

Napo Mashesne

Poetry as a black art

(edited by Raphael d'Abdon)

Oral Poetry

One only appreciates oral poetry when one realises that for ancient man the way to ancestors or to God or Supreme Being was through some kind of poetry. Our people have always been believers of the higher being, spiritual and close to existence. The Supreme Being was found in rivers, mountains, plants and the animal kingdom. Hence many of our clan names are associated with a particular animal. It was also found in four elements of life: fire-air-water-earth. Within African traditions... high priests-traditional healers-poets have had ways of creating rituals, making it possible for people to reach their gods.

Es'kia Mphahlele in *Lets Talk writing Poetry* wrote:

“spoken word artists must write verse that makes good public reading without sacrificing poetry itself, i.e. depth meaning in which powerful words express powerful feelings. One should be able to read such poetry silently and still enjoy it. And such poetry shouldn't depend on the approval of an audience but on a greater care for the words themselves.”

Poetry must sharpen our sense of awareness. It must increase the listener's emotional, spiritual and intellectual being. It must involve and touch the people in a way that deepens their sense of being. One can only enjoy poetry when they can tune into its sound, its sense of image and its vibrations.

There is magic in spoken word ... the kind of power that stirs the imaginations of a listener. The quality of words and the way in which the wise writer produce words must be able to echo in the minds of the people long after the poet has moved from stage.

Ingoapele Madingoane, with *Africa My Beginning* allowed his own words to live behind him. My fear for us, the present generation of spoken word artists both in South Africa and the United States is that we are more concerned with how we look and how much people mum after our words. Yet once they have shouted “MORE FIRE!” whatever you have said does not live with them. If our generation continues to rob the spiritual quality of life our art will disappear like our history.

History can only be carried within words. And when that history is shared it reflects the mental and spiritual understanding of its people. Oral poetry

breathes the spirit of our ancestors. It is awareness that we are not only black but also African. The concept of "Black Consciousness" helped to establish a platform of pride. The kind of pride that promotes who we are.

Language

Professor Willie Kgositsile once said that if we as young poets are willing to make English speak our mother tongue we must take into consideration that we are empowering English. Which in actual fact is true but...how does one define language? Sound in language is a mere interpretation of one's feelings or thoughts. There is a need to claim all the tongues in which we speak to make speech of many languages that give expression to the unique cultural reality of a people, especially since South Africa has eleven official languages.

For centuries many things have been written in English about who we are as Africans. Today it's with my great understanding of this very same language that I know how many lies are said and have been said about my people. We should not shy away from speaking or knowing English. However we should find better ways of telling our stories through it so that those who think they know can be corrected.

We need to accommodate each other's languages. We should use any language necessary to take people on a journey they will never forget. My suggestion is that we take as many proverbs and idioms from our mother tongue and translate them into English. Let us bend English to fit our own background. Let us put it into up to date modern contemporary language to suit our expectations.

English is the vehicle not the thought... not the idea or the content. It is no hidden factor that our present generation in South African is more westernised. But even the old Drum magazines journalist of Sophiatown in the 50's expressed themselves through this medium. The influence might have been from American movies, jazz and art. But, like them or our political leaders, we are at the point where we cannot chuck English out. It is important that we reserve our language but also allow it to expand to a large audience. But the past has cut off our voice so we need to grow two, three or four voices, into different tongues our songs should spill out.

Proverbs and the figures of speech are condensed form of language; they contain a number of meanings at one time. Idiom expressions help the audience or us to remember longer what the poet said. Through them we are able to probe the essence of things, events, people, and experiences at large. We see beneath the literal or surface of words.

Poetry abounds, it passes from mouth to mouth. We are African people united by a family of languages and by the spiritual element of our culture. What

recourse is left to us then but to create our own language? A language, which can connect our identities to one capable of communicating values true to us. We writers should be bold to create our own definition of experience not by decisions that stand only because they a response to the white man's definition of us. Our ghetto cry is a voice without any resonance, if we plug our ears against the cries of those in poverty of freedom.

Writing

Writing is an individual craft. A lonely undertaking most of the time. One cannot avoid the pain and labour and tears it takes to produce true art. The passion to read variety of literature and the patience to listen intellectually to people are crucial qualities in a writer. One must use all senses, what you see, smell, feel, touch, who you see, what you hear – what history has it – and by history, I mean your story or should I say 'herstory'. The untold story does not have to be a "long ago" one – it could be a place where you fell and badly hurt your knee.

Audience

Poets must often ask who their reader is. And also we need to agree that the definition of one's audience does not necessarily lie with the writer herself. And maybe the right question should be 'what are you writing about?' instead of who do you write it for. I always emphasise that I write and speak for Black African women. That geographically I am a South Sotho woman who can only reflect the true sense of the Sotho culture even if someone in Germany would relate to my experiences.

I write about me, my mother, sister, friends and those women in my community who have endured the suppression of their own voices. But often I find that most people across culture, colour, gender and race get touched by my poetry the same. Who?...Subject compromises the value sometimes. What I write is a reflection of what I like to read. But mostly of where I am from.

How I write is an influence of thousands of writers who give me a distinctive voice. These are writers who I first wrote like until I could speak through their voice, finding my own voice in the process. For example I would find my self-writing like Don Mattera, Ngugi wa Thiong'o or Gcina Mhlophe until such a time I can kill them in my writing. This we call killing your parent in the writing field.

But also my voice has essence of my upbringing and how my accessibility to books and reading has placed itself in me. People should write stories that live in them from the depth of their being. Writing should not be about ego, even though most of us write to be noticed. I say write from an honest place...be sincere at all costs. Give people your honest opinion, thought; feeling and voice. We should stop painting ourselves as people who are carriers of suicide notes for our culture.

Performance poetry

Poetry is an oral art...if you do not read it aloud even to yourself as a reader it is a waste. Poetry is sound of words. And if you know it by heart it takes a different tune and form without it being hip-hop. Young writers must take this discipline as a field of excellence not a game.

They must value poetry and keep it as a wealth of knowledge where we can see ourselves even when others refuse it. We must take note that in poetry sometimes the simple, ever so simple words are more powerful than when we try to embroider them in longer words or bombastic terms. Let's just play around with words.... in some languages, metaphors are always far stronger than a simile.

Poets must broaden our minds by reading other peoples' work. We must attend as many poetry sessions as possible just to see the variety of how words are delivered and received. It should not be about fame or shine but rather about whose words will live long over time. We must make sure that our words wrapped in poetry can stand on paper. Most of our people are lazy to read. They prefer to jump on "open mic" sessions as if the world is made for their bad sounds without facts. Spoken Word is a remarkable reworking of the original poem. Read your work aloud and feel how it sounds. Read it to friends and be willing to be criticised. And if you can see that it does flow and the lines have an energy that is generated because of its tight structure you are playing on a tight spot and that is good.

Figures of speech must work for us. We, as writers and artists, must free ourselves from the chains that hinder our cultural fulfilment. Let us be the voice of our people. And lives not as puppets of idiotic worlds. We should know by now that just because one can slang, wear Erykah Badu headpiece, walk sideways and be among the crowds does not mean you are a poet. Poets like ordinary people seek avenues where they can define the self, while globalisation threatens to sweep cultural borders.

Poetry as a woman's tone

Poetry as a woman's voice/tone/vibration/identity is like X becoming the known. And a woman's voice in everything that lives has its own song. Traditionally women are soldiers of homesteads, builders of nations and makers of kings. Universal forces have entrusted us to nurture our offsprings through generations. And we have done so through our storytelling, song, dance and play. We have secretly wrapped the beauty of our language, tradition, culture and rituals in our hearts. The reason we exist and evolve with time is to fill the void of every generation as reference.

However today's philosophies and values that women live by are not given space. White supremacy, capitalism and patriarchal state use us as poster faces for community projects, new products, magazine covers, and fashion. Some of our African brothers have labelled and detached themselves from us. It is sad to see writing about feminism as placing a shadow over female poets. Women in the past were held as mirrors in which our people could look at themselves. Though some traditions and cultural groups have worked to silence us – on moving from silence into speech is revolutionary gesture.

Bell Brooks in *Taking Back. Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* says:

“the idea of finding one's voice or having a voice assumes a primacy in talk, discourse, writing and action. As metaphor for self-transformation, it has been especially relevant for groups of women who have previously never had public voice, women who are speaking and writing for the first time, including many women of colour.”

Feminist focus on finding a voice for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings - despair, anger, shame, rage, anguish - who do not speak for fear that our words will not be heard as what they are. Coming of voice is an act of resistance. From the same book Bell Brooks continues to say:

“Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless- our being defined and interpreted by others.”

Traditionally black women knew what to do when the lands were upset with us. We had learned how to remain strong in the face of adversity. But most we knew the wisdom that binds black people together. Each time a woman begins to speak, a liberation process begins, one that is unavoidable and has powerful political implications.

African people generally understand the answers for most life's basic questions. Our lives, values, and standards are deeply rooted in our communities. Through out the Diaspora we were encouraged to celebrate life without shame. We were taught that we lived side by side with others who were different from us and honoured the variation of traditions. So when we decide to come out of our cocoons it is in search for definitions to our identities within our families, communities and for answers with meaning to our own personal struggles.

To speak as an act of resistance is quite different than ordinary talk. In South Africa as a woman the idea of finding a voice risks being romanticized in the rhetoric of those who advocate a shallow feminist politic which privileges acts of speaking over the content of speech. I cease to see the day when black women (“feminist” or “womanist” or “revolutionalist”) can be appreciated and looked at as people with opinions, dreams, plans and ideas. Not scars hanging on the worlds back as fat, too straightforward, too optimistic, too opinionated,

to beautiful, too crazy or arrogant. Different words in Sesotho will agree with me that a fire lights its self in us at birth and too whom new rays of light may break is she whose childhood fire never dies. African women are intelligent, strong, sensitive, giving, loving and talented. Silence with us should never be glitter gold.

It is also true that my poetry or play or art can be about a black girl with issues on white people or about the overly used revolution or HIV/AIDS. But that does not have to rob me of an opportunity to tell my story as a poet, not an outsider. The universe gave us a chance to look at others as our selves and as part of something that can contribute to change. We are like a vases designed to hold knowledge. The world must give women a space without trying to fit them into a box. Boxes were never designed to fit us.... they can not contain any of us. They can only provide corners and shadows for hiding.

Men or women, we are all more than complex. We all have issues and baggage's which we need to throw away now and again. I have always looked to discover same things as every person: an identity that can make me part of a whole. It does not matter if I am a Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu woman: the point is that I could be the only point of reference my children can have. They need to hear a broader truth of themselves in me...before the world tells them they are too black. This is clear-cut simple, I am a cultural weapon and weapons do not stay in their boxes.

When we formed *Feela Sistah! Spoken Word Collective*, March 2003, it was for every thing that women are but never found spaces to articulate. It was to remind our communities that a young, beautiful, black woman can be sexual, sensual, political, sexy and bold enough to expose her inner secrets without fear of oppression. *The Spoken Word Collective* was formed to give voice to positive black women and making poetry "Not An Intellectual Experience". This we did by addressing critical social issues, God, and the joy of Africa. We were a group made out of phenomenal women having a massive audience of men, Rastas and professionals, black and white, college professors and middle-aged people. We sold out shows at Kippies, Old BassLine, Grahamstown National Arts Festival, and The Women's Arts Festival and performed for organisations like the Steve Biko Foundation. Our public appeal was indeed diverse.

People may not want to acknowledge the movement that *Feela Sistah!* created for women and men poets and they are entitled to their opinions. But the truth of the matter is that we made "herstory". We used our skills, talents and writings to form a collective that is irreplaceable to this day. For what its worth, our scars were an amour which fought the price tags on our culture, heritage, art, philosophy, views on women artists and their dignity. How then can we be looked at as only observers? The world never wants to affirm us as female poets but who we are is proud of us today. Poetry and spoken word are really ruling the world street culture. Young black women are recognized through the world as having something unique and important to contribute, and we have got to

take advantage of that. The creative attitude should remain with us always and be the touchstone by which we gauge our actions in the world.

Napo Masheane is a drama and creative writing mentor, actress, playwright, stage director and spoken word artist (poet), Napo Masheane is one of South Africa's today most appreciated all-around artist. Though still very young, she has already produced and directed several theater pieces, and worked extensively both in her country and abroad (Botswana, Germany, USA). In regards to poetry: she was the Co-Director of a group called *Feela Sietah Spoken Word Collective* founded by four female poets (Lebo Mashile, Ntsiki Mazwai and Myesha Jenkins); she has been nominated for Daimler Chrysler Award for South African Poetry (2005); she has published a book of poems, with essays and prose titled *Caves Speak In Metaphors* (2006). Currently (September 24th - October 8th, 2006) she is performing at the Amsterdam Afro Vibes Festival (Holland) with *My Bum Is Genetic Deal With It* (an original work conceptualized, written and performed by herself and brought to the stage with direction by John Matshikiza).

For more bio info, photos, videos, poems, and contacts, visit Napo Masheane's website: www.napomasheane.co.za