



Three protagonists in B.W. Vilakazi's "Ezinkomponi" ("On the mine compounds")

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Abstract

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In this poem the great Zulu poet B.W. Vilakazi is preoccupied with the surreal scene of a gold mine compound in the 1940s Johannesburg, and reflects on the three protagonists of the drama that plays out in front of him: the miners, mine magnates and the heavy machinery, all things that drive the entire enterprise of enslaving the workers. Feelings flood his imagination: about the terrible status of the miners (with whom he identifies); what they have left behind, their dreams and the reality they battle with; the unfeeling and overwhelming spectre of industrialisation, and distant capitalist interests; and the instruments of oppression: the deafening mine machines. These three protagonists¹ (especially the first and the third,) assume human characteristics and fight to justify their respective roles in the conflict. Vilakazi's famous protest poem becomes a cry for help in the face of destructive industrial advancement as ever-present human drama, which pits values of gold/ and money against what is more fully human and worth living for; possibly

1 In the discussion, the words *poet* and *miners* will be used interchangeably to refer to the same idea as the poet is the voice of the miners. The same will apply to mine magnates, white or capitalist interests which will also be switched from time to time.

unachievable present prosperity against a vision of future happiness and fulfilment.²

Opsomming

Drie protagoniste in B.W. Vilakazi se "Ezinkomponi" ("In die mynkampongs")

In hierdie gedig is die groot Zoeloedigter B.W. Vilakazi intens betrokke by die surrealistiese beeld van mynkampong in Johannesburg gedurende die veertigerjare van die vorige eeu. Hy besin oor die protagoniste van die drama wat voor hom afspeel: die mynwerkers, die mynmagnate en die swaar masjinerie wat al drie die hele onderneming aandryf om die werkers tot slawe te maak. Gevoelens oorweldig sy verbeelding: die mynwerkers (met wie hy identifiseer) se slegte omstandighede; dit wat hulle moes agterlaat, hulle drome en die werklikheid waarmee hulle te kampe het; die gevoellose en verpletterende spookmag van industrialisasie en ver verwyderde kapitalistiese belange; die instrumente van onderdrukking: die oorverdowende mynmasjinerie. Hierdie drie protagoniste (veral die eerste en laaste), neem menslike eienskappe aan en stry om hulle onderskeie rolle in die konflik te regverdig. Vilakazi se beroemde protesgedig word 'n kreet om hulp in die aangesig van die vernietigende industriële vooruitgang as 'n immer teenwoordige menslike drama. Industrialisasie stel die waardes van goud en geld teenoor dit wat mensliker is en die lewe die moeite werd maak; dit stel die moontlik onbereikbare welvaart in die hede teenoor 'n visioen van toekomstige geluk en vervulling.

1. Introduction

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906-1947), major Zulu poet and novelist, was called to Johannesburg from Natal to teach at the University of the Witwatersrand: the first African lecturing at a white South African university. The move exposed him to both admiration and jealousy. In this solitary position he ventured into the heart of industrialisation: the gold mine compounds, where he could easily identify with the displaced and exploited miners, as he was overwhelmed by the unceasing deafening noise of heavy machinery. This he saw as the symbol of heartless white exploitation, the unfeeling long hand of distant capitalist interests. The resulting famous protest poem, "Ezinkomponi" ("On the mine compounds") (Vilakazi, 1945:41-45), per-

2 I wish to acknowledge my mentor, Prof N.N. Canonici, for his valuable suggestions for revision of the original script.

sonifies the three protagonists of a drama that is still being played out all over Africa, where industrialisation is often enforced at the expense of human values and *ubuntu*.

In the name of black solidarity, Vilakazi identifies himself with the black workers and their problems, and is thus able to express their feelings about their often inhuman conditions. The noisy machines are also identified with the so-called "industrial development" which masks the exploiting capitalist drive and its unreasonable demands. Now and again the machines seem to display almost human aspects which compel the poet to appeal to them to treat their fellow slaves with some respect. The machines will do that by allowing the miners at least some peace to sleep, or even to slip away to the land of their dreams, to their family homes, or to the bosom of their ancestors. Nevertheless, the effort to demonstrate sympathy does not go far, as industrialisation and mechanisation are inseparable from the deplorable conditions of the miners.

Industrialisation is generally a thorn in the side of human society. Mechanisation and the obsessive urge for profit often trample on human needs and values. Protest voices are heard the world over, especially where industrial development is accompanied by wholesale urbanisation, which destroys individual and cultural identity and transforms people into faceless numbers. Change for progress is a tricky two-edged sword, even according to African creation myths where the Creator entrusted the trickster Anansi with the establishment of an orderly society.

Having been originally entrusted with the creation or the organization of the material and social worlds, Anansi's energies were later poured into sowing chaos in the changing universe he had helped to order. (Canonici, 1995:7.)

The price of growth is partial or total death, shedding of the scum accumulated along the way.

B.W. Vilakazi's poetry is a very significant voice in this chorus of reflection and protest, which greatly contributed towards the cause of justice for his fellow people. Published in two volumes, *Inkondlo kaZulu* (1935) and *Amal'ezulu* (1945), Vilakazi's work touched the hearts of many through its English translation by Friedman (Vilakazi, 1973:124-128), which brought the world closer to the experiences of those on the periphery of South African society. The poems are also remarkable, because, as even Vilakazi's critics acknowledged, they

show how to assimilate new forms and contents into the Zulu poetic tradition of the praise-poetry of kings and heroes.

Exploitation of workers is not unique to South Africa, nor is social protest, which took rather violent forms during the last decades of the apartheid regime. One example is "Paiva", a satirical protest poem about the single sugar company that dominated the Lower Zambezi over the course of eight decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Vail & White, 1991). Filled with the Marxist ideology of exploitation by the owners through production, the poem intensely criticises the founder/owner, Jose de Paiva Raposo, for making unreasonable profits by exploiting the poor. Also, "Ezinkomponi" serves as a vivid example of the fact that poetic performances held throughout Southern Africa were not censored, and were thus able to articulate, in song or poetry, the mine workers' grievances. Although it is not expressed in Marxist terms, class struggle is a significant theme in "Ezinkomponi".

2. Unpacking the title

The situation described in "Ezinkomponi" is highly dramatic, as it lays bare the contrast between industrial development and bucolic traditional life. Alvarez-Pereyre (1979:122) identifies in the poem three protagonists or main action-movers:

The poet, who identifies with the African miners and speaks in their name; the machines, always present through their noise and movement; and lastly, the white man, who remains in the background but commands both the miners and the machines.

The machines are inanimate material objects, but are here endowed with a kind of life and some characteristics that render them capable of action. They are there to make exorbitant profits for the distant investors. Also the poet, although he observes the scene from some distance, is able to identify with and describe the miners' intimate feelings. The relationship that exists among these participants is of an unequal nature. The poet, as the voice of the miners, can be perceived as belonging to their camp – oppressed by the white man and his machines. But the role of the machines in relation to the miners, as well as to their distant masters, is ambiguous and stimulates our interest.

The machines, while producing financial gain for both investors and workers, are also accomplices of capitalist oppression. On the other hand, they are also subjected to oppression: they are made to groan

and labour to bring about growth, wealth and development. In this sense the poet, the miners and the machines have the same master: the faceless white interests. These conflicting roles of the machines are linked by a single fate: to serve the faceless master of white interests; the role which puts them in an ambiguous position. Wainwright (1977:49) is of the opinion that the machines, which the poet addresses, are but a thinly disguised metaphor for white investors. For this reason they have a closer relationship with the master than with the miners. As the analysis develops more details of the different protagonists will be presented.

3. Context of “Ezinkomponi”

Genuine poetry originates from the depths of the individual’s soul, as the person feels thrilled or saddened by something. The underground miners’ lot is particularly suspenseful as they are constantly exposed to danger, as even the most vigilant safety measures prove insufficient when unpredictable disaster suddenly strikes. This is a global concern as re-affirmed by the recent Chilean incident in which “33 miners trapped under Chile’s Atacama Desert will have been stuck underground longer than any others in memory” (Anon., 2010a:6). In addition, South African experts are “destined to play a critical role in the attempt to rescue [these] 33 miners” even though such rescue is only expected “around Christmas” (Anon., 2010b:10). Time and again the media reports on lives lost underground as a result of accidents that take place there. Findings regarding the causes of these mishaps seldom, if at all, reach the public.³

In the poem, Vilakazi castigates industrial mechanisation, because it reduces blacks to a faceless, soulless and unidentified class. The entire poem arouses feelings of sadness, as it contemplates the physical pains that the miners undergo for meager wages, but especially the enrichment of foreign white men. Furthermore, Vilakazi articulates a general cultural disgust for underground mine work, because it looks like being buried alive and descending into the realm of the dead; a condition only acceptable if one has lived a complete life and can look forward to remaining an important part of his family as an *idlozi* or protecting spirit:

Wake wakubonaphi ukungcwatshwa
Ubheke ngawo womabil’ uzihambela? (l. 71-72).

3 I am glad to report that since the revision of this article all 33 miners have been rescued and safely reunited with their families.

Where have you ever seen a person buried alive?

The miners are identified as "rock rabbits" (dassies), *izimbila* (l. 18), which, in folklore, are too lazy to fetch their tails from the Creator and are thus left without tails, taken as a sign of lack of intelligence. Ashamed of their situation, they hide in rock crevices, constantly sniffing as if weeping, and looking more dead than alive. The machines transform these dassies into moles that burrow into the bowels of the earth in search of gold, creating enormous heaps of white sand (l. 19; 44-47).

4. Analysis: initial remarks

- ngimamatheka njalo,
Ngikhombisa nokwenama,
Ngikhombisa nokwenama,
Nom'ungifak'emgodini
5 Ngaphansi kwezinganeko
Zamatsh'aluhlaz'omhlaba-
Sewuthi nginjengensika
8 Yon'engezwa nabuhlungu.

*Because I always smile
And even look happy,
Singing at the top of my voice,
Even when you push me into a hole
Under those mysterious
Blue/green stones of the earth –
You then say that I am like a post
That can't feel any pain*

"Ezinkomponi" is an unusually long poem in comparison with Vilakazi's other protest-poems. It is made up of nineteen stanzas, each consisting of nine equal lines. I do not intend to comment on the entire poem but only on a number of passages which convey the core message. The English translations are my own, but take into account Friedman's (1973) rendition whenever this seems fitting. Bearing in mind that the exact meaning of the source text is lost in translation (Bassnett-McGuire, 2002), I have taken great effort to maintain the sense of the original text.

Apart from a general protest about the pitiful conditions of the miners (l. 4-9, 85-86) and the deafening noise of the machines, which re-

presents the stone-hearted attitudes of the white investors (l. 100-104), the composition does not get into specific elements of protestation or revolt. The poet, however, must be praised for the courage to express feelings of opposition towards such an exploitative and heartless system. In so doing, he provokes a rethinking of the entire process of industrialisation, which, to become humanly acceptable, must respect and value the individual and his needs. The poem also contains a veiled threat (l. 108-120): the black race were able to prevail over Queen Victoria's powerful armies and it can achieve similar feats again. Then they will be the masters of the mines and the machines.

5. Analysis: the poem

The poem opens and ends with a powerful apostrophe to the machines. "Dumani mishini yezinkomponi!" (*Thunder away powerfully, you machines of the mine compound!*). The verb *ukuduma* ("to thunder, rumble, make a powerfully resounding noise") is repeated twelve times in the poem and dominates the composition. It underlines the feeling that the deafening noise is the overwhelming characteristic of the scene, and makes the machines the main protagonists of the drama, shifting the other two protagonists to the background. The verb gained international popularity during the 2010 FIFA World Cup in the form of *Laduma* shouted any time the ball entered the net like a thunderbolt. Friedman cannot find an appropriate one-word translation for "ukuduma" and render it as *roar*, and *clang*, where *roar* represents the noise of the engines and *clang* the din of their metal parts. The overall meaning of the words is that nothing seems to matter except the grinding noise of these monsters of steel, installed to excavate the very bowels of the earth in search of precious metals. The overwhelming noise factor emerges from the following lines that dominate the entire poem:

Dumani mishini yezinkomponi
Nidume ngesokusa lize lishone. (l. 1-2)
Dumani kancane kengilale ubuthongo
Ubuthongo bokucimeza. (l. 164-165)

Roar and clang – thunder away powerfully mine machines
Roar from dawn till darkness falls
Roar quietly that I may get some sleep
Some sleep just to close my eyes.

The clarion call of industrial and economic development is all-encompassing, and "progress" is unstoppable. But is it real progress when it

grinds to dust sacred human values and needs? Is wealth the new religion capable to satisfy all human desires? And by the way, whose wealth? The workers' or the foreign investors'? "Ubuthongo bokucimeza" (*close the eyes for a nap*) indicates the need for a reflective pause to consider the consequences of a way of life imposed by a self-proclaimed "superior culture". The manner in which Vilakazi plays around with words also suggests his mockery of the machines who are asked to "roar quietly" to allow for a momentary rest. The poet occasionally sympathises with the machines which, he contends, had no say in their destiny. Using the singular, he addresses them thus:

Memeza mfan' omdala,
Kukude lapho wabunjwa khona.
Washisw' emlilweni, kwavuthwa
Wena kwasal' amalahle wathunyelwa. (l. 10-13)

*Bellow you frenzied bull of steel
Far is the place where you were molded.
You were baked in fiery furnaces
Until you were ready and only coal remained.*

The colloquial form *mfan'omdala* is used by male peers to praise an achievement or a wise action of a colleague referred to here as "older brother" or possibly "brother in arms". How ironic: slave and enslaver associated in the same fate, slaving side by side, day and night.

The poem is rich in very vivid images that can be almost visualised as a painted picture. In what Axel Olrik (Canonici, 1996:47) terms "the law of tableaux scene", which reflects one of the patterns by which oral narratives are constructed, the author successfully reaches out to the audience to symbolise what he feels.

Apart from the above *mfan'omdala*, there is the sad acknowledgement that mine work reduces African men, traditionally the proud heads of families and lineages, to the worthless status of "boys" as they are referred to by their masters:

Buphelile ubumnumzane, singabafana. (l. 68)

Manhood is finished, we are boys.

Commenting on the line above, Malcolm (cf. Friedman, 1973:xv) draws our attention to the stripping of the miners' dignity:

[In this poem] we have a stark picture of what life in the compound of a gold mine means to an African labourer. From the comparative peace and dignity of his life in his rural homeland he comes to the roar and machine-like routine of manual labour. He feels that he has left his manhood behind him and he has become a 'boy' to his master.

As it was pointed out earlier, the machines belong to two worlds: that of the miners and that of the white man/employer. This fact places miners and machines in a common fate. Adopting them to his camp, the poet addresses them in a fraternal manner:

Abanewenu nabo bayagqwala
 Ngaphakathi ezinkomponi.
 Amaphaphu abo aya ngokugqwala
 Bakhwehlele balale bafe.
 Pho nina anikhwehleli ngani? (l. 32-36)

*Your brothers also get rusty
 Inside the mines.
 Their lungs gradually get rusty
 They cough, sleep and die.
 So, why don't you cough?*

Miners and machines are placed together, called "brothers", possibly in misfortune, as they are exploited by the same masters, although the result of the work affects them in unequal ways. The health of the miners is soon compromised; they get sick and die but the machines seem in comparison to last forever. The intentional reference to the machines as brothers, *abanewenu*, is to achieve a specific effect. The normal form would be *abafowenu*. This word constitutes a conscious effort to include them in the traditional family structure where siblings refer to their brothers as *abanewethu* rather than *abafowethu*. In this way the relationship feels stronger than with the other term, and an unlikely "blood bond" between the two protagonists is created.

But the playing field is far from equal. The miners' health quickly deteriorates in underground work, their lungs are affected, the men cough and die. The machines seem invulnerable by human standards of time and service; and yet they are eventually stripped of their invulnerability as humans are: they too eventually grow old. In this sense, old age comes to all. What the poet is trying to say is that if the machines were to die and not be replaced, then workers would also find a break; in which case for a while the machines would save the lives of the miners.

The poet goes on to say:

Vimbezelani ngomsindo singezwakali
Nakuba sikhala sigquma njalo.
Amalungu emizimba yethu adliwa yini
Gegethekani mishini emidala. (l. 57-60)

*Prevent with your noise that we may be heard
Even though we cry and mourn all the time.
Parts of our bodies are eaten away by you
Laugh mockingly, you old machines.*

By using double meaning expressions in "vimbezelani ngomsindo" and "singezwakali", the poet is being cynical in his "admiration" of the machines. He returns to the initial image of the overwhelmingly deafening noise that drowns every other sound and covers up all human cries and sighs, as if they were irrelevant, as the machines' roar seems to say mockingly.

The machines are not, however, morally responsible for the miners' plight. They were stealthily brought into the country under cover of darkness by international means of transport and never apprised of the task ahead. Sometimes the poet sympathises with them: that it was not their own choice that they should make life tragic for the miners; at other times he views them as the employers' partners in crime. He says:

Wathwalwa ngononjinjikazi bezwe,
Bakushushumbisa bakusa laph' eGoli. (l. 15-16)

*You were stealthily carried by the international trains
and brought here to Johannesburg.*

The passive verb derivative form *wathwalwa*, "to be transported" indicates that the machines had no say in their coming to Johannesburg. The verb *shushumbisa*, points to the fact that the "carrying" took place in secret, under cover, as if "stealing away" illegally. This verb is also used to refer to drug trafficking. Industrial development often implies crushing the old ways of life and substituting them with an impersonal and unfeeling society. The conspiracy that Vilakazi seems to suggest in reference to the arrival of the machines is commented upon by Ntuli (1984:182):

The poet chooses to use the verb *shushumbisa* to imply that the train did not act openly because it knew that it was party to a conspiracy aimed at the exploitation of the black miners.

In his other protest poem, “Woza Nonjinjikazi” (*Come monster of Steel*) (Vilakazi, 1935)⁴ (not discussed in detail in this article), Vilakazi had already complained that people going to work in the enormous Rand mines were regarded as lost forever by their rural families. In “Ezinkomponi” he describes the return to a desolate broken-down home for those who manage the return journey after spending most of their lives in the mines – they find their families gone and their homesteads deserted.

Ngathi ngiyagoduka nemithwalo
 Ngashayw’ amahlanga namanxiwa,
 Ngenway’ ikhanda ngisangene
 Ngabuz’ umkami nabakhwekazi
 Bangitshel’ umlung’ engimsebenzelayo. (l. 94-98)

*When I went home with my luggage
 All I found were mealie stalks and broken down walls
 I scratched my head as I entered
 I asked where my wife and parents-in-law were
 And I was told of the white man I work for.*

In “Woza Nonjinjikazi”, Vilakazi criticises the train for breaking up family life by taking away the men to search for work in unknown places, which hide them in mines that burrow deep into the bowels of the earth. The train is like the traditional all-devouring monster of Zulu folklore that eats and destroys everything in its path because it disrupts the worker’s way of life and ignores his culture (cf. Zondi & Canonici, 2005).

The above lines illustrate that it is not only the men who left their homes that were affected but their families back home as well. As head of the family, an African man is expected to provide for its needs. Away from home and faced with completely new situations and a loss of identity, some men, unjustifiable though it may seem, turn to local women for comfort. Some of these women may exert a negative influence on the men resulting in them gradually neglecting their families in order to support the newly found love. Due to the lack of support, back home the wives return to their parents’ homestead for support and to share the little the family can offer.

The following lines are pregnant with innuendos that workers are deceived into believing that mine work will improve their finances:

4 This poem also makes reference to machinery that was brought by trains being a source of human degradation.

Ngizwile kuthiwa emgodini
Kuy'izizwe ngezizwe zikaMnyama (l. 37-38)
Ngizwile kuthiwa kwakhala
Imishini kwavela mbil' emnyama.
Emqondweni wayo kuhlwile khuhle
Yabanjwa yaphendulw' imvukuzane
Yavukuz'umhlabathi ngabon' igolide. (l. 41-45)

*I heard that in the mines
Are found men of black tribes
I heard that when the machines roared
There appeared a black rock rabbit
In its mind it was night time
It was trapped and turned into a mole
It burrowed deep and I saw gold.*

The poet describes the installation of the machines as a clarion call to black people to fulfil their hopes for a better life. But they were only *izimbila*, black rock-rabbits, sent underground to search for glittering gold irrespective of their social and personal health consequences. The use of the ideophone *khuhle* in "kuhlwile khuhle", suggests that the employer thought the black worker was a fool who lacked knowledge about his rights. This state of things is reiterated in the lines of another of Vilakazi's protest poems, "Ngoba ... sewuthi" (*Because ... you now say*) in which he writes:

Ngoba ngiwumgqophane
Ngibulawa ukungazi. (l. 28-29)

*Because I am a simple dupe
Full of ignorance.*

The picture implies that black workers were perceived by their master as totally ignorant. As a result they did not see anything wrong in being turned into objects of exploitation. The imagery of night-time projects the idea that, just as one cannot see anything in darkness, so blacks could not discern issues affecting them.

The following lines offer a somber, if ambiguous biblical reflection: as the starving Israelites in the desert longed for the "onion of Egypt", a symbol of their subsistence level slavery, so the oppressed miners now look back with longing to the poor life of their rural homesteads, where they happily scraped a meager but fulfilling living. The miners had been offered the hope for survival by the prospect of wages, but these had proved meager, insufficient and dehumanising. Was it not better to be in the rural homes where they

could fend for themselves, even though they had no steady income?
The promised land contained no guarantee of fulfilment:

Sashiy' amabele nobisi
Sazohlalela uphuthu nephalishi. (l. 66-67)

*We left corn and milk
And preferred dry porridge and porridge.*

By using two sets of food combination – corn and milk, and thick porridge and mealie meal – Vilakazi highlights how pre- and post-industrialisation impacted on African life. In his idyllic vision, exposed in several poems, he sees a traditional African living: a happy communal life, with open fields and cattle, a large family, all in their place within clans and tribal structures. Being dispossessed of their lands and with the introduction of industrialisation and money-based economy, men had to find means of income and survival, whereby migrant work became a necessity. The vision of the green peaceful hills of Zululand overwhelms the poet with nostalgic feelings, as he recalls Stanger/KwaDukuza, the rural place of his birth and happy infancy, where he hopes to return to and find rest when the machines lower their roaring and he will be called to share eternal peace with his ancestors.

6. Conclusion

The miners, mine magnates and the heavy machinery, three protagonists of the drama in Vilakazi's protest poem, "Ezinkomponi" represent the contrasts and the growing pains that accompany human progress from the womb to the tomb. As something is achieved or acquired, something else must be shed and discarded. Someone makes a gain and someone registers a loss. This is the life cycle that affects all humanity and its history. Unfortunately, those who can, do not always try to alleviate the groaning pains of those who suffer, who feel destroyed by the force of events. They rage against the closest protagonist seen as the instrument of their pain, as Vilakazi rails against the machines that he sees as the long hand of an anonymous oppressive class, although they are supposed to bring prosperity to the entire nation.

Like contemporary bards and bards of old, the poet assumes the role of the protagonist himself, the spokesperson for black people and all the oppressed, as he embraces them all in his deep reflections on life. His expressions become universal and his work is relevant even today, as any society experiencing hardships could

learn that there are alternative ways of non-violence to difficult situations. In adopting a three protagonist model, the poem speaks about all stakeholders in the mining industry: the suffering miners, the investors and mediators, and the mine machines. The poem demonstrates that, like Vilakazi, contemporary artists can achieve tangible change if they are sincere in their literary approach and offer well-balanced reflections to address social ills, such as the scourge of HIV and AIDS, as well as women and child molestation, which are great concerns in our rainbow nation.

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Kernbegrippe:

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Vilakazi, Benedict Wallet

