

Inaugural Lecture by Professor Nompumelelo Zondi

TITLE: Revisiting the poetry of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi: The utility and meaning of African Languages and Literatures in Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Good evening Vice-Principal, Prof Mosia,

Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Professor Reddy, my fellow colleagues, my family, students and friends.

This evening I have chosen to speak about the utility and meaning of African Languages and Literatures in Higher Education, and whether revisiting the poetry of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi enables some perspective in thinking through the issue of utility and meaning. I have structured my lecture in broadly four parts that may not be described as discrete sections, but rather as four interconnected sections that firstly take us directly to Vilakazi, then to a contemporary set of contextual observations, then back to Vilakazi, before finally concluding with a set of ideas that speak to a vision.

As a Prelude and reflection, I engage the first part of the title of the lecture, namely “Revisiting the poetry of Vilakazi”.

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his death, I turn to the figure of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi (1906–1947). His body of work offer salient perspectives on the meanings and location of African languages and literatures with regard to epistemic diversity, the ‘transformation’ of curricula, tradition versus modernity, gender, the meaning of identity, and the broader humanist project. I might not fully account for all of these issues (I will do so in a published version). Vilakazi was a scholar, linguist, novelist and poet who is affectionately canonised as “the Father of Nguni literature” (Ntshangase, 1995:1) and “the founder of modern Zulu poetry” (Ngwenya, 1998:128).

At a time when ‘democratisation’ and ‘decolonisation’ are popular buzzwords in academic circles, the writings of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi are worth revisiting. When Vilakazi passed away so untimely on 26 October 1947 at 41, he had already made an enormous contribution towards the development of African languages and literatures through having written three important novels and two anthologies of poetry, as well as a dictionary. Recognition of the impact of this scholar’s contribution to the scholarly project in African languages and literature is long overdue – based on the postulation that Southern African literary historiography has, “for socio-political and ideological reasons[,] relegated black writers to a marginal position in relation to the English dominated South African literary establishment” (Ngwenya, 1998:127). The work of Vilakazi deserves some recuperation to a central position in the Southern African literary canon. Vilakazi boldly proclaimed in the poem ‘Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu’ (‘Tell Me, White Man’s Child’) (in *Amal’ezulu* 1945:9),

Isikhumba sami siyangiceba¹
Ulimi lwami lona luhle
Noma abanye bethi luyangehlisa
Ngibulewe ngalo ngiding’ ukwelashwa

(My skin condemns me
My language is beautiful,
Even though others say it degrades me,
I am bewitched, I need to be cured)

In addition to expressing pride in his cultural heritage, he did so in a way that did not romanticize an African past. Vilakazi articulated the voice of the underprivileged, voiceless black masses as part of his calling as a poet crossing ethnic boundaries. This sentiment, which is foregrounded in both of his volumes, is vividly illustrated in ‘Woza Nonjinjikazi’

¹ The English translations draw mainly from those by Florence Louie Friedman, with my own modifications (wherever necessary), as found in my Master’s dissertation (1995).

('Come, Monster of Steel'). This poem laments the fact that black men's hard labour in the mines nonetheless failed to improve their livelihoods. The speaker in this poem says:

Shona langa lemihla yonke.

Wen'owanqab'ukukhanyisa

Kithina sizwe sikaMnyama

Imfihlo yomtapo weGoli

Engilibone licebisa

Izizwe nezinhla zomhlaba

Thina bakaMyama sibuka

Sikhex'izindebe ezinkulu

(O set, you daily sun

You who refused to bring light

To us, the black nation.

The hidden mysteries of the caves of gold

Which I see bestowing wealth

On nations everywhere on earth,

While we black people watch,

Our thick lips gaping)

Issues Vilakazi addressed in the first half of the 20th century remain relevant to social issues today. The safety of black miners is one such an issue, considering the recent fatalities at Sibanye Gold Mine in Carletonville, where the death toll had risen to seven by the 7th of May (Times Live 2018) and the Lily Mine disaster in Mpumalanga two years ago, for which families of the victims have not found closure yet (ENCA 2018). Material realities seventy years later attest to the significance of Vilakazi's poems and underpins the perception that, even then, he

already was a visionary writer who wrote about the plight of the poor. I shall later return to this point.

Interestingly, in the poem just quoted ('Woza Nonjinjikasi'/'Come, Monster of Steel'), Vilakazi displays his non-essentialist worldview, evident in his citing of ethnic groups other than the Zulus with whom his works are predominantly concerned:

Ngizw'abaVenda nabaTshopi

Behay'amahubo

(I hear Venda and Tshopi people

Singing songs)

The mentioning of other groups such as the Xhosa and Basotho in the poems 'Ngizw'ingoma' ('I Hear a Song') and 'Ithongo lokwazi' ('Ancestor of Knowledge') shows that the example quoted above is no coincidence. He is almost calling already for unity against uncoordinated ethnic boundaries that, by their very nature, were deliberately orchestrated to divide black people.

In view of the above, it is timely that, 70 years after Vilakazi's passing, the impact of the work of this scholar be revisited and be centralised in the South African literary establishment (see Ngwenya 1998: 127, as quoted formerly).

Likewise, it is crucial that we begin to critically question the epistemologies and discourses of domination that have created blind spots in respect of how education is structured, with the purpose of beginning to actively unshackle ourselves from the often unquestioned acceptance of what constitutes 'a classic'. When reading about William Shakespeare, for example, literary historiography and literary theory undeniably underscores that his works

are central to the literary canon (of Britain, the English literature and world literature). His works are labelled 'classic', and he himself 'a "universal writer"'. This is an author who, more than 400 years ago, already wrote about matters that continue to plague and have bearing on our societies today; be it love, politics, power, war, etc. Indeed, he continues today to be read, studied and analysed; his works and himself canonised the world over. His works are worthy of the label and the status of 'a classic'. Consider for example his depiction of Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth. His depiction of issues of existence and the search for meaning² resonate with our very existence, in texts prescribed at all levels from basic education to tertiary education at institutions of higher learning. His works are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them, and have therefore been translated into many languages and, in this technological era, have been made into films and committed to other media that almost ensures that Shakespeare has taken on new relevance.

Similarly, the great works of African literary writers and scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mongane Wally Serote and our own Es'kia Mphahlele are not foreign to students of literature (certainly in the field of African languages and literatures). What the work of these writers have in common is the central truth that literature deals with issues that affect us as people at a particular time. I am of the view that therefore Vilakazi, whose life span was comparable to that of Shakespeare, is to be 'resurrected' (*avukuzwe emathunjini omhlaba*), so to speak, and the saliency of his works for our times be recognised.

Although I had read some of Vilakazi's works at an earlier stage of my life, it was only in the 1990s, during my undergraduate years, that I received a thorough introduction to Vilakazi's works; an introduction that gave me a cogent understanding of the breadth and depth of this writer. His works inspire me and have always stimulated re-readings. I believe my fascination with him is also tied to our kinship, which is sealed by his childhood nickname, Bhambatha.

² "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought..." - Sonnet XXX

Born in 1906 in KwaDakuza, Vilakazi was named after Bhambatha kaMancinza Zondi, chief of the Zondi clan in Greytown, KwaZulu-Natal. In the same year, Bhambatha led the famous Bhambatha Rebellion against the poll tax imposed by the colonial government under Charles Smythe.³ Even though the rebellion was unsuccessful, Bhambatha's bravery in attempting to stop his people from supplying cheap labour in order to pay the poll tax would, at a later stage, influence Vilakazi to continue the battle, albeit with a pen instead of a military arsenal. Remembering his initiation into becoming an *imbongi*, a traditional bard, Vilakazi, in the poem 'Ugqozi' ('Power of Inspiration'), refers to himself as Mancinza, which is one of the Zondi clan names (*izithakazelo*). Hereby Vilakazi lays claim to the kinship of Bhambatha and thus perceives himself as rightfully belonging to a Zondi clan. He says:

*Namhla kangikwaz' ukuthula noma
Lapho ngilele ngikwesikaBhadakazi,
Ngivuswa nguMnkabayi ethi kimi:
'Vuka wena kaMancinza!
Kawuzalelwanga ukulal'ubuthongo.
Vuk'ubong'indaba yemikhonto!
Nank'umthwal'engakwethwesa wona'*

(Today I can never be silent
Because in the depths of the night
Mnkabayi awakens with the words
'Arise, O you son of Mancinza!
Your destiny bids you awaken
And sing to us legends of battle!
This charge, I command you, fulfil!')

³ www.sahistory.org.za/article/events-leading-bambatha-rebellion

Not only did Vilakazi rely on his own imagination and creativity; he also cooperated with higher ancestral powers, symbolised in the above poem by Mnkabayi, Shaka's paternal aunt, "perhaps the most powerful woman of her time in Zululand" (Attwell, 2005:105). Central in the lines just read, Vilakazi associates his poetic inspiration with Mnkabayi. This signifies his consciousness and appreciation of the status of women – in this case, royal women – even back then when patriarchy, as manifested in (*inter alia*) male writing of female *izibongo* (cf. Zondi, 2006:2) depicted the contrary. Vilakazi could have selected and charged any other royal male figure with his success, but this was not the case. What he did, can be described as quite visionary, in fact rather revolutionary in gendered terms. I shall elaborate on this point later.

My inaugural lecture comes at an appropriate time in my professional career; a time when, as part of this lecture, I am afforded the opportunity to share with you my vision for our Department of African Languages at the University of Pretoria. I believe that Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, a writer who has exercised a great influence on my academic trajectory, matches this vision perfectly. As I mature and evolve in my career, I find that Vilakazi's work continues to exude a superb quality from which new ideas arise with every encounter – and this encounter is in the act of rereading. To me, this legendary figure (and his work) remains a classic. I recognise in literary contexts the notion of a classic is always in dispute, but in my view, classics have a way of becoming part of the shared experience of a whole culture or group providing that it be always subject to on-going reading and scrutiny. At this very moment, out of a different kind of nostalgia for my home province, KwaZulu-Natal, I identify with a number of sentiments expressed in his poems, particularly 'KwaDedangendlale' ('The Valley of a Thousand Hills'), in which Vilakazi (1945:23) invokes the Natal landscape:

Ngikhumbule kud' ekhaya

Laph'ilanga liphumela

Phezu kwezintab' ezinde

Lishone libomv'enzansi

*Kuze kusondel'ukuhlwa
Nokuthul' okucwebile,
Laph'uphuma phandl'unuke
Uhogele ngamakhala,
Uzigqum'umzimba wonke
Ngomoya wolwandl'omanzi*

(I remember far away at home
There where the sun rises
Above the tall hills
And goes down shining red below
Until dusk comes
With its pure silence
There where you go outside and breathe in,
Breathe in deeply with full nostrils
And feel your whole body affected by
The moist air of the sea)

Beyond my personal sentiments, let us consider the scientific appeal of the poet. Consider *how* it was shaped by and how it captures the social forces that provide its broad and complex template in the acts of reading and writing. Second, let us read his works to begin to reveal the insights into the humanities and African languages, and consider, in tandem with the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013:37-41), what his work advances with regard to the importance of understanding the seminal relationship between language, literature, context and society.

As a second entry point into this lecture I turn to some CONTEXTUAL MARKERS

It may sound clichéd to state that we live in times of profound change, given the temperature of our socio-political context. Ours is a context in which the template of change is deeply embedded in the meaning of a democracy. We are regularly directed to the question of rights, expectations, service delivery, the meaning and ethics of leadership, of what it is to be a nation and, at the heart of it, the meaning of embodiment in the context of gender and sexuality. The academy is intricately entangled in a web of several competing social problems and social forces. Within this scheme the location, position, utility and meaning of language remains a key marker not simply for its current position in the public domain or in higher education transformation, but in my view it is central to the idea and meaning of a university. There are many drivers of our location as academic professionals within a university, but central for me is (1) the production and harnessing of new knowledge, (2) the building of cultural and political understanding, (3) finding new and innovative applications of existing knowledge, (4) validating knowledge and values through our curricula, (5) providing opportunities for social mobility, (6) strengthening social justice, (7) promoting dialogue and debate, (8) educating and providing skills for a changing labour market, and (9) nurturing the hopes of the world by recognising our interconnectedness to the world.

I propose not to cover all of these but to urge you to keep these issues in check as they inform the thinking in this lecture. An engagement with African Languages in the higher education environment must recognise that we shift paradigms from the deficits in thinking about the limitations, in other words, what constricts, prohibits and proscribes our languages, to an argument about what enables, enhances, strengthens and facilitates its further development – aligned to the value in supporting the uses of African languages in the development of science and technology – broadly speaking, the knowledge project. To do this requires of us that we remain critical in making sense of how we build, renovate and amplify thinking in and through our disciplines, and more important, how we navigate our subject disciplines in an evolving Higher Education context.

The official recognition of African languages in the Constitution represents a groundbreaking intention about status that takes us beyond symbolism to the importance of identity and identification. Whereas the apartheid regime accorded independent recognition of African dialects with the purpose of dividing the African population along ethnic and linguistic lines, the opening up of South African society after apartheid has created new problems that turned managing the multilingual situation into a new dilemma. The task of standardizing African language is an on-going challenge, and the State is unable to cope with the development of official languages on equal terms. The centrality of linguistic citizenship, a notion suggested by Christopher Stroud, is a way to address, spotlight and recuperate the lost semiotics of historically marginalised agency and voices in societies under transformation. This is a lens that magnifies the language politics that shape citizenship and challenges sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, literary scholars and indeed all of us who are located in the academic profession of languages.

Singling out the importance of the humanities and of African languages, the DHET, in the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013:37-41), advances an understanding of the seminal relationship between language, literature, context and society. The *National Development Plan* (2011), another founding document shaping the developmental agenda for South Africa, acknowledges that “major humanist projects which link our heritage and our future as a society” are encompassed by the humanities in general and African languages in particular, and advises that our education from basic to tertiary and through the science and innovation system should invest and build capacity and high level expertise in these (in White Paper 2013: 37). Our task is to critically revisit the idea that the ‘demise’ of African languages in the academic sphere poses a serious threat to linguistic diversity in South Africa’ (White Paper 2013:38) must be reversed. The DHET White Paper commits itself to a set of key ideas and strategies to ensure the rejuvenation of African languages through a “cross-disciplinary approach” (White Paper 2013: 38) but does not clarify how we get there.

In framing my thinking, I borrow the insights of two scholars who in recent publications offer some thoughtful ideas that have a bearing on this argument. Pam Maseko⁴, an African Languages scholar at Rhodes University, in a paper titled “The Struggle over African Languages”, makes a number of key points:

Maseko states, “The development of African languages was never meant to benefit their speakers. The descriptive grammars were largely aimed at assisting others to understand those languages and using them for purposes of education, whatever that education meant – conversion to Christianity, and so forth” (Maseko, 2016: 82).

Maseko goes further, indicating that “We have inherited a system in which African languages were taught in ways that were entirely disconnected from the people who spoke the languages. While global scholarship on languages has shifted, we in South Africa have not shifted – or are shifting only at a very slow pace” (Maseko, 2016: 82).

Maseko (2016: 83) adds the following: “When the Bantustan universities were established, all they had to fall back on was missionary education. This may sound controversial, but apartheid did a lot to develop African languages, whatever its agenda, which was obviously to subjugate people and all that. But it did a lot for the structural development of the language; the development of its corpus”.

Maseko (2016: 84), drawing on her own experience of studying isiXhosa at UWC in the mid-eighties, makes a key point that “African languages in higher education were meant to benefit ‘others’ – they were meant to have a utilitarian or functional value for speakers of other languages”, such that “when the entry of African language speakers to these universities accelerated, African language departments had nothing to present to them”.

Maseko also speculates on the diminishing numbers of students of African languages in the post-apartheid period. According to Maseko (2016: 84) the reason for this is that the numbers of second language speakers dropped because “Society did not value the

⁴ In an interview with Peter Vale

languages. Jobs did not require them in the same way that they required English and Afrikaans during apartheid. There was no demand for universities to produce graduates capable of responding to the linguistic diversity of South Africa” and that “speakers of African languages did African languages simply because the one certain thing they could do was to teach” (85). Another reason Maseko ascribes to this drop in mother tongue speakers “was that these languages were taught in ways that did not relate to their own experiences” (85) and that “even the funding systems did not relate to the value supposedly placed on these languages in national legislation” (85). In Maseko’s (2016: 85) view, “there was no correlation between policy and what actually happened in practice”. In her view, “parents and even people in the academy feel that English needs to be promoted even more strongly” and there is lip service to the value of multilingualism. For Maseko (2016: 87), “there is a lack of understanding that African languages are alive and relevant for people today, even though English is the dominant language”. The rejuvenation of the academic engagement of languages is in her view, one that I share, to perhaps minimize the emphasis on structure and to centralise the social value of language especially in its intellectual traditions.

However, this is not all. In another powerful engagement, Nomalanga Mkhize, in a paper titled “Away with Good Bantus: De-linking African language literature from culture, ‘tribe’ and propriety” (Mkhize, 2016: 146-152) suggests that literary regeneration ought to be at the heart of African language intellectualisation. In her view, “there appears to be more talk about intellectualisation than actual practice” (ibid.,2016: 146). Mkhize claims that “intellectualisation in African languages is not merely institutionalisation, but a re-framing of the kind of the ‘native subject’ or ‘implied reader’ that the African language literary tradition has historically constructed”. In essence, her view is that the ‘institutionalisation model’ of promoting African languages fails because it reproduces conservative scholarly practice associated with African languages and literary culture. Where am I going with this? Mkhize (2016: 147) goes further: “At its heart intellectualisation ought to be a project of literary regeneration, a project to push the boundaries of discourse. This requires that scholars move beyond administrative and lexicographic approach that sees intellectualisation endeavours revolve around university signage, dual-language circulars and terminological and lexicographic quibbles”. At the core of Mkhize’s argument (to which I subscribe) is that

“intellectualisation should expand the imaginative scope of academic work, and it is new literary production that has the potential to challenge scholarly conservatism and expert gatekeeping that has characterised African language scholarship” (Mkhize, 2016:147).

Remaining with Mkhize (2016: 147), “the major hindrance to the intellectualisation of African languages is that textual production (fiction and non-fiction) has historically been heavily bent towards conservative themes, in which cultural pride, propriety and identity take centre stage – that is – a literature that speaks to ‘Good Bantus’”. Our experience in school and university curricula shows a narratological tradition marked by three characteristics: “(1) the close linkage between ethnic identity and language”, (2) use of African language as cultural reclamation and pride and (3) narratological stagnation and lack of inventiveness in literary production (Mkhize, 2016:147). Mkhize claims that “intellectualisation efforts that do not effectively de-link African languages from these suffocating tendencies will fail to bring African languages properly into the centre of scholarly production in South Africa”.

Mkhize’s observations mobilise perspectives that direct our attention to the prospect that African languages (beyond missionary control and supervision to the Verwoerdian era of linguistic tribalisation, has resulted in African language book writers to struggle to innovate, dissent and break new ground. Second, in her view, resonating with Maseko (whom I cited earlier), is the rigid and overwhelming emphasis on grammar and orthographies. More alarming is the view that the “print culture of African languages has been largely used as ideological tools of creating ‘good and proper Bantus’”. Essentially, what Mkhize calls for is a literary subversion in African language literature, claiming, “there is a great divide between popular usages of the language and their use in the realm of scholarship, book publishing and teaching” (Mkhize, 2016:148).

While Mkhize provides provocative analytical and conceptual thought, I believe there is a central contradiction to her argument. While she points to a “narratological stagnation” or the aesthetic rut in which African language writing finds itself, we must realise that her observations are in fact acts of reading and interpretation. Reading and interpretation are

also acts of rewriting, directing us to modes of interpretation that can also assist in revising meanings. Rereading consists of on-going and repeated encounters with a text, guided by a particular task so that segments of the text become revisited and rethought. Rereading is the most effective type of reading because it demands of us to also recognise that reading is also a way of rewriting a text (as Roland Barthes has informed in his classic essay “The Death of the Author” – basically when the authorial voice is done, the reader takes over, and in doing so recreates the text). This is all the more relevant in relation to the idea of a canon (a body of literary and cultural production that influences a literary tradition). **In the next third part of my address** I return to the work of B W Vilakazi, an iconic figure in South African literature and a central figure in the canon of isiZulu literature, to suggest that rereading and reengaging his works is part of an intellectual effort; it is both transformative and, indeed, a form of praxis.

Unpacking Vilakazi’s works

In a period of 12 years, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi wrote three novels and two anthologies of poetry, and completed his Master’s and Doctoral dissertations. He also collaborated with Professor C M Doke on the *English–Zulu–English Dictionary*, which was published posthumously in 1948. Ntshangase (1995:1) maintains that “no other person in African languages and literature in South Africa has been able to achieve what Vilakazi did”. His impact is still being felt even today, as attested to by Nyembezi, who maintains that “some writers of Zulu poetry, for example, have taken Vilakazi as their model; but not only do they try to emulate his style; they even employ his expressions so that the end product is just another poem by Vilakazi” 1959:28). Neither his life nor his work is well documented. In fact, his works have always been relegated to the periphery of African intellectual history (Ntshangase 1995:1). This bias might be explained in the context of the academic discourse where his contemporaries wrote in English. In this regard, I want to single out Herbert Dhlomo, whom I regard as his principal ‘rival’.

Owing to constraints of time and scope, I shall briefly discuss only a few poems to illustrate Vilakazi’s significance for the idea of the transformative project in higher education. I shall

draw on two volumes of poetry, *Inkondlo kaZulu (Zulu Songs)* and *Amal'ezulu (Zulu Horizons)*, indicating trends, tendencies and applicability for current times.

In the poem, 'Imfundo Ephakeme' ('Higher Education') Vilakazi steadfastly alludes to collaboration. Referring to his own education, which exposed him to various influences, he says:

Ngavakash' izimbong' ezimnyama

Zihay 'imiqondo yamakhosi,
Nezinye zibong' utshwal'emsamo.
Ngafak' ukuhlakanipha kwazo,
Ngakudiya nokwezabamhlophe.
Namhla zixaben' ekhanda lami.

Ongaqondi lutho ngalezi zinto
Nozilalel' ubusuku bonke
Engafundi lutho kuze kuse,
Engamazi uSiza noSisero,
NoShaka, noNgqika noMshweshwe,
Namhl' uyathokoza ngenhliziyo.

(I visited black poets
Praising their kings' wisdom
And others praising traditional beer at the sacred place
I took in their wisdom
And mingled it with that of the white men.
Today they are mixed up in my head.)

One who understands nothing about these things

Who sleeps the entire night

Not reading anything till morning breaks

Knowing neither Caesar or Cicero

Nor Shaka, Ngqika and Moshesh,

Today is happy at heart.)

To me, the above quote essentially speaks of a man who understood the possibility of what Pratt (in Ngwenya, 2008) described as 'contact zones' between African traditionalism and Western modernity. He also did not pretend that such encounters had no impact on him. Rather, his poems and critical writings "reflect his awareness of the inherent contradictions underlying the challenging task of having to ensure continuity and preservation of Zulu traditions while simultaneously devising new strategies and forms of poetic expression to suit modern context" (Ngwenya, 1998: 129). Moreover, Vilakazi (in Attwell, 2005:81) also sees himself as a man who did not neglect or despise the past, but who interpreted it through his own imagination. After all, is acculturation not an effect, when two cultures cross paths? Vilakazi demonstrated depth by borrowing from values that could enhance his own. I would personally find it problematic if he had remained indifferent in his outlook on life after having encountered various influences. On the contrary: Vilakazi does not leave us speculating about these 'contact zones'. Conscious of his environment, in an article entitled 'The conception and development of poetry in Zulu', he reiterates his intentions, writing that

There is no doubt that the poetry of the West will influence all Bantu poetry because all the new ideas of our age have reached us through European standards. But there is something we must not lose sight of. If we imitate the form, the outward decoration which decks the charming poetry of our Western masters, that does not mean to say that we have incorporated into our poetry even their spirit. If we use Western stanza-forms and metrical systems, we employ them only as vehicles or receptacles for our poetic images, depicted as we see and conceive (Vilakazi, 1938:127).

In the context of institutions of higher learning today, I believe Vilakazi is advocating for a recognition of influence, intention and affect (somewhat similar to what in literary studies has for several decades claimed to be intertextuality). Rooted in African oral tradition which is dependent on memory, Vilakazi, by writing down his poetry, was already selling the African story, wisdom and experience and making it accessible to broader society and the world, a reciprocal value of what is to be expected when diverse cultures meet, sometimes collide and where mutual enrichment is envisaged. By recording his culture through his poetry, he also guaranteed posterity for his future generations. Even though some critics such as Jabavu (1943) and Ntuli (1984) do not always find his adoption of Western forms desirable, Vilakazi's view of the colonial encounter is largely characterised by a conscious desire to integrate the worldviews of the coloniser and the colonised into a coherent perspective. "Coherent" does not mean 'uncritical'. It could be argued that unlike most members of the African petty bourgeoisie class of Vilakazi's time, he did not embrace Western culture thoughtlessly, at the expense of his own. Rather, contrary to the typical values and worldviews espoused by the black bourgeoisie (a class Vilakazi belonged to) that perceived Western culture as superior, Vilakazi "regarded the two cultures as epistemologically different yet with complementary value systems" (Ngwenya 2008:57).

Vilakazi was also capable of 'borrowing' from the West but yet, at the same time, remaining conscious of issues affecting Africans. Conscious of the influence of the West, Vilakazi understood it as a European 'form' in the poetic presentation of a recognisably African 'content' (Ngwenya 1998:135). In his PhD dissertation, Vilakazi (1946:372) accentuates the point:

[w]hat future literature needs is not a compromise between the old and the new ideas, but a fusion, as it were, not of a mixture but of an amalgam. The virile elements of both African and western cultures must fuse and give birth to a new life, expressed in new literature.

In his appraisal of the Western attributes of Vilakazi's essentially African poetry, David Attwell (2005:89) notes:

We can now see that Vilakazi's seemingly obsessive fondness for rhyme, together with his interest in prosody, were essentially means to an end, which was to enable Zulu writing to acquire abstraction, distance, monumentality and perfection – broadly speaking, the qualities of aesthetics.

Now for the fourth and final component of my lecture, I turn to a brief vision statement which I will reconnect to the work of Vilakazi

Having briefly explained the context of Vilakazi's poetry, I shall now present a brief historical background of the Department of African Languages at the University of Pretoria with the objective of forging continuity with Vilakazi's vision. The Department proudly offers four African languages, namely Sepedi, Setswana, isiNdebele and isiZulu. Research conducted in the Department is multifaceted, ranging from lexicography and terminology to the literatures and linguistics of the four languages currently on offer, as well as translation and interpreting studies. In recognition of the research possibilities afforded by the advent of machine-readable language corpora, almost all lexicographical and terminological research done within the Department is corpus-based, with general electronic corpora for all eleven official South African Languages being compiled at the University of Pretoria. In fact, various studies on corpus linguistics published by members of our Department prove to be at the cutting edge of international research in lexicography. Owing to the degree of staff expertise in this field, several partnerships and collaborations exist both locally and internationally.

I intend to maintain and build on the excellent reputation of the University of Pretoria and the Department of African Languages by furthering the development of additional areas, and finding new ways of addressing the challenges resulting from dynamic changes in the higher education environment. It is critical that African languages be actively promoted and advocated as an asset in the broader context of multilingualism and in the context of UP as an institution. My vision for expanding the landscape of our Department of African Languages is informed by the White Paper on Transformation. This document warns that the demise of African languages in the academic spheres poses a serious threat to linguistic diversity in South Africa, and consequently provides a set of key ideas and strategies to

ensure, firstly, the rejuvenation of African languages and, secondly, their development as languages of literature, science and academia. Thirdly, it argues in favour of the “strengthening of African languages” as one of the means to combat “the decline of African languages departments [and] to recognise the importance of African languages to the work of universities”.

I have highlighted my intention to support and further the excellent lexicographic work of international standing undertaken in our Department. My intention of forging new avenues rests upon the dual premise that, firstly, research, teaching and community engagement are interconnected and, secondly, our research should inform our teaching. Theory, practice and learning should intersect; and research, teaching and community engagement must therefore inform and enhance one another. This belief supports my vision to advance the literary domains in our Department by expanding and diversifying the range of literary theories of which we avail ourselves (on a par with international practice). The recently held international conference entitled ‘Thetha Sizwe: Intersections, Practices, and Identities- Rethinking Gender in African Languages and Literature’ attests to another of my beliefs, namely in the value of collaboration and interdisciplinary research. Hosted by UP’s Faculty of Humanities under the direction of the Department of African Languages and in collaboration with Wits and UKZN, this conference extended beyond African languages and gender studies owing to the inclusion of a number of cross-disciplinary papers. Considering trends on the African continent, our Department might, in future, even consider including non-South-African African languages such as Kiswahili.

The White paper also alludes to the creation of a non-sexist and non-racial society and the discovery of Ubuntu as a major humanist project that links our heritage and our future as a society. Earlier in this lecture, I promised to return to the issue of Vilakazi as a transformed man at a time when patriarchy was rife and gender activism an unknown concept. Despite the limits of this context, Vilakazi, albeit very subtly, touches on gender, a subject close to my heart. In a society steeped in patriarchy, Vilakazi’s acknowledgement of a female figure as an ancestor from whom he drew inspiration was quite exceptional – a notion we can further in contemporary South Africa. When at King Shaka’s court and while in a trance,

Vilakazi could have imagined a male royal figure tasking him to leave a legacy for generations to come. However, it is Mnkabayi that he found suitable to inspire him, as described in the earlier cited poem 'Ugqozi' ('Power of Inspiration').

Princess Mnkabayi was the daughter of Jama, son of Ndaba, sister of Senzangakhona and paternal aunt of Shaka. She was one of a set of twins; and for the first time, contrary to Zulu custom, the lives of both twins were spared. As a result, the custom of *ukugingisa itshe*, which entailed causing the death of one of the twins by letting it swallow a small stone, was permanently discontinued. Later, Mnkabayi acted as a regent for the period when Shaka was still too young to take over from his father, Senzangakhona.

According to Freudian theory,⁵ the dream Vilakazi had after having fallen asleep outside King Shaka's court suggests that it had been Vilakazi's wish from the onset to receive inspiration from Mnkabayi. We first hear her name in the second stanza of the poem 'Ugqozi' ('Power of Inspiration') when told that Mnkabayi, an all-powerful woman with supernatural powers, without opening her mouth had the gatekeeper open the gates to allow Vilakazi to enter the royal court. Vilakazi says:

Kwafika kim'uMnkabayi emuhle

Wangithatha phansi wangiphonsa phezulu

Ngabon'umlindi-masango evula

(Mnkabayi appeared to me looking beautiful

She looked at me from head to toe

The gatekeeper then opened the gate)

⁵ As Sigmund Freud argues, what is common in all these dreams is obvious. They completely satisfy wishes excited during the day, which remain unrealised. They are simply and undisguisedly realization of wishes.

At the second mention of Mnkabayi's name (in the fourth stanza) Vilakazi opted to say "Ngamfuna uMnkabayi" ('I searched for Mnkabayi') rather than *ngafuna uMnkabayi*, thereby emphasizing that he specifically wanted the woman Mnkabayi to be the source of his inspiration. He identified with a woman, and in the final stanza she tasks Vilakazi with teaching future generations.⁶ As the abstract states, the *context* in which language and literature communicate contributes critically to the *content* of the message. Vilakazi uses repetition – a common feature of oral poetry (Canonici 1996:29), in this instance, a repetition of Mnkabayi's name to enhance the quality and richness of the poem.

Vilakazi's poems not only illustrate the relationship between context and content, Mr Vice Principal, but also the link between history and literature. The way in which the 1913 Natives Land Act⁷ allocated 7% of arable land to Africans while leaving more fertile land for Whites (Modise and Mtshiselwa, 2013) speak to two matters that remain highly contentious to this day; land and conditions in the mining industry. In his protest poems 'Ezinkomponi' ('On the Mine Compounds') and 'Ngoba...Sewuthi' ('Because...You Now Say') Vilakazi engages in intellectual warfare. I only have time for a brief comment on 'Ezinkomponi' ('On the Mine Compounds'). In this poem Vilakazi, speaking on behalf of the voiceless, reflects on a gold mine in Johannesburg in the 1940s. The miners, the mine magnates and the heavy machinery are depicted as three protagonists who struggle to validate their respective roles in the conflict. This famous protest poem remains a cry for help in the face of destructive industrial advancement that pits the values of gold and money against human values that are worth living for (adapted from Zondi 2011:173). To illustrate my point, consider the text:

Ngizwile kuthiwa emgodini

Kuy'izizwe ngezizwe zikaMnyama (lines 37-38)

Ngizwile kuthiwa kwakhala

⁶ There is insufficient semantic and lexical equivalence to precisely render the difference between *ngamfuna* and *ngafuna*.

⁷ The 1913 Land Act allocated only 7% of arable land to Africans, leaving the more fertile land for whites. This Act is seen to have "created socio-economic injustices in terms of poverty and dispossession of land from black people" (Modise and Mtshiselwa 2013).

Imishini kwavela mbil'emnyama
Emqondweni wayo kuhlwile khuhle
Yabanjwa yahendulw'imvukuzane
Yavukuz'umhlabathi ngabon'igolide (lines 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

Vilakazi (and others in his league) should be studied beyond Departments of African Languages. If Shakespeare, Achebe, wa Thiong'o, Soyinka, Serote and Mphahlele appeal to the taste of students regardless of the medium of instruction, why would the legendary Vilakazi not have the same effect, especially given that his poetry is available in both Zulu and English?

Colleagues, let me conclude

My address has focused on the utility and meaning of African languages and literatures in Higher Education, their linkage to the knowledge project, their intellectualisation within the academy and how, by revisiting the work of one iconic writer/scholar, namely BW Vilakazi, we could give further impetus to the prospect of intellectual efforts in African languages. A central message in this address is the idea that intellectualisation should not be seen, as Mkhize has reminded us, to be centred on conservative institutional attempts to render sanitised renditions of language and reality; to make a heavy push for translation between the various languages to facilitate theorisation of literary frameworks that can handle the

plurality and intersection of South Africa's related story-telling traditions; and, more importantly, that African language literary production and scholarship needs to boldly use the vernacular idiom to theorise the transgressive, the subversive (the latter I have not fully engaged, but something I am planning to engage).

In essence, African languages and literatures in an academic context require a serious engagement with who is the 'implied reader', 'the native subject' and requires greater troubling, unsettling in the way we teach, the way write, and the way we read. If anything, my address has suggested that acts of re-reading (albeit preliminary) is an important intervention in the project of intellectualisation of our discipline. I thank you.

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