



CELEBRATING THE DYNAMISM OF *African poetry*



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The occasion to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Poetry Africa festival presents us with an opportunity to take a retrospective look at the road we have travelled over the past quarter of a century. Poetry Africa was established shortly after the birth of South Africa's democratic dispensation and there is reason to believe that the jettisoning of official apartheid and the ushering in of democratic rule inspired the founding of this festival.

The dawn of democracy brought about renewed hope and a sense of optimism about the future of the South African society in its various facets. Poetry, in particular, seemed to be gaining momentum and well-deserved respect, starting from the high echelons of power down to the grassroots level. Shortly after the prison doors were flung open to set Nelson Mandela free after 27 years of incarceration, praise singer Zolani Mkiva was by his side to "sweep the floor" ahead of his public speeches. This included political rallies during his campaign leading to the landmark April 1994 national government elections, culminating with Mandela's inauguration as the first democratically elected President in May 1994.

Mandela's deputy, the University of Sussex educated Thabo Mbeki, who would in 1999 take over the reigns of power, was himself a deeply cultured individual with a penchant for the verse. Initially perceived to be an English classical fanatic because his speeches were peppered with verse from the classical poets, Mbeki soon proved that he was as passionate and well-versed with African poetry, citing S.E.K. Mqhayi as he did with Shakespeare. In one of his most memorable speeches, Mbeki dazzled the South African and global community with his rendition of

"I am An African" eulogy, on the occasion of the adoption of the new South African Constitution in 1996. Mbeki's rendition of a tribute poem, "Isinamva Liyabukwa", on the occasion of Mandela's farewell ceremony held in the National Assembly in March 1999, was evocative even to non-Xhosa speakers.

In his second term of office, which he won with an overwhelming two-thirds majority, Mbeki appointed another politician who is a known literary enthusiast and, at the time, leading intellectual in the ruling party, the African National Congress, Pallo Jordan whose parents A.C. Jordan and Phyllis Ntantala, were internationally acclaimed writers and academics in their own right. Jordan appointed an equally respected individual and well-known poet, Keorapetse Kgositsile, as his Special Advisor. Under Jordan, the Department of Arts and Culture supported the establishment of the National Poet Laureate Prize in 2005, the South African Literary Awards a year later, and reprinted the largely out-of-print classics in the nine constitutionally recognised indigenous languages.



The late Keorapetse Kgositsile, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Don Mattera are some of the giants on whose shoulders the new generation of poets stand.

Mazisi Kunene, who had been writing poetry mainly in isiZulu for almost 30 years of his exile life, was appointed as the first National Poet laureate of South Africa. Kunene passed away in 2006, and Kgosisile succeeded him. Kgosisile passed away in January 2018, after 12 years at the helm. He was replaced by another former exile and liberation struggle activist, Wally Serote, who remains South Africa's National Poet laureate. Serote was one of the leading proponents of Black Consciousness alongside the likes of Don Mattera, Mafika Gwala, Chris Van Wyk in the 1970s.

These developments evince a country that is hopeful and a leadership that values poetry. This was hardly surprising as poets had occupied the frontline trenches in the struggle for freedom alongside other activists, both conscientising and mobilising the oppressed against apartheid. During the tumultuous 1980s, the lanky Mzwakhe Mbuli, with his booming voice and verse that thrived on explosive rhymes and repetition, rendered poetry that galvanised and exhorted people into action. In every rural village, peri-urban settlement and urban township across South Africa and its Bantustans, there were many aspirant Mbuli's reciting poetry in school halls, community halls, political rallies and funerals, as they blurted the words:

Listen to the voice of reason;
Words of wisdom have to be uttered;
A better world has to be built;
Listen to the voice of the reason.

Although purists have argued that Mbuli's verse was more prosaic than poetic, there is no denying that it resonated with the masses of the oppressed. In "Jazzy Poetry", Gloria Bosman reminisces about the 1980s and how the echoes of Mbuli's "Ngizwa izigi" roared across Soweto, the most populous township in South Africa.

The literary snobbery that seeks to dismiss Mbuli's brand of poetry is no different from the erasure suffered by the likes of Nontsizi Mgqwetho years earlier. Although she wrote and published poetry in newspapers like *Umteteli Wa Bantu*, Mgqwetho was not as prominent as her male counterparts like Mqhayi and J.J.R. Jolobe, for instance. Until recently, Mgqwetho had been left out of the annals of South African literary history. It has taken historians and modern feminist scholars to accord her the dignity she deserves.

Sadly, the optimism about the celebration of poetry and cultural workers by politicians started waning. Perhaps, as I argued elsewhere previously, the trouble is in the idiom that we habitually embraced – the Rainbow Nation – as conceived by the beloved

man of the cloth, Emeritus Bishop Desmond Tutu, in his capacity as the Chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). A rainbow, by its nature, is not a permanent phenomenon. It appears after the rain and thrives on optical illusion. Its semblance of magnificent colours adorn the horizon, and disappears within no time, leaving grey skies in its wake. In her essay, "From Decolonising the Self to Liberating the Senses", Zuleika Bibi Sheik echoes this sentiment as she argues, "Rainbows by their nature are not meant to last and can only be seen under very specific conditions."

Through a partnership with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts, we bring together no less than 50 African voices.



In her keynote address, Ugandan poet, scholar and activist, Stella Nyanzi, reminds us that "The bill of rights which is central to all the supreme laws of the different states in Africa provides the constitutional right to freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, free press, free speech, academic freedom, the right to peaceful demonstration, and freedom of association with like-minded others." Having listed the different types of Constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, she adds that all must enjoy them. "These freedoms are not only provided for government praise-singers who applaud the strengths of power holders in public office, but also to those who criticize the violations, vices, violence and excesses of those in power." In her activism, and as a staunch critic of President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power for more than 30 years, she knows incarceration, treachery and torture.



Nyanzi's argument is in line with Jordan's conception of the role of a poet in society, which he described as:

The traditional "Imbongi" was anything but a praise-singer. True, poets would heap praises and laurels on the historic figures whose actions they thought praise worthy. But an imbongi could be more scathing and derogatory than even the sharpest modern political cartoonist... An imbongi had the unquestioned licence to employ every known literary and poetic device to mock, jeer, castigate and criticise anyone in his community from the king down to the lowliest subject. Pre-colonial African societies accepted this as one of numerous checks on the power of rulers.

The validity of this assertion has been put to a test by a group of artists who occupied the offices of the National Arts Council (NAC) for two months. Led by opera singer Sibongile Mngoma, they branded themselves as "Abahlali base NAC", demanding that the institution pay the cultural workers after unilaterally reneging on contracts. This happened in the backdrop of the devastating Covid-19 imposed restrictions, which saw many cultural workers unable practise their craft and suffering tremendously as a result. In his review of *Hashtag Poetry* (2021), a publication that features a plethora of dynamic South African voices, Sandile Ngidi writes: "Renowned South African poet and actress Lebo Mashile salutes Mngoma in her distinctive and extraordinary portrait of a seemingly mad and selfless Black woman holding a government building *hostage*, thrown by harsh circumstances to give voice to an emerging artists' movement."

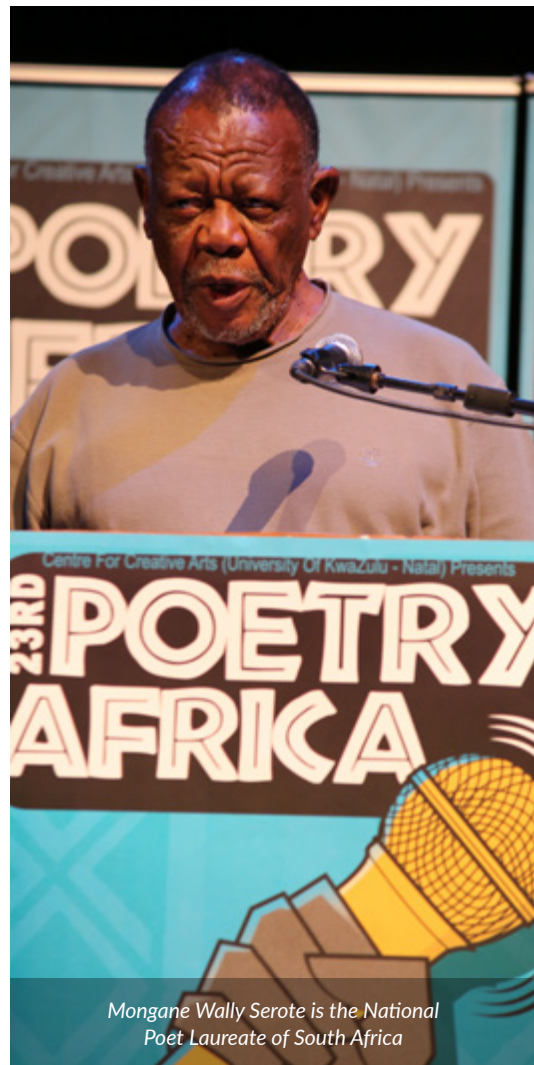
Mashile has been a celebrated voice since she burst into the male-dominated South African poetry scene after the turn of the century, and turned it on its head. She and three acquaintances, Napo Masheane, Ntsiki Mazwai and the late Myesha Jenkins, under the rubric of Feelah Sister Collective, stamped their authority on the cultural landscape. It was during the same period that Mashile took poetry to the screen with her show, *L'atitude*, thus giving hope to a plethora of both aspiring and seasoned poets in various parts of the country. However, despite her popularity, Mashile never lost sight of the fact that she stood on the shoulders of giants like Kgositsile, Mhlophe, Don Mattera, James Matthews and now Mngoma, whom she pays tribute to in *Hashtag Poetry*.

Affirming one another is an integral part of the South African poetry scene. Kgositsile, both in his poetry and in his personal interactions, is known for affirming other artists, young and old. In his collection, *This Way I Salute You* (2004), he pays tribute to fellow

artists including Gloria Bosman, Johnny Dyani, David Rubadiri, Cassandra Wilson, etc. Similarly, in this edition the legendary Don Mattera pays homage to Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, about whom he says:

Looking back, Nomzamo,
I see you in the raging tide;
bellows, tempests of derision
subdued and spent
against the unyielding rocks
of your immovable spirit

The articles and essays in this publication also pay particular attention to the marginalised and peripheral, situated away from the limelight of big cities and television. In his essay, "Poetic Innovation and Its Bottlenecks in Post-Apartheid South African Poetry", Vonani Bila alludes to various initiatives around the country, in big and small towns, and joins Ngidi in decrying the negligence of poetry in African languages. He argues that "despite South Africa's wealth of languages, the canonical voices of poetry in the land are usually those that write in English." In this publication, we feature works in various African languages. There is no better way of representing the poetic voices of Phomelelo Mamampi Moshapo, Zolani Mkiva, Anthony Molosi, etc. other than in their indigenous languages.



Mongane Wally Serote is the National Poet Laureate of South Africa



Acclaimed South African writer and poet Gcina Mhlophe has long flown the flag for spoken word at Poetry Africa and other stages.

Although this publication is not exhaustive in representing contemporary poets from South Africa, Africa and the Diaspora, it makes a strong statement about its commitment to amplifying African voices. The new generation of poets include Siphokazi Jonas, the featured poet at this year's Poetry Africa, the phenomenal Koleka Putuma, and Page, who developed through the ranks of Poetry Africa as a regular participant in their Poetry Slam component, continue to entrench their voices on the cultural landscape.

Imbiza exists because poets, writers and scholars exist and need publishing platforms. This edition of *Imbiza* is inspired by the dynamism of African poetry which is evident in the lineup of Poetry Africa festival. My sentiments about the significance of Poetry Africa are best captured in Steve Kretzmann's article, "Poetry Africa: a Hopeful Celebration of the Word", where he says: "Poetry Africa and other arts festivals in uniting people, not through a patriotism that serves

power, but through the sharing of stories and ideas rooted in the celebration of the imagination, the joy of conversation. Through listening to one another, dancing together, and crying together. And educating one another."

Through a partnership with the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts, we bring together no less than 50 African voices in this edition of *Imbiza*. Guest-edited by erudite scholars and distinguished cultural practitioners in their own right, Ongezwa Mbele and Nomcebisi Moyikwa, this edition of *Imbiza* presents a feast of poetry and articles on African poetry.

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