Junior Secondary School. I mention these biographical details because they suggest that Mdllele would have wanted to use the themes from Shakespeare's plays as a platform to educate his readers – mostly school pupils – on a range of critical issues, offering 'life lessons'. With *Macbeth*, for instance, he may have wanted to highlight the themes of evil, unbridled ambition, and the role that supernatural forces can play when people are susceptible to their dangers. Consider, for example, *Macbeth*'s

1 There has been limited scholarly engagement with Mdllele's translations. Some thirty years ago Peter Mtuze wrote about *UJulius Caesar* in this journal. See Mtuze, "Mdllele's Xhosa Translation of *Julius Caesar*", *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 4 (1990/91): 65–72.

Andinanjongo

*Indidudulayo, ngaphandle kokuthand' udumo okungenamida,
Okutsiba kuye kutsho ngaphaya komgca
Kuye kuwa kwelinye. –*

(I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other –)

(1.7.25–28)²

Insofar as *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* are 'political' plays, it is debatable to what extent Mdllele was inspired to translate these plays by the events of the late 1950s, a watershed period in South Africa's liberation movement, when a rift developed among members of the African National Congress (ANC) based, inter alia, on different approaches to what Tom Lodge and others have dubbed "ethnic nationalism".³ At the height of this misunderstanding a group calling itself the Africanists, led by Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, broke off and formed the Pan African Congress (PAC). Sobukwe and his colleagues were accused of seeking power for themselves rather than liberating the oppressed majority. The PAC would go on to launch a peaceful anti-pass protest, culminating in the massacre at Sharpeville on 20 March 1960, when police opened fire on protestors and killed 69 people.

In this light, it is pertinent to try and surmise Mdllele's ideological leanings. His daughter, Blanche Nomathemba, has stated that her father hosted many meetings at his home in Alice attended by the likes of Z.K. Matthews (ANC top brass, responsible for co-writing the Freedom Charter in 1955) and Liberal Party M.P. William Ballinger, who was a regular guest in his capacity as an advisor. Notwithstanding Mdllele's assertion that he was "first and foremost an educator", the fact that he later occupied the portfolio of Transkei Minister of Education at the invitation of his former student, Kaiser Matanzima – Prime Minister and then President of the nominally independent 'homeland' or Bantustan of Transkei – complicates his political legacy.⁴ Yet in his Shakespeare translations, as in his work as educator more generally, Mdllele was primarily concerned with promoting isiXhosa as a language of learning and teaching, of creativity and cultural exchange. Undoubtedly, translating Shakespeare raises questions regarding the relevance of the history and culture of the English Renaissance, and its significance to a contemporary South African audience or readership. As Hans-Georg Gadamer put it, "All interpretations of past literature arise from a dialogue between past and present. Our attempts to understand a work will depend on the questions which our cultural environment allows us to raise ... Our present perspective always involves a relationship to the past."⁵ In the case of South Africa this requires an acknowledgement of the impact of colonial and apartheid history, which underscores the distance from Shakespeare's place and time.

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In his introduction to *UMacbeth*, Mdllele lists the main themes of the play as loyalty, guilt, innocence and fate. He states that of all the critics who have examined Shakespeare's tragedies, A.C. Bradley is the most reliable – an indication of the then-standard literary critical paradigm informing his translation. Mdllele observes that in Medieval and Early Modern European literature, Fate and Fortune were the two

2 Mdllele's text in *UMacbeth* (Johannesburg: APB, 1959) closely follows the act, scene and line divisions of standard editions of Shakespeare's play. I have used the Folger Shakespeare Library's online edition of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. Where English and isiXhosa lines are quoted together, a single reference is given unless the texts diverge.

3 Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p.84.

4 Quotation taken from interviews conducted with Mdllele's only surviving child, Blanche Nomathemba, and his nephew Spokes Mdllele (Cala, 2 March 2023).

5 Quoted in Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th edition (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1997), p.54.

forces that affected the life of a person, and that there were overlaps in some instances between the two. Fortune was associated with good luck, Fate with disaster. Yet while Fate has the fairly straightforward isiXhosa equivalent *ishwangusha*, this is not so with Fortune. Mdledle tells his readers that when they come across “*iThamsanqa*”, “*iCamagu*” or “*iShologu*” in his translation, these may all be linked to the concept of Fortune – and the three isiXhosa words are by no means synonymous.⁶ Good fortune (in the sense of good luck) is *ithamsanqa*, but *ishologu* has ominous connotations: it could also refer to a witch’s familiar that has been freed and is out of control. As for *icamagu*, its meanings are intricately interwoven. Often it is used in greetings or as a recognition of one’s ancestors; it signifies a connection to the spiritual world. Lady Macbeth invokes *icamagu*, as in “fate and metaphysical aid” (1.5.32). Macduff appeals to *icamagu* when he is hunting Macbeth (“Let me find him, fortune”, 5.7.22).

Mdledle sees the tragedy of *Macbeth* unfolding from the moment at which the three witches appear and prophesy to Macbeth and Banquo equivocally. To drive his point home he foregrounds in his commentary the demise of the hero by quoting the first apparition from Act 4 Scene 1: “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! *lumkela uMacduff;/ Lumkela iNduna yaseFayfu*” (“Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff;/ Beware the Thane of Fife”, 4.1.71–72). Mdledle also highlights the second apparition’s misleading prophecy that Macbeth cannot be killed by a man born of woman. Another false promise is that Macbeth will not be overthrown until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane. The centrality of the witches in the play guarantees the unalterable destiny of the characters involved. That Macbeth is vulnerable to what they say makes it vital that their link with him in particular, rather than any other character, be investigated. The witches target the person who is predisposed towards their sorcery; by contrast, Banquo’s reaction shows his incredulous attitude, as he puts their encounter with the witches down to hallucination (“...have we eaten on the insane root/That takes the reason prisoner?”, 1.3.85–86). Macbeth’s paranoia is born of the initial prophecy that Banquo’s children will become kings. Banquo’s murder will be but one in a series of tragic episodes woven into the witches’ web.

I propose that the prophecies were uncanny and potentially unsettling to Mdledle and his readers because of their own history and culture. The prophecies’ proximity (if not similarity) to the South African situation thus merits serious inquiry. In the nineteenth century, three amaXhosa prophets were key figures in conflicts with British colonial forces that displaced the native peoples from their land, circumscribed their movement and forced them to obey hostile laws. This laid the groundwork for the systematic subjugation of black people under apartheid. The white government promulgated the Group Areas Act in 1950 and the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act in 1959, preparing the way for the establishment of the Bantustans or ‘Homelands’. Forced removals of non-white communities from white-designated areas also dominated the first two decades of apartheid; cosmopolitan communities like Sophiatown in Johannesburg (1955) and District Six in Cape Town (1966) were destroyed. All this was playing out in South Africa at the time of Mdledle’s translation of *Macbeth*. The twenty-first century reader thus cannot afford to treat the main themes of power, ambition and concomitant violence in *UMacbeth* without regard for South African history and culture.

The first of the amaXhosa prophets who divined under the cloud of colonial invasion in the Eastern Cape was Makhanda, also known as Nxele (1780–1820), who in 1819 led a raid on Grahamstown against British forces, promising that the colonisers’ bullets would turn to water and be harmless. Of course, this was a lie, and the amaXhosa suffered massive losses. Makhanda’s contemporary, Ntsikana (1780–1821), had prophesied about the effect of British colonialism – that the native peoples of the region would be displaced, resulting in the irretrievable loss of their economy and culture – but at the same time he preached conversion to the Christian faith, promising that acceptance of the Bible would bring better prospects of success.

In the 1850s, a century before Mdledle translated *Macbeth*, the third prophet – a young woman named Nongqawuse – set in motion a millenarian movement that culminated in tragic self-destruction: the amaXhosa killed their own cattle and destroyed their crops. Some accounts of this history blame the Governor of the Cape Colony, Sir George Grey, who (it is said) plotted the massacre; others relegate the Governor’s role to merely that of a very useful cog in the colonial machine that was bent on destroying the political and economic independence of the amaXhosa. Jeff Peires, an authoritative commentator,

6 Mdledle, introduction to *UMacbeth*, p.viii.

points to Nongqawuse's uncle, "the frustrated Gospel Man Mhlakaza/Wilhelm Goliath" who was "a preacher in search of a prophecy" and who, "instead of curbing Nongqawuse's talk of two strangers ... actively encouraged it and brought it to the attention of [King] Sarhili".⁷ Nongqawuse affirmed that she had seen some new people in the bush and in the sea, who told her that the dead were preparing to rise again (these 'new people' were actually to be understood as the ancestors of the amaXhosa). Wonderful new cattle were coming too, but the condition was that people should kill their cattle and destroy their crops. On the day in question those who did not believe the prophecies would be destroyed by the burning sun and fierce winds. The same would happen to their impure cattle, and also any tools of witchcraft that people used. In short, this was envisaged as a kind of resurrection, suggesting a Christian influence in the anticipation of such a fundamental societal change. Another view held by Peires is that Nongqawuse "must have heard of the prophecies of resurrection inspired by the supposed Russian victories in the Crimean War". More recently, however, J.J. Klaas has suggested that the Nongqawuse narrative is a colonial fabrication – that the cause of cattle-killing was a lung-sickness epidemic that struck in 1855: as fears of more cattle deaths grew, people chose to kill diseased animals, anticipating that they would die anyway.⁸

Whatever the real cause, the events of 1819 and 1856–7, as well as their catastrophic aftermaths, can only have influenced Mdllele's approach to translating the play. He hoped that *Macbeth* could be a warning, helping to alter the mindset of his people and moving them away from beliefs and prophecies like those of Makhanda and Nongqawuse. Instead he identified with Ntsikana, God's messenger, bringing good news. As a devout Christian himself, Mdllele cared about both the physical and the spiritual welfare of his people.⁹ The calamities linked to Makhanda and Nongqawuse, the loss of life and economic welfare, represented to his Christian mind a spiritual darkness brought about by evil – the work of the devil, reified in the three witches and their deceptive prophecies to Macbeth. Moreover, there is something peculiar in both cases: neither Makhanda's nor Nongqawuse's prediction was solicited. In African culture, someone who needs their future predicted approaches a sangoma for divination, and it is a service that is paid for (among the amaXhosa, *amagqirha*, *abaprofethi* and others beside *izangoma* can also be approached). Prophecies which come from the mouth of a diviner are taken seriously, as they often highlight problems in the existing way of doing things and caution against pitfalls, thus requiring the person concerned to fix their supposed wrongs and to undertake a drastic reconsideration of their life situation. In some instances, sacrificial tokens to the lineal ancestors are made. In *Macbeth/UMacbeth*, because the prophecies are unsolicited, there are likely to be deadly stings in their tails.

Since Mdllele was a devout Christian, he probably had a strong aversion to matters pertaining to the occult. Yet he could not avoid this in translating *Macbeth*. The appearance in Act 1 of the witches who look like anything but women, with beards on their faces, signals something equivalent to the isiXhosa term *ukwelama*, meaning to see a supernatural vision. Accordingly, Macbeth is instantly enchanted. The witches' *modus operandi* of equivocation, with the intention of creating confusion and turmoil in Macbeth's mind, is aided and abetted by the weather at the start of the play: "*Ubhle lizotho, izotho bubhle:/ Ndandazelani enkungwini nasemoyeni ongcobileyo*" ("Fair is foul, and foul is fair:/ Hover through the fog and filthy air", 1.1.9–10). Macbeth echoes their equivocal words ("So foul and fair a day I have not seen", 1.3.39), but Mdllele chooses a different formulation to the one he has given the witches: "*Enje ukuba mbi nokuba ntle imini andikayiboni*".¹⁰ Banquo correctly describes him as *uchulumachile* ("rapt" by the workings of the witches). This, then, is the inciting incident that sets the whole tragic action of the drama in motion. Although Macbeth's wording is not exactly the same as that

7 Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856–7* [1989] (Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2013), p.329.

8 J.J. Klaas, *Triangle of One Hundred Years Wars* (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2023).

9 The Committee of the British and Foreign Bible Society presented Mdllele with a copy of the Bible "in grateful recognition" of his help in preparing the latest isiXhosa version on 15/1/1963.

10 With regard to line 1.3.39 above, it would be fitting for Xhosa readers to experience a transfiguration of Macbeth based on the mystical element of the episode, driven by his stunned and almost hypnotised reaction. It would be uncommon to see witches in the flesh in the translator's traditional culture, so since the line points to the theme of the power of evil to deceive by false appearances, some readjustments in the translation to express disgust would be in order. For instance: "*Rhaa, enje ukungcola nokuba ntle imini andikayiboni*".

of the witches, the episode evokes the African mythology of *isithunzela* – a zombie, risen from the dead and put under a witch's spell, who repeats his handler's words mechanically.

Mdlele enriches the mood of the setting by citing the elements of nature as a symbolic mirror of the events taking place. In his introductory commentary, he quotes (or slightly misquotes) his translation of the conditions described by Ross on the night of Duncan's murder and into the following day: “*ukukhanya 'kuminxekile' 'ubumnyama bubungcwabile ubuso bomhlaba*” (light is suffocated, darkness has buried the face of the earth).¹¹ (The actual line is “*Le nto amathunzi obumnyama abungcwabileyo ubuso bomhlaba*” for Shakespeare's “darkness does the face of earth entomb”, 2.4.8.) With this personification, the translator points to a situation where supernatural forces have sway over people's everyday lives. Although it may seem to have biblical echoes (from the creation story in Genesis), the line also calls to mind a different frame of reference with which Mdlele was familiar: the performance of sacrificial rituals to the ancestors, which occasion the shout, “*Makuded'ubumnyama kuvel'ukukhanya*” (Let the darkness recede and let the light come).

All this depicts the hopelessness of the situation where supernatural forces have hegemony over logical understanding. The weird sisters place the world of *Macbeth* under a spell, powering the actions of the characters – especially Macbeth – to a climax over which they have no control. Macbeth is divested of his innate willpower; he is a toy, a mere site for enacting the witches' agenda. The action and incidents in the drama are irreversible. Everything spoken by the witches about Macbeth and Banquo is set on an irrevocable course, fated to happen exactly as intended by supernatural forces. There is thus something fitting in Macbeth's fatalistic cry, “*Vuthuza moya! yiza, tyoboza!*” (“Blow, wind! Come, wrack!”, 5.5.51).

In his introductory exposition, the translator presents his understanding of Shakespeare's play world. *Intlekele* (tragedy), by Mdlele's definition, is an unexpected change of fortunes from prosperity to misery, allowing the audience/reader to see that such a victim of circumstance is a fumbler who cannot help himself. He is manipulated by forces that are beyond his control. Small wonder that he reaches a point where he sees human life as torturous and emptied of significance; death would be a better option. *UMacbeth*, then, also functions as a warning or cautionary tale. In Mdlele's translation, *Macbeth* evokes the age-old tradition of *intsomi* (fable or folktale), the function of which is to socialise a young person into responsible ways of behaving. It would not have escaped Mdlele's attention that in this tradition a road – such as where Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches – functions as a metaphor for growth into maturity. It entails a process of personal introspection, as the traveler encounters adventure and narrowly escapes from harm at the hands of half-human and half-animal creatures. In short it should serve as a rite of passage.

If South Africans today recognise ourselves in this story, it is not necessarily because of the supernatural aspects in it, but rather because *Macbeth* is our *intsomi*, teaching us to grow up, because we still behave very much like teenagers born long after the advent of democracy in 1994. Nevertheless, in the present moment no less than at the time of Mdlele's translation, the phenomenon of the witches strikes a chord – in the Eastern Cape in particular. Mdlele would have had in mind the notorious Gwadana Forest in then-Transkei, a so-called “mecca of witches” where, in fact, “a large number of elderly women have been witch-hunted and persecuted”.¹² Ritualistic murders and human sacrifices to the supernatural world still occur in South Africa.¹³ Reading Mdlele's translation of the witches' scenes in *Macbeth*, one senses his visceral response to their stock-in-trade of familiars such as owls, toads (believed to be evil and poisonous), as well as other animals and animal parts, all boiled in the cauldron in preparing their spells – a concoction that seems disgusting to the translator. Mdlele was no doubt aware of a similar variety of familiars that might be used in South Africa to cast a spell and harm others,

11 Mdlele, introduction to *UMacbeth*, p.xiii.

12 Nkgopoleng Moloi, “It's a long way to Gwadana – Simphiwe Ndzube's portal to a fantasy”. *Bubblegumclub*, 11 Jan 2021 (online: <https://bubblegumclub.co.za>).

13 The recent case of Mduduzi Zulu and Tshiamo Rabanye attests to this. These young boys from Soweto were killed “so that their body parts could be used for muti ... the boys were found with their throats slit and part of their genitals removed”. Eunice Mason, “Family ‘in pain’ after grandmother, partner arrested for murder of Soweto boys”. *Mail & Guardian*, 27 April 2023 (online: <https://mg.co.za/news/2023-04-27-family-in-pain-after-grandmother-partner-arrested-for-murder-of-soweto-boys/>).

such as *uhili* or *utikoloshe* (the mischievous or evil spirit), *impundulu* (the lightning bird), snakes and so on.

Other cultural points of reference for Mdllele and his readers add further local connections to the world of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Traditionally, amaXhosa attach much importance to the spilling of blood on occasions when an ox is slaughtered in the household's kraal for ancestral sacrifice and, sometimes, appraisal. The animal bellows to signal that the guardian spirits of the family have accepted the sacrifice and that the beast is ready to be slaughtered for its blood to bless the cow manure of the kraal floor. In response to this bellowing and bloodshed, the isiXhosa cry is "*Cama-a-a-gu!*" ("Bless us!"), as they anticipate the good fortune expected to come the way of the family. This is the inverse of the scene that is described when Macbeth comes back to his chamber with bloodstained hands after killing Duncan. Macbeth could not say "Amen" when the drunk guards called out, "God bless us!" (2.2.39–40) and Lady Macbeth "heard the owl scream and the crickets cry" (2.2.15), a stark contrast to the beneficent cry of the bull and the jubilant shout of *Cama-a-a-gu*. The scream of an owl would definitely be regarded as sacrilege, since this bird is associated with evil. When a human being is butchered there are no blessings expected.

Later, in the handwashing scene, Lady Macbeth expresses her amazement: "Yet who would have thought the old man/to have had so much blood in him?" (5.1.34–35) In his introduction Mdllele identifies these words ("*Ukanti ngubani obengacinga ukuba indoda endala inegazi elingaka kuyo?*") as among the most horrific and moving in the play.¹⁴ The enormity of the crime of regicide causes Lady Macbeth's mental disturbance; she acts as if she is under a spell, just as her husband has previously done. She seems to realise the sanctity of human life – unlike the witches – and yet she is, in a sense, equally guilty of spurring Macbeth's crimes. In his commentary, Mdllele emphatically blames Lady Macbeth's extreme aspiration: "... *hayi intliziyo yomnqweno ayakh'itsho, ikhwezelelwa ngumfazi wayo owayengunomagugwana, osel' ezibona eyikumkanikazi*" (the desire of Macbeth's heart could not be satisfied, as it was stoked by his ambitious wife who was already seeing herself as a queen).¹⁵ Mdllele thus draws our attention to his translation of Act 1 Scene 5, when Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter and resolves to ensure that her husband will do what is necessary to become king:

*UnguGlamis; noCawdor; waye uza kuba yiloo nto uyithenjisiweyo.
Kanti ke ndinoloyiko ngendalo yakho;
Iya phuphuma lubisi lobubele bobuntu
Ukuba ube unokuthabatha eyona ndlela imfutshane; ube uya kuba mkhulu,
Ukuthand' udumo akukuswele kona, kodwa uswele loo ntliziyo imnyama
Efanel' ukuhamba nako; oko unga unganako kuphakamileyo,
Unga unganako ngendlela engcwele; akungi ungenza okungafanelekanga,
Ukanti ukuba uza kuzuza ngokungekho mfanelweni; umelwe kukuba naloo nto, ngangalala ndini
Glamis,
Idanduluka ithi, 'Ukuba uza kukuzuza oku, ke umelwe kukusenza isenzo;'
Kube oko ukoyikayo ukukwenza
Ude unqwenele ukuba kube bekungenziwe. Khawuleza uze apha,
Ukuze ndithululele umphefumlo wam endlebeni yakho,
Ndikohlwaye konke ngokhalipho lolwimi lwam
Okukukhubayo ekuyeni esitshabeni,
Elithe icamagu ngoncedo lwezinto ezingezizo zeli lizwe labonakala
Lithanda ukuba uthweswe isitshaba.*

(1.5.14–29)

(Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be
What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness

14 Mdllele, Introduction, p.xiv.

15 *Ibid.*, p.iii.

To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst great;
 Art not without ambition, but without
 The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
 That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
 And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'ldst have, great Glamis,
 That which cries 'Thus thou must do', if thou have it;
 And that which rather thou dost fear to do
 Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
 That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
 And chastise with the valour of my tongue
 All that impedes thee from the golden round,
 Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
 To have thee crown'd withal.)

Mdllele stops short of calling Lady Macbeth a witch herself. Still, she employs imagery that links her to the witches, as she calls on the powers of evil: "*Yizani, mimoya ...*" ("Come, you spirits ...", 1.5.39). Macbeth reasons with his wife about why he should not go ahead with the plan to kill Duncan: "*Yena usandul' ukundithi jize ngewonga kutshanje; ndaza ndacingelwa/Phezulu zizo zonke iindidi zabantu*" ("He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought/Golden opinions from all sorts of people", 1.7.32–4). Lady Macbeth's persuasion prevails, however, and the 'power play' between husband and wife continues after the murder of Duncan and then of Banquo, as we see in the banquet scene (Act 3 Scene 4).

As the play reaches its climax, however, Macbeth returns the causal focus to the witches. When he faces Macduff in combat and learns that "Macduff was from his mother's womb/Untimely ripp'd" (5.8.15–16), we are reminded of the witches' equivocating prophecies. Mdllele's translation makes Macbeth's lines a desperate confession:

*Maluqalekiswe olo lwimi lundazisa loo nto,
 Kuba litsho labanda elo cala kum lisenobuntu:
 Makungabisakholelwa nto yanto kwezo dimoni zimfamekisayo,
 Ezisenzela amaqhetseba ngentetho ebumbolombini;
 Argcina ilizwi lesithembiso endlebeni yethu,
 Alaphule kulo ithemba lethu.*

(5.8.17–22)

(Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,
 For it hath cow'd my better part of man!
 And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
 That palter with us in a double sense;
 That keep the word of promise to our ear,
 And break it to our hope.)

*

Mdllele's interpretation of *Macbeth* may be explained in terms of an isiXhosa idiom: *Kungafa intaka endala amaqanda ayabola* (always when the figurehead perishes, the eggs rot). The murder of King Duncan is an inversion of the natural order, setting in train a legacy of misfortune for the people of Scotland. Beyond the consideration of supernatural forces of good and evil, the play's commonly recognisable themes of ambition, pride and retribution appeal to both political and moral concerns. Any society that suffers these ills in its leadership is bound to meet the fate of Scotland under Macbeth. At the end of the play, Malcolm is declared the new king of Scotland and wants to start afresh and restore order, invoking an image of nature and rebirth in his promise to reward his loyal followers: "... planted newly with the time" (5.9.31). These lines eloquently echo the sentiments of those heroes that Africa has been blessed with, but in the twentieth century, African countries did not achieve the fulfilment of Malcolm's vision. Instead, many of those heroes became martyrs, victims of the Macbeths of Africa. In apartheid

South Africa, in the decades after Mdledle's translation was published, such 'Banquos' included Ahmed Timol, Abram Onkgopotse Tiro, Steve Biko and Neil Aggett. At the same time, in post-apartheid South Africa, there is a need to be wary of "these juggling fiends [who should be] no more believed" – those who campaign for votes, making promises to bring about a new order that will benefit all, but really pushing their own selfish agenda as they "palter with us in a double sense".

From a broader continental perspective, the publication of *UMacbeth* in the period when many African countries achieved independence is significant. It may also be noted that it appeared the year after Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Okonkwo in Achebe's novel is often regarded as a tragic hero like Macbeth. The editors of the Wits School Shakespeare point to other parallels, such as that "in both *Macbeth* and *Things Fall Apart* the victims have absolute trust in their murderers; Macbeth was a cousin of Duncan, while the boy (in Achebe's book) was slain by his erstwhile protector."¹⁶ Half a century later, Wole Soyinka would satirise Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha in *King Baabu*, drawing on similar motifs. On the other side of the continent, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe was guilty of the same behaviour. There are many other examples of Macbeth-style African tyrants. In the context of modern African history the Second Witch's opening lines are instructive: when is the battle "lost and won"? Africans lost their freedom and land through colonisation, only to win both back, but the hurly-burly is not done yet. When Mdledle undertook his translation, chaos and confusion were still prevalent; Africa was, and would for a long time remain, in a state of limbo.

In South Africa we are still waiting for our true, selfless liberators to return, figuratively speaking, from their hiding places. There are glimpses of hope when courageous individuals expose corruption. Perhaps the legacy of Macbeth in (South) Africa is the message that all is not lost, and in this sense Mdledle's reading inspires optimism: "*Noko ke umoya womdlalo kaMacbeth asinguwo wobumnyama tsiki, kuman' ukuthi danya ukukhanya, de maxa wambi kukhanye ngohlobo lokuba kungatyhaphaza.*" (At least the atmosphere of the play *Macbeth* is not that of stark darkness, often there are flashes of light to an extent that sometimes it causes temporary blindness.)¹⁷

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16 Victor Houliston, Harriet Davis, Peter Farrands, Joanna Parmenter and Zwelakhe Mtsaka (eds), *Macbeth*, Wits School Shakespeare (Cape Town: Nasou Via Afrika, 2007), p.17.

17 Mdledle, Introduction, p.xiii.