

TRANSFORMING TRADITION OR TRANSFORMING SOCIETY: SITAS, HLATSWAYO AND PERFORMATIVE LITERATURE

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Sitas' vibrant eulogy of Mi S'Dumo Hlatswayo's poetry (1986; *Transformation*, 2), cries out for a critical response regarding uses in Southern Africa of the notion of tradition. The article is a significant contribution to a rapidly developing debate on characterising workers' literature, poetry and theatre, and that genre's relationship with other similar performative practices. Comment aimed at Sitas will hopefully resonate with that debate.

Sitas characterises Hlatswayo's poetry as 'an important revival of the Nguni *imbongi* tradition in the service of the black worker's struggle ... a revival and transformation of the tradition ... (which) offer(s) an interesting formal mutation of *imbongi* poetry' (1986:50; original emphases).

The problem with this characterisation lies in the perception that there exists some kind of real, authentic (and implicitly static) '*imbongi* tradition', which was historically associated functionally with an hierarchical social structure, and to which one can refer to establish a kind of static baseline model of a normative '*Nguni imbongi* tradition' set in the context of an equally static and idealised '*traditional Nguni society*'. Sitas' idea that praise poetry needs to be transformed, rather than applied directly, for use in the trade union context, implies an acceptance of just such a static conception of what constitutes an original (real; pure; authentic) traditional form.

Quinlan's (1986) article, in the same number of *Transformation*, demonstrates the fallacy of working with notions of static and authentic '*traditional*' forms, albeit in a different context. It thus signals the importance of recognising that traditional forms are constantly transformed and changing, despite appeals by their purveyors that they are replications of earlier forms: Sitas appears to have ignored the recent literature on instrumentalist uses of traditionality elsewhere in the world (eg Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983).

Perhaps Sitas' analysis has been influenced by the literature on southern African praise poetry much of which does represent it as a static tradition of unchanging form and style, bound up with the hierarchies of chiefs and commoners in what is portrayed as traditional (Zulu; Xhosa; Nguni; Sotho) society; this despite Mafeje's efforts twenty years ago (1967) to dispel notions of the *imbongi* as praise poet for the chief, and to indicate his role as bard and socio-political commentator. Setting out to record and analyse examples of praise poetry from a particular place and period easily leads to the description of a static form in much the way as occurred with codifiers of 'customary law' (Chanock, 1982). Perhaps, also, Sitas has unwittingly been seduced by Inkatha's claim to be the purveyor of authentic Zulu culture (or tradition) (Harries, 1987) which would include in itself the notion of an 'original' (authentic) *imbongi* style and form of praise poetry.

The probable reason for the problem outlined above is that Sitas, like so many others, appears to work from the premise of a dichotomy between (if not societies, then) forms of practice which are either traditional and reactionary or modern and progressive. The dichotomy reflects a notional opposition between non-rational thinking and transmission of ideas about form and style on the one hand, and, on the other, rational thought and communication. In South Africa, moreover, progressives' acceptance of this dichotomy is reinforced by the state's use of traditionality in creating and bolstering the bantustan system (Spiegel, 1987; cf Perry and Perry, 1985) so that 'ideologies that stress "tribal order" and "traditional" life ... are ... viewed as reactionary concepts that serve to disrupt the development of a national consciousness' (Mills, 1987: 37).

For Sitas, acceptance of this dichotomy manifests in his counterposing tradition to *transformed* tradition, with a further overlay of implicit opposition between bad (hierarchical) and good (communitarian): he thus romanticises Hlatswayo's discovery, in an independent African church, of a 'community of concern and care ... without status distinctions (and) where ordinary people shared and prayed together' (Sitas, 1986:52), and he sets this up in opposition to both an image of earlier hierarchies of so-called traditional Zulu society, as portrayed in the literature (and by Inkatha: see Harries, 1987), and the contemporary hierarchies experienced in certain 'community-based' organisations as well as on the shopfloor. It was in the former 'communitarian atmosphere', says Sitas, that Hlatswayo learned the skills now imbedded in his poetry and which he uses to confront the hierarchies and exploitation experienced on the shopfloor and more widely by working class people in their daily lives. Moreover, he emphasises the dichotomy when he says that Hlatswayo 'is *consciously* transforming tradition propelled by a future he longs for as opposed to the *izimbongi* of KwaZulu (and thus Inkatha) who are attempting to *preserve* social hierarchy by linking it to the past' (Sitas, 1986: 54-5, original emphases).

Two points need to be made here. Firstly, praise poetry, like all other oral literature and indeed all traditional form, is *transformed* in the process of each performance, in its *transmission* from one performance to the next, and from one poem to the next. Analysts who set out to discover the commonalities of content and/or form in examples of oral literature and performing arts must be held responsible for creating an impression of static, so-called traditional, style and form, and their example should not be followed blindly.

Secondly, and more importantly, Sitas' last-quoted observation reveals that the practice of praise poetry is being used as a *resource* and drawn upon for diverse political ends. Both Hlatswayo and the KwaZulu (Inkatha) *izimbongi* are using it because it is 'rooted in popular symbolism' of the day (Sitas, 1986:54); put simply, it has an appeal to their constituencies. But whether this is because, in people's minds, it is linked to the past or because it foretells the future is a moot point - even if that future is portrayed as a golden age. Possibly Marx suggested the answer when he wrote that

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things ... precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service ... (Marx, 1968:96).

If this is the case, Sitas has done a great disservice to both Hlatswayo and the progressive movement. At the general level, his own commitment to images of the future-as-good has blinded him to the importance of being able to use images ostensibly drawn from the *past* as a means of mobilising in the present. More specifically, he has misapprehended the import of Hlatswayo's work which, by using a style which is said to come from the past, enables him to draw in others who value that past, and its symbols, so that they will gain an understanding of their present and be hastened into perceiving their future as the image in which Hlatswayo portrays it.

Moreover, Sitas has implied that Hlatswayo's poetry has so significantly transformed a version of Nguni praise poetry that he barely deserves the appellation *imbongi* which Sitas readily bestows on the praise poets of Inkatha whom he implicitly characterises as exemplifying authentic *izimbongi*.

The point at issue here is that, just as the KwaZulu *izimbongi* do, the *imbongi* Hlatswayo uses a practice - readily described as *traditional* - as a resource for the mobilisation of people with whom that particular representation of traditionality resonates. As Morris (1986) has pointed out, people in the Natal region are sometimes unionists and sometimes Inkatha supporters. In their respective efforts to draw their constituencies into offering more consistent support, neither Inkatha nor Hlatswayo (and the progressive movement) can afford to disregard the potency of appeals to the *past* as phrased in terms of traditionality.

It is for precisely that reason that the columns of *Sechaba* have repeatedly been used to contest Inkatha and Gatsha Buthelezi's claims to be upholding 'tradition'. Such contests over what constitutes the traditional have been recognised as a primary aspect of liberation struggles elsewhere in the world (Tonkinson, 1982; Ranger, 1983; Philibert, 1986), and the ANC's continuing conflict with Buthelezi and Inkatha provides an arena for just such a contest (cf Harries, 1987).

On occasions such as Shaka's Day, Buthelezi thus adorns himself in leopard-skins and rehearses his genealogical links to both Cetshwayo, the last independent Zulu King, and to Cetshwayo's prime minister (Harries, 1987); and *Sechaba* responds with an attack on his use of 'traditional leopard skin regalia' not only because it 'contrasted seriously with the high technology of the microphones before him' but also because Buthelezi 'was not interested in continuing Shaka's tradition' (*Sechaba*, Editorial; November 1985). That heritage is one which Buthelezi, despite his 'traditional status as a chief ... long ago turned his back on (it is) the strong and proud tradition of struggle which is the heritage

of all our people including the ones whose loyalty and support he falsely claims - the Zulus'. It is thus, under the heading 'The Tradition Betrayed', that *Sechaba* berates Buthelezi's participation in 'the bantustan system, which constitutes the cornerstone of apartheid' (September, 1984: 4-5). Clearly *Sechaba's* editorial writers feel it is important to wrest from Buthelezi his assumed right to decide what constitutes the traditional so that it can be used as a resource by the ANC rather than by Inkatha.

The same should surely apply to progressive interpretations as to the efficacy of such practices as praise poetry and other performative literature: too great a concern with the formal transformations of such practices might reduce their longer-term efficacy in effecting social transformation because much of their appeal and power comes from their appearance of having come, untransformed, out of the past.

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