



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

The Poetic Expérience in South Africa

February, Vernie

Citation

February, V. (1988). The Poetic Expérience in South Africa.
Leidschrift : Black Culture In South Africa, 4(Juni), 17-32.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72961>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72961>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

'GO MEASURE THE DISTANCE...': THE POETIC EXPERIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

Vernie February

Praise poetry

It is impossible to write about poetry in South Africa without referring to the tradition which exists among the Bantu speaking peoples of South Africa, namely, praise poetry. Already in 1857, David Livingstone observed in his *Missionary Travels* that "each one of the boys is expected to compose an oration of himself called 'leina' or name, or to be able to repeat it with fluency". That not everyone appreciated the importance of poetry among the Nguni is clear from the introduction to the *Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* compiled by the Reverend J.L.Döhne in 1857. He was a missionary to the American Board and had worked among, what he called the Zulu-Kafirs for twenty years. Yet despite his vast knowledge of the language, Döhne had no hesitation concluding in his introduction:

Some have expected to find much poetry among the Zulu-Kafirs, but there is in fact none. Poetical language is extremely rare, and we meet only with a few pieces of prose. The Zulu nation is more fond of 'ukuhlabela', i.e. singing, and engage more in 'ukuvuma amagama esinkosi', i.e. singing the praises of the chief, than any other Kafir tribe ... nothing like poetry or songs exist, no metre, no rhyme, nothing that soothes the passions, no admiration of the heavenly bodies or taste for the beauties of creation.²

Quite obviously, the Reverend Döhne was a dupe of his Eurocentric approach in that he might have looked for dactyls, pentameters, trochees, heroic couplets and rhyme conforming to the Western tradition of abba's and aabb's etcetera. In his inability to find these, he concluded that the Zulu-Kafir had no penchant for poetry. Now it is not uncommon for Europeans to arrive at pejorative statements in respect of African culture. African languages were often dismissed as being irrelevant on the

basis that the language was primitive, because it lacked grammatical regularity.

It is apparent when one looks into the Zulu language that poetry in fact did exist. The verb *ukubonga* means to praise (as when given something to admire) or to give; *isibongo* means clan name, whereas the plural *izibongo* means praises. The praise-poet is known as an *imbongi*. Many clan names have a very poetical meaning: Quabe (musical bow), Luthuli (dust), Vilakazi (large, lazy fellow), Zulu (sky), Nyembezi (teardrop), Mtutuzile (comforter). The *imbongi* held a unique position within his society. This was reflected in his attire. He had an excellent memory, was well-versed in the history of his people and was, because of that knowledge and his creative powers, held in high esteem. He was practically the court historian. Praise poems are to be found in many varieties, ranging from the earlier uncomplicated poems to the couplets and triplets in the eighteenth century and the stanza's in the nineteenth century. The diversity in praise poetry is so enormous because, as the distinguished Nguni specialist A.C. Jordan wrote, "in fact every boy was expected to recite his own praises, those of the family bull, those of the family cow, even if composed by somebody else".³

Praise poems have been likened to eulogies, odes and epics. The late professor Lestrade called it a "type of composition, intermediate between the pure, mainly narrative epic and the pure, mainly apostrophic ode bearing a combination of exclamatory narrative and laudatory apostrophizing".⁴ A.C. Jordan characterized it as "perhaps the proudest achievement of Bantu-speaking South Africa partly narrative or wholly descriptive. It abounds in epithets very much like the Homeric ones, and the language is in general highly figurative".⁵ The praise poem is not an extinct genre and is, from time to time, adapted to suit the changing conditions in South Africa.

It is often used - as it was in the traditional context - to satirize, to expose. The classic example of such a praise poem is the one dedicated to the Prince of Wales when he visited South Africa in the 1920s. It was written by the greatest of Nguni poets, Samuel Krune Mqhayi (1874-1945), who was also responsible

for seven verses of the national anthem *Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika*. The poem is a satirical endictment of the English inheritance in South Africa, and, as such, a forerunner to many others written as late as the 1970s. I cite the following lines:

Ah Britain, Great Britain
Great Britain of the endless sunshine.
She hath conquered the oceans and laid them low,
She hath drained the little rivers and lapped them dry;
She hath swept the little nations and wiped them away;
And now she is making for the open skies.
She sent us the preacher. She sent us the bottle.
She sent us the breech-loader. She sent us the canon.
O. Roaring Britain, which must we embrace?
You sent us the truth, denied us the truth;
You sent us life, deprived us of life;
You sent us the light, we sit in the dark
Shivering, benighted in the bright noonday sun.⁶

The modern poets, many of them now known as "Soweto poets", can thus draw on a long tradition ranging from the very early praise poetry to, more recently, Mqhayi and Benjamin Vilakazi, the Zulu poet. The latter had a major influence on South African traditional poetry. Although in his early poetry he was influenced by the romantic tradition, cf. 'WeMoya Inqomfi' (The Wind and the Lark), he eventually returned to the blank verse of the Zulu *izibongi*. His 'Ezinkomponi' (In the Goldmines) must certainly rank as a classic in our literature. It was included in his first book of poems *Inkondlo KaZulu* (Zulu Horizons). Apart from its excellence in poetry as in form, the poem gives a very fine description of the situation in which the black mineworker finds himself, when

Vernie February

employed on the goldmines:

Ezinkomponi

Roar without rest machines of the mines
Roar from dawn till darkness falls
I shall awake, oh let me be!
Roar, machines, continue deaf
To black men groaning as they labour,
Tortured by their aching muscles,
Gasping in the foetid air,
Reeking from the dirt and sweat
Shaking themselves without effect

.....

I heard it said that in the pit
Are very many black men's tribes;
It's they who raise the great white dumps
That so amaze their ancestors.
They said: one day a siren screeches
And then a black rock-rabbit came,
A poor dazed thing with clouded mind;
It burrowed, and I saw the gold.

.....

Roar without rest machines of the mines,
Louder still and louder roar!
Drown our voices with your uproar,
Drown our cries and groans of pain
As you eat away our joints
Jeer machines, yes jeer and mock us,
Let out sufferings cause your laughter,
Well we know your terrible powers,
We, your slaves, and you, our masters!⁷

When Vilakazi died at the age of forty-one, he had pioneered in poetry as well as in society. He was the first black South African to study African languages and to receive a doctorate at

'Go measure the distance...'

Witwatersrand University. He was also the first African to be appointed to the Department of Bantu Languages.

Non-Nguni poetry

In 1946, the year Vilakazi died, Peter Abrahams, the novelist and short story writer, had already published his first book in English.⁸ With Abrahams one is at once aware of what Melville Herskovits called "socialized ambivalence" among the colonised. Abrahams was one of the first major literary figures who could not draw directly on a Nguni poetic tradition. The apartheid policy of successive South African governments, constitutionally enshrined in 1948, was detrimental to the development of literature in the Bantu languages. The misuse and abuse of the term Bantu ideologically, where it came to mean something inferior, was largely responsible for a non-appreciation of traditional literature and traditional poetry.

By the mid-fifties and early sixties, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the South African artist to escape the suffocating laws of apartheid. The regime propagated a "culture for the few" and ignored the "culture of the many". The great mass, in the ideology of apartheid, was "beyond art" and "unthinkable". With the poetry of Dennis Brutus we have moved away completely from the Nguni tradition and are confronted with English poetry written in English. In his first anthology, *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots*, his imagery is defined by the oppressive system in South Africa:

Under jackboots our bones and spirits crunch
forces into sweat-tear sudden slush
sun-striped perhaps, our bows may later sing
or spell out some malignant nemesis
Sharpe-villes to spearpoints for revenging⁹

Daniel Abasiékong observes of Brutus's poetry in *Transition*: "It is natural that a South African poet with an open sensibility should react to the horny police regime that operates in the country".¹⁰

Brutus conceived of a good poem as one in which " we are conscious of a rich, variegated experience which sums up the whole in a complex and intellectually satisfying emotion". He sees himself in one of his poems as follows:

A troubadour, I traverse all my land, exploring
her wide-flung paths with zest
no mistress-favour had adorned my breast
only the shadow of an arrow-band¹¹

His anthology *Letters to Martha*, consisted of his experiences as a political prisoner on Robben Island. They were written as letters to his sister-in-law to avoid censorship. The *Guardian* wrote of the poems: " ... in the deft simplicity of the first part of the book, he has grace and penetration unmatched even by Solzhenitsyn....". The imagery and symbolism recall those of other South African artists. He can state with certitude:

I have lashed them
The marks of my scars
Lie deep in their psyche¹²

It caused the critic Abasiékong to argue that the political poems of Brutus do not so much represent a political attitude as one of several ways in which the poet's sensibility functions.

"Literature engagée"

The period between 1960 and 1976 is the era of the apartheid generation. Did the nineteen-fifties at least create the impression that there was still room left for a dialogue between white and black (the period was characterised by what Mahatma Gandhi

'Go measure the distance...'

called Satyagraha - passive resistance), in the nineteen-sixties, after the Sharpeville killings, many South Africans went into exile. Leaders of popular movements were either gaoled or exiled and the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) were proscribed. Because of this growing repression, a change of policy took place within the ANC. It abandoned the tactic of passive resistance and accepted violence as an inevitable part of the struggle for liberation. The establishment of the organisation Umkonto weSizwe was an expression of this change in policy.¹³

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was gaining credibility among young blacks all over the country. It resulted among other things in the establishment of the South African Student's Organization (SASO) in 1968. Steve Biko remained the charismatic leader of the Black Consciousness Movement up to his tragic death in 1977.

In literary circles, the BCM gave rise to "literature engagée". Poetry, harrowing and harsh at times, written by blacks for blacks affiliating with the "burn-baby-burn" phase of the Afro-Americans in the sixties. It was in 1972 that James Matthews and Gladys Thomas had the distinction of having the first poetry anthology banned in the country, namely *Cry Rage*. Poetry has become, in the words of James Matthews, the following:

It is said
that poets write of beauty
of form, of flowers and of love
but the words I write
are of pain and of rage.¹⁴

This is "literature engagée". No attempt is made to produce "l'art pour l'art". Matthews and Thomas produced poetry for the masses in a language which needs little explanation. This is the other side of the coin of Western civilisation. It is, in the word of the Afro-American poet Jon Eckles, "Western Syphilisation" on

display. The ideologue, not easily given to laughter, replied with the only weapon available: force. So *Cry Rage* was banned by the authorities. Matthews spelt out his message coldly, if rather crudely, in the following poem:

Can the white man speak for me?

Can the white man speak for me?
Can he feel my pains when his laws
tear wife and children from my side
and I am forced to work a thousand miles away?

.....
Will he sooth my despair
as I am driven insane
by scraps of paper permitting me to live?
Can the white man speak for me?¹⁵

Perhaps the poet and dramatist Adam Small comes close to interpreting the mood amongst blacks in South Africa when he asserted in 1971:

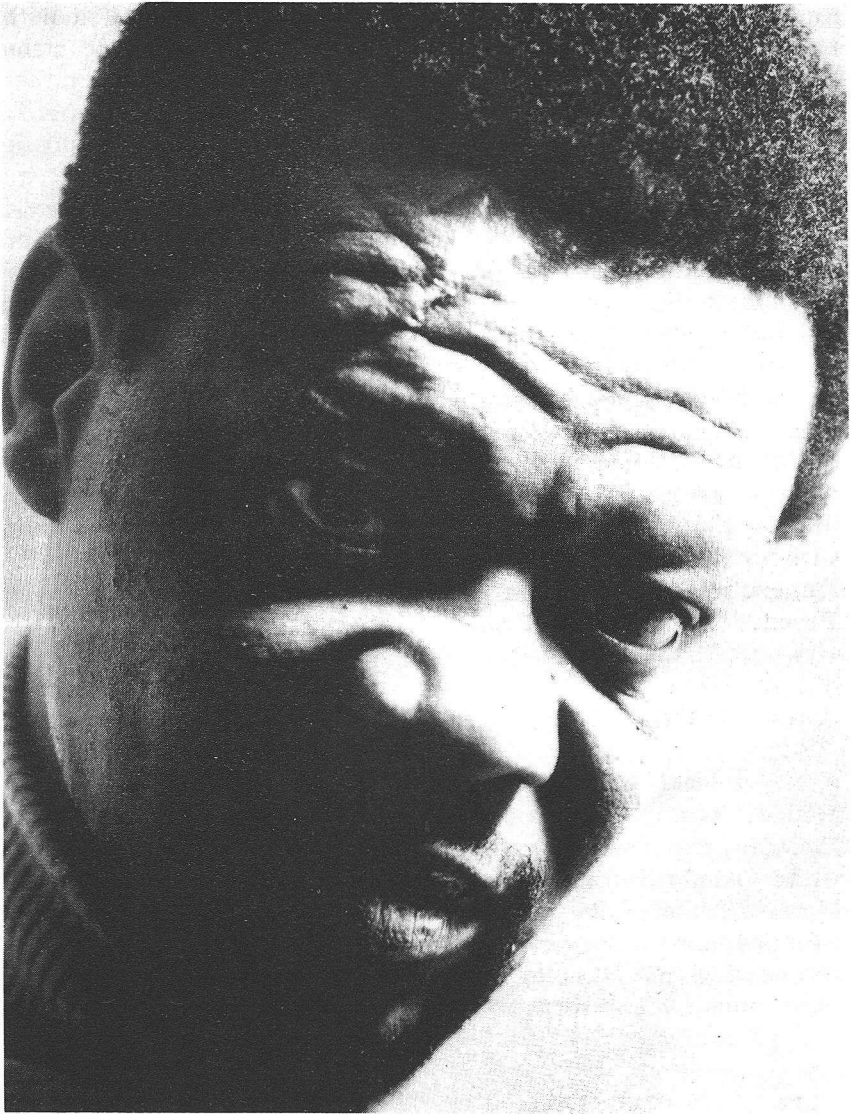
Our blackness is an expression of our pride. We no longer care whether the white man understands us or not... We may live by the grace of God, but we do not live by the grace of the whites.¹⁶

In an article entitled, "Black Consciousness: a Reactionary Tendency", Mildred Poswa, the writer, observed:

That the ideas of Black Consciousness were first advocated by the students of the oppressed communities, who have for almost a decade been attending tribal colleges, hence they were attracted to these ideas because they seemed to hold the promise of a dignity which those institutions had by definition been incapable of imparting to the students.¹⁷

Apart from the poets influenced by the BCM, there have been more very fine poets. Arthur Nortje was one of them. In 1973 he published *Dead Roots*. Probably one of the best poets to come out of South Africa, Nortje tragically committed suicide in Oxford. Another exception is Masizi Kunene, who writes in Zulu. In an

'Go measure the distance...'



Wally Mongane Serote (photo by Sean Fitzpatrick, (courtesy of AABN))

interview in *De Gids* Kunene admitted that it was difficult to translate Zulu adequately into a European language. He stated then:

The context of a translation always lies in a specific framework of thought processes, be it cultural, linguistic, the own forms of logic, value judgements etc. This means that for a correct translation, or properly stated, an exact translation, all these factors must be taken into consideration. Thus, for example, in translating Zulu in a non-tonal language, a form of compensation must be found.... Even more important perhaps than the linguistic factors.... is the fundamental logic, the range of ideas. For often, that which is logical in Zulu is illogical in English!¹⁸

Masizi Kunene's first volume of poetry, simply called *Zulu Poems* (1970) are not English poems but poems which originate directly from a Zulu tradition. Kunene himself said: "Since the Zulu literary tradition has been largely undervalued, I began to write without models, until I discovered the poetry of Vilakazi.....".¹⁹ Kunene's 'Emperor Shaka', an epic poem, and his 'Anthem of Decades' are classics of South African poetry.

"Soweto" poets.

A major black poet to emerge in the early seventies was Oswald Mtshali. His leading book of poems was called *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, which was published in 1971. The South African white Anglo-Saxon literary establishment eagerly embraced Mtshali. Some of the reviews were very good indeed. His poems were humorous, satirical and moving. Nadine Gordimer in her foreword to his anthology referred to Mtshali's "colloquial tone, ironic humour and evocative simplicity" as in 'The Shepherd and

his Flock':

The rays of the sun
like a pair of scissors
cutting the blanket
of dawn from the sky...²⁰

Mtshali is described as the poet of the "kraal peasant" who uses "the imagery of survival" with "a city poet's tongue, quick as a chameleon's and rasping as a tiger's". If Mtshali's poetry found a ready response amongst white critics and readers, then the poetry of Wally Mongane Serote came as a shock to them.

Serote published his poems at a time when the growing suppression by the government of "illegal" activities like meetings and strikes came to be matched by the strength of the Black Consciousness Movement. It was the time that Steve Biko wrote:

The call for Black Consciousness is the most positive call to me from any group in the black world for a long time. It is more than just a reactionary rejection of Whites by Blacks. The quintessence of it is the realisation by Blacks that, in order to feature well in this game of power politics, they have to use the concept of group power and to build a strong foundation for this.....The philosophy of Black Consciousness therefore, expresses group pride and the determination by the Blacks to rise and to attain the envisaged self. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by the Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.²¹

It all came to head in the Soweto uprisings of 1976, after the South African government enforced the teaching of Afrikaans, the language of the oppressor, in black schools. The Soweto poets were very much involved in and concerned with this struggle. And Serote was one of them. He managed to express the feelings of his dispossessed countrymen in a simple language. His *Yakhal' inKomo* was published in 1972. In 1974 Serote published *Tsetlo*, to be followed by *No baby must weep* in 1975. The comments on the

poetry of Serote were of a very varied nature. Christopher Hope, the novelist, wrote of his *Yakhal' inKomo*:

Serote writes of his experience of what it is like to be black in the township of Johannesburg, in White South Africa. *Yakhal'inKomo*: the cry of the cattle going home to slaughter. What he has to say is emphatic, sometimes harrowing. He is a man at war. "The poetry is in the pity" Wilfried Owen said of a situation no less extreme, and thereby caused a great deal of damage to poetry.... The question is whether the poet has the right to indulge in his rage by giving way to it?²²

Yet, Lionel Abrahams remarked of Serote's poetry, in contradistinction to the comments by Christopher Hope, that the poet's "emotional burden is neither guilt nor anger - though these feelings are material to his vision - but a profound human grief".²³

White South Africa reacted (and still reacts) hysterically to the following lines:

If I pour petrol on
a white child's face
I wonder how I will
feel when his eyes go pop.

....

I understand alas I
do understand
The rage of a white man
pouring petrol on a
black child's face²⁴

It is Aggrey Klaaste who reminds us that "if it were not for the fact that Wally Serote has the happy facility of bringing out the black experience in such vivid poetic colour, one would imagine the man fairly gets drunk with words".

To Klaaste "Serote manages to speak the true language of the black man".²⁵ Serote eventually left South Africa and is now attached to the cultural department of the ANC in London.

'Go measure the distance...'

Other important Soweto poets are for example James Matthews, who published his anthology *Black Voices Shout* in 1974. A later publication, *Pass me a Meatball*, was banned. In exile Barry Feinberg edited his *Poets to the People* in 1974. Other anthologies were published by Sipho Sepamla (*The Soweto I Love*), Essop Patel (*They came at Dawn*) and in Afrikaans by Hein Willemse (*Angsland*).

"Cultural workers"

In 1977 Ravan Press, Johannesburg, launched *Staffrider*, which became one of the most important literary platforms for black poets and writers. A staffrider was some sort of a rogue, very much a Baron von Münchhausen type, deft, mercurial and brilliant in the art of survival. Staffriders were the persons who jumped onto the trains already packed to capacity and hanging dangerously outside, clinging to the windows and the doors.

The Medupe Writers Association had as its aim to encourage Blacks to write. Medu was first called the Azanian Poets and Writers' Association. (AZAPOWA). Ingoapele Mandingoane's epic 'Black trial' became quick a favourite amongst black audiences. Thousands came to hear him recite it, accompanied by musicians and poets from Mhloti (Shangaan for tears).

The first significant literary conference in conjunction with the ANC was the Medu conference in Gaborone, Botswana in 1982. It was here that it was clearly established that there was no difference between the poet, the painter, the photographer, and the guerrilla fighter. Here too the word that came to be used for writers and artists was culture worker.

Increasing oppression inside South Africa has led to a further exodus of blacks and a revival of culture as an important instrument in the struggle for liberation. This has led to the establishment of Culture Desks by the major democratic organisations inside the country, namely UDF and COSATU - a trade union. "Popular culture" - poetry and literature for and by

the masses, in the workshops, in the factories became very important. One of the important popular culture poets to emerge in Cosatu was Qabula. In Cape Town, Mavis Smallberg also attracted attention with her poems for the people.

This was (and is) "literature and education for the masses" - an attempt to dispel the lie that the "great mass was beyond art".

The major conference on culture was held in Amsterdam in 1987, entitled CASA-culture in another South Africa. Its uniqueness lay herein that all the major democratic organisations inside South Africa, for example UDF, COSATU, COSAW (Congress of South African Writers) as well as the cultural department of the ANC co-operated to make the conference momentous. Exiles and writers still inside the country met - some of them for the first time - in Amsterdam. The discussions and the subsequent revolutions may prove to be of great help in a future South Africa.

Ironically, it was a member of the National Executive of the ANC who reminded his countrymen - writers, poets, painters, photographers - that what is needed is not "pamphleteering", but "excellence in one's craft".

Conclusions

The differences between traditional poetry and modern black poetry are obvious. The traditional poet operated in a culture area and context and cosmological experience totally different from the apartheid society. Zulu, for example is a tonal language, and tone cannot be divorced from meaning, context or text. The traditional poet can fall back on literary devices inherent in his language tradition, for example, parallelisms, juxtapositions, alliteration - the language is concordially related. The *iculo*, i.e. song, often surfaces strongly in these poems. There is also the onomatopoeic device which lends added strength to the poetry.

'Go measure the distance...'

In contrast, the black poet under apartheid conditions is often alienated from his traditions, writes in a language (mostly English) which is an acquired one, and is up against a poetic tradition established by western society. Often, acceptance of his poetry is determined by white critics, who will comment on form, technique, imagery and symbolism through the critical tools at hand and provided by western poetic traditions. Very often, the black poet is charged with producing "literature conscripted for the victims" at the expense of craftsmanship. It is with this in mind that I would like to recall Mazisi Kunene who reminded us:

Ndaba kuyofa abantu
Kuyosala izibongo
Yizona eziyozala zibadabula emansciweni

which means:

My Lord generations of man come and go
But our epics will remain
It is them that will make them graze and weep at
the ruins.

Notes

1. Sipho Sepamla, *The Soweto I Love* (1977) 14.
2. J.L. Döhne, *Zulu-Kafir Dictionary* (repr.; Hampshire 1967) ix.
3. A.C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature* (Los Angeles 1974) 21.
4. Lestrade, "Traditional Literature" in: I. Schapera ed., *The Bantu-speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London 1946) 925.
5. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature*, 21.
6. Ibidem, 27.
7. Benjamin Vilakazi, *Zulu Horizons*, transl. D.M. Malcolm and F.L. Friedman (Cape Town 1962) 169.

8. Peter Abrahams, *A Black Man Speaks of Freedom* (Durban 1940).
9. D. Brutus, *Sirens, Knuckles and Boots* (Mbari 1963).
10. Daniel Abasiokong, "Poetry Pure and Applied", *Transition* 5, 23 (1965) 45-48.
11. D. Brutus, *A Simple Lust* (London 1973) 2.
12. D. Brutus, *Letters to Martha* (London 1968).
13. Umkhonto weSizwe or Spear of the Nation was founded as a sister organisation of the ANC in June, 1961. It was to engage in acts of sabotage without harm to life.
14. James Matthews and Gladys Thomas, *Cry Rage* (Johannesburg 1972) 2.
15. Ibidem, 9.
16. Adam Small in the *Rand Daily Mail*, July 13, 1971, cf. V. February, *Mind your Colour* (London 1981) 102.
17. Mildred Poswa, "Black Consciousness: a Reactionary Tendency", *The Educational Journal*, March, April, May and June 1976.
18. Masizi Kunene in: *De Gids* 4 (1975) 239.
19. Masizi Kunene, "Als je wreed bent zonder dat je daar een reden voor hebt", J. Iven in gesprek met Nasizi Kunene, *Bzzletin* (1982) 31.
20. Oswald Mtshali, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* (New York 1972) 3.
21. Steve Biko, *Black Consciousness in South Africa* (New York 1978).
22. Christopher Hope, "The poet in the abbatoir" in: M. Chapman ed., *Soweto Poetry* (Johannesburg 1982) 72.
23. Lionel Abrahams, "Political Vision of a Poet" in: Chapman ed., *Soweto Poetry*, 74.
24. Wally Mongane Serote, *Tsetlo* (Johannesburg 1974).
25. Aggrey Klaaste, "Poetry that our Kids Should Read" in: Chapman ed., *Soweto Poetry*, 75-76.