

# Censure and Social Comment in the *Izihasho* of Urban Zulu Women

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## Introduction

Ong (1990:43) makes the point in his work *Orality & Literacy*, that many if not most oral or residually oral cultures, strike literates as extremely agonistic in their verbal performances and even in their lifestyles. He goes on to say that oral narratives/renditions are often marked by the enthusiastic descriptions of physical violence which he explains as resulting from the common and persistent physical hardships of life. Furthermore, personal tensions can also arise due to ignorance of physical causes of disease and disaster, where these are seen to be caused by something or the malevolence of someone.

Vituperation moreover, is seen in oral art forms to be directly connected with the structure of orality itself. As all verbal communication by its very nature is directly transmitted by word of mouth, interpersonal relations are kept taut on both positive and negative levels.

In most polygamous societies, as in Zulu traditional rural societies where women live together in close proximity in the homestead situation, tensions are bound to arise between co-wives as well as between a husband's mother and his wives. In line with this, Jafta (1978) and Ntshinga (1993) state that tradition forbids a woman from talking openly about her marriage situation and its inherent problems.

These tensions can be evidenced in the cryptic naming of children or animals where

names reflecting censure, disapproval and discontent serve an important social function in that they tend to minimize friction in the communal environment, by enabling a person about whom defamatory allegations have been made, to refute

these accusations, and attempt to clear his/her name in a subtle yet effective manner. They may also function by either exposing, accusing, mocking, warning or challenging the underlying reason or cause of the friction. This serves as a means of working out tension and frustration by affording the namer the possibility of passing an indirect yet effective comment in an environment where direct confrontation and conflict is not only inadmissible, but also socially unacceptable (Turner 1992:45).

Ntshinga (1993) quotes numerous examples of Xhosa women's songs which are sung in specific settings, e.g. while working in the fields, at certain ceremonies or even at social gatherings. In these songs, those who deviate from the cultural norms, are chided for their transgressions. These songs operate in exactly the same way as women's izibongo in exposing social ills, but have a broader frame of reference. In addition these songs are less personal in that they are not necessarily directed at any one specific person, although they may have originally have been conceived with a specific person in mind. When they are sung, the message embedded within the lyrics of these songs may be aimed at a more general audience.

Enoch Mvula, in his research conducted on the pounding songs of women in Ngoni society, states that these songs which are performed by women when pounding or grinding maize,

become a licensed means of communication employed strategically to play out social conflict and to define, maintain, or alter the position of women in the Ngoni community .... The pounding forum provides the means to do this by creating a safe and licensed context and the pounding song acts as a poetic genre for expressing and defusing social tension (Mvula 1991:4).

In line with these types of songs which are often communal experiences and include music and movement, are Zulu *izigiyo*. These are normally performed by women after feasting when much food and traditional beer has been consumed. They are rhythmical chants or songs which are done with one woman acting as the leader and others responding as the chorus. Women often use these *izigiyo* as a means of passing criticism or just commenting about the behaviour (often that which is deemed unacceptable) of others in the community. Usually these *izigiyo* are performed in the presence of the culprit at whom they are aimed, so that she be made aware of any social undercurrent. Although no names are mentioned, the person targeted most often realises that the performance is for her 'benefit'. Apart from these indirect attacks which occur in the guise of these songs, there may also be retaliation either by the victim, or by her supporters if she or they become aware of the direction of the intended slur. Despite the fact that the message in the *izigiyo* is often spiced with ridicule and reproach, it is normally done in a playful, teasing spirit without a malicious or vicious tone. These songs

are normally performed in rural settings as in the following example:

Leader: 'Klwi - klwi - klwi'  
Chorus: 'Wayithathaphi, incwadi yokufeba?'  
Leader: 'Klwi - klwi - klwi'  
Chorus: 'Ngayinikwa, incwadi yokufeba'

The sounds made by the leading woman are accompanied by exaggerated gestures depicting writing. The chorus joins in by posing the question: 'Where did you get it, the license (letter) to indulge in unlawful, extramarital sexual relations?'. The writing is imitated again and the women join in the second time by replying: 'I was given it'. The criticism in this instance was directed at a woman in the community who was suspected of committing adultery with the lead singer's husband. Instead of confronting her directly, the song is sung in her company, and the singer's supporters, who are party to the underlying message, then join in. The woman being accused in this instance was fully aware that the accusation was directed at her and failed to respond (presumably out of guilt).

## Personal Praises in Zulu Society

In many African societies, people are recognised not only by their personal names, but also by an extension of their names which form a core of 'praises'.

As a child a person is given a principle name or 'great name' (Krige 1950:74), by which he is known to his parents. Besides this name, he is given a name which is coined when he begins to *giya* (an improvised dance which is performed when praising, usually mimicking war movements). Thereafter, a new name is taken on reaching adulthood, and this is added to by other names which bear comment on certain deeds, characteristics and achievements. In some cases these names are expanded on and become incorporated into what is known as *izibongo/izihasho* which are personal praises. Being known by his praises, provides a person with an identity, a sort of recognition and support which is important to his ego and self-image (Turner 1990:56).

The term *izibongo* has many varied aspects to its nature, but the meaning that is most widely accepted, is that they are 'praise poems' which laud the feats, character and personality features of the person about whom the poem is composed.

Despite the fact that the content of *izibongo* is made up largely of praises, it may also contain aspects of criticism and censure of the subject

about whom they are composed. Opland (1973:33) in preference to the use of the definition of 'praising' to describe the verb *ukubonga*, defines it more accurately as meaning 'to utter a poem about', as he regards the description of 'praising' as too limiting when one has also to deal with elements of censure and criticism. With regards the praises of ordinary people, it seems that the term most preferred when referring to this type of poetry that is not connected with important people and is not recited by a specialist bard or *imbongi*, but can be recited by anyone, is *izihasho* which is a sub-category of the umbrella term *izibongo*.

The *izihasho* which contain satirical and critical references are not the exclusive property of ordinary women, but are also prevalent in the praises of women of Royal blood. If one looks at the praises of important women in history such as Mkabayi, Nandi, Monase, Nomvimbi and Ngqumbazi, there is abundant scatological and agonistic references contained therein on the same lines as the praises of the promiscuous nurse, the local gossipmonger or the lazy daughter-in-law. In the *izibongo* of these Royal women, the content, despite their rank in society, is often not altogether complimentary or praiseworthy.

'Physical oddities such as ungainly height, wide spaced thighs, big chin, heftiness as well as extreme ambition, meanness, unpleasantness, sexual forwardness and ruthlessness' are some of the disparaging references that are encountered (Turner 1986:61).

Unlike the praises of Zulu men which are common, and which may contain both positive and negative references, in researching Zulu women's praises in urban areas, the most striking feature, is the lack of praises generally accorded to women at all in urban environments. Why this should be, may be seen to be a direct result of their role in society and the very composition of the patrilineal and patriarchal Zulu social structure. Furthermore, the *izihasho* that have been researched and documented, are remarkable for the lack of praiseworthy material they contain.

The same principle as found in the naming of both people and animals, applies to women's praises, which are an extended collection of 'names', where a social comment, however critical or accusatory may be made in the allusive but acceptable poetic form of *izibongo*. This phenomenon it seems is not restricted to women in rural, polygamous communities only—there is clear evidence of an urban counterpart, although the content, function and tone of these 'praises' has discernible differences.

The apparent lack of positive praises accorded to women seems to be the result of the prevailing attitude among various urban educated women whom I interviewed, who maintained that 'decent women do not have *izihasho*'. The field of praising was largely perceived to be a male preroga-

tive, and if a woman does acquire 'praises', they will invariably be of a non-complimentary type.

## **The Function of Personal Poems/Izihasho**

In times gone by, Vilakazi (1945:46) regarded the *izibongo* of women as 'compositions dealing with something beautiful and praise-worthy'. Gunner criticizes Vilakazi's claim that the praise poems of women deal with 'something beautiful and praiseworthy'. She maintains that Vilakazi's claim seems almost to ignore the contents and statements of these very praise poems, which for the most part

reflect the facets of life important to women, while displaying at the same time the sharp eyed concern with individual identity that characterizes all Zulu praise poetry (Gunner 1979:239).

Gunner who has done extensive research on the *izibongo* of women in rural areas, cites the function of *izibongo* as 'a poetic statement of identity' (Gunner 1979:241). A woman's acquaintances will acknowledge her indirectly or greet her directly by referring to one or more lines of her praise names. She goes on to say that

the women who possess and compose praise poems are usually traditionalists who do not belong to any of the mission churches, and many are married in polygamous households (Gunner 1979:239).

Apart from the function of 'poetic identity' which Gunner cites, she also lists complaint and accusation as important functions of these praise poems. Tension and rivalries that exist in the close knit structure of the Zulu polygamous unit find their legitimate outlet in praise poetry through allusive diction. Gunner (1979:239) states that:

The statement of complaint or accusation in a praise poem is an effective and socially acceptable way of publicly announcing one's anger or grief.

## **Contemporary Oral Poetry in Urban Settings**

Women who live in rural areas have a far more prolific collection of praises than their urban counterparts. The reason for this is to be found in the very nature of their communal existence. By reciting or having one's praises recited, one's sense of belonging within a particular community or cultural

group is reinforced. As women's praises are normally performed in the presence of other women e.g. within the homestead, in the fields while working or at any social occasion, 'the feeling of group solidarity and a shared identity is often very strong' (Gunner 1979:243). Praises can be self composed or given by one's peers. They may comprise lines that arise from both these sources. The performance of these praises is a communal experience and as such, the balance between praise and dispraise or complaint motif encountered in the majority of the oral poetry of rural women, is more marked. Although there may well be uncomplimentary references and accusations against others, these are often balanced with those that serve to compliment and flatter the subject.

The oral poetry encountered in contemporary urban settings differs markedly from its rural echo. Apart from the fact that very few women in urban areas have praises of their own, and this even includes certain famous women of the ilk of Dr. Nkosazana Zuma, the personal oral poems that I have come across which seem to be most prevalent, are those of a disparaging and deprecatory nature.

The acceptability of this form of criticism lies in the community structure within which these women live. Although not as close knit as the life of women in rural environments, nevertheless all members of urban society hold a basic shared value-system and therefore feel at liberty to comment through the lines recited in the oral poems of their peers, on any form of behaviour that effects the stability and smooth running of their societal setting.

Another interesting fact is that lines from poems of this nature are not the sole composition domain of women. Obviously, where castigatory and caustic references are predominant, it stands to reason that the lines are not self composed, although this does happen. In certain of the poems recorded in urban settings however, men as well as other women have added lines.

## Composition

The language encountered in this type of remonstratory oral poetry is of a highly allusive and formulaic nature. At the same time however, it contains a very clear and unmistakable message which is intended to act as a warning and admonishment against pursuing unacceptable forms of behaviour. Reflecting the very nature of the criticism contained therein, it is also common to encounter scatological references as well as crude and vulgar terms. These words are acceptable within the framework of *izihasho* but would be frowned upon as '*inhlamba*' or filth, if used loosely in everyday speech.

The types of irregular behaviour targeted in these oral poems focus primarily on misdemeanours such as promiscuity, laziness, gossiping and drinking.

## **The Theme of Promiscuity**

The most prevalent theme by far contained in the *izihasho* researched in urban areas, is promiscuity. Often more than one theme can occur at a time within a poem, so a woman can be reprimanded not only for promiscuity, but also for drunkenness and laziness as well. Certain formulas recur in the examples given, and it is clear that there is often an urban counterpart for a well established formula prevalent in rural areas e.g.

'akadlulwa bhulukwe' vs 'akadlulwa bheshe'/'akashiywa sidwaba'

The following *izihasho* are those that have promiscuity as the dominant topic. Due to the allusive nature of this oral poetry, it is necessary with some examples, to fill in biographical detail as well as examining the texts themselves.

### **IZIBONGO of KHI NGCOBO<sup>1</sup>**

The One who picks up,  
She picks up here and discards there  
She beckons, Come, ride, going forward  
Social Worker, vehicle of the public!

### **Literary Analysis**

The deverbalised image in the first line of picking up is carried through to the next line and contrasted with the verb *qathaza* which means to drop, in order to highlight this woman's behaviour in having affairs with many men.

The images in the last two lines of being a vehicle (taxi), is a common one when alluding to promiscuous behaviour, the woman being likened to a mode of transport which is easily accessible, provided one has the money to pay, plus carrying the sexual undertone of being something that someone is able to ride on.

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#### **IZIBONGO zikaKHI NGCOBO**

UmaCosha  
Siyacosha, siyaqathaza lapha.  
Sithi Woza, gibela, oya phambili  
Social Worker, moto yomphakathi!

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The metaphor expressed in English of the Social Worker alludes to someone who serves the community in a positive way—in this instance the male community, who make frequent use of her services.

### **IZIBONGO of S'BONGILE<sup>2</sup>**

Enough you talkative one!  
Enough you old beer pot  
Which is tired and worn out  
For it has been in use a very long time.

#### **Literary Analysis**

The reference in the first line to Mangqengqewu is a derivation from the verb *ngqengqeza*, a verb which denotes noise or the constant sound of a ringing bell.

The allusion to S'bongile, a woman in her mid forties, as a an old worn out beer pot, is a double edged sword. Not only does it carry the reference to drinking, but at the same time her promiscuity which is well known and shows no sign of abating, has rendered her a worn out utensil which is no longer desirable or useable.

### **IZIBONGO of MASITHOLE<sup>3</sup>**

You who have no fixed place to live  
Because of your promiscuity.  
Prostitute you upset me,  
You do not sleep at home because of men  
The lover of men,  
The changer of different men,

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#### <sup>2</sup> **IZIBONGO zikaS'BONGILE**

Yeka mangqengqewu!  
Yeka khamba oludala  
Oselukhathele!  
Kade kwasa ludlela.

#### <sup>3</sup> **IZIBONGO zikaMASITHOLE**

UMahamb' ehlala  
Ngenxa yobusoka  
USifebe siyangicasula,  
Wangalali ekhaya ngenxa yamadoda.  
Untandokazi yamadoda  
Mshintshanisi wamadoda,  
Oshintshe amadoda ayishumi,



4

Who rejected Sipho  
By accepting S'fiso  
When she had already admitted John.  
Who rejected John  
By replacing him with Sabelo.  
Sabelo ran away  
And was followed by Vezi

The changer of different men  
Who rejected Mdu  
And changed him for Zakhele  
All men belong to me!  
The lover of men,

You have men in Durban  
You have men in Johannesburg  
You have men in Olundi,  
You have men in Port Shepstone,  
You have men in all spheres of the world.

### Literary Analysis

Although these lines may not have much metaphorical imagery, the appeal lies in the structure of the poem, which is based very closely on the lines of traditional *izibongo zamakhosi*. Instead of conquests in battle, we are presented here with a number of 'love conquests' who are discarded and done away with in much the same fashion as the heroes of old dealt with adversaries in battle.

4

Ushintshe uSipho,  
Wamshintsha ngoS'fiso  
US'fiso wamshintsha ngoJohn  
UJohn wamshintsha ngoSabelo.  
USabelo wakhala wemuka  
Walandlelwa uVezi.

Mshintshi wamadoda ahlukene  
Oshintshe uMdu  
UMshintsha ngoZakhele.  
Madod' onke ngawami.  
Mthandi wamadoda

Othande eThekwini  
Wathanda eMgungundlovu  
Wathanda oLundi  
Wathanda ePort Shepstone  
Othande nkalozoneke.

### IZIBONGO of DELIWE<sup>5</sup>

You who goes everywhere!  
You who does not choose  
Whether a person is old or young.  
You also don't choose  
Whether a person is black or white  
Because you say you do not discriminate by race.

You want to satisfy yourself  
Because you believe that what you have is inexhaustible.  
You spreader of venereal diseases  
To young and old alike.

#### Biographical Detail

This woman lives at Ngonyameni near Umlazi. She is illiterate and comes from a poor family. She turned to prostitution as a source of income. The lines would be recited when with her peer group and were not taken to be malicious, but spicy teasing.

#### Literary Analysis

The first five lines refer to this woman's indiscriminate sexual behaviour, even across racial lines. The last two lines refer to her ongoing treatment at the local clinic for venereal diseases.

### IZIBONGO of NOBUHLE BUTHELEZI<sup>6</sup>

The cooker of different foods like the summer pot!  
You are transporting and accompanying people, you bus!

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#### <sup>5</sup> ZIBONGO zikaDELIWE

Mqedi wezwe!  
Wena ongakhethi  
Ukuthi umuntu mdala noma mncane.  
Wena futhi ongakhethi  
Ukuthi umuntu mnyama noma mhlophe,  
Ngoba uthi awubandiululi muntu.

Wena futhi ufuna ukuzidelisa  
Ngoba ukholelwa ekutheni lento kayipheli,  
Mitshali wamalumbo  
Kwabancane nabadala.

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#### <sup>6</sup> IZIBONGO zikaNOBUHLE BUTHELEZI

Maphek' ethulule njengebhodwe lasehlobo!  
Uyathutha uyaphelikezela webhasi!

7  
Yesterday you were at the firm,  
Today you are in the street in lorries and taxis.  
Both Blacks and Whites are known by you.  
I wonder what the capacity of your thing is?  
Happy are those who know it.

### **Literary Analysis**

The first two lines of this poem are the only ones which have metaphors that require elucidation. The first line refers to her as the summer pot referring to the wide variety of lovers she has in the same way that the summer pot has such a wide variety of different vegetables which are cooked because of the favourable growing season. The second line refers to her in the commonly used image of a bus, a vehicle which transports many people provided they have the fare—a reference to her many lovers. The poem is concluded with crude references to her sexual capacity.

### **IZIBONGO of BUSISIWE<sup>8</sup>**

Go, go away child!  
Weighed down by parcels every day.  
Books that have not been written in.  
She goes up and down with the buses.

We are tired of young prostitutes  
Darkness is coming, it is now at the door  
All will be revealed!

### **Biographical Detail**

These praises belong to a schoolgirl in Standard nine in Umlazi. She was

7  
Izolo ubusefemini,  
Namuhla usengaqweni  
Emalolini nasematekisini  
Abamnyama nabamhlophe baziwa nguwe  
Kazi ingakanani lento yakho?  
Bayadela abayaziyo.

### **IZIBONGO zikaBUSISIWE**

Hamba, hamba ngane!  
Nomgodlagodla wezinsuku.  
Mibhai' engabhalwanga!  
Sehla senyuk' emabhasini.  
  
Sakhathala ngezincane izifebe  
Kuyez' ukuhlwa, sekusemnyango  
Zonke zozwakala!

given these lines by different people who live in her community, and they are normally recited by various members of her peer group. On being questioned about the content of the lines, she showed indifference to any negative view that they expressed about her.

She said that her parents were not aware of her 'praises'.

### **Literary Analysis**

The first verse refers to the fact that although this girl left home every day laden with books for school, her books were not used, as she would not attend school, but would go into town with potential suitors.

The second verse acts as a warning to the girl, that people in the community are aware of the situation, and that if she is caught out, the evidence will be made known for all to hear.

### **IZIBONGO of LUNGILE<sup>9</sup>**

Lungile, mother's baby!  
No mother, don't worry,  
She eats Induna (maize meal) and fills herself up for some time!  
A child who has a child

### **Biographical Detail**

These praises which were recited at occasions by this young girl's peers and even sometimes by their mothers, were given to her in an attempt to censure the mother. The accusation levelled at her in these lines was to expose the fact that she indulged her daughter and spoiled her rotten. She would also not heed the warnings of others, with regards her daughter's bad behaviour and is thus chided with the results of her lack of discipline, i.e. her daughter's pregnancy.

### **Literary Analysis**

The first two lines gently tease the girl, but in the third line, the mother is addressed in a sarcastic manner. The fourth line alludes to the fact that the girl is pregnant (i.e. her stomach is full having satisfied herself with Induna maize meal). The last line is a reference to the undesirable situation of a young girl falling pregnant.

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<sup>9</sup> **IZIBONGO zikaLUNGILE**

ULungile, umama's baby!  
Hhayi Mama, ungakhazeki,  
Udl' Induna, esuthis' isikhathi eside!  
Ingane inengane!

## **IZIBONGO of ZOKUPHIWA MAKHATHINI<sup>10</sup>**

Panties that loosen on seeing a man!  
Bus which leaves no-one behind  
It is ridden on with credit.  
Lovable one to men!  
The real thirst quencher

### **Literary Analysis**

The first line here is a more modern urban equivalent to the original lines which appear in Nandi's praises.

Umathanga awahlangani  
Ahlanguka ngokubona umyeni/indoda

Again the concept of a woman as a form of public transport is used here—where Zokuphiwa is likened to someone who accepts anyone's advances. However, unlike a professional prostitute, she does not expect payment hence the reference to *isikweletu*, but rather expects her lovers to court her and buy her things. Her appeal to men is quite obvious and the way in which she is referred to in the last line refers to her ability to gratify the sexual needs of her suitors.

## **IZIBONGO of MAMKHIZE<sup>11</sup>**

Container without handles!  
Long rope of string  
Mouth that waters  
When it sees one who wears trousers.  
One who loves till losing consciousness,

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### <sup>10</sup> **IZIBONGO zikaZOKUPHIWA MAKHATHINI**

Udilozu liyaxega uma libona indoda!  
Ibhasi engashiyi muntu.  
Egibelisana nangesikweletu  
Uyigagu lamadoda!  
Isiqeda koma soqobo.

### <sup>11</sup> **IZIBONGO zikaMAMKHIZE**

Umqomo ungenankintsho!  
Untamb' ende kalayini.  
Umlomo uconsa amathe  
Mawubona into efake ibhulukwe.  
Umaqoma aze aquleke,

- 12     You don't care that the weapon has froth  
         That goes down the throat  
         Stay Sarafina!

### Literary Analysis

The metaphor used in the first line of a container or bin is commonly used to describe a person who is indiscriminate either in drink or love matters. The second line is a metaphor that is associated with height. The last three lines criticise her for excessive drinking, and end the poem with a jibe at her for being condemned to the status of an old maid, the name Sarafina being in popular use before the film of that name, to indicate an old, outdated person.

### IZIBONGO of NOMSA<sup>13</sup>

The strainer which is leaking!  
No news passes her by,  
No man passes her by.  
She whose thighs do not meet,  
They open voluntarily when seeing trousers!

### Literary Analysis

This talkative woman who is also exposed for her immoral behaviour is well known amongst her associates in Kwa Mashu by these formulaic lines. The first line contains a reference to the image of *uvovo*, a particularly striking metaphor, where her gossipmongering habits are likened to that of a strainer which is used to strain traditional beer. The formula which is used in the fourth line is taken from Nandi's *izibongo*.

### IZIBONGO of a NURSE at KING EDWARD HOSPITAL<sup>14</sup>

The one who stabs at Point Road with red buttocks,

- 12     Awusibheki isikhali esinengwebu  
         Okwehla ngomphimbo kuyelilela.  
         Sala Sarafina!

13     **IZIBONGO zikaNOMSA**

Uvovo liyavuza,  
Kadlulwa zindaba,  
Kadlulwa bhulukwe.  
Umathanga awahlangani  
Ayazivulekela uma ebona ibhulukwe!

14     **IZIBONGO zikaNESI waseKING EDWARD**

Umagwaz' ePhoyinti osinqasibomvu,

15

You are as ugly as a pig!  
For taking a kiss and dipping it into the mud.  
The child is innocent, the problem lies with the mat.

The healer of Aids while she spreads it!  
The panties are loosened when seeing a man.  
This thing of God does not spoil!

### **Literary Analysis**

These lines would be recited by the peers of this nurse when chiding or teasing her. They would normally be treated with hoots of laughter by those listening, and at worst would cause mild embarrassment to the recipient on some occasions, depending who was in the company.

The first line alludes to her abode in Point Road in Durban, notorious as a place of prostitution. The second line refers to her facial appearance, as she is not an attractive woman and the fact that she is not choosy about the appearance or status of her lovers either. The third line seems to reflect the sentiment of debasing sexuality and sexual relations with its metaphor of mud. The fourth line is a jibe at her habit of never sleeping alone. The next line is true irony, although she is a nurse whose profession it is to render help in curing people, because of her loose morals, she actually is responsible for spreading disease. The penultimate line speaks for itself, but came into her 'praises' for her reported affair with a patient at the hospital. The last line is a line that the woman herself was fond of saying when questioned about her insatiable sexual appetite, implying that no matter how much she engages in intercourse, her sexual organs were indefatigable!

### **IZIBONGO of MAMSOMI<sup>15</sup>**

Thighs that open easily,  
Never bearing children like a chicken does an egg.  
No-one passes her by,

15

Umubi wengulube!  
Ngokuthath' ukiss uwufak' odakeni.  
Ungan' ayinacala indab' isocansini.

Umelaph' wengculazi kanti uyayifafaza!  
Udilozi liyaxega malibon' indoda.  
Into kaThixo ayipheli!

16

### **ZIBONGO zikaMAMSOMI**

Umathanga ayazivulekela,  
Umazalela ezeleni njengenkukhu.  
Akadfulwa bheshu, akadfulwa bhulukwe,

- 17 Whether you are ugly or handsome, as long as you are a male.  
All men know about her!

### Literary Analysis

The bearer of these izibongo, MaMsomi, is not averse to these lines which criticise her promiscuous behaviour. They are normally recited by her peers seemingly not in a malicious way, but more in a type of 'barbed' teasing manner.

### IZIBONGO of MAGUMEDE<sup>18</sup>

MaGumede, woman that hits men!  
Railway bus of the Whites  
Dominator in the household.

### Literary Analysis

These lines serve to hold this iron willed lady up for ridicule. In a patriarchal society such as is found amongst the Zulu, it is extremely rare to encounter a woman who dominates the household or her husband. For this reason she is criticised, but to her, these praises are a delight and she has no problem with calling her own praises out gleefully. The praises would operate on a second level when recited by her peers, in so far as they would also be recited in order to rebuke the husband, who has allowed such a thing to happen in his household, and would be an invocation to him to address the situation.

### IZIBONGO of BELLA MSHIBE<sup>19</sup>

You low-classed women of D-Section, what are they doing?  
They wear rags  
When did you last see a Whiteman wearing a headring?  
Hololo! Hololo! No leave me alone!

- 17 Umubi, umuhle, inqobo uma uyindoda.  
Uyindaba izekwayo emadodeni!

### 18 IZIBONGO zikaMAGUMEDE

MaGumede, mfaz' oshay' indoda!  
Ngqongqoza bhasi yabelungu  
Ngqoshushilizi emzini.

### 19 IZIBONGO zikaBELLA MSHIBE

Bafazana baka-D, benzani?  
Bahlinc' izidwedwe  
Wake wambonaphi uMlung' ephuhl' ungiyane?  
Hololo! Hololo! Hhayi ngiyeke wena!



### **Biographical Detail**

The lines in this woman's praises were self composed and are used as a comment directed at a section of women who lived in D section in the township of Umlazi. She came from a rural environment to town to join her husband who secured accommodation there. She encountered this group of woman in the community who looked down on her and mocked her for her traditional form of dress.

### **Literary Analysis**

The use of the now offensive term *umfazi* in its diminutive form which reflects derogation, makes Bella's feeling about her critics quite clear. The reference to *izidwedwe* which are equated to discarded clothing or rags, is an effective slight about these women's clothing, which although Western are described as being rags. The term *izidwedwe* carries a double entendre, as it may also refer to a morally bad person.

The third line carries the main implication of the intended message, in that White men are never seen wearing the traditional Zulu headring, *ungiyane*, therefore those who shun traditional ways as traditional dress and adopt other people's customs—their people's customs and culture—cannot be respected.

### **Conclusion**

Okpewho in his research on African Oral Literature explains that speaking about one's problems, whether in the form of song, poetry or story, provides the performer with an avenue for emotional and psychological release in day to day relations between members of society, helping to promote the bases for social harmony. He notes that this form of oral lampooning is widespread across Africa. The type of oral poetry encountered in the praises of women from both rural and urban environments, is used as an acceptable means of social commentary and deflection of ill-feeling that is commonly found in women's *izihasho*, as well as

discouraging social evils such as theft, adultery, truancy and general irresponsibility among young and old alike ... they encourage the citizens of a society, to observe proper conduct, cultivate a sense of purpose and responsibility, and issue a warning whenever anyone or any group indulges in habits that are detrimental to the moral health and general survival of the society (Okpewho 1993:149).

In considering the content of these praises, the most important point to take into consideration when analysing these oral texts, is context. The perform-

ance is not complete in itself—it exists within a recognised tradition. The impact that the recitation of these has, not only on the person at whom they are directed, but also on the people present, is totally reliant on the environment in which they are recited and also on whom is responsible for reciting them. This will often also determine the function intended in the articulation of a person's praises. In the case of the praises of Lungile, these praises may be recited by the mother of one of her friends, in an attempt to satirize the lax control the mother has exercised over her child, as well as the moral looseness of the daughter. In the vast majority of examples cited here, where specific women who transgress socially acceptable norms in urban settings are exposed in these poems, one must bear in mind that they are atypical examples of *izibongo* or *izihasho*, where the good and the bad are normally balanced and blended together to give an overall picture of the person.

Gunner (1979:242) makes the point that:

Praise poems that are wholly sexual in their content are considered to be in poor taste and to be inferior compositions

When one compares the paucity of metaphorical allusions and rich imagery in these examples as compared to those that are normally found in the 'balanced' praises of women, then one might have to agree with Gunner from an analytical, academic point of view. The people to whom these oral poems refer, may not however, regard them in quite the same way.

Generally, the lines of one's 'praises' are known by people close to the recipient in her community setting. In these examples, the oral poem seems to be used as a form of reprimand but the severity of the chastisement depends largely on the context, and may vary from mild and playful teasing, to deprecation or derogation. The mercurial nature of these oral praises also renders them extremely difficult to capture in writing. If the person to whom they refer should be asked to recite their own praises, often a form of editing occurs which robs them of any risqué spice. Should one ask the subject's parent, the version they might give may vary considerably to that rendered by the subject's friends.

Most often, despite the content of these oral poems, they do not evoke hostility or animosity, because of the humour which is embedded in the images, and also because of the context in which they are recited. Where the humour may be lacking in the actual words, they may be very much part of the actual performance, where the reciter softens the message by absurd facial expressions and bodily gestures in order to motivate laughter. This ultimately will reveal whether the person is being chastised or not, or whether the articulation of her praises, often in a shebeen setting as with

many of these examples, is meant to delight and excite the recipient. This results from the fact that attention and acknowledgement of her character, is being focused on her. Among her drinking peers, the recitation of her praises elevates her and is not necessarily taken as an admonishment or insult, despite the seemingly censorious or insulting overtones in the poem. Being known by her 'praises' provides these women with a distinct identity, a sort of recognition and support which is important to her ego and psyche.

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