

# Improvisational Songs from Hearts: Traditions and Structure of Xhosa Praise Poetry

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**Abstract** The Xhosa oral tradition has been persistent in the past two hundred and now is still flourishing. The Xhosa iimbongi compose praise poems at important and exciting occasions. General improvising, memorizing, the refined improvising of the iimbongi and the writing form the Xhosa praise poetic traditions. Any Xhosa praise poem is composed with one of the activities. The textural features such as breath, intonation and gesture produce a division of the poem. Facing the influence of the “high culture,” the Xhosa iimbongi still keep their praise poem tradition and make the praise poems heard in their homeland.

**Key words** Xhosa praise poetry; activities and structure; Xhosa iimbongi

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In 1970, Ruth Finnegan published her milestone work *Oral Literature in Africa*. In her work, she pointed out, “Praise poetry, and in particular the Southern Bantu

form, is among the best-documented types of African oral poetry. Nevertheless, much remained to be studied... Though many texts have been collected, particularly from South Africa, full discussions of these are less common, and further detailed accounts are needed of specific forms in particular areas” (146).

The Xhosa in South Africa are the very people who have kept traditions of composing oral praise poetry. Xhosa-speaking people mainly live in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The Xhosa court poet, or *imbongi* (*plural-iimbongi*), is able to compose his praise poetry while performing it. The Xhosa praise poems record and show a person’s qualities and deeds and they are the brief references to a person’s moral and physical attributes, to his or her interpersonal relationships with others, and to his or her status in the society. Today in fact, many Xhosa speakers have also inherited the gift of their ancestors and can compose praise poems spontaneously. Dr. Mnwana, a Xhosa educator and a researcher, worked for many years as in several schools in East London of Eastern Cape Province and now a researcher in University of Witwatersrand, gave an account on how Xhosa poetry has become an integral part of extracurricular activities in many schools in the province. Dr. Mnwana described how some students in some secondary schools are able to speak out praise poems while they are performing in the ceremonies. It is a common occurrence, Dr. Mnwana averred that during school ceremonies young boys and girls will, at the very peak of the ceremony (when the dignitaries enter or when the key note speaker is about to address the congregation), jump up and eloquently and skillfully utter praises without being called upon. These young *iimbongi* are usually dressed in traditional attire, similar to the one often worn by adult *iimbongi*.

Any *imbongi* among the Xhosa people in the Eastern Cape can make praise poems on the spur of moment and literate poets may compose praise poems spontaneously or write Xhosa poems. However, more common people will memorize some famous and important poems of their clans so that they are capable to compose praise poems either on the spot or from their memory.

Four activities form the Xhosa praise poetic traditions. The most important one is general improvising. The other three activities are memorizing, the refined improvising of the *imbongi* and the writing. Any Xhosa poem is composed with one of the activities (Opland 5). As to the general improvising, which will be fully discussed in the paper, the common Xhosa men or women or even the teenagers in schools can be improvisers. Particularly in the countryside, where the western cultural influence is less penetrating than in the cities, it is common to see a person just stand up and improvise a praise poem on a wedding or a beer-drinking party.

In the cities, while watching football games, it is not rare to see a person stand up and improvise a praise poem. The poets are touched by the atmosphere and desire to convey his feelings through improvised poems. This kind of praise poems are improvised and spoken in a fast speed loudly, but not refined or with rhymes and to the music.

Dr. Mnwana has witnessed so many of such occasions. To a significant extent, it can be boldly said that the popularity of Xhosa poetry has remained strong. Unshaken by the winds of colonialism, unfazed by the waves of Western civilization and undaunted by the manacles of white domination, the Xhosa people in South Africa's Eastern Cape province have kept praise poetry at the centre of their culture and social life. The most common trend of preserving poetry is through its integration in schools' extracurricular programmes. Most schools, particularly rural schools encourage young poets (school girls and boys) to take part in and to develop their common innate gift of poetry. Although very few children actually display the rare gift of eloquently uttering an unprepared poem, many Xhosa children do give this a try.

It is, however, mainly through informal recreational activities that praise poetry penetrates Xhosa people from the early stages of their lives. For instance, one of the most enjoyable thrills to rural Xhosa herd boys is to watch a fight between two bulls. During mating season bulls often fight off over females (cows), which lets the boys enjoy their favorite spectacular bull fight and poetic feast. As the bulls begin to lock horns, boys will be jumping up and down, whistling, calling their bulls by names and eulogising them. It will be as if the bulls are instigated by these, and the fight will heat up immediately. In such instances, a boy is often heard praising his father's bull by saying 'Aah Dyamluthi [the name of the bull]!' Such spontaneous praising of bulls not only makes cattle herding more enjoyable to the boys but also helps boys to identify and develop their praise poetic gifts.

With the recent economic shifts and post-1994 massive urbanisation in South Africa, many Xhosa boys no longer look after cattle, but praise poetry has managed to find its way into the lives of Xhosa boys and girls. During the last quarter of 2011, Dr. Mnwana attended a huge school event: the formal opening of Byllets Combined School, one of the popular rural schools near East London. This event was well attended by dignitaries, including honourable Mr. Mahlubandile Qwase who was the MEC of Education in the Eastern Cape, and a horde of senior Department of Education officials, school principals, teachers and parents. It was at the very peak of this gracious occasion that a young poet emerged and shattered all the order and formality of the occasion into pieces. This 16-year old school

boy completely disrupted the programme just before a dignitary could speak, and he ran to the stage, grabbed the microphone and started to praise, eloquently and boldly. Suddenly, in a moment the quiet, orderly congregation busted into whistles, ululation and shouts. The atmosphere was never the same again in that occasion. The young poet had broken the ice. It was as if a great manacle of apprehension on speakers and boredom on listeners had been broken.

The role of *imbongi* goes far beyond entertaining and praising kings, chiefs, heroes, and other Xhosa notables. Even the word “praise” does not accurately describe what the Xhosa poet does when he or she performs. Indeed, long before Xhosa praise poetry could be written down and published *iimbongi* held a very prominent position in Xhosa society and culture. Historically, poets were highly venerated and referred as *iimbongi zenkundla* or *iimbongi zomthonyama* (the poets of the kraal). Although they were always found in the company of kings, chiefs, and other dignitaries, the role of *iimbongi* did not end merely in praising these dignitaries during “tribal” meetings and other important gatherings. Perhaps, the enormous respect that *iimbongi* enjoyed stemmed out of their strong character, fearlessness and outspokenness. *Iimbongi* were able to speak out openly and eloquently about anything including evil deeds by some feared individuals or groups in the society that would normally be concealed out of fear of the perpetrators. Owing to their vast knowledge of the history, culture and politics of the nation *iimbongi zomthonyama* were able to warn the nation in times of danger. SEK Mqhayi, one of South Africa’s most illustrious Xhosa praise poets whose poems were among the earliest to be recorded in writing was a typical example of a fully fledged *imbongi yomthonyama*. A “praise singer” to Chief Ndlambe, Mqhayi went far beyond praising the chief. Due to his amazing knowledge and foresight he also took upon himself the duty of warning the Xhosa nation openly in some of his praise poems (*izibongo*) when he deemed necessary. Even in times of distress to the nation, Mqhayi, who had also assumed a status of “the poet of the nation” (*imbongi yesizwe*) would use his superb oratory skills to console the nation. A good example is the poem that Mqhayi dedicated to the nation after the tragic incident of the sinking of SS Mendi. The latter was a British-African steam passenger-ship carrying African members of the 5th Battalion of the South African Native Labour Contingent during the First World War. Mendi sank in the heavy fog, near the Isle of Wight on February 21, 1917 after it collided with the SS Darro (another ship). This war vessel (Mendi) was carrying more than 800 men on board, mostly isiXhosa speakers from the Eastern Cape and more than 600 lives were lost. It is a notable attempt to console the nation through his epic poem “Ukutshona

Kukamendi” (*The Sinking of Mendi*), Mqhayi said:

Ewe, le nto kakde yinto yaloo nto.  
 Thina, nto zaziyo, asothukanga nto;  
 Sibona kamhlope, sithi bekumelwe,  
 Sitheth’engqondweni, sithi kufanelwe;  
 Xa bekungenjalo bekungayi kulunga.  
 Ngoko ke, Sotase! Kwaqal’ukulunga!  
 Le nqanaw’, umendi, namhla yendisile,  
 Na’igazi lethu lisikhonzisile! (Mqhayi 22-23)

Yes, this thing flows as a normal thing from that.  
 The thing we know is not scared of that;  
 We say, things have happened as they should have,  
 Within our brains we say: it should have been so;  
 If it hadn’t been so, nothing would have come right.  
 You see Sotase, things came right when the Mendi sank!  
 Our blood on that ship turned things around,  
 It served to make us known through the world!  
 (Translation by R Kavanagh and ZS Qangule)

As we have already hinted, Xhosa praise poets have a crucial role to keep the nation informed and to use their oratory skills to warn the people. Again we shall use one of Mqhayi’s praise poems to demonstrate this role. In 1925 the British colonial administration in South Africa asked Mqhayi to welcome the Prince of Wales with a praise poem during his visit (Nxasana 47). With amazing eloquence and skillful use of words, Mqhayi presented what would appear to be praising at a shallow glance, but the deeper meaning of some of the words used in this praise poem pointed to the contrary. For instance, in the second stanza of his welcoming “praise” poem Mqhayi says to the Prince:

Phumani nonke, nize kufanekisa! [Come out all of you, and let’s observe properly and identify him!]  
 Phumani, zizwe nonke, nize kufanekisa! [Come out oh, nations and let us identify him!]  
 Sisilo sini n’ esi singaziwayo? [What creature is this that no one knows anything about?]

Singajongekiyo, singaqhelekiyo? [So difficult to look at, so hard to get used to?]

Yaz' ithi kanti yile nabulele; [It may be a nabulele - a huge mystical monster]

Isilokaz' esikhulu seziziba; [The huge monster that lives in the dark, deep waters]

Yaz' ithi kanti ngulo Makhanda-mahlanu, — [This could be Makhanda-mahlanu — the beast with five heads]

Inyok'enkul'eza ngezivuthevuthe; [A mighty snake that brings the stroms]

Yaz'ithi kanti ngulo Gilikankqo, — [This could be Gilikankgo — the nameless one]

Isil'esikhul' esingaziwa mngxuma. [The great monster that cannot be known by any lair — hole].

This definitely is not a praise to the Prince. Through the extended metaphor he portrays the Prince or perhaps even the British Empire as a fearful, powerful monster that the Africans have to watch out for. Such words carry a warning to the nation and are not a praise to the Prince. Ostensibly, due to political tensions and lack of freedom of speech during Mqhayi's era, he was unable to openly voice out his dissatisfaction with the British control over South Africa. However, he eloquently and skillfully employs figurative language in the above-mentioned poem to warn, particularly Africans, against the less understood "British Monster."

The second activity that forms Xhosa praise poetry is memorizing. Quite many Xhosa people have memorized some poems by heart. When they express their gratefulness or feel proud of somebody, they just open their mouths and recite praise poems without any change or a very little change. The Xhosa boys in the countryside may gather together to practice improvising praise poems. The Xhosa men may recite the praise poems of their clans while dancing and singing during cultural ceremonies. In the small town of Ngqamakwe in the Eastern Cape, where Dr. Mnwana's home-village is located, such people form the majority of the performers.

As to the refined improvising of the imbongi, which is the third activity that forms Xhosa praise poetry, the imbongi may memorize some izibongo, that is, the historical poems, the praise poems of clans, the poems of individuals as well as the improvisational praise poems produced by other imbongii. Now in South Africa, it is traditional for Xhosa praise poets to produce spontaneous poems in praise of

dignitaries.

The imbongi used to be the private performer and a herald announcing the arrival of an important person. The imbongi was also the person who could criticize the chief and in fact the chief paid much attention to the imbongi's criticism and improved his rule according to this as it was the voice from the people. In recent decades, most iimbongi are educated men. Their professions can be much diverse, from teachers to laborers. Although many Xhosa young people have now migrated to big cities such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Pretoria, and East London, the majority of them still have strong connections with the countryside and most still submit to the rule of chiefs (now called traditional leaders) and poetry is still an integral part of their lives. So the iimbongi have to find chances to perform either for the chiefs who visit the cities or on some other occasions. However, when the iimbongi perform, they still wear the traditional garb of animal skins and still announce the arrival of a certain chief when he gets off a car. Many iimbongi, such as Manisi, Burns-Ncamashe, Msila, Mabunu, all have written and published their poems either in the traditional or modern way.

The last activity that forms Xhosa praise poetry is writing. The writers of Xhosa praise poems, many iimbongi write poems either with Xhosa or European structure. Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi is a great Xhosa praise poet and wrote with European structure. As the first Xhosa praise poet to write and publish his poems, he bridged the gap between an imbongi and a poet writer. Mqhayi is regarded as the "Imbongi yesizwe jikelele" (imbongi of the whole country). Manisi and Burns-Ncamashe have had their collection of praise poems published and some writes published their praise poems in the articles or newspapers. Many more written Xhosa praise poems remain to be published.

### **The Structure of Xhosa Praise Poetry**

Praise poetry can be found Africa, Middle East, Polynesia, Asia and in early Western Europe. According to Opland, "praise poems are essentially exercises in individuation encapsulating in a concatenation of discrete nominal references the distinctiveness of a person, comprising often elliptical allusions to lineage, physical and moral characteristics, and actions in the subject's public career" (1997: 85). And Finnegan defines praise poetry as "the type for court poetry and is one of the most developed and elaborate poetic genre in Africa" (1970:111).

Xhosa, Shona, Sotho, Zulu and Yoruba are especially known for their praise poetry. The core of Xhosa praise poems is irreducibly names. A Xhosa name may convey some physical personality or peculiarity of a person. A Xhosa person

may be referred to by one of his or her many different names, which were given by parents, relatives, associates or oneself. These names can refer to a person's moral or physical qualities, or an event which he or she took part in. These names may be extended into parts of an izibongo. Xhosa personal praise names form part of the praise names about men, women, children, ancestors, clans, chiefs etc. The praise poems of a clan are a sequence of the praise names. Thus, Xhosa names form the core of clan praises, chief praises and personal praises of common people. The following poem by one of prominent Xhosa poets of our times, Zolani Mkiva demonstrates this. During the historical event of the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first president of democratic rule in South Africa on May 10, 1994, Zolani Mkiva displayed robust knowledge of Mandela's clan names, history and other biographic details as he praised this leader with an exhilarating poem titled "Ntengu-ntengu macetyana." Mkiva skillfully traces Mandela's clan and lineage as follows:

Yinquleqhu ukubekwa kukaMandela,  
Iqadi lika Jongintaba ka Bhagrayi ka Nkonka, unyana ka Nosekeni.

[It's a great assignment to inaugurate Mandela, of the house of  
Jongintaba, of Bhagrayi of Nkonka, the son of Nosekeni<sup>1</sup>]

This extract alone displays that this imbongi (Mkiva) has far more than average knowledge of President Mandela's lineage.

Clan names of the chiefs or other dignitaries who are being praised are also quite important. For instance, most poets who praise former President Nelson Mandela often recite his clan names like Madiba, Ngqolomsila, Yem-Yem, Sophitsho etc. Dr. Mswana's clan names are Nkwali, Bhukula, Lusu, Mkhwanase etc.

All Xhosa praise poets tend to employ in their performance the stylistic tropes of anaphora and anadiplosis. They adopt a strained mode of articulation, with rising intonation at the start of a line and a tendency to drift down to the end of the line with a length of the penultimate syllable. They perform on public occasions of significance before traditional gatherings. The following are the characteristics of the structure of Xhosa praise poetry.

Firstly, a Xhosa praise poem typically starts with a few lines as an introduction. The openings are served as calls for attention while the poet gathers for what follows. A Xhosa praise poet would begin with "Iziizwee! Iziizwee!"



Secondly, a Xhosa praise poem always refers to the physical appearances of their subjects. References to physical attributes tend to be formulaic.

Thirdly, when the Xhosa imbongi composes his poems in performance, there is a correlation between breath groups and line demarcations. The pattern of breath groups is significant. The poet will take a breath at the very beginning. For instance, he will breathe before he says, Kuyavakala! [We have heard!...] [breath] Kuyavakala Thole Lesilo<sup>2</sup>! [We have heard from you Offspring of the Great Beas] Fourthly, rising intonations are mostly used at the start of some of the lines. The first five lines, for example, all commence on a rising pitch. Rising intonation may appear in the middle of the lines.

The fourth characteristic is the gesture, Xhosa poets usually wear a clock and hat of animal skins and carry two spears or sticks. They often walk around among the audience.

From the above analysis, we have known that four activities form the Xhosa praise poetic traditions, which are general improvising, memorizing, the refined improvising of the imbongi and the writing. Any Xhosa praise poem is composed with one of the activities. As to the textural features such as breath, intonation and gesture produce a division of the poem. Before Line —, the poet takes breaths at the start/middle, but after Line —, he breathes at the end of line. The poet takes his sticks/spears/something else in his right/left hand. The content of the praise poem indicates a transition in the certain part of the poem.

The Xhosa oral tradition has been persistent in the past two hundred and now is still flourishing. The Xhosa iimbongi were invited to recite praise poems at the inauguration of President Mandela in 1994 and at the welcoming ceremony of the Queen and the Pope to South Africa. Facing the influence of the “high culture,” the Xhosa imbongi have never given in and now still make their voice heard in their homeland.

## Notes

1. Nosekeni is the name of President Mandela's Mother.
2. Kuyavakala! Kuyavakala Thole Lesilo! These are the usual opening words when *imbongi* is about to praise the chief after the latter has uttered some wise words to the people.

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