



# The symbolic significance of P.T. Mtuze's poem "Isinagogo" in *Uyavuth' umlilo*

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## Abstract

### The symbolic significance of P.T. Mtuze's Poem "Isinagogo" in *Uyavuth' umlilo*

*This article examines the symbols used by P.T. Mtuze in the poem, "Isinagogo", which is contained in "Uyavuth' umlilo" (1990). The symbols used in the poem include "isinagogo" (the black barbet), "amavukuthu" (the doves), "izadunge" (the dirty water ponds) and "umphathi wamavukuthu" (the master of the doves). In the discussion it will be illustrated how these symbols represent Nelson Mandela when he was a prisoner, the South African Police, the then State President of South Africa, P.W. Botha, and Robben Island. However, before the actual discussion of the symbols, an attempt will be made to define the concept of symbolism.*

## Opsomming

### Die simboliese beduidenheid van P.T. Mtuze se gedig "Isinagogo" in *Uyavuth' umlilo*

*Hierdie artikel ondersoek die simboliek wat P.T. Mtuze gebruik in die gedig "Isinagogo", wat opgeneem is in "Uyavuth' umlilo" (1990). Die simboliek wat gebruik word in die gedig sluit in die "isinagogo" (die kuifkophoutkapper), "amavukuthu" (die duiwe), "izadunge" (die vuil waterpoele) en "umphathi wamavukuthu" (die meester van die duiwe). In die bespreking sal geïllustreer word hoe hierdie simbole Nelson Mandela as gevangene, die Suid Afrikaanse Polisie, die voormalige Staatspresident van Suid Afrika, P.W. Botha, en Robbeneiland uitbeeld. Daar sal egter eers gepoog word om die konsep "simboliek" te definieer.*

## 1. Introduction

While Mtuze's poetry is rich in symbolism, so far, no attention has been given to this poet's use of symbolism in his poetry. The aim of this article is to reveal the rich usage of symbolism in the poetry of Mtuze, with special reference to the poem, "Isinagogo", in the volume, *Uyavuth' umlilo*, which Mtuze co-authored with Satyo.

During the apartheid period in South Africa, South African writers in general, and Xhosa poets in particular, expressed their observations and feelings about what was happening in the country. Unfortunately, they could not do it so freely and openly for fear of detention and/or the banning of their works. This was because of the lack of freedom of speech and expression during those times. These writers had to use symbols to reveal their perceptions and express their observations and feelings about what was happening in the political situation of South Africa (Tshomela, 2006:56). It is for this reason that Mtuze, in this poem, uses symbols to reveal conditions of political prisoners, particularly Nelson Mandela, at Robben Island during the apartheid period.

Examples of other Xhosa writers who use symbols in revealing the negative effects of the political situation in South Africa during the apartheid era include Siyongwana (1962) in the novel, *Ubulumko bezinja*, Qangule (1970) in the poem, "Inkabi kabawo" and Jolobe (1992) in the poem, "Ukwenziwa komkhonzi". The symbols used by these writers are not readily clear to everyone. One has to apply one's analytical skills to get to what these writers are actually presenting in their works.

## 2. P.T. Mtuze

The poem, "Isinagogo", is written by Peter Tshobiso Mtuze in the anthology *Uyavuth' umlilo*, which is co-authored with S.C. Satyo. Mtuze is a prominent writer of Xhosa literary works including prose, drama and poetry. He has written over thirty books of Xhosa literature. He has served as court interpreter, radio personality and a lecturer at the University of South Africa, Fort Hare and Rhodes universities. He is presently a Professor of African Languages at Rhodes University.

Mtuze composed the poem "Isinagogo" particularly to reveal some facts about Mandela's life in jail, when he was a political prisoner at Robben Island. Due to the lack of freedom of speech and press, and political intolerance by the apartheid government in South Africa, he

uses symbols to reveal these facts. The symbols he uses are the barbet, doves, water ponds and the master of the doves, as the discussion in this article illustrates.

### 3. The concept of symbolism

Symbolism is defined by Rooney (1999:1891) as “the use of symbols to invest things with a representative meaning”. On the other hand, Mtumane (2000:242; 2005:85) defines symbolism as “the use of an object, idea or incident to stand for or represent another”. The object, idea or incident used would be referred to as a symbol. Shipley (1970:322) views symbolism as “the representation of a reality on one level of reference by a corresponding reality on another”. The object, idea or incident used as a symbol then is a reality that represents another reality. This is the reason why Shaw (1972:367) views a symbol as having values different from those of whatever is being symbolised. The use of a symbol is generally based on some association with what is represented.

Symbolism then may be viewed as the systematic or creative use of arbitrary symbols as abstracted representations of concepts or objects and distinct relationships in between, as they define both context and the narrower definition of terms. In a narrow context, symbolism is the applied use of any iconic representations which carry particular conventional meanings.

In the words of Grambs (1984:355) symbolism is:

the use of visible or palpable things as specific signs or tokens to represent things, forces, qualities, universal truths et cetera; signification through real or sensory objects or occurrences; the imaginative use in art or literature of animate or inanimate phenomena for meanings beyond the real or immediate world, invested or latent meaning.

From the above definitions, it is clear that symbolism entails the use of something to represent something else. This thing that is being used is a symbol that adds meaning that is not of itself, but about something else, the represented. It is for this reason that in this article it will be investigated what meaning is revealed by the symbols used in the poem under study. These symbols are discussed below as *isinagogo* (the barbet), *amavukuthu* (the doves), *izadunge* (the dirty water ponds) and the master of the doves. The idea that the bird symbols used in the poem represent human beings is strengthened by the use of personification with regard to such symbols. For instance, the doves are presented talking, laugh-

ing and being sarcastic, while the barbet is imbued with pride, as the discussion below will reveal.

#### **4. *Isinagogo* (the barbet)**

The barbet is a bird that is black in colour. Considering the contents of the poem, one deduces that this bird is used to symbolise a black person who is in detention. Like someone in detention, this bird is put in a trap which represents one's being in jail. The fact that this bird is used to represent someone in detention is also deduced from the manner in which it is treated, as the following lines reveal:

*lhambil' iminyaka kungekho ban' usibonayo;*  
*Tshitshilili noko kutya ...*  
(Mtuze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(Years went by with no one seeing it;  
Even food was pushed to slide to it ...)

The bird's not being able to be seen by anyone suggests that the person symbolised might have been in solitude. He might have been where he would not even be visited by members of the public. Generally, during the apartheid time in South Africa, it was political prisoners who were denied visitation from the public. This is confirmed by Mandela (1994:474), who was a political prisoner, when he says: "I was entitled to have only one visitor, and write and receive only one letter every six months ... Visits and letters were restricted to first degree relatives." The situation of the barbet in the poem suggests that the prisoner represented might have been detained for his ideas and actions against the policies of the state. In other words, he was a political prisoner. The authorities might have feared that should such a prisoner be visited freely by the public, the prisoner would be able to spread his influence to the latter. Besides, they might have even wanted to frustrate him to change his mind concerning his political ideas.

Note the use of the idiophone *tshitshilili* in the second line. This idiophone is generally used to illustrate the action of pushing something to slide on the floor. As this idiophone is used with regard to food in the poem, it illustrates the manner of giving food to the barbet. A plate of food is made to slide on the floor to the barbet. This action strengthens the idea that the barbet represents a prisoner. It is prisoners who are generally served food by pushing the plates and making them slide on the floor (*tshitshilili*) to the prisoners. This action generally illustrates the disrespect with which

prisoners are treated by those serving them food. As it is usually the police or prison warders who give food to prisoners, this action denotes how the prisoner is treated with disrespect by these officials.

The prisoner, represented by the barbet, seems to be a very proud one, probably because he is detained for a good cause. He does not complain but leads a life of pride and perseverance in jail. He is also a prisoner who is respected by, as well as, enjoying the sympathy of the public, as the following lines confirm:

*Sahlal' isinagogo siziqenya kuloo mgibe;  
Sazibelek' izidanga, ezembeko nezovelwano.*  
(Mtuzze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(The barbet stayed proud in that trap;  
He was proud of being respected and sympathised with.)

The pride of the barbet within the trap signifies the uncompromising and unapologetic nature of the prisoner. The respect and sympathy referred to in the second line signify the positive attitude of the public towards the prisoner.

It is uncommon for a prisoner to be respected and sympathised with by the public, as prisoners are often criminals who trouble the public in more ways than one. However, the respect and sympathy of the public with regard to the prisoner represented in the poem indicate that the public is not happy with his imprisonment, as he might have been imprisoned for a good cause or undeservingly. It is this situation that triggers public respect and sympathy for him.

The perseverance of the prisoner is also denoted by the words:

*Ihambil' iminyaka sibethwa ngaloo maqhwa;  
Sazithwala nezamaqhwa izambalo kwezo ngalo.*  
(Mtuzze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(Years passed by while storms hit it;  
It remained proud even in storms.)

The phrase *Ihambile iminyaka ...* ("Years passed by") which appears twice in the poem, indicates that the prisoner symbolised in the poem has been detained for many years, as he is given a very long sentence that took many years to serve. The word *amaqhwa* (storms) literally refers to strong unbearable winds. In life storms are generally regarded to symbolise difficult conditions, hardships and troubles one experiences. The barbet's being hit by storms denotes

the difficult conditions, hardships and troubles the prisoner has to bear while in jail. The second line denotes how he has persevered and went through those conditions.

Considering the above discussion, and applying the poem to the South African situation during the apartheid period, one observes a strong connection between the experiences of the barbet and those of political prisoners, particularly Nelson Mandela when he was a detainee at Robben Island. It is Mandela whom the public was not allowed to see in jail as he was a political prisoner. Although visits were restricted to first degree relatives, as already stated above, these relatives were allowed a visit of only thirty minutes after six months. Even Mandela's wife, Winnie, was allowed a thirty minutes visitation after six months (Mandela, 1994:477).

It is Mandela who remained proud in jail and would not compromise nor be apologetic about his political ideas. Mandela's pride in prison became apparent when he was determined not to lose his dignity in jail, as he states:

Prison and the authorities conspire to rob each man of his dignity. In and of itself, that assured that I would survive, for any man or institution that tries to rob me of my dignity will lose, because I will not part with it at any price or under any pressure. (Mandela, 1994:464.)

These words reflect how proud Mandela was of his dignity, even in testing circumstances in jail. His uncompromising and unapologetic stance for his political ideas became apparent when he voiced his preparedness, even before his detention, to die because of his ideas, as he says: "I was prepared for the death penalty" (Mandela, 1994:445). This stance is also confirmed in his speech during the Rivonia trial where he voiced his preparedness to die for his political ideals (*Reader's digest*, 1994:413). This uncompromising stance also manifested itself when Mandela rejected the offer given by P.W. Botha to set him free even before the completion of the period of his sentence (Mandela, 1994:621).

It is Mandela who persevered difficult conditions in jail. The difficult conditions are spoken of as *amaqhwa* (storms) in the poem, as reflected earlier in this discussion. These storms may be taken literally to refer to winds that blew while Mandela was in jail. In this perspective reference may be made to the colds he had to endure while he was a prisoner, as he states:

June and July were the bleakest months on Robben Island. Winter was in the air, and the rains were just beginning. It never seemed to go above 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Even in the sun, I shivered in my light khaki shirt. It was then that I understood the cliché of feeling the cold in one's bones. (Mandela, 1994:458.)

On the other hand, the storms may be taken symbolically to refer to the difficult conditions and hardships Mandela went through while a prisoner on Robben Island. These conditions included the hard manual labour he was involved in. This hard labour involved moving loads of stones with wheelbarrows and pounding rocks (Mandela, 1994). It also involved the mining of lime at a lime quarry for thirteen years, which caused blisters and bleeding hands (Mandela, 1994:479-486). As the poet states that years passed by with the barbet in the poem entrapped, Mandela also served a long sentence of about twenty-seven years, from 1964 to 1991.

Despite his being a prisoner, Mandela enjoyed the respect and sympathy of the public, as he was detained for a good cause and undeservingly, for his actions and speeches in trying to bring about a democratic change in South Africa. With regard to respect or honour, Biko (2004:40) states: "People like Mandela, Sobukhwe, Kathrada, M.D. Naidoo and many others will always have a place of honour in our minds as the true leaders of the people."

The sympathy of the public with Mandela would be eminent in the protest marches that would be held and people's attendance of court proceedings during the Rivonia trial. When Mandela was at Robben Island, public protests were held within South Africa, while the international community also exerted pressure on the government of South Africa to release him (Mandela, 1994:620). All this indicates how Mandela enjoyed the respect and sympathy of the people within South Africa and abroad. The idea that the barbet in the poem represents Mandela was confirmed by Mtuzze in an interview on 14 September 2006.

## **5. *Amavukuthu* (The doves)**

Generally, doves are regarded to be symbols of peace. It is for this reason that in gatherings, which are aimed at fostering peace, doves are released to fly away. The doves being symbols of peace blend well with the duties of the South African Police officials during the apartheid era in South Africa. The responsibility of the South African Police Service was supposed to involve keeping peace in the country. It is for their symbolising peace, which blend with the

peace-keeping responsibility of the police force that the doves in the poem are regarded to be symbols of the South African Police officials. This idea was confirmed by Mtuze in an interview on 14 September 2006.

The action of the doves in the poem also points to those of the members of the police force. It is these doves that put the barbet (symbolising a prisoner) in a trap (symbolising jail) (Mtuze & Satyo 1990:27). The putting of the barbet in a trap symbolises the duty of the police officers to lock up prisoners in jail. Note that the word *amavukuthu* (doves) is in the plural while *isinagogo* (the barbet) is in the singular in the poem. This suggests that the doves are many, while the barbet is one. This links up well with the tendency of the members of the police service to be a pair or a group of three or more when arresting a person. This has been proven by the fact that Mandela was arrested by three police officers (Mandela, 1994:231).

The doves in the poem are also portrayed giving the barbet an unfriendly treatment. Instead of helping it when it experiences problems, they mock it, as the following lines suggest:

*Ehla kakub' amanzi, ...;*  
*Enentsin' amavukuth' ath' inen' uza kubhadla.*  
(Mtuze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(The water went down badly, ...  
The doves laughed, saying: 'you'll definitely come to your senses'.)

The phrase *inen' uza kubhadla* ("you'll definitely come to your senses") suggests that the doves regard the barbet as not in its senses, probably because of its actions and ideas that led to its imprisonment. In their opinion it is their unfriendly treatment that will bring the barbet to its senses.

The unfriendly treatment experienced by the barbet in the poem is also apparent in the lines:

*Enziw' onk' amaceb' ingayekwa yon' impoxo –*  
*"Masiselel' ezadungeni ze sicace singumoni.*  
(Mtuze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(All plans were made involving sarcasm –  
"Let it drink at the dirty water ponds as a sinner.)

The word *impoxo* (sarcasm) suggests that the barbet is scorned and mocked. The sarcasm of the police officials towards prisoners



becomes apparent when a prisoner named Kathy could not balance a wheelbarrow full of a load of stones. The warders laughed at him instead of helping him (Mandela, 1994:459). The phrase *masiselel' ezadungeni* ("let it drink at *izadunge*") may have two meanings. One meaning may be that the barbet drinks the water of *izadunge*. The second meaning may be that while the barbet is at *izadunge*, it drinks water that is not from *izadunge*, but from somewhere else. In this case clean water that is suitable for drinking might be brought for it to drink. This idea is also echoed in the phrase *sisezelw' ezadungeni* ("it is given water to drink at the dirty water ponds") earlier in the poem. Also note that being at *izadunge* is associated with being a sinner, as the second line suggests. *Izadunge* then are used to represent a place where people who are regarded as sinners are kept. This point will be discussed in more details later in this article.

Regarding the unfriendly treatment experienced by the barbet from the doves (representing police officials), it is a well known fact that during apartheid in South Africa, prisoners, especially political ones, were exposed to an unfriendly treatment in jail. This is confirmed by the words of Mandela (1994:409) when he describes the nature of their work on Robben Island, as "We worked hard that first day, but on each succeeding day Kleinhans pushed us harder. He did this crudely, as one would urge on a horse or a cow."

Kleinhans was one of the prison warders who supervised the prisoners at Robben Island during Mandela's stay there. A horse or cow is normally urged by being beaten with a whip or sjambok when it is spanned to carry a heavy load. The association of Kleinhans' urging the prisoners with urging a horse or cow then indicates that he would urge them in a cruel and inhumane manner.

Even the dress code of the prisoners suggested an unfriendly treatment, as Mandela (1994:455) avers: "Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were 'boys'". For elderly people, as the prisoners were, to be treated as boys among amaXhosa is a serious offence because of its negative connotation. It tends to put one in an inferior position, as a "boy" is always regarded to be an inferior person and never regarded as a grown up person among amaXhosa. He is always treated with contempt as he is regarded to be an inferior human being. The treatment of Mandela and other prisoners as boys then proves how they have been regarded as inferior in jail (Mtumane, 2004:5). This is no surprise, because during those years black people were generally regarded as inferior

citizens, who were not treated with any dignity in South Africa, even in normal life outside jail (Mtumane, 2004:5).

## **6. *Izadunge* (Dirty water ponds)**

*Isadunge* is a small natural pond that often contains dirty water. Its water is normally unsuitable for human consumption because of its dirty nature. Very often frogs and crabs are found in pond water. It is very common to find a number of such ponds close to each other, hence the common plural reference to them as *ezadungeni* instead of the singular *esadungeni*. When these ponds are many they often form a circle with an island formed at the centre. The whole area that is composed of the ponds is generally referred to as *eza-dungeni*. Something which is even outside but in the vicinity of the ponds, including the island at the centre, is normally said to be *ezadungeni* (at the dirty water ponds).

Note that the barbet that is presented as entrapped in the poem is said to be *ezadungeni* (at the dirty water ponds) as the following phrases illustrate:

... *sisezelw' ezadungeni*.  
*Masiselel' ezadungeni* ...  
(Mtuze & Satyo, 1990:27.)

(... given water at the ponds.  
Let it drink at the ponds ...)

The barbet is normally not a water bird. It lives outside water. For that reason it would not stay in water for a long time, until years passed by, as the years referred to earlier in this discussion passed by with the barbet entrapped there. Being entrapped at the ponds does not necessarily mean that the barbet is in the water within the ponds. It is definitely entrapped outside the water but still within the vicinity of the ponds. The most favourable spot to entrap anything at *izadunge* would be on the island at the centre of the circle formed by the ponds, as it would not be easy to escape from there.

Considering the above explanation of *izadunge*, linking it up with the earlier discussion of *isinagogo* (the barbet) which represents a prisoner, one may obviously conclude that *izadunge* in the poem represents Robben Island. In other words, the prisoner symbolised by the barbet was jailed at Robben Island, like Nelson Mandela was. This idea was confirmed by Mtuze in an interview on 14 September 2006.

Robben Island is an island within the Atlantic Ocean, about twelve kilometers off the coast from Cape Town. Like the island at the centre of the circle formed by the ponds, whose water is not suitable for human consumption, Robben Island is surrounded by sea water which is also not suitable for human consumption because of its brackish taste. Brackish water usually upsets one's stomach even to the extent of vomiting. That is the reason why the water of *izadunge* is described as having made the barbet eruct when the doves tried to give it to drink.

Robben Island is also where political prisoners were kept during the apartheid era in South Africa. These prisoners were kept on this island in solitude, away from the public, as a punishment and to make sure that they would not be able to spread their anti-apartheid influence to the public.

## 7. The master of the doves

A master is someone who has authority over something or someone (Rooney, 1999:1162). The poet reveals that the doves referred to in the poem have a master when he writes: *Ngelingen' uthembisil' umphathi wamavukuthu*. (Ultimately the master of the doves made a promise) (Mtuzze & Satyo, 1990:27).

As it has already been explained that the doves in the poem symbolise members of the South African Police service, their master then would represent someone who has authority over the police officials – that is their employer.

It becomes clear that the promise made by the master is directed to the barbet (prisoner) as the master presented by saying: “*Yek' umbhodlo uthi pe-e, ndikukhulule uhambe.*” (Stop eructing and say *pe-e*, so that I release you to go) (Mtuzze & Satyo, 1990:27). The phrase ... *ndikukhulule uhambe* indicates that the master, who makes this promise, has the powers and authority to release prisoners even before the completion of the period of their sentence. In South Africa it is the State President who has such powers and authority. The master referred to in the poem then represents the State President of the Republic of South Africa during the years when political prisoners were kept at Robben Island. The State President who made an offer and promise to Mandela during his prison times was P.W. Botha. This idea will be dealt with in more details later in this article.

*Umbhodlo* (eructation) involves the rough sound that is produced when someone is eructing. Most commonly, eructing is accompanied by a bad smell. This is what makes eructing very unpleasant to the listener. In the above line the master of the doves urges the barbet to stop eructing so that he could release it even before completing the period of its sentence. In the line, *eructing* represents fearsome, unpleasant and dangerous words the prisoner might be uttering. These are words which might also lead to violence. The danger of these words becomes apparent in an earlier stanza where it is revealed that the eructing of the barbet made the eggs of the doves rot. This is expressed where the poet says: *Atsh' abole onke amaqand' amavukuthu* (All the eggs of the doves get rotten) (Mtuze & Satyo, 1990:27).

Eggs tend to rot when exposed to dangerous situations like heavy rains, cold and sunny conditions. It is for this reason that the eructing of the barbet in the poem then is presented as so dangerous as to make the eggs of the doves rot. The eggs of the doves in this line may be taken to refer to the police officers and members of the public who collaborated with them, who would be endangered because of political violence which was the order of the day during the apartheid regime. This is the violence in which the oppressed (black) people would express their anger against political oppression, discrimination and the detention of their leaders.

It is also interesting to compare *umbhodlo* (eructation) which the barbet is urged to stop, and *pe-e*, which it is urged to pronounce for it to be released. As stated earlier in this article, *umbhodlo* involves a rough sound. On the other hand, *pe-e* is pronounced with a softer and low voice. When it is pronounced it sounds like someone is weeping. The master of the doves urging the barbet to stop eructing and pronounce *pe-e* instead, signifies the State President's pleading with the symbolised prisoner to stop the rough, fearsome, unpleasant and dangerous words for the softer, more fearless, pleasant, apologetic and danger free ones, which may not lead to violence. This is in line with what the State President P.W. Botha did when he gave the conditions under which Nelson Mandela could be released from prison before completing the period of his sentence. This is recorded by Mandela (1994:620) as follows:

Faced with trouble at home and pressure from abroad, P.W. Botha offered a tepid, halfway measure. On 31 January 1985, in a debate in Parliament, the state president publicly offered me my freedom if I 'unconditionally reject violence as a political instrument'.

The idea that the master of the doves in the poem represents P.W. Botha was confirmed by Mtuze in an interview conducted with him on 14 September 2006. Had Mandela agreed to reject violence, in accordance with the above condition, that would involve his uttering words that are softer, less dangerous, probably apologetic and compromising his ideas. That would be in line with stopping eructing and pronouncing *pe-e* by the barbet, which it is urged to do by the master of the doves in the poem. That would also be detrimental to the entire struggle for the liberation of the black people in South Africa.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has examined the symbols used by Mtuze in the poem "Isinagogo" (Mtuze & Satyo, 1990). It has illustrated how the symbols used in the poem represent Nelson Mandela during his prison years, the South African Police, Robben Island (where Mandela was a prisoner) and the State President P.W. Botha of South Africa. The use of these symbols in the poem reflects Mtuze's skill in concealing valuable and dangerous information behind symbols. This information is said to be dangerous as it would possibly lead to his detention or banning of his work, should it be discovered by the apartheid government. It is the use of personification in the poem that gives a clue to the reader about the significance of the symbols. The use of these symbols also reveals Mtuze's deep knowledge of and concern about the problems that affected his people during the apartheid era in South Africa.

While the symbols used in the poem could be applied to other political prisoners as well, as Mandela was not the only political prisoner on Robben Island, the characteristics bestowed on these symbols and the actions associated with them in the poem, and the confirmation by Mtuze in the interview conducted with him, strengthen the idea that these symbols point specifically to Mandela during his prison years.

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**Kernbegrippe:**

"Isinagogo"  
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