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## Analyzing, digitizing and technologizing the oral word: The case of Bongani Sitole

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This article analyzes the oral poetry, *izibongo*, produced by Xhosa oral poet Bongani Sitole (both in book and technological form). It will trace this poetry from the moment it was orally produced, through to the technologizing and publication of this poetry in book form and on a website. The initial part of this article looks at the life and work of the poet. A contextual analysis of selected poetry is provided. The latter part of the article concentrates on issues related to technology and its relationship to the oral and written word. The term ‘technauriture’ has been coined in order to refer to this process. The contribution of eLearning4Africa ([www.elearning4africa.com](http://www.elearning4africa.com)) to the digitization process of Sitole’s poetry is acknowledged.

### 1. Introduction

Bongani Sitole’s book *Qhiwu-u-u-ula!! Return to the Fold!!* (Kaschula et al. 1996/ 2006) was recently re-released in a second edition. This article discusses the accompanying technologizing and digitizing of this South African poetry, whilst a contextual analysis of selected poetry is provided. The article presents an opportunity to trace the contemporary development of the oral word as a five-fold process: Firstly, capturing the oral word through technology and transcribing the oral word into written isiXhosa; secondly, translating the written isiXhosa into English; thirdly, the publication of both the isiXhosa and the English translation in book form; fourthly, the digitizing of some of the material and making it available on a website for downloading by interested parties; fifthly, the oral and live performance of some of the poetry by new and innovative township youth groups.

In essence this article answers the following questions: How was the poetry collected? Where was it published? How did it come to be in book form? How has it come to be represented on a website? What was the process involved? What are the copyright issues involved in the further commercialization of this oral art? To what extent does the technologizing of the initial oral word, through the digitization of the transcribed and translated word, bring it back to orality? This article builds on the primary works of Walter Ong (1982), Ruth Finnegan (1988) and others where the link between orality, literacy and technology is explored. On the one hand, the article shows that these three forms comfortably co-exist as indicated in Finnegan’s work (1988). On the other hand, the article suggests that Ong’s theoretical stance, which associated orality and literacy as separate modes of thought, can be misleading in the context of Bongani Sitole’s work. Street (1995, 158–9) sums this up as follows:

Ong’s thesis, then, appears to have little value in the investigation of the relationships between orality and literacy. We would do better to look for more specific relationships between literacy events and literacy practices on the one hand, and oral conventions on the other. In the project of

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investigating these relationships on a cross-cultural basis and in such a way as to yield fruitful generalizations, Ong's thesis does not provide much help and is, indeed, likely to mislead the unwary researcher.

Building on critical works such as that of Street, it is important to note that parts of Sitole's book are now available on-line together with an accompanying teacher/student guide. This completes the orality–literacy continuum and brings it full-circle. Exercises accompany each of the poems in the book and this study guide can be downloaded from the site ([www.oralliterature.co.za](http://www.oralliterature.co.za)) together with the oral poems (both the isiXhosa and English versions).

## 2. The Xhosa *imbongi*

The tradition of the *imbongi* or Xhosa oral poet has never been a static one. As Jeff Opland (1983, 236) puts it,

The dynamic element is necessary in our approach since the tradition of Xhosa oral poetry has clearly changed and is continuing to change with changes in Cape Nguni society. Tradition is not a lifeless thing; it alters and adapts to new social circumstances.

Many elements of the tradition have been dropped or adapted. Nevertheless the concept of singing praises still retains an identifiable character which is based on the tradition in the past. The *imbongi's* relationship with the audience and the role which their *izibongo* (poetry) play within that particular society are of utmost importance. Any analysis of the tradition will therefore have to take into account the context of the performance, the audience itself and the function and role of the *imbongi* in a society which is subjected to constant socio-cultural, political and technological pressure. In a contemporary South African context, Opland (2005, 387) argues that the poet's role '... is to break down barriers between people; he is... a matchmaker, gathering people together who differ'. In relation to the well-known *imbongi*, D.L.P. Yali-Manisi, Opland (2005, 387) continues to state that:

In performance he came alive, he was freed of the constraints of social intercourse, he broke free of the pains of his body, he could say what he wanted as he wanted. And what he said and the way he said it demanded attention and marked him as a man of stature, a true son of the soil of Africa, and one of its greatest poets.

Similarly, this article provides a case study of the late Bongani Sitole in order to show how the tradition has adapted into a technologized, globalized world where orality, literacy and technology now constantly interact.

The role of the *imbongi* as mediator and as political and social commentator in the power base within which they operate has been retained over time. This is an important aspect of defining the contemporary oral poet. For example, Alfred Qabula, an *imbongi* who operated within the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), saw his role as that of mediator between the people and the union which he represented, in the same way that the traditional *imbongi* mediated between the people and the chief. Bongani Sitole saw his role as mediator between organizations or chiefs with differing view points and also as an advisor to such organizations or chiefs. Sitole and Qabula also saw their roles as including the awakening of political consciousness. Elizabeth Gunner (1986, 35) states that,

The *izibongo* are a unique tool in raising workers' consciousness of their union and its role in their lives as workers. Yet they are also quite clearly an expression of a strong and old art form with its roots deep in social and political awareness.

The tradition has grown and adapted to new environments and is 'dynamic'. Urbanization, the impact of education, the formation and later disbanding of the independent homelands, the changing nature of the chieftainship, the emergence of black nationalism during apartheid,

the subsequent release of political prisoners, the unbanning of organizations in the early 1990s, South Africa's transition to democracy, the growing equality between genders, as well as the rapid emergence of new technologies have all had their effect on the tradition. David Coplan's research (1995) which analyzes changes in performance creativity and culture over the years in South Africa provides concrete evidence of the adaptability of tradition. Coplan (1985, 242) states that,

...the production and reproduction of performances must be located within the set of political, economic, social and cultural, relations between performers and the total context in which they perform.

In accordance with Coplan's methodology, it is the purpose of this article to contextualize Sitole's performances. This will provide a more holistic impression of the *imbongi* as well as the factors which have contributed to change in the tradition within the reality of globalization and increasing reliance on what one could term technologized literacy or technauriture.

Archie Mafeje (1967, 91) defined the *imbongi* as

A praise poet who frequented the chief's great place and travelled with him in traditional Nguni society. His distinctive feature is that he can recite poems without having prepared them beforehand.

If one bears in mind the socio-economic, political and technological changes which have taken place in the South African society over the past years this definition no longer reflects the reality of the situation. Opland acknowledges the fact that the 'actual situation today is complicated by social processes such as urbanization, assimilation, and formal education. ...' (1983, 33). It may already be necessary to build on a more recent definition (Kaschula 2002, 47). Definitions are in essence anachronistic and require constant revision. In this definition by Kaschula referred to above it is suggested that the contemporary *imbongi* can be classified as a person involved in the oral production of poetry using traditional styles and techniques in any given context where they are recognized as mediator, praiser, critic and educator and accepted by the audience as such. However, there is no mention of technology which would need to form part of a contemporary definition. The discourse used by *iimbongi* (oral poets) is moulded within both the physical and technological contexts in which they find themselves. This is clearly illustrated by the case study presented in this article.

### 3. Bongani Sitole

Sitole was born at Mqhekezweni near Mthatha in the Eastern Cape (Transkei) province on 21 June 1937. This area was under the control of the Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo, a chiefdom which was very supportive of the anti-apartheid liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC) as well as its leader, Nelson Mandela.

Sitole worked as a migrant worker from 1959 until 1976 in the Johannesburg area as well as in Port Elizabeth. He then returned to Mthatha where he resided until his death in 2003. He was a Research Assistant in the Bureau for African Research and Documentation (BARD) at the then University of Transkei from 1990 until his retirement in 1996. There is a certain irony in the fact that he was employed by an Institution of Higher Learning, when he himself had hardly progressed beyond primary level schooling. It again takes one to the orality-literacy debate and in this instance, a university largely based on the concept of literacy, rightly recognized the importance of the cultural and socio-political underpinnings of orality.

According to Sitole, he began praising while he was still at school in about 1954. He would praise at various school functions such as school concerts. Sitole's contemporary poetry shows that, although the themes of the poetry have changed, or been added to, they have been adapted to accommodate new pressures and new power bases (Kaschula et al. 1996/2006). The traditional *iimbongi* (attached to chiefs) were concerned mainly with events which were taking

place in the immediate area where the chief lived. Historical themes also permeated their poetry. Today, modern *iimbongi* are concerned with events which are affecting their lives and it is these events which form the basis of their poetry. Sitole's poetry was therefore still fuelled by present-day events immediately prior to 1994, the audience's response and so on. It also contains historical perspectives regarding, for example, the origins of the struggle against apartheid. Again the adaptation of themes reflects change in 'textual elements', those features which, according to Jeff Opland (1983, 241), are reflected in a transcribed text. The themes have changed because the political and social environment of which poetry is a commentary has also changed. Changes in themes are also linked directly to changes in what Opland (1983, 253) terms 'contextual elements'. The context in which the poetry is performed is no longer limited to the chief. The use of, for example, political rallies and meetings as well as contemporary open mike sessions as a platform in order to perform *izibongo* has also encouraged a change in the thematic repertoire of poets such as Sitole and the more recently acknowledged 'President's Poet', Zolani Mkiva who has performed in honour of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki (Kaschula 1999, 64–5). The repertoire now often reflects the new power bases which were legitimized with the emergence of a democratic South African society.

Sitole began praising in the Eastern Cape (Transkei). He praised Chief Jongintaba Dalinyebo of the Mqhekezweni region. Sitole stated in interviews conducted in the 1990s that his inspiration for producing oral poetry depended entirely on the occasion at which he found himself together with the people who were present there. The occasion and the audience largely determined whether or not he felt inspired to produce. When in the mood, Sitole burst forth, producing poetry of which he was often unaware. In other words he was often unaware of the content of his poetry. Sitole accounted for this as part of a process of *ukuthwasa* where he moved into a state of 'emotional intensity' which was also often associated with Xhosa ritual or religious expression. Sitole's performance was always a spontaneous one of which there was no record, unless the poetry had been recorded. Jeremy Cronin (1989, 41) makes the following general comments with regard to this type of protest oral poetry produced in the 1980s and 1990s:

The poetry is, clearly, largely a performance. The bodily presence of the poet becomes an important feature of the poetics. Arm gestures, clapping, and head nodding are often used expressively and deictically. The poets also draw freely from the current political lexis of gestures: the clenched fist salute of people's power.

Although the modern *iimbongi* normally holds a microphone which can be an inhibiting factor, there is still a lot of movement and the *iimbongi* is never stationary. Gesture is therefore still an important part of the performance. The performance as a whole plays an integral part in keeping the audience's attention. It also enhances or supports much of what the *iimbongi* is saying.

In terms of what Opland (1983, 248–50) refers to as 'contextual elements' (those features which an audience can see and hear but which are not reflected in a transcribed text), some changes have taken place. Individual poets such as Sitole adapted dress in order to suit their particular power bases. Individual poets have therefore reacted differently over time to these 'textual elements'.

Shouts of *amandla* (Xhosa/Zulu 'power', a well-known anti-apartheid slogan) accompanied by audience response were common in Sitole's poetry. This was once again an attempt to make *izibongo* relevant as these utterances were integral to the political climate of that time. It was therefore important for the poet to make use of these where *izibongo* were being performed, for example, at mass rallies. The use of such language further enhanced the *iimbongi's* position as a political commentator in the community. This again indicated the political power base from which Sitole sometimes operated as political commentator.

Sitole's role as political commentator was also clearly supported by the content of his poetry. In an interview in May 1990 Sitole stated that the *imbongi* would align himself with a policy with which he agreed. He stated that: '*Kukho i-African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress, so I don't function with PAC, andikholwa yisystem yayo...*' (There is the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), so I don't function with the PAC, their system does not agree with me...).

Although he may not have been inspired to praise the PAC as such, he was still in a position to try and join the two together: '*Into endinokuyenza kukudibanisa i-PAC, ndibonise indlela emakuhanjwe ngayo*' (What I could do is join together the PAC and ANC, and show the road on which we should go). Sitole therefore aligned himself with a particular power base in the 1990s with which he felt comfortable.

The dress of the *iimbongi* sometimes reflects the power base in which they operate. Contemporary *iimbongi* do not necessarily have a uniform dress, or any particular style of dress at all for the matter. Zolani Mkiva, for example, wears a headdress made from porcupine quills and dresses in a dashiki. It depends entirely on the individual performer. The *imbongi* no longer wears the traditional animal skin robe and animal skin hat. Traditionally they also used to carry a spear. However, one often sees *iimbongi* wearing remnants of the traditional dress such as an animal skin hat whilst dressed in a suit. Sitole was more traditional in his dress. Sitole chose to wear a fully fledged traditional animal skin and animal hat. He also carried a knobkerrie. The only difference was that the skin was braided with the ANC colours whilst the stick was beaded in ANC colours. In an appropriate gesture, upon his death, these skins were finally placed alongside his coffin and buried with him.

The poetry in Sitole's book (Kaschula et al. 1996/2006) was initially recorded on tape and video, with more than one hundred recordings made, which reflect the volatile pre-election period from 1990–1994. The poetry was then transcribed into isiXhosa by the performer. Together with the book's co-author Mandla Matyumza all three of us then worked together to translate the material into English. The book *Qhiwu-u-u-la! Return to the Fold!* – containing fifteen selected poems in both languages, was then published by Nasou-Via Afrika in 1996 and re-issued in 2006.

#### 4. Analysis of Sitole's poetry

Sitole's poems provide valuable insights into the socio-political issues facing South Africans immediately prior to the first democratic elections of 1994. They represent a window, a 'slice of life' at a time when South Africa as a nation found itself at a turning point in its history. Sitole's poetry was diverse and dynamic. Take the following extract produced at the re-burial of Chief Sabata Dalindyebo, an opponent of the independent homeland system and Paramount Chief of the Thembu clan. He was deposed by K.D. Matanzima who eventually became the first Prime Minister of the 'independent' homeland of The Republic of Transkei in 1976, in terms of the apartheid government's divide and rule policy. Chief Sabata died in exile in 1986 in Zambia, during the Matanzima era in Transkei. When the Paramount Chief's body was brought back to Mthatha, it was forcefully removed from the funeral parlour by Matanzima's bodyguards and buried in a women's graveyard as a final insult to the King. This angered many people. Matanzima was then ousted in 1989 by military leader Bantu Holomisa (now a parliamentarian and leader of the United Democratic Movement in the new South African democracy). With the blessing of Major-General Bantu Holomisa, who had by then become the new military leader and was pro-ANC, the immediate exhumation of Chief Sabata's remains was allowed, and the King was buried at his rightful burial place at Bumbane Great Place. It was the first time that the revolutionary movements operated openly in the homeland. Also present was regional

ANC representative for Transkei and councillor to the royal Dalindyebo family, A.S. Xobololo. The full version of this poem appears on pages 64 and 65 of *Qhivu-u-la!! Return to the Fold!!* (2006).

1 *Amandla!*

*Uza kuphakam' umzukulwana kaXobololo,  
UXobololo uza kuxobul' ixolow' emthini kuvel' intlaka,  
UXobololo uyaxoboloza,*

5 *UXobolol' unesifo sombefu,*

*Uxweb' impundu ngokuhlal' estoksini ngenxa kaDaliwonga*

1 Power!

The grandchild of Xobololo is going to stand up,  
Xobololo's going to peel the tree bark until gum appears,  
Xobololo's trying,

5 Xobololo's suffering from asthma,

His buttocks are chaffed due to being jailed because of Daliwonga (Matanzima).

The *imbongi* introduces the poem by making use of the power salute *Amandla!* This was common in the performance of *iimbongi* within the struggle for freedom in South Africa. In this poem it creates a sense of unity and power within the organization and the people who support it. This is so because the audience would normally respond to this power salute with a suitable reply. This serves to integrate the audience with the occasion, the performer and the subject of the performance. Sitole is also critical of Chief K.D. Matanzima who is blamed for much hardship experienced by the ANC and its members in this region during earlier days. By condemning the action of Matanzima, the *imbongi* is emphasizing the power base of the ANC. This is especially true if one bears in mind that Matanzima was never an ANC supporter and that he always aligned himself with the previous apartheid regimes.

The following extracts are taken from poems produced during Mandela's first visit to Transkei after his release from prison. He was released from prison on 11 February 1990 and paid his first visit to his place of birth, Qunu in the old Transkei, on 23 April 1990.

1 *Liphupha lamathongo,*

*Liphupha lamampunge,*

*Isizalo sikhale sancama,*

*Mingaphin' imiphefumlo ephantsi komhlaba?*

5 *Zingaphin' izidumbu ngenxa kaMandela?*

*Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la*

*Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la*

1 It's a dream of the dead,

It's a dream that people thought would never come true,

People cried till they gave up,

How many souls are under the ground?

5 How many corpses because of Mandela?

*Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la*

*Mand-e-e-e-la Mand-e-e-e-la*

The *imbongi* here refers to those comrades who died in the struggle in order to get Mandela released. The poet also refers to those comrades who died, never thinking that freedom would

be so near. In lines 6 and 7 the *imbongi* moves from one side of the stage to the other, shouting Mandela's name in a praising way, and, in the process, emphasizing Mandela's power and that of the ANC.

The poem continues:

- Bambiza bengamazi,*  
*Bambiza bengazange bambone,*  
10 *Yiyo loo nto kufuneka sithozame sithozamelane,*  
*Kuba side sambona.*  
*Umzekelo kaYesu erhuq' abantu abaninzi indimbane,*  
*Weza nabo ngenyaniso nocoselelo,*  
*Kuloko sinokunqina khona ke siv' amazw' akhe,*  
15 *Kuloko amazw' akhe siwaqinisekisile ukuka ayinyaniso.*

- They call him even if they don't know him,  
They call him even if they've never seen him before,  
10 That's why we need to be humble and respect one another,  
Because we've seen him at last.  
An example of Jesus followed by many people,  
He's come with them in truth and dignity,  
That's where we can hear and witness his words,  
15 That's where we've confirmed that his words are true.

The *imbongi* here plays a mediating role asking people to respect one another. An interesting metaphor is used where Mandela is compared to a Christ-like figure, in other words someone who is a leader, imbued with qualities of perfection and truth. Again, this creates an image of a powerful, mystical, spiritual person to which the poet is instinctively attracted. The integration of Christian mythology and imagery within contemporary political discourse is innovative and significant. Christianity is regarded as one of the corner-stones of Xhosa society. The church wields significant power within Xhosa communities. Many *iimbongi* also operate within the church, praising God in the same way as a Chief would have been praised. Janet Hodgson (1982) notes that the first Christian *imbongi* to praise God using the traditional *izibongo* style was Ntsikana. The use of Christian mythology by Sitole is further proof of the adaptability of the tradition.

Sitole continues:

- Ziyace-e-e-engwa izinto,*  
*Ziyacengwa izinto xa ziza kulunga,*  
*Azenziwa ngobuxhiliphothi,*  
*Azenziwa ngokunxanywelwa,*  
20 *Lithe chu-u-u-u*  
*Umntaka Ngubencuka kaNgangelizwe,*  
*Uthe chu-u-u-u*  
*Uhamba nabafundi bakhe,*  
*NjengoYesu,*  
25 *Uhamba nooSisulu nooMbeki,*  
*Uhamba nooMhlaba,*  
*Uhamba namadoda aphilileyo.*



- Things are approached with skill,  
 Things are approached carefully if they're to succeed,  
 They're not approached with vigour,  
 They're not approached with speed,  
 20 He's steady,  
 The son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe,  
 He's steady,  
 He's accompanied by his disciples,  
 Like Jesus,  
 25 He's accompanied by Sisulu and Mbeki,  
 He's accompanied by Mhlaba,  
 He's accompanied by worthy men.

This extract sees the furthering of the bible metaphor with Sisulu and others being described as disciples, in line 23. Mandela is again compared to Jesus, in line 24, leading his people and accompanied by his disciples. Again this enhances the image of power within the ANC. There is also some reference to genealogy, namely 'the son of Ngubengcuka of Ngangelizwe', in line 21. This is common in traditional Xhosa *izibongo* and serves to strengthen the legitimacy of the individual being praised.

In another poem Sitole comments on the relationship between ANC stalwarts, Mandela and Walter Sisulu, from the early days up to the present. He also portrays the Rivonia Trial of 1963, where Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of attempting to overthrow the South African apartheid government, and the law of that time as follows:

- 1 *Wayiqqibezel' imfundo yakhe bayokudibana ngobugqwetha benyaniso,  
 Khumbula kaloku amagqwetha ukutheth' ityala lawo engagqwethanga  
 kweliny' igqwetha.  
 Asuk' ema amagqweth' azigqwethela,  
 Kuba yayingagqweth' inyaniso.*

- 1 He finished his education and they joined in the law of truth,  
 Imagine, lawyers representing themselves.  
 They just stood and defended themselves,  
 Because the truth could not be perverted.

Sitole comments here on the early involvement of Oliver Tambo, erstwhile leader of the ANC, and Nelson Mandela in the legal fraternity in Johannesburg before the banning of the ANC. This extract makes an interesting play on the word 'lawyer' *gqwetha*, literally meaning to turn something inside out or to turn around, bearing in mind that Mandela represented himself at the Rivonia Trial. Mandela is presented as a lawyer of truth, and not one to turn things around and inside out. The power base of the ANC and its leaders is portrayed as truthful. This serves to subvert the power which was implicit in the South African legal system during the 1960s. Reference to the Rivonia Trial and so on can also be seen as an attempt by the poet to preserve aspects of history.

The poem later continues:

- 5 *Asinakujika ndawo,  
 ITshangane, uMsuthu, iNyasa, umXhosa, iVenda, umTswana,  
 Hayi madoda nomZulu ngokunjalo,  
 Singabantu abamnyama.  
 Nce-e-da-a-ani!*

- 10 *Nceda mntaka Mandela,  
Ncedani niyokuthatha uGatsha Buthelezi nimfak' estoksini,  
Ingxak' ilapho,*
- 5 We'll never change,  
Shangaans, Sothos, Malawians, Xhosas, Vendas, Tswanas,  
And Zulus as well,  
We are black people.  
Please!
- 10 Please, son of Mandela,  
Please go and fetch Gatsha Buthelezi and arrest him,  
The problem is there.

In this extract Sitole appeals for unity. He calls for the arrest of Chief Buthelezi in order to create a climate for unity in the struggle. Thousands of people died in clashes between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the ANC just prior to the 1994 democratic general elections. It was later assumed that right wing elements in the ruling National Party (NP) under the then leadership of F.W. de Klerk had formed a 'third force' which contributed to arming the IFP militants and inciting this violence. It is this tragedy that the poet is alluding to, long before the true facts were ever made known. This is an excellent example of where the poet juxtaposes two power bases, and, in turn, makes use of this opportunity in order to legitimize the ideological power base from which he is operating at the time. At the same time the poet avoids blaming 'ethnic' differences for the violence and conflict emphasizing that Zulus, too, are part of an overall Black unity. However, Chief Buthelezi is isolated and disempowered by the poet, setting him apart from the Zulu people, thereby increasing his culpability in the violence.

At the height of the violence, ostensibly between the ANC and Inkatha, Sitole in Mandela's presence at Bumbane Great Place, refers to the nation as follows:

- Ndivumelen' ndizityand' igila xa kunje,  
Ngoba liyalengaleng' ilif' elimnyam' emaZantsi Afrika,*
- 10 *Enzonzobileni yamanz' amdaka omntw' endinguye,  
Ngoba kaloku uRhulumente uyasizonzisa. . .  
Yavel into kaRholihlahla madoda.  
Lwakhak' usana, lwathi: Amandla-a-a!  
Aqal amaBhulu ajik ebusweni ngob' ev' inyaniso,*
- 25 *Amthath' ambek' esiqithini ngob'ev' inyaniso. . .*

- Allow me to speak my mind at times like this,  
Because a dark cloud looms over southern Africa,
- 10 In the depths of the dirty waters of that which I am – human,  
Because the government is destroying us. . .  
Rholihlahla appeared, men.  
And then a miracle happened,  
The infant shouted and called out: *Amandla-a-a!* (Power!)  
The Boers were startled, their faces changed when they heard the truth,
- 25 They took him and placed him in jail when they heard the truth. . .

The first part of the poem highlights the violence that was on-going in 1992 and alludes to the human frailty that underpins human existence. The second part of the poem reverts back to Mandela's imprisonment because of the 'truth' that he represented. During the violence in the 1990s

the ‘truth’ and the relationship between the IFP and the NP remained only suspicion and for this reason the poet highlights that the truth can be a dangerous notion to defend.

In another poem produced in 1990 where Mandela called together the Thembu Chiefs at Bumbane Great Place, Sitole again refers to Mandela’s quality of truthfulness and this quality is linked to his place of birth, thereby legitimizing the people of Qunu and Mhqekezweni as well as the qualities they represent, which have nurtured Mandela to be the person that he is. The poem concludes as follows:

*Nawe Qun’ akumncinc’ ezizweni,*  
 35 *Unenyhweb’ umhlaba waseMqhekezweni,*  
*Ngokukhulisa wondle uDalibhunga,*  
*Sinethamsanq’ isizwe sabaThembu,*  
*Ngokuzalelwa uRholihlahla Mandela,*  
*Ngokuzalelw’ igorha, ikroti, ikhalipha,*  
 40 *Umafung’ angajiki ekumnyam’ entla.*

Even you, Qunu, are known amongst nations,  
 35 The land of Mqhekezweni is fortunate,  
 In fostering and feeding Dalibhunga,  
 The land of the Thembu has been blessed,  
 With the birth of Rholihlahla Mandela,  
 By the birth of a brilliant, brave individual,  
 40 The one who swears an oath and does not turn back, even if darkness looms.

Mandela’s birth-place is personified in this poem, thereby giving birth to him and his qualities of brilliance, commitment and truthfulness. These qualities are pursued metaphorically in another poem produced in 1991 at Bumbane Great Place, where Mandela is referred to as follows:

*Mhl’ amaBhulu abek’ iingxowa ezimbini,*  
 25 *Ingxowa yomhlaba nengxowa yemali,*  
*Kwathiwa ikumkani mayiketh’ eyithandayo,*  
*Kulok’ umntwana kaSampu wenz’ isimanga,*  
*Yhini ukusuk’ athat’ ingxowa yomhlaba!*  
*Ingxowa yemal’ ithathwe zezinye iinkosi,*  
 30 *Andenzanga nto mabandla akowethu!*

On a particular day, the Boers placed down two bags,  
 25 One containing soil, the other money,  
 The King was asked to choose which bag he preferred,  
 The son of King Sampu did a wonderful thing,  
 Wow! He chose the bag of soil!  
 The bag of money was taken by other chiefs,  
 30 I’ve done nothing, people of my home.

The bag of soil represents the South Africa that was being fought for – the bag of money represents those chiefs who were corrupted by apartheid and took leadership roles in the homeland system. Again, the quality of truthfulness and standing for that in which one believes is attributed to Mandela in this powerful metaphor concerning the soil.

The leadership qualities mentioned above were also bestowed on other anti-apartheid leaders. At a South African Communist Party (SACP) rally in Mthatha in 1991, Sitole produced a poem in

honour of the late Joe Slovo, then leader of the SACP, likening him to a bull, which represents power and strength. As pointed out later in the article, this is a popular image used to refer to leaders.

- 7 *Amncamile amaBhul' umfo kaSlovo,  
Yinkunz' eqhuba kuqhum' uthuli kusiphuke iziduli.  
Mbuzeni kuFosta noVelevutha,*
- 10 *Bamshiya bemjongile noPW Botha.  
Inkwenkwe yeLuthuweniya ulushica.  
Myeken' atheth' ophel' uJoe Slovo,  
Kuba yinkunz' edl' iintloko neziny' iinkunzi,  
Nditheth' uMandela xa ndisitsho.*
- 7 The Boers have given up on Slovo,  
He's a bull which kicks up dust and breaks ant heaps.  
Ask Vorster and Verwoerd about him,
- 10 Even PW Botha just looked on and couldn't do anything.  
This son of Lithuania is very strong.  
Let Slovo speak as he pleases,  
Because he's a bull which collaborates with other bulls,  
I'm speaking here about Mandela.

In a more celebratory tone, just prior to the 1994 general elections, Sitole praises Africa, South Africa and its transition to democracy. Again the continent and country are personified and depicted as individuals coming out of a period of mourning, similar to the Xhosa tradition of 'releasing the widow' where black clothing is now replaced with white clothing and the widow is allowed to again lead a normal life:

- Nants' iAfrika,  
Ikhulul' impahl' emnyama,  
Ingena kwezimhlophe,*
- 15 *Ifun' ukuqhaqhazela.*
- Here's Africa,  
Removing its black clothing,  
Putting on its white clothing,
- 15 It wants to shine.

Stylistically, Sitole's poetry bears many similarities to traditional poetry produced about chiefs. Those techniques which are generally associated with the production of traditional *izibongo* include personification, use of metaphor and simile (which are closely linked and involved elements of comparison). The metaphor, according to Untermeyer (1968, 225),

... is usually more effective than a simile because it makes an instant comparison and an imaginative fusion of two objects without the use of explanatory prepositions.

The devices are used by contemporary *imbongi* as devices to create imagery, an important part of poetry. Examples of this would be where Sitole metaphorically compares Mandela to Christ, or to a black bull which is all powerful. Jeremy Cronin (1989, 42) states that

The most notable verbal stylistic features are those commonly associated with principally oral cultures: the style tends to additive, aggregative, formulaic, and 'copious'... The repetitive and

formulaic features assist the performing poet mnemonically. But these features also assist the audience to hear and understand the poem.

The use of parallelism or repetition is an interesting and useful device. It allows the *imbongi* to develop a particular idea, either by initial, final or oblique linking in a sentence. Such repetitions assist the audience in their understanding of the meaning of the poem. Through the use of repetition, the poet also reinforces the power base from which they draw.

Jeff Opland (1983, 241) refers to elements associated with stylistic technique as ‘textual elements’. Clearly, certain of these textual elements have been retained over time, though they may have been adapted. The use of *amandla* as an opening formula is an example of such an adaptation. Again, the adaptation reflects affiliation to a particular power base but at the same time is rooted within the tradition as it existed in the past. The use of animal metaphor and anaphoric repetition also reflects the retention of textual elements found in traditional *izibongo*. According to Opland (1983, 246) metaphors involving *inkunzi*, ‘a bull’, were often used traditionally in order to refer to chiefs. In a poem (1991) about Mandela which appears on pages 58–63 of *Qhivwu-u-u-la! Return to the Fold!*, Sitole refers to Mandela as follows:

*Yinkunz’ ethi yagquba kula’ amatye kusiphuk’ iziduli,  
Ngusilo sijamel’ isibhakabhaka  
5 Ngobusuku zaw’ iinkwenkwezi. . .*

He’s a bull that kicks up dust and stones, breaking ant heaps  
He’s the wild animal that stares at the sky  
5 Until the stars fall down. . .

Likewise, Meshack Masumpa (1991, 88) makes use of this traditional animal metaphor in order to refer to Cosatu. This is clear from the title of the poem *UCosatu Inkunzi’ Emnyama* (‘Cosatu, Black Bull’). This metaphor is used throughout this poem. The past and the present stylistic techniques are therefore interlinked.

The tradition described above, together with the poet’s stylistic techniques have now been transported into the realm of technology. This represents another leap in the revitalization of oral tradition. The tradition was initially set free or liberated in the 1990s, with political liberation, and it is now being allowed to re-invent itself within the realms of technology such as the internet, and the world-wide-web.

## **5. The technologizing of Sitole’s work: Towards technauriture**

In late 2004 with a project team from elearning4Africa, a vision to collect, collate and digitize oral literature and tradition, beginning with Sitole’s oral poetry, was espoused. Through local, national and international linkages, it was envisaged that an open source platform would make the Sitole material accessible for the widest possible audience: From learners in schools across the country using the material as learning resources, through to graduate students collecting oral traditions and writing teaching resources for post graduate certificates and degrees, through to tourists learning about the ‘real’ history of the places they aim to visit.

Through this open source structure it was further envisioned that contributions would be made in the following areas: Cultural identity; indigenous knowledge systems ([www.Indigenouknowledgesystems.com](http://www.Indigenouknowledgesystems.com)) archiving and development; development of African language and history for post graduate study routes; creation of a platform to support cultural tourism (initially in the Eastern Cape); expansion of open source digitization options across partner organizations; creation of robust community-based initiatives to promote the on-going

development and sustainability of the platform (initially with <http://www.technowledgeable.com/tingo/>); establishment of an international model for harnessing indigenous knowledge systems for the classroom and distributing learning material. The Fingo Revolutionaries are a group of performers presently adapting Sitole's material for the stage, thereby bringing the material back to a form of orality. This amounts to the fifth stage of the five-fold process as outlined in the introduction of this article.

The digitization project, still in its early stages, is now being driven by the School of Languages and particularly the African Language Studies section, at Rhodes University to ensure that all aspects of the platforms' potential are firmly built within an institutional framework to support replication and sustainability. One of the first development areas has been supported by the Foundation for Human Rights, namely the technologizing and digitisation of the Sitole material (this material is available on-line at <http://www.elearning4africa.com/>).

Arguably, it is access to technology that creates and encourages a global culture of immediate access to information. From the above we can see that orality, literacy and technology are developing a special relationship. It may be argued that the whole idea of computers as machines is being replaced by computers as companions, facilitating the ability to speak, interact and even translate from one language to another, thereby enabling communication to take place, and, in many cases, community development. Performance poets are taking advantage of this new form of technologized orality, thereby giving rise to what is termed *technauriture* in this article. This term encapsulates technology, *auriture* and literature. The term *auriture* has been chosen as it involves both the oral and the aural, which seems appropriate when talking about both the production of oral literature as well as its reception through hearing and understanding, namely the aural aspects. Coplan (1994, 9) makes the point that, '[m]any authors... pay lip service to the expressive inseparability of verbal, sonic, and visual media in constituting meaning in African genres, but do not address this unity in their analysis'. Coplan thus makes use of the term *auriture* '...for these performances as a caution against the application of Western categories of literary analysis to African performance...' (Coplan 1994, 8). *Auriture* implies the use of a range of senses in one's appreciation of the oral word: hearing, speaking and the more abstract aesthetic analysis of the word – hence this word has been chosen to form part of the newly coined term, *technauriture*.

The interaction between orality and literacy is now more complex than one would expect, as it now also involves technology. It would seem to be dependent on the individual performer and where they find themselves on the oral-literacy-techno continuum, as well as the extent to which they choose to allow orality and literacy to interact with modern technology. Isabel Hofmeyr (1993) rightly points out that there is an 'appropriation' of the oral into the literate, and the extent of this process depends on the individual performer. This 'appropriation' is now often taken one step further, namely, into the arena of technology. In fact, those extralinguistic elements, which are often lost in the transmission of orality into literacy, can again be re-captured through technology where sound-bites or video-clips are uploaded. The reaction of the audience, the performer's intonation, voice quality and emphasis, the effects of rhythm, context and speed of performance are lost in the written version, but can once again come alive through the technologized version. This renders a performance of differing impact and intensity, a performance based in *technauriture*.

The differences between individual poets further complicate the debate surrounding appropriate literary criticism of transcribed oral texts (Yai 1989, 62–3). Added to this would now be a literary criticism which incorporates aspects of technology. The dialectic between print, popular performance, technology and primary orality differs both in terms of individual performers, as well as the culture-specific community of, for example, Bongani Sitole's world as described in this article.

Further examples of groundbreaking work in terms of technauriture would be the *Verba Africana Series* which has been developed at the University of Leiden (Netherlands) as part of the project *Verba Africana; E-learning of African languages and Oral Literatures: DVDs and Internet Materials*. The aim of this project is to document African oral genres (poems, narratives, songs and so on) for both teaching and research purposes. An example of material is that of a DVD and website which include Ewe stories and storytelling as well as Taarab and Ngoma performances, as well as a DVD and digital material on Ewe stories and storytellers from Ghana. This initiative is a collaborative one between various universities in Europe.

The technauriture being developed at Leiden therefore goes beyond the work of an individual performer and begs the question as to what the future holds for technauriture. It would be most likely that various centralized sites should be set up in various parts of the world, at selected institutions, which specialize in documenting, preserving and disseminating various aspects of technauriture. This will facilitate further interaction between local and global literatures within a coordinated system.

In terms of the work that is being done at the University of Leiden (Merolla 2006 onwards, Merolla and Jansen 2009) it is pointed out that '[n]owadays, the study of African Oral Literatures faces new research challenges due to expanding technologies of audio-video recording and their increasing popularisation and mass-diffusion (Beck and Wittmann 2004, Ricard and Veit-Wild 2005)' (Merolla and Jansen 2009). It is also pointed out that there are only a small number of experimental projects where new technological documentation and research methodologies are being explored (Furniss 2006; Merolla 2006 onwards).

The important point that this digitization makes is that for the contemporary classification of oral literature one is required not only to capture the textual content, but also the visual performance in order to classify, describe and comprehend the full aesthetic qualities of the performance. The next step in terms of the Sitole material would be to upload video clips onto the existing website.

The interaction of South African national literatures with global literature is also apparent through technauriture available on websites. The internet site [www.Litnet.co.za](http://www.Litnet.co.za) contains sites such as *Isikhundla Sababhali* 'The Writer's Den' and *Phezulu* 'From Above' which publish isiXhosa and isiZulu works, including poetry in traditional form, though only in transcribed written form. Alongside these sites representing indigenous works, one finds a critique of Afrikaans and English literature, thereby bringing together the local and the global through technology. This technauriture is also supported by the fact that even Microsoft programmes now make use of, for example, oral poetry, hence allowing for its absorption into the modern technological arena. A contract, was, for example, entered into between Microsoft and the late Bongani Sitole in 1999 whereby he sold the rights to some of his orally produced isiXhosa poetry. The recorded snippet was sent to Microsoft on tape. Three hundred and fifty dollars were paid for a forty five second snippet of a praise poem in honour of Nelson Mandela.

Increasingly, technology is opening up the field of oral literature in terms of commercialization of the discipline in relation to the emergence of globalization. With the advent of technauriture, it is important that the rights of the performers be protected contractually. This is a field which requires further exploration in relation to oral poetry as technauriture. Sello Galane (2003) in regard to the Sepedi oral tradition of Kiba song and dance concludes that:

Dance and drum designs are not . . . protected by any copyright law . . . Kiba and other forms of classical art and culture are continually being recorded by various radio stations . . . The royalty accrued on these songs should be paid back to the communities through a foundation or directly to the group that has performed the recorded and broadcast text . . . The institutional memory of South African . . . communities needs to be protected (Galane 2003, 147–9).

The proposal of a 'foundation' should be commended and needs further exploration. The real question is: How does one go about placing a financial value on the oral, recorded word, even more so the oral, recorded, technologized word?

## 7. Conclusion

In their attempts to remain relevant amidst socio-economic, political, and recent technological changes in South Africa, many *iimbongi* shifted away from those chiefs who were initially associated with apartheid, to those chiefs who remain relevant in the contemporary political South African landscape, for example, Nelson Mandela. Directly linked to these changes is the fact that the power bases from which the *iimbongi* drew in the past have changed. The modern *iimbongi* are attracted to power bases which represent the interests of the average man in the street, the ANC and the South African president Jacob Zuma; religious organizations such as the Zionist movement, as well as trade unions such as COSATU. In research conducted by Leroy Vail and Landeg White (1991, 56), the question of poetic license in southern African poetry produced within differing power structures has been discussed. They conclude that it is not the poet that is licensed but the poem. It is the poem which is able to defy authority and to criticize it. However, it would seem that if the power of the poet were curtailed, then so too would be the power of the poem. The power of the *iimbongi* should rather be given a holistic interpretation in terms of the tradition itself, together with all its contextual and ever-changing technological facets, rather than in relation to one aspect of tradition.

This article is designed to show that the oral poet remains a relevant figure in Xhosa society. This is ensured by the fact that the power base from which the poet draws, whether it be social, political or religious, is an accepted one – hence ensuring the *iimbongi* of the support of the people.

In adapting to changing power bases, *iimbongi* such as the late Bongani Sitole have proven the adaptability of culture and traditions in the face of drastic societal, political and technological changes in southern Africa. In the midst of the societal change, the voice of the *iimbongi* links the traditions of the past to new directions and visions of the future.

The need to develop and harness indigenous knowledge systems across the developing world is a central aspect for the maintenance of cultural identity, while widening the exposure to the traditions and customs of indigenous societies through technauriture will ensure that the momentum of globalization is of benefit to all the world's communities. The Sitole project has allowed the model to embark down the avenue that will see the creation of a vibrant and effective open source structure to support the collection, collation and utilization of historical treasures. Not only does this project honour the name of a great, yet relatively unknown, South African poet, the late Bongani Sitole, it also helps to bring back to life and to preserve, via technology as well as the written word, the poetry of this great poet.

In this article the term technauriture has been coined in order to highlight the complex nature of oral literature in the contemporary global reality, as indicated, for example, in the *Verba Africana* series being developed at the University of Leiden. No poet or oral performer remains untouched by the influence of radio, television, the internet and the constant interaction between the oral and written word. In Africa, television and particularly radio remain the driving technological influences promoting the oral word. Increasingly the internet is also playing a pivotal role. This will follow on the emergence of technauriture as an established discipline in the rest of the world. There is no longer any society which is not affected by Walter Ong's (1982) notion of secondary orality. The influence of technology on both the oral and written word has reached a point where both are inextricably linked, where both feed off each other in a symbiotic fashion – hence the article argues for the legitimization of technauriture as a discipline in its own right – a discipline worthy of analysis, study and critique.



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**(b) Internet sources**

[www.elearning4africa.com](http://www.elearning4africa.com)

<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/verba-africana/swahili/>

<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/verba-africana/ewe/>

[www.Litnet.co.za](http://www.Litnet.co.za)

[www.oralliterature.co.za](http://www.oralliterature.co.za)

<http://www.technowledgeable.com/vingo/>