

POETRY FOR LIFE

IS'KHATHI SETHU/IT'S OUR TIME

Keynote Address At The 27th Poetry Africa Festival 2023

By Eugene Skeef

(Open by playing the track, '[custodians of the song \(umakhweyana chant\)](#)')

Izitbongo zakwa Mpehlo

ODlamini

OJama

OSiJadu

OFakade

OMrhawu

ORhenqwa

OXuza

ONgwangwini

OMoni

OSeti

OMhlantshini.

Allow me to start by expressing my gratitude to Poetry Africa and the Centre for Education Rights & Transformation (CERT) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg, for granting me the platform as a poet and professor of practice to inspire young people, especially, to free their minds for the purpose of positively transforming society.

In my personal lexicon poetry is a feast for all the senses because it embodies every imaginable human expressive form, including music, movement and visual interpretations of life within and around us.

I cultivated my personal craft of poetry and music precisely because normal language falls profoundly short in trying to express the inexplicable eternity of the universe. For me, poetry and music are coterminous with love, in the sense that I understand it only through indulging profusely in it.

I believe we are chosen as poets to be scribes of spiritual permeance – to give voice to the silent song of creation as it unfolds in all directions at once. For everything is everything in the eternal moment of being one immeasurable whole: a manifestation of the Divine. Therefore poetry can unveil the truth that is embedded within the invisible and bring out the beauty of its form for all to revel in its magnificence.

Poetry is not about oratory, even though these words may rhyme in their unrelated time! Eloquent and rhetorical language does not define the prerogative of poetry. True poetry goes beyond the decorative drapery of words. True poetry bestows itself with the deeper purpose of revelation through the elevation of expression into the stratosphere of our dreams of peace and the wholeness of being. True poetry can unveil the dark to reveal the light. True poetry can inspire the weak to find their might.

The true poet finds form in the discarded shavings from the monolithic sculpture that has been erected in the path of the sun so that its shine does not reach some concealed parts of the society. The true poet dissolves the monument to rebuild the desecrated truth. In our times, the true poet is the spoken word poet. The spoken word poet speaks words that are hot to the touch - fresh from the crucible of truth. The spoken word poet spits fire because they have learned to shape their lips around the sun.

The spoken word poet is the new *imbongi*.

The veracity of the verse of the spoken word poet is in the sincerity of their expression. They are the unwavering voice of truth.

Some of us who were poets during apartheid used creative deception the same way that animals use camouflage to blend in with a particular environment or situation. We employed this device to outwit the oppressive regime and conceal our true poetic import, but without compromising our objective of reaching the minds of the people.

The praise poets of old used sugar-coated language when they wanted to say something that was critical of their royal patrons, concealing the true meaning of their words. This was sometimes referred to in the Nguni languages as “*ukuluma uphaphethe*”, which can be translated as biting and instantly soothing. The evolution of the modern *imbongi* has given us the poetic dichotomy of both the direct and indirect format. The literal translation of the term *imbongi* is “one who praises”. Herein lies the dilemma of the inherent contradiction. The term assumes that the role of the traditional African poet is simply to praise their patron to garner favour in the form of material benefits and social privileges. To maintain this outmoded custom, the modern-day poet is faced with the near impossible task of having to search through the proverbial haystack to find the needle of praiseworthiness among those who occupy the thrones of dominion over the people.

The contemporary *imbongi* is a modern-day Anansi or Brer Rabbit who uses verbal dexterity and creative cunning to conjure cultural conjecture to stimulate the minds of the people to fill the blanks in their invisibilised narrative of self.

This contemporary poetic context implies a society of elevated consciousness to appreciate this new level of poetry. So, the contemporary poet needs must also be an educator. In this kind of cultural milieu, we rise together into the firmament of higher consciousness on the shared wings of the heightened language of poetry. Gone are the days of the imposed alien colonial culture

whereby poetry is the domain of a privileged class of a compartmentalised society. For poetry belongs to everyone who is touched by its feathers.

There was a time when everyone spoke in poetry because we were spoken to in song from birth, and we grew to learn from nature to murmur rhythmically like the rivers, to whisper wistfully like the wind, and to find the timbre of the swaying trees in our own song. There was a time when the language of our courting and counting cattle constituted elevated poetry. The spoken word poet reminds us of this time and inspires us to reconnect where we veered off from the poetic path of our ancestors.

In the lineage of our knowledge as Africans we are told that first there was the sound. The word comes from the sound. It respects the sound as the source of its meaning. So, the spoken word poet is a moulder of sonic energy into its manifestation of meaning. The words of the spoken word poet vibrate the molecules in the space between us and within us. When we say that poetry touches us, it is literal. We feel it. In feeling it, we understand it. The spoken word poet has the responsibility of knowing the power of their words to transform the state of their audience, because the art of spoken word poetry is one that defies the conventional limitations of the borders of a book page. It is an art that utilises the motive power of what we call in the Zulu language, *isigqi*. The rhythmic groove of spoken word literally moves the audience, who themselves are not static, but oscillate in resonance with the word.

The Nguni concept of defining melody as being the song following the path of the word, which is the embodiment of the sound, tells us this power of the spoken word.

Like sound, poetry can express any and every emotion. It is not limited to expressions of rage and anger alone. Poetry can celebrate the innocence of a child, the beauty of a flower, the melting of an unpretentious smile, or the tenderness of love. I remember an article in the British daily newspaper *The Guardian* by Albie Sachs, the South African lawyer, activist, writer, and former judge appointed to the first Constitutional Court of South Africa by Nelson Mandela. Sachs was questioning South African poets who seemed to be stultified by the eventual release of Mandela from prison. He asked why their supposed inspiration had apparently run dry and was unable to extend beyond subjects associated with violent struggle. Does the struggle poet lose their voice in times defined more by a perceived culture of peace? Did the purpose of poetry cease to exist with the end of the fight against the racist rule of apartheid?

Was the surrounding natural environment, with its indomitable spirit of resistance to human destruction, not part of the conscious poet's source of inspiration? Did poets not play in the fields and encounter birds and flowers mollifying the putrescence of their political situation? Why did these poets allow themselves to be severed from the spirits of their placentas buried in the earth where their navel strings are intertwined with the roots of the symphonic sacred forest?

The new *imbongi* sings the praises of the people, for we are the progeny of the sacred forest.

The new brand of *imbongi* starts by immersing themselves in the mushrooming community circles and sharing their poetry in small interactive circles. The pulse of this creative energy has been

spreading outward in concentric circles across the larger community until the ripples of positive energy overlap, causing the entire country to be infused with poetry that is a natural part of the people through active participation. The parts where the rippling circles overlap become the new nerve centres of poetic re-evolution that will expand until they explode and blossom into a re-appraised language of self-praise.

For no-one can sing our song more tunefully than ourselves.

One of the original purposes of poetry, beside being a source of entertainment and intrigue through the magic that words are naturally imbued with, was the alignment of the individual and the community - that is the alignment of the individual with the self as well as the alignment of the community as a manifestation of the collective self as a singular harmonised organism of being. Alignment is about centring. To centre oneself is to be healed. So, the original purpose of poetry was to heal the self and the community. The practice, through the dissemination of poetry, leads to the creation of a healthy society.

Poets are doyens of deep listening. They are born with the gift of perceiving that which normally eludes the rest of society. To be true to their gift, poets, of necessity, must be committed to sharing their inspiration with the rest of us; otherwise it is a wasted gift, and wasted gifts can bring about unforeseen misfortune for the recipient of the gift. You could say it is the poet's DNA to share their inspiration. They can't help it.

Poets are messengers from beyond these more obvious realms of life that we inhabit (We call these messengers *izithunywa* in the Zulu language). By this I mean that it is totally natural for them to tap into a higher or deeper consciousness of being for the purpose of interpreting the invisible intimations of this consciousness for our benefit. The truly gifted poet is an exquisitely vibrating instrument that makes known to us the knowledge from beyond that is too indirect for us to simply know. This gift does not make the poet more important than the rest of us. Indeed, a genuine poet acts with humility. The poet is no more deserving of dignity and respect than anyone else. It simply means that their expression possesses a quality of enlightenment that we need as food for the soul. Without these messengers our souls shrivel and we are left wanting.

Even load-shedding cannot stop an *imbongi* from speaking words of truth to power. The motivation to act as a current of truth is as perpetually alive as the electrically charged particle that carries the promise of power in its spark.

I have had several personal experiences of the power of poetry in action in different parts of the world. Here are just two from my youth growing up in South Africa.

My mother was a cycling midwife, herbal healer and health visitor. When she was giving birth at home to one of my siblings she directed my father to boil water for sterilising her equipment and pass it to her in a basin. He made for the door, but she grabbed him by the hand and ordered him to do as she had asked. In that moment as my mother was pushing the baby out, my father, this man whose nickname was Bhubesi (Zulu for Lion) and was feared by everyone, including the Apartheid state police and marauding township gangsters, had succumbed to his fear of one of the most delicate moments in life. In that moment, my mother taught him about the strength that

lives in the most beautiful and generous act of life. He would never be the same man after that. Though she was in pain, my mother sang poetry in her Xhosa tongue as she delivered my sister.

As a young activist, I used poetry in conflict resolution. I literally used poetry to bring about peace between the Fast Guns and the Spaldings, two rival gangs from Westbury, a township in Johannesburg. In those days my pseudonym oscillated between Peacemaker and Pacemaker. My courage was characterised by a combination of the different traits of resolve I witnessed in my mother and father.

More recently, just the other day, in fact, I was practicing my udu while recalling the praises of my mother's clan. A man who was busy doing some manual work across the balcony from me showed his appreciation by making sounds of approval. When I looked up, he smiled at me and showed me a thumbs-up sign. A little while later, the Afrikaner woman who is in charge of the rented apartments drove into the forecourt. She got out of her car and immediately cursed loudly. She shouted for the black man who responded with, "Yes, missus", and came running to her, even though the distance was just a few paces. Pointing at the unsatisfactory outcome of the work she had tasked him with, she asked him why he had done such a poor job. He timidly made some excuse. She raised her voice even higher and asked him if he was capable of doing a better job. He muttered something, but she didn't wait for him to finish, and told him that she could easily find someone who could. She told him he was like a child (A boy, who might have been his son, stopped playing with his football in the courtyard and stared at them in shock). Then she sent him off.

I felt the bile rise in my throat. I had not witnessed this level of demeaning behaviour towards a grown man in decades. I struggled to contain the simmering rage within me, but I decided to rest in the assured feeling that my brief poetic Xhosa *izibongo* and mellow udu rhythms had seeped into my brother's soul and somehow reinforced his sense of self-belief...