



A Critical Appraisal of Zolani Mkiva's Biographical Details that Colour His Post-apartheid Poetry

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Abstract

The debate on the significance of an artist's biographical details on his or her aesthetic work continues to grow. Some scholars argue that the upbringing and life of an artist have little or no influence on the work they produce, while others warn against the danger of bias as a result of basing analysis on author's biographical details. In contrast, other scholars view biographical details as influencing authorial ideology, as art is not produced in a vacuum. Therefore, it was the aim of this article to examine the influence of Zolani Mkiva's biographical details on his aesthetic work in the post-apartheid era. In answering the question, does Mkiva's biographical details have an influence in his aesthetic works, the article analyses his post-apartheid poems. The results support the view that the artist's upbringing and life contributes to his authorial ideology on his other aesthetic work, and thus should be considered in the analysis of artist's work as they offer insights in understanding artist's work.

Keywords: Zolani Mkiva; authorial ideology; post-apartheid poetry; imbongi; biography

Introduction

This article examines how the rich life of Zolani Mkiva colours his poetry. There is a growing debate on the significance of the artist's biographical details in his/her aesthetic works. New Criticism theory is among theories that encourages critics of literature

to restrain themselves from the impact of author's life (Aail and Wisal 2019). This ideology is espoused by Ntuli (1984, p.1), who notes, "biographical notes do not always help in making a reliable evaluation of an artist's work. In fact, a critic may be prejudiced

by his knowledge of the writer's life history and he may arrive at incorrect interpretation of the work under scrutiny." Similarly, Mkonto (1988, p.14) states that "biography alone should not be relied upon when one is attempting to understand the writer's ideal." In contrast, Qangule (1979, p.1), citing Kunene, states:

While I agree with critics who assert that one's knowledge of the life of an author does not enhance one's appreciation of the author's writings, it seems to me that there is equally no doubt that the understanding of an author who is clearly dedicated to a campaign of social reform is enhanced by a knowledge of his social and cultural world, its effect upon him, and the effect upon him also of any factors which being external to this social milieu yet bombard it towards a forceful, even cataclysmic change.

Cutalele (2007) concurs with Kunene (1967) and Qangule, citing biographical details' importance in understanding the author's contribution to the issue at hand. Biographical details share experiences of the artist leading to his or her production of art. These practical experiences nurture the ideology of an artist within the dominant ideology of a certain era, as he interacts with his immediate and extended surroundings. Qangule (1979, p. 3) adds, "The home, the school and the church constitute a milieu that has a great influence in shaping up one's outlook." Furthermore, Mtumane (2000, p. 9) posit that biographical details "provides a mirror where one can access the author's philosophy and thought processes". Makhenyane (2022) further states that these details enhance understanding of the poet's stand on certain issues. Although Diko (2022) does not trace the biographical details of the poet he examines, he does make reference to a biographical detail of Anelisa Thengimfene in stating that she is umXhosa. This fact about Thengimfene gives an idea of her worldview, as reflected in her poetry. This article then adds to the current debate on the significance of the artist's biographical details in his/her aesthetic works by examining the impact of Mkiva's biographical details on his aesthetic work. In examining Mkiva's experiences of life, the article will note only those experiences that are relevant to his aesthetic work. Therefore, this article will examine the family influences and educational experiences, as well

as community responsibilities, using biographical criticism as a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This article uses biographical criticism as its primary theoretical framework. Biographical criticism dates back to the 1779 publication of Johnson's book, *Lives of the Poets*. Although met with many critiques, his thoughts on the significance of biography in understanding poet's work is foundational. It laid a firm foundation for biographical criticism, which spurned centuries to our day. Purba (2018, p. 19) describes biographical criticism as "the practice of analysing a piece of literary work through the lens of the author's experience." This theory takes into cognizant the artist's upbringing, race, age, family, formal and informal education, and the economic status that informs the artist's work. Biographical criticism asks two primary questions: How does the text reflect or does not reflect artist's life? Is this aesthetic work an extension of the author's position on issues in the artist's life? In answering these fundamental questions, the researcher must be careful not to reduce the theory into drawing parallels between the artist's life and his or her aesthetic work. Instead, biographical criticism is a study of artist's intention and audience. Biographical criticism relies on biographical information to illuminate deeper meaning of themes, ideologies "and literary allusions based on author's own concerns and conflicts" (Purba 2018, p.22). Mazwi (2019, p. 97) argues, "we need to understand what kind of life the author led, what was going on in his life during the time the work was written, and what was happening in the world around him at the time." Mazwi (2019) used biographical criticism in examining the works of Mqhayi and she noted that Mqhayi wrote of his childhood experiences of suppression and Frontier Wars during colonial times. In answering the research question, which asks, to what extent has Mkiva's life influenced his aesthetic, this article will examine the period in which Mkiva was born and how it influenced his authorial ideology. Furthermore, it will examine his education and work and how they are reflected in his poetry.

Methodology

Using a qualitative research approach, data for this article was collected from Mkiva's biographical accounts and his poems. Only poems produced

in the post-apartheid era were used as data. These poems were chosen since the significance of biographical details in works produced during apartheid has been established. This article examines the influence of biographical details in the post-apartheid era. Mkiva's poems used in this study were collected as audio format from compact discs and digital platforms and transcribed into a written format. In the following section, textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique.

Following in the footsteps of his forebears

The Mkiva family, of the Miya clan, has a rich ancestry of iimbongi. Mkiva shares (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 133): "in my family, and especially my forebears, we have always had praise singers, *iimbongi*. We have had historians, that is, oral historians, who were recognised in their community and beyond. They played a role in my immediate community and the royal family. We have also had orators". This environment nurtured and cultured an imbongi of note in Mkiva as he grew to follow the example of his forebears. His voice of imbongi is recognised locally and abroad, commenting on socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic issues.

Mkiva (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p.137) further states:

Poetry is in the bloodline of my family.... It's something that I picked up from my father. My father got it from his forefather. His forefather got it from his great-grandfather. His great-grandfather got it from his great-great-grandfather. So, it comes through that pipeline.... It's an inherited trait.

Mkiva describes his great-grandfather as "a very dynamic poet, a praise poet, and a historian" as well as "the main person who really polished and honed" his skill as a poet (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 133). He muses: "at a personal level, I was grateful and honoured to have had an opportunity to live with him. In a sense, therefore, I have understudied him. I have lived with my ancestor" (*Ibid.*). Mkiva's great-grandfather "was one of the founding members of the liberation movement. And he was a mine worker" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 133). Mkiva adds, "He played a very important role as an *imbongi* in motivating workers at work, and that gave him a theatre that is almost closer to the one I enjoy right now" (*Ibid.*). In the same breath, Mkiva is motivating his audience to action and

encouraging them to liberate themselves and their minds. In the poem titled 'Mbambe Lubobo' (Recall Him Nation), he encourages the nation (*lubobo*) to recall a certain leader as Mkiva "was not happy with some of the things that were happening in the country, for instance, money was used on other things, like arms, instead of important issues like education" (Telephone Conversation 2010). Similarly, in 'Phambili Ngomanyano', he calls for South Africans to unite under one banner of the Rainbow Nation espoused by Nelson Mandela, and refrain from holding the grudges of the past. He closes the second stanza with complete parallelism that is followed by a refrain in saying:

Sithi, phambili ngoxolo, phambili!
Sithi, phambili ngomanyano, phambili!

We say, forward with peace, forward!
We say, forward with unity, forward!

Impinda: Phambili, phambili manyano (x2)
Phambili ngomanyano (x5)

Refrain: Forward, forward unity (x2)
Forward with unity (x5)

Mkiva follows in the footsteps of his forebears on a larger scale. His forebears were limited to the Xhosa nation. As a young boy, Mkiva had the privilege of accompanying his uncle to cultural events, where he was invited to perform his poetry. It is a custom among amaXhosa to have *imbongi* in cultural events like *imigidi* (the big day marking the coming home of the boys from initiation school), *imitshato* (weddings) and in gatherings at the Royal House. This privilege opened doors for young Mkiva as it led to his "first public performance in 1981" (Telephone Conversation 2010), at a tender age of nine. That exposure honed Mkiva for future performances on bigger stages like Mandela's inauguration as the President of South Africa, Parliament, and the African Union summit.

Therefore, the art of *ukubonga* is intrinsic to Mkiva. He possesses the traits that can be traced back to his forebears; he is dynamic in his praises and critiques, and his poetry is rich with historical facts. His poetry reflects his family values, beliefs, and ideologies and that of his nation. In his poetry, he is aware of the role he must play as modelled by those who bore the family name before him. This is not only evident in his poetry, but also in community projects he participates in as well as in the cultural circles he serves.

Education and Related Milieu

Childhood to High School

As alluded to, Mkiva's first form of education came from his family, more especially, from his great-grandfather, Pauzen Jacula Mkiva. The education he received from this legendary figure had a lasting effect on his mind. It was at the feet of this sage that he was first introduced to the importance of culture, activism, and a sense of social responsibility, as well as the art of *ukubonga*. In the same breath, he has taken the microphone and continued where his great-grandfather and other forbearers left off. He states: "coming from a heritage where in the family unit I have heard praising, I have actually inherited what belonged to my forebears and taken it from there and developed it according to modern times" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 134). It is clear from these words that Mkiva appreciates the education he received from his family, which nurtured what was already running in his veins.

Mkiva grew up tending to his father's herd with other boys on the plains of Bholothwa. He shares his experience in this manner:

When I was growing up, I had to look after the livestock of my father. And in that process, like any other boy who comes from that kind of family, I used to sing praises of the cows that belonged to my father. In doing so, I would also sing my family names, my clan names, combining with praise that I would chant for the cows that belonged to my father (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p.134).

In the praises of revolutionary leaders such as Mandela, Castro, Mbeki, Zuma, Mkiva borrows from his experience of looking after his father's herd. He often uses the bull metaphor to compare leadership qualities to that of a bull, the leader of the herd. He praises Mandela as a bull that breaks down bulwarks without horns and as a bull that devours heads of other bulls. Furthermore, he borrows from his experience by weaving clan names in his poetry. The use of clan names in Mkiva's work is woven seamlessly into the theme of the poem. For example, in the poem, 'Maz' Enethole' (Mkiva 2001), he uses the clan names of Mandela to tie this leader to his roots and to remind him of his patriotic responsibility. He exclaims:

*Goduka swayiba lezwemb' elide lakwaZondwa
LakwaYem-yem, kwaVelabembhentsese...*

Go home slender and tall one of Zondwa
Of Yem-yem, of Velabembhentsese...

Similarly, in 'Inkunz' kaMbeki' (Mkiva, n.d.), he sings praises of the leadership qualities of Thabo Mbeki by employing his clan names to reveal where Mbeki learned his craft:

*Yinkunz' emnyama ephuma kwiinkomo
zikaFakade kaMbekisa;
Phantsi kwamabandla kaJama,
KaSjadu ziyamjejula ngejejana lajej' ijejana...*

He is the black bull from the cattle of Fakade,
of Mbekisa;
Under the courts of Jama,
Of Sjadu who is adorned in long red coat...

This aspect in Mkiva's poetry dates to his childhood while tending to his father's livestock. It also has its roots in orature.

In addition, as any village boy, Mkiva grew up playing the traditional game of stick fighting. In this game, there would be teams and each member of the team would take turns with the members of the opposing team. In an act of motivating his team, "the one who has the skill of singing the praises...will praise your team as it plays against the other", Mkiva reveals (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 134). He adds, "[in] that way you also generate and regenerate the skill of praising" (*Ibid.*). In 2000, he sang praises of motivation and warning while he accompanied South African boxer, Vuyani "The Beast" Bungu, to the ring to face Prince Naseem Hamed for a World Boxing Organisation title. In his praises, Mkiva mentioned the skill of Bungu in fighting and how he defeats his opponents and how he was going to beat Prince Naseem to a pulp that night. Although Bungu lost the fight, Mkiva's childhood education of praising stick-fighters was evident that night.

To his advantage, Mkiva's childhood education was capped by attending primary education at his grandmother's school (Brown and Kiguli 2006). The foundation received at this day-school prepared him for the future as he was to step into a generation of multilingualism and globalisation. In addition, it excited an appetite in him to entertain diversity in his life and helped him to be able to

address audiences outside his own culture. For example, in a poem titled 'God Bless Africa' (Mkiva 2001), he uses both English and Swahili while in other poems he borrows phrases from other international languages. Had he failed to attend formal school, he would be limited to isiXhosa only as language and understanding of other foreign cultures was going to be a barrier.

Mkiva attended different post-primary schools around the former Transkei region. He did Standard 8 at Freemantle Boys High School, but he was expelled after performing a poem titled 'Paramount Thief' instead of Paramount Chief (Cutalele 2007). He then moved to St John's High School in Mthatha to do the final years of his high school until he matriculated in 1991 (www.poetofafrica.com). A former schoolmate at St John's, Nkululeko Mdingi, said that "Zolani used to perform his poems at the cultural functions at school where he displayed a great deal of skill" (Telephone Conversation 2010). Mdingi (*Ibid.*) further revealed that whenever there were protests and learners were still thinking of making their voice heard, Mkiva would just come out of nowhere and render a powerful poem that would voice out their concerns. This is his measure of creativity. As Mafeje (1967, p.196) suggest about poets, Mkiva would "represent the opinions of the ruled". Neethling (2001) argues that it was at St John's that Mkiva grew extensively as a poet.

It was while studying at St. John's that Mkiva came to the attention of the nation. Phosa (2002, p. 9) states that "a starry-eyed schoolboy was thrust into the national limelight in 1990 when he was given the honour of praising Nelson Mandela at a welcome home rally in the then Transkei". This event "became a fortune-changing experience" for Mkiva (*Ibid.*). The experience gained at that event prepared him for an international stage. Since that day, Mkiva's voice has traversed the globe: "today, Mkiva is a respected globetrotter whose invitations come from heads of state and custodians of culture in their respective countries" (Sibiya 2002, p.3).

Tertiary Education

According to Neethling (2003, p.200), "Mkiva pursued his studies at the University of the Western Cape between 1992 and 1995 where he finally graduated with an honours degree in Developmental Studies in 1995". His courses included "oral traditions, history and cultural

studies, scholars of African Poetry and traditional music" (poetofafrica.com). The knowledge acquired at the University of the Western Cape equipped Mkiva with an extended resource to help him polish his skill, grow his audience and to affect more influence with his aesthetic work. He notes, "...my stay at the University of the Western Cape contributed a lot to my poetry" (Phosa 2002, p.5). Mkiva adds, "In 1994 I was approached by the inauguration committee to praise-sing Mandela [at his inauguration]" (*Ibid.*). There, he rendered a poem titled 'Ntengu-ntengu macetyana' (Mtuze 1996, p. 7), which led to "invitations from various Western countries, including America and Germany" (Phosa 2002, p. 5). This performance and many others about Mandela led into Mkiva being tagged The Presidential Praise Singer.

During his stay at the University of the Western Cape, Mkiva performed "at the graduation ceremonies... in 1995" (Neethling 2003, p.199). At these ceremonies, he "rendered six poems over eight days (a weekend came in between)" (Neethling, 2003: 200), and one of those poems was entitled 'UMBombayi'. After observing Mkiva perform, Neethling concludes: "Mkiva is clearly a gifted poet: he could have rendered the 'same' poem every night, given the context (a graduation ceremony) remained unchanged" (*Ibid.*). Neethling further observes that Mkiva addressed "a wider and more diversified audience" as he used "more than one language when performing" and "is not shy to be creative in another language" (2003, p. 203). This is evident in many of his poems, some of them cited in this paper.

Mkiva as Teacher

Mkiva has had an honour of being a "guest lecturer at both the University of the Western Cape and at Stellenbosch University" (poetofafrica.com). He has delivered "public lectures at schools with relevant topics on Patriotism and revival of our culture" (*Ibid.*). The following are themes he pivots on in educating the youth of South Africa: culture in general, African values and norms, South African history, struggle history, present challenges of the African continent, Oral poetry in Africa, African African royalty and traditional communities, languages and idiomatic expressions, lineages and genealogies, clan names and African Royal Houses (www.poetofafrica.com). This thematic range extends to his poetry as well.

Zolani Mkiva, the Poet

This section outlines Mkiva's idea of an *imbongi* and the role one fulfils as *imbongi*. In addition, it examines his source of inspiration, his affiliations to the Black Consciousness Movement and African Renaissance, ideas on oral tradition as well as the audience he addresses. These aspects form his ideology as a poet and help the researcher understand his aesthetic.

According to Mkiva, "the name "praise poet" is not a true translation of *imbongi*" (Brown & Kiguli 2006, p.136). He alludes to the fact that *imbongi* does not only praise, but also has to criticise. He emphasises that the "criticism from time to time has to be a constructive one" and it must not be anyhow (*Ibid.*). Although an *imbongi* has a "license to caution leadership", he must "criticise with passion and bring proposals" (Telephone Conversation 2013).

In the spirit of patriotism, in one of his poems, 'Guya' (Mkiva 2001), Mkiva uses constructive criticism to question traditional surgeons who circumcise young boys in the Eastern Cape, an act that has led to several needless deaths. He interrogates:

Hay! Hay! Hay! Hay!
Ndiyanaqanda sizwe sikaKhushe;
Sekutheni namhlanje sekuseluk' iintsana?
Sekutheni namhlanje sekuseluk' iidyongo?

No! No! No! No!
 I am stopping you, nation of Cush;
 Why today, are children circumcised?
 Why today, are young boys circumcised?

This poem can be compared to the praises he sings to the custom of *Intonjane* (girl initiation) in the poem entitled 'Incoyane' (Mkiva 2001) to ascertain the role of *imbongi* according to Mkiva. He exclaims:

Yavel' intonjane Ma-Afrika!
Ayithombang' ithunakele!
Khawukhangel' ubuhle beentombi zelilizwe;
Zihlom' iincebetha neenkciyo, madoda;
Zigaxel' izigcina nezicwinana.

Here comes intonjane, Africans!
 Aroused by her initiation
 Behold the beauty of women of this nation;
 Covering their breasts and loins
 Adorned in beaded necklaces and bracelets.

In both poems, Mkiva speaks with the voice of a patriot as he calls the Xhosa nation to uphold their sacred cultural practices.

Mkiva uses terms to define *imbongi*: "a spokesperson for a given community; a social commentator; historian; oral library; adjudicator; inter-mediator between leadership and people" (Telephone Conversation 2013). In addition, he refers to *imbongi* as a "custodian of language, someone who develops language and uses old and new idioms" (*Ibid.*). He further sees *iimbongi* as "the cultural activists, who have led the processes of transformation in our country" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p.136). Mkiva states: "the institution of *imbongi* in the African society is there to give recommendation for legislation to be passed, it is there during the time of conflict to act as a go-between between leadership and the rank-and-file people" (*Ibid.*). In a poem delivered at the opening of Parliament in 2010, Mkiva used an idiomatic expression to make a call to President Jacob Zuma to address poverty and unemployment in South Africa. He said:

Uzube ngundodl' inqilo, ndidl' igwangqa!

You must eat the cape longclaw and eat the light brown animal!

This was at the time when South Africa was feeling the effects of the global fiscal crisis (2008/9) politically. With this idiomatic expression, Mkiva advises the president to come up with the plan of equally sharing the wealth of the country with everyone who lives in it to thwart the effects of the global fiscal crisis on the poor. In mentioning that the English and the Afrikaners agreed and said yes (lines 24 and 25), Mkiva was encouraging the president to formulate and implement a policy that will favour everyone, that will balance the scales without hurting the rich. Their yes was a willingness to negotiate the way forward.

Mkiva also views *imbongi* as a seer, one who "actually pro[phesises] as to what will happen in the future" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 136). He outlines the contours of this role by stating that the prophecy a poet makes is "informed by what is happening in the present" (*Ibid.*). According to Mkiva, *imbongi* must be quick to notice and point out the consequences of the current actions of the people, whether good or bad. He must foresee the dangers or the victories that might emanate from what is being done. In the poem stated in the previous paragraph, Mkiva, in a muted protest, warned the President about repercussions of failing

to formulate a plan to address the economic woes of the country. In years to follow, his presidency was disrupted by the Economic Freedom Fighters who accused him of misusing public funds in Nkandla renovations and he was later recalled as the President of the country.

Sources of Inspiration

Zolani Mkiva draws his inspiration from several sources. He declares, “the most fundamental source of inspiration is where I come from” (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 137). His background, the environment he grew up in, his Africanism, and “the valleys, the hills, the rivers and the streams” (*Ibid.*), that are a pride of Africa and his great-grandfather, Pauzen Mkiva inspire his voice. Moreover, he reads to sharpen his thinking and to broaden the horizons of his knowledge and watches television in order “to be current about things that are happening around” him (*Ibid.*). He also relies on the feelings of the masses he is representing; he listens to their perceptions and desires and “polish[es] them into concise and precise poetic phrases” (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 138), becoming true to his role of a spokesperson.

Mkiva on Black Consciousness and African Renaissance

Brown and Kiguli (2006, p. 140) note that in his poetry, Mkiva, “often alludes to the tenets of Black Consciousness or the African Renaissance without actually using the terms”. They cite a poem entitled “Son of the Soil” where Mkiva uses couplets that define these African-born ideologies. He recites:

I do not have perfumed lips,
But I speak the truth.

I do not have cat eyes,
But I can see the true colours of the universe.

I do not have donkey ears,
But I can hear what makes sense and what is a nuisance.

I do not have a dog nose,
But I can smell and distinguish between carbon-monoxide and oxygen.

I do not have a big heart,
But I have passion for love and I love people.

I do not have soft hands,
But I can deliver my people from shame.

I am the son of the soil!
Like daughters of the land.

Mkiva's poetry is coloured by praises of African leaders, African idea of life and African customs. On the contrary, he criticises those African leaders who are doing disservice to the people of Africa and those who are careless with the African culture and thought. He encourages Africans to think for themselves, to make a difference for themselves and the continent of Africa. These ideas are the cornerstones of the Black Consciousness Movement and African Renaissance. In a poem delivered at the AU Summit, he called Africans to “be thinkers of great thoughts.” Furthermore, he calls for a sense of pride and dignity in an African. Mkiva affirms: “the content of what I'm saying must work deep into the hearts and minds of my fellow Africans to say that we are people, we are fully fledged human beings and therefore we have got to have pride, we have got to have dignity in ourselves” (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 140).

Mkiva and Oral Tradition

Mkiva is a firm believer in the oral tradition of poetry. He strongly believes that there will always be a place for oral traditions in the African community, “even if everyone can read and write” (Kaschula 2002, p. 100). His poetry is colour-coded with devices from oral renditions of old. He uses folktales, proverbs, idiomatic expressions, sayings, repetition, parallelism, metaphors, genealogies and clan names to paint a vivid picture of his message to challenge the conscience of his audience. Mkiva states: “It is my view that genealogy is a very important feature in Africa, that you can't talk about genealogy out of context, out of proportion.... When you talk of genealogy, you've got to give a message to the people as well that is going to educate them, that is going to conscientize people” (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 139). He clarifies: “There's no point just reciting it for the sake of reciting it. You've got to give a message to the people that must ring a bell and that must tell them something- what has to be done” (*Ibid.*). Mkiva's ideology is evident in his poetry as his use of genealogy is interwoven seamlessly in his poetry. In praising Jacob Zuma at the State of the Nation Address in 2010, he said:

*Yiyo leyo k' inkunz' emdwaydwa kaLugaju;
Ithole leenkunzi zomgquba zakwaMatomela;*

There is the bull of Lugaju;
The calf of the bulls of the offspring of Matomela;

Mkiva used Zuma's genealogy in mentioning two of his forebears who were in leadership positions like Zuma. His main message in the poem was to call on President Zuma to balance the economic landscape of South Africa. In mentioning Chief Lugaju, who brought together the Zuma clan that was scattered (Ndlovu 2015), Mkiva was reminding President Zuma to follow in the footsteps of his forebears and bring together the nation under one economic banner. Therefore, Mkiva employs these devices to enhance the voice of the poet in his poetry.

Mkiva and His Audience

Mkiva views all people in the world as his audience. He states, "I am a human, I speak with human beings, and I believe my message is universal. It's a message that is born and bred in Africa, but it's for universal consumption" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 144). This kind of approach has led Mkiva to deliver his poetry in countries such as Uzbekistan, Colombia, Germany and Cuba. Mkiva's talent and creativity allow him to render his poetry in different languages. Although several of his poems are in isiXhosa and English, he has lines and stanzas in languages such as Swahili, Italian, French, Arabic languages. When he praised Nelson Mandela on his inauguration in 1994, Mkiva sang:

Ndimvile kalok' uBoutros Boutros Ghali esithi:
It will be *contra bonos mores* for the masses of South Africa not to liberate themselves.
Ndimvil' uColonel Gaddafi esithi:
Karambanini, karambanini, akuya ta gayi ta kura.
Ha-a-yi, watheth' uSam Nujoma esithi:
Emangulekenengeesisili
Ha-a-ayi ziyatheth' izizwe,
Ziyatheth' iinkokheli,
Vryheid of doodsoorwinning is gewis.

Likewise, in the poem entitled 'Phambili Ngomanyano', Mkiva uses different languages to emphasise the theme of unity:

Ndibavil' abeSuthu besithi:
Kopano ke matla.
Akhuluma namaZulu esithi:
So nqoba simunye.
Athetha namaBhulu esithi:
Een drag maak maag.
Batheth' abeLungu besithi:

Unity is strength.
Athethile namaTaliyane esithi:
Ex unitate vires
Atheth' amaXhosa esithi:
Umanyano ngamandla.

Mkiva employs other languages in his poetry to reach a wider audience. He overlooks borders because he believes that they are artificial and must be undermined (Telephone Conversation 2013).

Mkiva at Work

Spoornet Railway Poetry

In 1996, Mkiva "joined Spoornet as a communications specialist" (Chikanga 2000, p. 13). One of his tasks was to collect poems by commuters who travelled daily by train in South Africa. He compiled these poems into an anthology entitled *Railway Poetry*. He shares, "Railway poetry has been written from the beginning of time by people from all walks of life" (*Ibid.*). He adds, "Railway Poetry is, in a way, a collection of history of railway travel in South Africa, capturing the mood and sentiments of both black and white communities whose life was intertwined with this mode of commuting" (*Ibid.*). People writing these poems write "from the premise of pain that they have undergone having worked in the railways, some people were writing out of happiness at seeing this amazing environment" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 145). Mkiva engaged in this project for a specific purpose. He observed "that we (the country) encourage the nation to read but are not encouraging the nation to write" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, p. 145). He adds: "for me, that's an imbalance. I'm saying, let's encourage the kids to write, and let's encourage them to read. Our history must be rewritten, yet how do you begin to prepare the rewriters of history when you don't encourage this kind of culture of writing?" (Brown and Kiguli 2006, pp. 145-146). Mkiva's message is that the nation must encourage people to tell their own stories and experiences in writing to preserve their history.

Mkiva's Humanitarian Foundation

In 1999, forty years after the death of his grandfather, Richard Mkhenke Mkiva, Zolani and his father "founded Mkiva Humanitarian Foundation in honour of [his] grandfather" (Telephone Conversation 2013). Mkiva describes his grandfather as someone who "was strong on

African-centred education and education at large” (*Ibid.*). This is also evident in the aesthetic works of Mkiva as one of his burdens is to educate the youth on the importance of culture and education. He encourages the youth in one of his poems entitled ‘Mbambe Lubobo’ (Mkiva 2001) with these words:

*Uthethil’ umntwana kandlu zimanqugwala;
Esith’ imfundo ngumth’ odubul’ umthi
wasentwasa-hlobo;
Udubul’ utyatyambe njengenyibiba...
Itsho ke yon’ inkunzi kaMakhonya
Isithi ‘fundani bafundi de nizijonge zigqobhok’
iincwadi.*

The son from the hut has spoken;
Saying: Education is the tree that buds the tree
of spring;
That buds and shoots like the lily...
Thus saith the leader of Makhonya
Saying: Learners, read your books until they
grow holes.

The imagery of spring emphasises that education is the first step in the journey to success. This is the motivation needed in the country, especially among the Black youth, who tend to drop out of school. According to Mkiva, “the Foundation focuses on education, promotion and preservation of culture, things my grandfather believed in. It also encourages humanitarian and philanthropic work” (Telephone Conversation 2013). He works as a field worker where he “helps the rural people on a number of issues relating to education, development of arts and culture, welfare and education” (poetofafrica.com). As an educated poet, he ploughs back what he learned in his own journey.

Xhosa Royal Council

Mkiva serves as an “admin head of the kingdom of amaXhosa” whose role includes “strategic planning as well as encouraging visibility of the kingdom to the people” (Telephone Conversation 2013). Likewise, he also reigned as the “Chief Executive Officer of the Xhosa Royal Council which looks after the interests of His Majesty, King Xolilizwe Sigcawu and the entire Xhosa royal family” (poetofafrica.com). These positions prepared Mkiva to serve at a National level.

Other Responsibilities

Mkiva has recently been “appointed as the Head of Presidency of Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa” (poetofafrica.com). He has been

a Chairman of the National Delphic Council of South Africa since 2003 and in 1996 he was asked by Making Music Productions to be Chairman of African Reconnection, a project which sought to “reconnect South African artists with the rest of Africa’s Divas” (*Ibid.*). According to *The Citizen* (2018), Mkiva is the Acting Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Council of South Africa. He assumed his duties on the 25th of September 2018. Mkiva was quoted by the newspaper saying, “The arts play a critical role in advancing social cohesion, and it is incumbent on the National Arts Council to develop and promote our artists.” He is now serving as a Member of National Parliament.

Conclusion

In tracing the life of Zolani Mkiva as a poet, it becomes evident that he was born an *imbongi*. He inherited this trait from a rich line of renowned poets and orators in his family and he polished this skill by observing his forebears closely, especially his great-grandfather, Pauzen Jacula Mkiva. This form of education was later supplemented by formal education that helped him to reach a wider audience. Mkiva graduated from the University of the Western Cape with an Honour’s degree in Developmental studies. He has grown to be a renowned poet in his own right, with his own style that has been influenced by his upbringing as well as ideologies like Black Consciousness and the African Renaissance. His involvement in the community and workplace further explains his ideals in life and helps with understanding his work. As I have shown here, his biographical details can be traced in his poetry, revealing the significance of these details in the works of Mkiva. Although biographical details of an artist are not the only framework for analysis, they offer insights in understanding artist’s work and are thus worth considering in relation to the work itself.

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