



AFRICA

Celebrating

ITS OWN



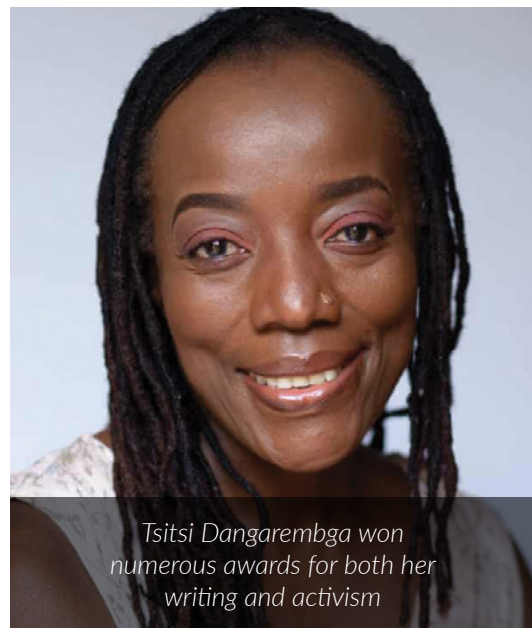
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Over the past year, several writers from across the African continent recorded remarkable achievements in the literary landscape. While the rest of the world might see this as the rise of African literature, the adherents of African literature see it as the waking up of the world to the enormity of African letters. For African writers have been telling their stories over generations.

This sentiment was aptly captured in the acceptance speech of South African writer, Damon Galgut, who won the 2021 Booker Prize for his novel, *The Promise*. "This has been a great year for African writing, and I'd like to accept this on behalf of all the stories told and untold, the writers heard and unheard, from the remarkable continent I'm part of. Please keep listening to us, there's a lot more to come," he remarked. Galgut's historic win was announced shortly after Tanzanian novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Gurnah became the fourth African writer to win the prestigious Nobel Prize, joining the elite list of Wole Soyinka from Nigeria (1986), Nadine Gordimer (1991) and J.M. Coetzee (2003) both from South Africa.

One of the biggest winners over the past two years is Zimbabwean novelist, filmmaker and activist, Tsitsi Dangarembga, who paradoxically, is also one of the most tormented writers in recent times. Dangarembga

won the 2021 PEN International Award for Freedom of Expression, she is the recipient of the prestigious 2021 Peace Prize awarded by the German book publishers and booksellers association, and was also chosen by English PEN as the winner of the 2021 PEN Pinter Prize. She is currently facing criminal charges, following her arrest on 31 July 2020, amidst anti-corruption protests in Zimbabwe. In the same year, she was listed on the BBC's 100 most Influential Women and she remains one of the most respected feminist voices across the world.



Tsitsi Dangarembga won numerous awards for both her writing and activism

Dangarembga's story bears some resemblance to that of Malawian poet and academic, Jack Mapanje, who is a previous winner of the PEN Freedom to Write Award. In an essay titled, "Natal Consciousness in Selected Poetry of Jack Mapanje", Nigerian scholar Olufemi Dunmade explores Mapanje's handling of the twin themes of migration and exile. In the late eighties and early nineties, Mapanje was persecuted and incarcerated by his own government, an ordeal that compelled him to emigrate to the United Kingdom.

Other notable achievements by African writers included Senegalese novelist Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, who won France's Prix Goncourt, for his novel *La Plus Secrète Mémoire des Hommes*. Another Senegalese author, Boubacar Boris Diop, was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. The International Booker Prize for translated fiction also went to a French-Senegalese scribe, David Diop, for his novel, *At Night All Blood Is Black*. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, a Ugandan novelist was awarded the 2021 Jhalak Prize for her novel *The First Woman*. Mozambican novelist, Paulina Chiziane, won the 2021 Prémio Camões, considered the most prestigious prize in the Portuguese literary world.

What is common with these accomplishments, apart from the fact that they acknowledge excellent contribution made by African writers to world literatures, is that the awards are either primarily supported or originate from Europe. It has become a norm that literary prizes, publications and festivals that centre African writing, are largely foreign-funded. We have no business, therefore, crying foul over the non-recognition of African literary icons like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Nuruddin Farah and the late Chinua Achebe, who have perpetually been touted as possible winners of the Nobel Prize. Africa needs to be more deliberate in investing to the development of its own literary culture. It is about time that African states and businesses considered establishing an African equivalent of the Nobel Prize, so that Africans can stop looking to Europe for validation.

In the spirit of celebrating African scribes, the lead essay by Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang offers an extensive critique of Zakes Mda's novels and plays. Titled "Zakes Mda's Magic: A Writing of Africa as a Place of Healers, Believers and Gangsters", the essay takes a critical look at the corpus of Mda's body of work in the world of letters. Part of Mda's magic is his ability to transcend a wide range of disciplines – he is a painter, composer, playwright, and novelist. A son of liberation struggle stalwart, A.P. Mda, known as the founding spirit of the Pan Africanist Congress, Mda's writing career was predestined from birth as his first name, Zanemvula, is derived from a character in a Xhosa novel, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940) by

A.C. Jordan. As a teenager, Mda was assisted in his Latin lessons by a family friend, Chris Hani, one of the most well-known martyrs of the South African liberation struggle.

Mda was recently recognised by the University of Witwatersrand with an Honorary Doctorate for his contribution to the world of the arts. An author of more than 30 books with countless translations, Mda is undoubtedly one of the most accomplished African writers alive. His oeuvre is largely preoccupied with historiography and transnationalism, indicative of his own nomadic life. Born in Herschel, Eastern Cape, and partly reared in Soweto, Johannesburg, Mda followed his father crossing the Telle River afoot to start a life of exile in Lesotho at the tender age of 14. Talking about his latest book, *Arola* (2021), which grapples with civilisation in precolonial Africa, Mda says: "I wrote this book because it is important for the African child, both on the continent and in the diaspora, to internalise a new mindset that we have not always been slaves. Our history does not begin with slavery and colonisation."

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Zakes Mda, Sipiwo Mahala, Nokuthula Mazibuko Msimang and Mandla Langa having a fun moment



Recently retired from teaching fulltime at Ohio University in Athens, USA, Mda is a visiting Professor at the University of Johannesburg and continues to nurture young talents and emerging writers through workshops, guest lectures and other forms of public engagements. Throughout June 2022, he conducted a creative writing workshop hosted by the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS), where he offered masterclasses to writers from different parts of the continent. The workshop was facilitated by his former student at Ohio, Sphiwe Gloria Ndlovu, a prolific author in her own right. A former winner of the Sunday Times Barry Ronge Fiction Prize, Ndlovu was recently announced as the recipient of the lucrative Windham-Campbell Literature Prize for fiction, alongside one of her literary idols, Dangarembga.

In the featured interview, Ndlovu says: "Tsitsi Dangarembga gave me the language to start questioning the workings of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism in my life and in my work." Similarly, South African poet Lebo Mashile, in her poem, "Dear Tambudzai", in which she pays tribute to Dangarembga, writes:

Tambudzai, there is no home for those who
Love their countries enough
To change their countries

It is also noteworthy that the accomplishments of the African writers cut across linguistic groups, including Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone languages. This is testament to the diversity of the African continent, and this is the spirit that *Imbiza* embraces. In this edition, we continue with our commitment of promoting the use of different African languages. We feature the Swahili short story, "Mashine" by Hassani Mambosasa, winner of the 2021 Kiswahili Prize. Founded by Mukoma wa Ngugi and Lizzy Attree, the prize is described as "the only pan-African, global literary prize for African literature in an African language". The Kiswahili Prize is an important addition to the African literary landscape and such an initiative should not be an exception.

Young scholar and lecturer, Sanele Ntshingana, pays homage to Xhosa poet, S.E.K. Mqhayi, while simultaneously lamenting the destruction of his archive. Writing about the Xhosa bard who passed away in 1945, Ntshingana says: "Considering the extensiveness of his corpus what we have and can access that is written by Mqhayi is marginal, especially compared to his Western interlocutors. There are still piles of texts that are not only studied but also not yet published." The hallmark of Mqhayi's contribution to isiXhosa is poetry, in both its oral and written forms.

There is evidence of mutual admiration between writers throughout this edition. This is also palpable amongst contemporaries, as seen in Mandla Langa's assertion during our interview, who said: "Zakes Mda has made a huge impact to the world of letters and has put South African writing on the world map." Similarly, Mda writes fondly about Langa in his memoirs, *Sometimes There is a Void* (2011). He reflects on a moment when they were stuck in a hotel in Umea, northern Sweden, due to snow. He joined Langa in his room and recalls that experience as follows: "I gained a lot of love and respect for Mandla [Langa] in that hotel room. I discovered that he was quite a sensitive soul. I believe sensitivity is an essential ingredient for great art" (2011, 361).

This intimate connection with the craft is also found in music. Internationally acclaimed pianist and musicology scholar, Nduduzo Makhathini, explores the concept of "Zimology" as a meditative and deeply spiritual practice. He reflects on his journey with the late Zim Ngqawana and unpacks the innate connection between spirituality and artistic expression. In the same vein, arts journalist and cultural commentator Sam Mathe, explores the healing power of Simphiwe Dana's music as she revisits her personal nostalgic journey over the past two decades. Dana does not only provide soothing sounds to others, but through her music she also finds healing. In the same breath, jazz vocalist Gloria Bosman reflects on the good and the bad of becoming a performer. Bosman's postulation, that "singing connects us to emotions we never knew existed", may be true of the various art forms.

The views expressed by the contributors in this edition of *Imbiza* bear testament to the complexities and conundrums of becoming a cultural worker in our historic moment. Many countries the world over have just returned from a Covid-19 imposed two-year hiatus, during which the hosting of festivals and other gatherings was prohibited. This period has been particularly brutal to artists due to lockdown regulations that effectively limited human interaction and economic activities. Many an artist lost their livelihoods, their mental health severely compromised and others even died in their own hands. In remembering those we have lost, we must also take care of those we still have in our midst. An enabling environment needs to be created for artists to hone their skills and access platforms to practise their craft.

Some of the critical platforms for writers are literary festivals and book fairs, which they could barely participate in over the past two years.

Festivals, writing residencies and fellowships have the special ability to instil a spirit of conviviality, camaraderie and solidarity across borders. I had the privilege of interacting with and being introduced to the works of some of the writers who are celebrated in this edition, including Dangarembga, Galgut and Gurnah, at the Time of the Writer Festival in Durban. Time of the Writer, which celebrated its 25th year this year, has been a point of convergence, a space for new ideas and friendships, for over two decades. The confluences established by cultural workers are far more effective than any diplomatic or politically orchestrated intervention, including such popular neurosis as social cohesion and nation building.

The author of the cover story in this edition of *Imbiza*, Mazibuko Msimang, one of the formidable voices in contemporary African letters, was the keynote speaker at the 25th Time of the Writer Festival. In her article titled, "Remembering Inkosi Albert Luthuli", she pays homage to the Nobel Laureate on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his autobiography, *Let My People Go* (1962). She reminds us that Luthuli played a significant role in different facets of life and associated himself with the struggles of the subaltern communities. It is against this backdrop that "Luthuli's life is an important blueprint for great leadership and a life lived with grace and the courage of kindness."

The touch of kindness is evident in the life of South African poet Don Mattera, who passed away recently. Mattera has inspired and mentored generations of readers, poets, writers and journalists in pursuit of their respective careers. In our previous issue, we had the wonderful honour of having Mattera entrusting us with the publication of two of his poems, "Nomzamo Winnie Mandela" and "Beyond Words", which are possibly his last two poems published while he was still alive. The two poems epitomise Mattera's oeuvre, which predominantly espouses African humanism and pan-Africanist ideals. We ought to heed his clarion call as he closes "Beyond Words" with the following:

All children in our country
In all countries of the world
They must be saved
They will be saved, beyond words...

To us, the children that Mattera refers to include the muted and the muffled voices that must be heard. *Imbiza* is here to amplify them, hoping that the world will listen. The voices of children from Cape to Cairo, from Madagascar to Morocco, must be heard.

In this edition we officially introduce Khehla Chepape Makgato as the arts curator of *Imbiza*. Makgato has been a consistent contributor to our publication

since inception, either through the publication of his own work or profiling the works of other artists. A collaborator of note, Makgato has previously teamed up with the likes of Zakes Mda in producing and exhibiting their works. In 2021, he was listed by the *Mail & Guardian* as one of the top 200 young South Africans who have made excellent contribution to their fields. It came naturally that as we reinforce our resolve to become the most inclusive journal, we appoint him to curate our arts feature.

The fourth issue of *Imbiza* continues with its approach of celebrating the works of prominent artists and juxtaposing them with emerging voices. Journals and magazines have a history of serving as launchpads for careers of writers who needed their first breakthrough. *Imbiza* was founded with this developmental thrust in mind – to serve as an inclusive and viable publishing platform for both imaginative and scholarly writing. Our youngest contributor in this edition, Lutho Nongogo Mtila, who is twelve years old, appears alongside seasoned campaigners like Lebo Mashile and Malika Ndlovu. We remain committed to our developmental objectives, as this edition features essays by early career scholars like Charmika Samaradiwakera Wijesundara and Sanele Ntshingana, who are pursuing their doctoral studies.

THE CONFLUENCES ESTABLISHED BY CULTURAL WORKERS ARE FAR MORE EFFECTIVE THAN ANY DIPLOMATIC OR POLITICALLY ORCHESTRATED INTERVENTION, INCLUDING SUCH POPULAR NEUROSIS AS SOCIAL COHESION AND NATION BUILDING.

The languages in this edition are as vast as the stories that are told, indicative of the richness and diversity of the African continent. This edition features a wide range of contributors – known and not yet known – from different parts of the continent and at various stages of their writing careers. It bears testament to the abundance of talent in African writing. The invocation made by Sindiwe Magona, "Don't honour my death, honour my life", as quoted by Elinor Sisulu in the article, "Sindiwe Magona @80", is an ideal that *Imbiza* espouses. We don't celebrate African writing sometimes; we celebrate it all the time. This is Africa celebrating its own.

