



## Izibongo – the political art of praising: poetical socio-regulative discourse in Zulu society

Kai Kresse

To cite this article: Kai Kresse (1998) Izibongo – the political art of praising: poetical socio-regulative discourse in Zulu society, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11:2, 171-196, DOI: [10.1080/13696819808717833](https://doi.org/10.1080/13696819808717833)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13696819808717833>



Published online: 21 Mar 2007.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 113



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 6 [View citing articles](#)

## *Izibongo – the political art of praising: poetical socio-regulative discourse in Zulu society*

KAI KRESSE

(School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)

**ABSTRACT** *This paper presents Zulu praise-poetry, izibongo, as a genre of fundamental political and socio-regulative relevance, an interpretation which within Zulu society seems to have been continually valid until today. The central feature of izibongo in this perspective concerns the ambiguous status of language in praising: in one and the same poem, it can also be used for the sake of public criticism. This is not only due to the logical possibilities of wordplay (i.e. using verbal artistry to ironize etc.) but is also enforced by the principle of 'poetic licence' which applies to most south-east African societies, granting freedom of expression to public statements made in the form of praise poetry (cf. Vail & White 1991). This principle, in combination with the poet's obligation (a) to paint a full and true picture of the praised and the social life involved, and (b) to contribute to a socially accepted, just progression of social life, leads to izibongo being regarded as documenting and forming a self-descriptive and normative social discourse of Zulu society.*

*This discourse is necessarily linked to the basic political structure of Zulu society, and in order to treat this aspect more deeply, Gluckman's work on 'ritual licence' in relation to 'poetic licence' and izibongo is discussed. Common features point at an interdependence of power between the ruler and the people, between which the poet (and praise-poetry on the whole) mediates, reconciling their interests for the common good of society. This is directly related to the standards of 'reasonable rulership' which are socially defined and publicly depicted and reformulated in izibongo. This notion is presented as the conceptual normative centre of a historically flexible tradition of reasonable socio-regulative discourse, in which potentially every member of society participates.*

'artists (...) theirs is the technical mastery which mediates the relation between the rulers and the ruled.'

ALFRED GELL (1992: 52)

### 1. Introduction

Recently, it has been noted that 'it is impossible to ignore the field of oral art when one studies the power relationships of a society based upon oral tradition' (Derive 1995: 129). Looking at Zulu society, 'where poetry is almost as common as ordinary speech' (D.P. Kunene 1996: 212), this is definitely true. Praise poetry is 'a highly political art form' (Gunner 1989: 49) in a highly poetical society. Looking back, however, it is striking to see that this has not always been adequately acknowledged by anthropology.

In the southern African and specifically the Zulu context, earlier ethnographies only hinted at the political significance of *izibongo* (Krige 1936, Bryant 1949) or even left it aside (Gluckman 1940 etc.). Later, much material was published on praise-poetry of the Tswana, Zulu, Sotho, and Shona (Shapera 1965, Cope 1968, D.P. Kunene 1971, Hodza & Fortune 1979), initiating the necessary interdisciplinary interaction between anthropology and literature. With increased knowledge about the complexity of aesthetics in oral art, research on African literature has surpassed the initial stage of merely collecting political aspects as part of the 'background' information (cf. Finnegan 1970), and a special focus has been set on social power relations inherent in oral art forms all over Africa (Barber & de Moraes Farias 1989; Furniss & Gunner 1995) and southern Africa specifically (Vail & White 1991).

This paper follows the observation that 'the art of ruling and the art of oratory intertwine' (Furniss & Gunner 1995: 17) in Zulu society. There, as I want to stress, the art of praising *is* the art of criticizing, particularly in regard to the ruler, and this has important political implications. The 'local-level politics of language' (Parkin 1984: 347), as far as they are concerned with local-level politics *in* language, are mirrored in *izibongo*, Zulu praise-poetry. *Izibongo* are central to the local language of politics; not only do they belong to an esteemed genre of verbal art, they are also recognized as an important medium of political discourse, reflecting and re-influencing the current political atmosphere within Zulu communities. Criticizing, as well as praising, is always linked to specific currently valid criteria which are rooted in social knowledge, marking what is laudable and what should be condemned.

In what is possibly an investigation of the Zulu-specific 'rationality of governmentality' (Moore 1996: 12), I intend to point to a conceptual basis underlying the dynamics of political discourse and power-mediation in *izibongo*: reasonable rulership. This reference-point for normative orientation seems to be constant in varying historical contexts. *Izibongo* constitute a flexible tradition of interlinking art and politics in social life, based on a tradition of reason which is in itself flexible. By showing this from within the aesthetics of *izibongo*, this work may help to re-instate the concept of tradition in its original sense of 'movement, a process of transmitting which points back to an original and essential process of social creation of values,' as called for by Hountondji, who makes a point of this understanding being valid for the African context as well as anywhere else (1983b: 139). In Africa, this is especially important since discursive (predominantly reasonable and explicitly rational) traditions have

largely not been a focus of enquiry – with some admirable exceptions. Consequently, from an analysis and discussion of *izibongo* as a flexible tradition of formalized, poetical speech linked to reasonable principles, it follows that ‘traditional authority’ itself should not, as has been argued, be understood *per se* as static and fixed (cf. Bloch 1975, 1989).

Gluckman, in his anthropological work on a political theory of the Zulu, appears to have overlooked the importance of *izibongo*. Scholars of African literature or history, however, leave little doubt in their writings as to their important role in political discourse. This role can be highlighted and considered in relation to Gluckman’s works and theses, as well as with anthropological interest in political life and local theory. In the first place, the underlying structure of ‘rituals of rebellion’ (Gluckman 1963) has, necessarily, common traits with that of *izibongo*. Consequently, the contextual discussion of the structure of ritual action in relation to the performance of *izibongo* is essential, as far as work on the political significance of both is concerned. Since it is crucial to develop the argument from within the context of social life and the social form treated, a large part of this paper is concerned with a reconstruction of *izibongo* as poetry and in its various social interactions.<sup>1</sup>

I have been careful to draw specifically from statements made from within society; from there, the complex web of *izibongo* of course appears more alive, and can, in a self-conscious way, be presented in its various shades, as artistic, political, religious, historical and also ‘philosophical’ (Dhlomo 1977, M. Kunene 1976). It is only when discussion starts out from within the internal dynamics of knowledge that the sensitive issue of power in the representation of social knowledge in other cultures can be analysed (cf. Fardon 1983: 16). Therefore, a central task of this paper is to evolve a model of the political discourse in a society from within *art*, namely the specific form of art that *izibongo* constitute.

## 2. *Izibongo – aesthetics and social context*

### 2.1 *Concept and genre*

*Izibongo* constitute the ‘genre’ of praise-poetry of the Zulu and several related south-east African peoples;<sup>2</sup> this genre responded to various dynamic historical processes and intercultural interactions, but in so doing maintained its distinct form (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 7). The term *izibongo* is derived from the verb *-bonga* which means mainly ‘to praise,’ and also ‘to thank,’ ‘to worship’ (Grant 1937: 85; Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 12), as well as ‘to give clan name or kinship

<sup>1</sup> In this, I have relied on the published and accessible texts in English (listed below). I am well aware that a full command of Zulu and fieldwork in Zulu society could only have added to my treatment of this topic. Even without these advantages, my attempt is, I think, nevertheless, sufficiently informed, focused and specific to contribute to theoretical reflection on *izibongo*, especially since new directions for their discussion, including from a philosophical perspective, are being established.

<sup>2</sup> Since the praise-poetry form is common to all, descriptions from one society may in certain respects be applied to another. In regard to Southern African praise-poetry, this is common practice (e.g. Vail & White 1991).

term' (Vilakazi 1938: 106). The clan name is called an *isibongo*, and is mostly identical with the name of the founder of a clan. As such it represents social identity and can be used for 'tracing kinship relationship and genealogy.'<sup>3</sup> *Izibongo*, meaning 'praise names' or 'praise poem' (a collection of praise names), is a *pluralis tantum* built from *isibongo*. Vilakazi (*ibid.*) emphasizes that 'the secret meaning' of Zulu poetry lies in these two terms – whereby the connotation of social identity is, for Zulu speakers, always invoked. The performance of *izibongo* is embedded in social life, and never takes place in isolation; it expresses publicly, and thereby reaffirms, social identity. The outstanding status of *izibongo* in Zulu literature and social life is most categorically stated by H.I.E. Dhlomo, who called them 'the essence of our being, the meaning of our name,' and claimed that 'they can only live through us, and we through them' (1977: 59).

The scope of the various types of *izibongo* is wide, but united in 'naming, identifying, and therefore giving significance to the named person or object,' in a specific, aesthetically acknowledged way (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 2). High social significance is best expressed in extraordinary, formalized language rather than everyday speech. Thus *izibongo* as a poetical genre evolved as a specific *art of praising*. Anything can be praised, and anyone can be the praiser, *imbongi* – although there is a category of specialists to which this term specifically applies. Everybody is given praise-names as markers of identity (already as a child), and anyone may compose such names and recite them.<sup>4</sup> *Izibongo* are composed even for animals, and in particular the highly valued cattle, as well as, recently, for political organizations or football teams (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 8). The greater the social significance involved, however, the greater the skill of praising needed for an adequate representation. Thus, the *izibongo of rulers* have a special status and constitute aesthetically the most highly appreciated sub-genre. The ruler, the king, or the political leader, who is traditionally conceived as the centre and 'symbol of the unity' of the community (Krige 1936: 224; cf. Jordan 1959: 74), must be portrayed as impressively as possible. This is where the *imbongi*, the bard, as a specially gifted and trained artist, becomes relevant.

In terms of verbal art, it is thus by the skill and complexity of the language used to mark the social significance of historical invocations involved – through references to earlier kings, royal ancestors, whose praises are often quoted or referred to in praises of the current ruler – that a differentiation between *izibongo* of the common people and those of kings, rulers and leaders reflects their difference in social life. In terms of politics, it is the latter who have traditionally been central to the political discourse and the dialectics of power within society (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 28-29). In both cases, emphasis on the artistic expression of identity is predominant, and this is what 'binds together the

<sup>3</sup> For a humorous and illuminating example of this, see A. Vilakazi (1962: ix).

<sup>4</sup> *Isithopho*, personal praise names for children, and *isithakazelo*, sets of clan praises constitute categories which are very near to *izibongo* (Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 12).

praises of kings and those of ordinary people' as the overall genre of *izibongo* (*ibid.*: 32), in which verbal art and social discourse are inextricably interlinked.

## 2.2 The performative art of praise-poetry

*Izibongo*, and specifically the *izibongo of rulers*, are regarded within Zulu society as 'the highest literary expression' (M. Kunene 1976: 28).<sup>5</sup> This literary aspect must be acknowledged, although it cannot be dealt with here in its own right. Reflection on the interrelationship between verbal art and its social functions can flourish only *after* the art-form has been presented in terms of the internal standards of the society concerned (D.P. Kunene 1971: xiii). This rule, that the understanding of social functions must evolve from an *analysis* of the observable forms, will in principle be followed here, but a strictly consecutive line of exploration is impossible: the verbal art of *izibongo*, like most material art in Africa (cf. Appiah 1997), is itself constituted by interrelations with other fields of social communication. The 'political' is itself part of the aesthetics of *izibongo*. Now, before separating off and discussing its political relevance, an effort must be made to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of this kind of poetry.

As *praise-poetry*, this is one of the four major genres of *izosha*, Zulu oral poetry (Vilakazi 1938). The basic structure of *izibongo* is a succession of praise names. While at its simplest it is created by lining up praise-name after praise-name, higher forms include stanzas which may again be substructured and show a varying interplay of units consisting of statement, extension, development and conclusion (Cope 1968: 50-63). The most decisive stylistic characteristics of *izibongo* are various repetitive structures, such as alliterations and diverse forms of parallelisms. Assonances (arising from the noun-classes common to Bantu languages) dominate, and a mark of literary quality is diverse forms of 'linking,' i.e. extensive phrases or appositions, linked to a praise name, mostly at the end of a group of praises, a stanza, or the whole poem.<sup>6</sup> The acoustic impact on the audience of the language used is just as important for an appreciation of *izibongo* as the structural play with layers of meaning. *Izibongo* art, like oral poetry as a whole, is by definition performative (Finnegan 1970: 2), thus the whole range of empirical elements at play in a specific recitation is part of the form itself, the 'body-language' of the *imbongi* which underlines the narrated meaning in tone, mime, gesture, as well as in the various possible responses of the audience.<sup>7</sup> In reciting, the artist shouts out the praises at the top of his voice as fast as he can; metaphorically speaking, he tries to cast a spell on the audience with a sort of *magical shower of words*. The pauses he needs to take breath (after a praise-name, but varying according to *imbongi*) create the basic units of verses and stanzas. Meaningful suspense may be created by slowing down and lowering the voice (Cope 1968: 28-30).

<sup>5</sup> See also Cope (1968: 24); Rycroft (1974: 56). This seems undisputed.

<sup>6</sup> Cope (1968: 38-50), following M. Kunene; for a more detailed survey of the linguistic foundations of the poetical figures see Doke (1948).

<sup>7</sup> For these interactions see especially Gunner (1984) and Gunner & Gwala (1991).

The much appreciated harmony in sound-features is easily achieved since it involves the relatively simple act of 'personalizing' things or actions by changing the prefix of the word to the noun-class of the subject of the sentence. 'Anything can be taken into a praise name by the simple process of nominalising' (Gunner & Gwala 1991: 31; cf. Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 30). These lyrical switches of class are legitimate within the realm of poetic speech. The 'ear-rhymes' so created are acoustic counterparts to the repetitions on the level of the contents. Both interlink and together create meaning in performance, emphasizing significance by their continual repetition. The most famous example of such a figure is part of the *izibongo* of Shaka, where his insatiable devouring of 'others,' rulers, competitors, enemies and subjects, is depicted in the multiple repetition of the phrase 'while he devoured some others he devoured some more' (Cope 1968: 96-97) which could be shortened or infinitely extended at the imbongi's will. This kind of presentation of the praised already contains an ambiguity, central to the further analysis of the social mediative functions of *izibongo* of rulers: Shaka's strength, power and wilful killing can in this depiction be said to be lauded as well as indirectly criticized.

The following is a passage of Shaka's praise poem (as presented by Cope) in which the stylistic characteristics pointed out so far (nominalization, assonances, repetitions) emerge clearly, while the overlapping functions of praising and historical documentation can also be observed:

UDlungwan' odl' imihlambi yabahwebi,  
Wadl' ezikuMandeku kwaMlambo,  
Udl' abadlungwana bakwokaMbengi,  
Owahlab' esengwayo zand' ukwaluka,  
Othandayo ahl' amzel'ekhaya.

Inyon' edl' ezinye,  
Yath' isadl' ezinye yadl' ezinye;  
Ith' isadl' ezinye yadl' ezinye,  
Yath' isadl' ezinye yadl' ezinye;  
Ith isadl' ezinye yadl' ezinye,  
Yath' isadl' ezinye yadl' ezinye.

Ongangezwe lakhe omkhulu kakhulu,  
Ongangezintaba,  
OngangoSondude,  
Ongangesihlahl' esikhalweni kuMaqhwakazi,  
Esasihlal' amaNdwandwe namaNxumalo.

Ferocious one who devoured the cattle of the traders,  
And ate up those that were with Mandeku at Mlambo,  
He destroyed the wild little people belonging to the Mbengi,  
He who slaughtered a cow before the cattle went out to graze,  
Anyone who liked could come to him at home.

Bird that eats others,  
*As it was still eating others it destroyed some more;*  
*Still eating some it destroyed others,*  
*As it was still eating others it destroyed some more;*  
*Still eating some it destroyed others,*  
*As it was still eating others it destroyed some more.*

He who is as big as his country, enormous one,

He who is as big as mountains,  
 He who is as big as Sondude mountain,  
 He who is as big as the tree on the ridge of Maqhwakazi,  
 On which lived the Ndandwes and the Nxumalos.

(Cope 1968: 106-107; my italics)

The reason given for why *izibongo* is to be regarded as the highest form of Zulu poetry is that they display the widest range of stylistic devices and encompass various layers of meaning. While they give rise to the Zulu language's most complex form of aesthetic experience, they also express more significance in regard to power relations and social structure than the other poetical genres. This, as already suggested above, may also be due to the fact that they are not conceivable without their social context of naming and identifying, thereby fulfilling a unifying function on various social levels, religious, historical and political (Gunner 1984). These are most apparent in the *izibongo of rulers* whose dynamic regulative and critical functions will be analysed below.<sup>8</sup>

Historically, stanzas, like many of the stylistic traits of this poetry, seem to have been developed in the 'Shakan' period of Zulu literature, in about 1800-1850 (Cope 1968, following M. Kunene: 50ff) – which already displays a crucial influence of the political on poetical form. The expansive phase of military conquest under 'the Zulu Napoleon, Shaka' (*ibid.*: 22), during which the subjected peoples were integrated into the emerging 'Zulu nation,' implied the need for the construction of a larger identity. This shift from 'tribe' to 'nation' was reflected in the poetical imagery of the *izibongo*: bolder metaphors and symbols than before were used in order to create a wider and more powerful image of the growing community – 'elephant' and 'lion' instead of birds and antelopes as dominant symbols for the rulers. After the peak of military expansion a more lyrical tone re-emerged (*ibid.*: 31).

The central impact of the key figure of Zulu history, Shaka, on the aesthetics of poetry as well as on other aspects of social life points to the inherent interdependence between power and art in Zulu politics. Power can only sustain itself in the long run with major support from within society, and thus attempts to make use of existing cultural means such as art to root and legitimize itself. The expression of art reflects, transmits and so yields to prevailing power relations – while it can also subvert, influence and strive to control these relations. The use of art by power for an internal social ideology entails a transformation of the appropriated form which, in terms of cultural tradition, is simultaneously maintained and changed – that is, the structure is used for the transmission of a new meaning. The continual use of *izibongo*, while connecting it to the new dimensions of social life, can be regarded as an example of the flexible transformation of a tradition in pre-colonial Africa, according to reasonable and pragmatic criteria.

<sup>8</sup> In this paper, a consideration of the *people's izibongo* (*izibongo zabantu*) has to be left aside. However, they share with the *izibongo of rulers* the general aspects of mediation between history, religion and politics within their performance. See Gunner (1984), Gunner & Gwala (1991).



A similar transformation in the use of the *izibongo* form can be observed in the most recent decades where the focus of reference has to a large extent undergone a shift from the ethnically bound to the national, South African realm. Nowadays, the well-known military metaphors of Zulu kings are applied to new political or even religious leaders (Gunner & Gwala 1991; Gunner 1983), as for example in the *izibongo* of Albert Luthuli which start off with some well known praise-names of Shaka himself:

U-u-uDlungwane kaNdaba  
odlung' emanxulumeni  
kwaze kwasa amanxulumana ebikelana  
Fe-e-erocious One, royal descendant of Ndaba  
who raged among the crowded kraals  
until dawn the news spread through the large villages  
(in Gunner & Gwala 1991: 80-81)

Also, the dynamic interplay still apparent between the *izibongo* art-form and the specific military form of social life initiated by Shaka's political interests and actions is remarkable. Poetic skill and the ability to fight are distinct traits of the male-centred, patrilineal Zulu society.<sup>9</sup> Both mark important aspects of education and realms in which social recognition or even admiration can be earned. The praises of kings originated in the wars they successfully led, and famous *izimbongi* are known to have been outstanding warriors (Gunner 1976: 75; 83). Even a distinct form of syncretic performance emerged with elements of fighting, poetry and dance: the *ukugiya* (Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 21-24). In a very peculiar way, then, Zulu social identity has a history of being emphatically poetic as well as military.

### 2.3 Social functions (i): mapping experience, speaking sense

If up to now the aspect of *izibongo* as a form of art has been stressed, this was to emphasize the creative aspect of the poetical construction of reality which is highly appreciated inside the society itself (Gunner 1984: 71f). But, as can already be seen, this appreciation does not operate in the sense of a purely aesthetic gaze, consuming this art form as *l'art pour l'art*, it arises from the fact that a relevant 'map of experience' (Vail & White 1991: 40ff) of society has been created, publicly performed, and has thereby reaffirmed communal identity.

The *art of praising* the king or the political ruler, giving a socially valid portrait of him, due to the historically central position of the ruler (Krige 1936: 218), also means giving an illustration of the current state of society. This is a delicate issue, and one can see why the *imbongi* has to be 'knowledgeable' in regard to all the different aspects of society, their current state and interaction, and their present significance for the relationship between ruler and ruled (Vail & White 1991: 77). Ideally, the *imbongi* must be especially sensitive in realizing, as well as considerate in reformulating and making 'what is going on' publicly known to ruler and subjects, while still giving a valid account of the ruler's

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Jordan (1959: 101). For the role of women as composers and performers of *izibongo*, see Gunner (1979; 1995).

performance and as such, an adequate 'map' of social experience. In order to do this, he should not only 'know everything that the king and all his ancestors ever did or ever had done' (Bryant 1949: 486, cf. Gunner 1976: 73), but also know all about 'public opinion' (Mafeje 1967: 222).

The imbongi has a special social responsibility, since his art has a central normative function in mediating power in two opposite ways. On the one hand, from the ruler to the people, all the feats and qualities of the ruler – and thus, inherently, of the whole social community which he represents – are to be celebrated, with the effect of reinforcing a feeling of social pride, strength and solidarity. On the other hand, a commentary on his rulership is mediated back from the people to the ruler, who in his status is traditionally dependent upon public opinion (Krige 1936: 219). The imbongi is at the same time a sort of special advisor or counsellor to the king, whom he traditionally had to stay and live near (*ibid.*: 236), as well as the documentor of the commoners' impression of the current state of affairs, giving voice to the people's feelings. He is 'a mediator between two social categories, the ruler and the ruled' (Mafeje 1967: 221). Ruling has to adhere to the socially defined public opinion; if this is ignored or violated, social order becomes unstable. Consequently, the potential influence of the *izibongo* – and the imbongi who composes and performs them – on the political dynamics of society can hardly be overestimated; in *izibongo* they are reflected and re-initiated. While social identity is ceremoniously (re-)created in performance, the balance of social power is at stake. The regulative function of *izibongo* is to reconcile the personal leadership of the ruler with the people's will, and thereby 'the main function of the ... bard is to interpret public opinion and to organize it' (Mafeje 1967: 195).

### 2.3.1 Constituting the map: religion and history

The prevalent religious function of *izibongo* lies in establishing contact with the ancestral spirits of the dead who are regularly on called for assistance in the everyday life of their descendants. The recital of the *izibongo* of a deceased, which are the individual praises that a person has earned or been given during lifetime, is a necessary condition – next to the sacrifice of an animal – for propitiating the ancestor (Cope 1968: 19). *Izibongo* of the ancestors seemingly<sup>10</sup> have to be recited on the various occasions of sacrifice (Krige 1936: 292; Rycroft & Ngcobo 1988: 26), and their recitation at festivals evokes their presence and assures the community of their support (M. Kunene 1976: 30). In this sense, one could speak of an additional mediating function of *izibongo*: between the living and the dead whose influence on the well-being of current social life in Zulu belief remains crucial. Here, the imbongi can be related to another central figure of social mediation, the *isangoma*, or diviner (Cope 1968: 21). After death, the *izibongo* of a person become 'in a way, sacred' and should only be recited on

<sup>10</sup> However, some ethnographers with strong missionary background working on Zulu religion and thought systems (Berglund 1976; Sundkler 1961) do not mention *izibongo* as a means of contacting ancestors nor do they deal with them specifically at all.

special ceremonial occasions or if in need of contact (Gunner 1984: 58). Apart from these situations, reciting *izibongo* of the dead is regarded as an offence, whereas *izibongo* of living persons seem subject to no such restrictions.

In regard to the historical context, *izibongo* fulfil an essential function in conserving and transmitting social consciousness. While they deal 'with the happenings in and around the tribe during the reign of a given chief,' they are documenting history: 'rivalries for chieftainship within the tribe: the ordinary social life: alliances and conflicts with neighbouring tribes: military and political triumphs and reverses etc.' – this is why the imbongi is 'a chronicler' as well as a poet (Jordan 1959: 74). Nyembezi has shown how many allusions to contemporary social history in terms of such rivalries, conflicts and triumphs are woven into the *izibongo* of the Zulu kings, often so subtle and witty that they are impossible to understand without thorough knowledge of the context. For someone lacking that social knowledge, the tall grass in Shaka's *izibongo*, for example, could never be understood as the growing danger of a conspiracy (Nyembezi 1948: 121). If such metaphoric historical dramatizations of social life within *izibongo* 'are to continue living' and 'be saved for posterity,' they must serve a socially bound consciousness in a historical as well as literary sense (*ibid.*: 173).<sup>11</sup>

Taking the phrase 'maps of experience' as leitmotif, the historical is not to be seen as just one sub-function of the *izibongo* among others, but as intrinsically central to the aesthetics of the genre – like the poetical form, which cannot be isolated from its social meanings. As poetically reconstructed life, *izibongo* encompass 'history as drama, evaluation and judgement: history with the metaphysics included' (Vail & White 1991: 73). In this conception, the point of history being dramatically re-enacted in each performance of *izibongo* is stressed. The physical presence of imbongi and audience is always part of *izibongo*'s 'taking place,' and it could be argued that through a kind of *magical power of poetical words*<sup>12</sup> in the act of 'speaking-out the past' a socially meaningful metaphorical presence of history is created, just as is done for the ancestors whose names are recited in order to make them present. In both cases, past life is *re-presented* as 'being there.' This interpretation, of course, strengthens the view of an interdependency of poetics, politics and history within *izibongo*, and leads back to the discussion of social context and relevance.

#### 2.4 Social functions (ii): mediating power, poetically speaking

In regard to the complex tasks involved in interpreting and organizing public opinion, *izibongo* have to include criticism of the ruler when appropriate. Only by 'praising what is worthy and decrying what is unworthy' can a full picture of social life be given, only then will the imbongi be acknowledged as someone

<sup>11</sup> This is how *izibongo* have been used in schools. Nyembezi himself published a selection of *izibongo* for this purpose (1958).

<sup>12</sup> 'Magical' here marks the shift of meaning that poetical language is able to effect, through the sensitive choice of apposite terms employed to reconstruct life, which, when successful, creates the impression of presence.

who 'speaks sense' in terms of public perception (Mafeje 1967: 193; 221f). Thus the aesthetics and rhetorical strategy of the art of praising in *izibongo* encompass also the art of criticizing. This of course makes the poetical genre of *izibongo* inseparable from the political domain, while it also links an important part of public political discourse to poetical language.

Criticizing, the negative counterpart of praising has, like praising, if less obviously, been a constantly inherent element of *izibongo*. There are two levels on which criticism can be uttered: indirectly, as 'absence of praise,' and directly, as 'presence of criticism' in the performance (Cope 1968: 31); in between, gradual sub-differentiations are possible. The expressing of public criticism of the ruler is a consequence of understanding poetry as reconstructed social experience, and it is remarkable that such criticism, linked to the form of *izibongo*, seems to be a basic right in (the otherwise strictly authoritarian) Zulu society. In an early account, Bryant, while failing to grasp the aesthetic value of *izibongo*, already noted 'the extravagant freedom of speech' granted to the reciters who during the performance on festival occasions publicly raised problematic issues which 'might otherwise have been difficult to state' (Bryant 1949: 486; cf. Gunner 1976: 73).

Extremely remarkable in this sense is a passage of outright criticism of even the quasi-almighty Shaka for having committed a massacre against the Langeni clan as a revenge for bad treatment there during his childhood days:

Nkosi umubi ngoba kawukhethi,  
Ngoba nabakwonyokolume uyababulala,  
Ngoba wadl' uBhebhe umntakaNcumela ngakwonyokolume.

King, you are wrong because you do not discriminate,  
Because even those of your maternal uncle's family you kill,  
Because you killed Bhebhe son of Ncumela of your maternal uncle's family.<sup>13</sup>

(Cope 1968: 110-111)

If the principle which founds and secures the possibility of such direct criticism can be called a kind of institutionalized freedom of speech, it is linked to the form of *izibongo*, and granted to those making use of it. Such 'poetic licence' is not the privilege of a specific social group, such as is constituted by the specialist *izimbongi*, but is granted to every subject who utters criticism in the prescribed form: 'it is not the *poet* who is licensed by the literary conventions of society; it is the *poem*' (Vail & White 1991: 56).

While the right to criticize might not actually be utilized by every subject (especially those lacking confidence in their power of words) and it might, just as in any other society, be violated by certain rulers, the important thing is to underline the internal, traditionally grown construction and validity of such a

<sup>13</sup> Of course, for a detailed account of this particular criticism, it would be important to know a lot more about the actual historical evolution and context of these lines, especially whether and how they were presented in front of Shaka during his lifetime, and how he, the God-like absolutist ruler actually reacted to them – i.e. to see whether the principle of poetic licence could actually have been seen to be valid. My aim here can be no more than pointing to the historically transmitted existence of such criticism, which is remarkable in itself.

basic right in south-east African societies. The principle of 'poetic licence' and its intrinsic socio-regulative value might be further illuminated when linked to Gluckman's reflections on the 'licence in ritual' and the principle of 'rebellion,' which were developed in the same ethnographic context and with aim of explaining the political structure.

### 3. Freedom of performance? Questions of 'licence'

'Performance,' understood as the 'enactment' of a meaningful and directed social function (Bauman & Briggs 1990: 73) offers a common basis for discussing both types of licence; a *performative approach* to comparison seems fertile (cf. Tambiah 1985). This is confirmed in that the main principle of *poetic licence*, that 'it is not the performer that is licensed but the performance' (White 1989: 36; Vail & White 1991: 57), can also be applied to the conception of licence in ritual. It is within a distinct form of expression that public social action 'against authority' is sanctioned, and an extraordinary liberty of expression granted to the person using it. Thus, each performer is licensed by and in the act of performing, it is never the social status of the performer as such which sanctions the critical content of action, it is the medium.<sup>14</sup>

#### 3.1. 'Poetic licence' and what it involves

This principle is apparent in all the various forms of Southern African praise poetry, in such a way that the performance of praise-poetry implies socio-regulative commitment as one major aspect (Vail & White 1991). Social responsibility is linked to the rules of the genre, even if entertainment might be the main focus of some recitals. What I call socio-regulative commitment refers to the basic normative principle involved in the aesthetic formation: 'a language with the authority to transcend the particular in the interests of justice or truth' is

---

<sup>14</sup> Since in every case in which poetical criticism is performed, *poetical licence* is to be granted, I do not see, as White does (1989: 36) the emphasis that has been put on the role of the imbongi by some scholars (Jordan, Mafeje, Kashula et al.) as being in real contradiction to this principle. To stress that the licence originates in the form is indeed important, but one has to concede that people making especially extensive use of this form naturally and rightfully become associated with the licence involved. Thus, while it seems perfectly sound to emphasize that *poetic licence* grants the right of public criticism to everyone, and thus each member of society is *in potential* a 'conscience of the nation' (Mafeje 1967), it seems nevertheless right to treat those who *do* use the form and in this way become involved in political action as *in reality* more relevant *personifications* of such a conscience than those who do not. This seems also to reflect the understandable appreciation of the *izimbongi* in society, on which comments highlighting the bards are based. – Gluckman's early account of 'The Kingdom of the Zulu,' in which he states that 'the people could not themselves criticize the king' (1940: 42), only the councillors had this right (*ibid.*: 33), would contradict the conception of 'poetic licence' as presented – it would, however, be compatible with the emphasis on the social category of bards as political mediators within society. As a reconciliation, one could argue that in the act of performing *izibongo* and for the duration of the performance any person with the right to criticism attains the status of a councillor.

sought 'through poetic expression' (White 1989: 38). Truth and justice as socially defined and embedded principles, necessary for the regulation of social life, are thus also taken to be ultimate criteria for artistic creation, which consequently remains linked to a common conception of reality as well as to a common good.

It seems that public licence is granted for the attempt to poetically construct a language with which to depict the current situation of society in such a way that a 'true' account of it as a whole is given, a social *map of experience*, and that a sense is achieved of whether this situation corresponds with the current socially inherent definition of how society ought to be – whether social life is also 'just.' Dealing with these two aspects, the *izibongo* of rulers present a 'reflection' of society in the twofold sense of the word: in reflecting social life, they reflect upon it. The poetical reconstruction of social reality includes a metaphorical account of the basis for the reference-point of this reconstruction, a social critique. In this way, a culturally distinct *social use of metaphors* (cf. Sapir & Crocker 1977) acts as a kind of reflective echo of society. *Izibongo* incorporate a meta-discourse – that of a self-reflexive society on itself – into the poetical depiction of the ruler. Standards of what social knowledge within society encompasses (truth) and how social action should proceed (justice) are implied in this kind of poetry as they are in society as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Mapping social experience thus leads to a kind of 'topography of society' in praise poetry – to adapt Appadurai's phrase of 'topographies of the self' and apply it to a level of communal representation (cf. Appadurai 1990).

In *izibongo*, descriptive and normative local knowledge is publicly presented to all within the framework of aesthetic enjoyment, and an appeal for the evaluation of the truth-claims on both levels seems implied. This appeal would be an appeal to all members of society for an internal social discourse on the self-identity of the community, involving the fundamental concepts of truth and justice, which are always socially embedded, constantly to be redefined (what is 'true' or 'good' is flexible in relation to the social and historical context), and linked to relations of power within society, though not totally determined by them. As an encouragement for social discourse to reflect upon these questions in connection with the specific content of what has been performed, such an appeal seems implied in the concept of *poetic licence*. For if taken seriously, it grants everyone the opportunity to speak up and present a personal version of approval or criticism of the affairs in the community. Apart from (theoretically) shielding

---

<sup>15</sup> The content and status of the respective, temporarily valid social conceptions of and discourses on *truth* and *justice* in Zulu (or other southern African) societies throughout history could possibly be explicated in a careful interpretation of various *izibongo*. A philosophical dimension concerned with basic regulative concepts of African societies – currently called for by African philosophers working on this context (Wiredu 1997) and anthropologists concerned with a relational orientation for anthropological knowledge (Moore 1996) – could be added to the historical dimension opened up by Vail & White.

the individual performers from the ruler's revenge,<sup>16</sup> poetic licence includes the principle of a plurality of speakers and thus of various 'visions'<sup>17</sup> of society being proclaimed. With the general licence for poetical reconstruction and commentary of social reality a plurality of political views is admitted in principle. There is, however, by no means a field of discourse in which *everything goes* in terms of a socially acceptable relativism, since a sense of social obligation is central to the aesthetic process, and it seems that only poetical attempts working within this obligation and referring to social standards of truth and justice (not simply reproducing, but rather reformulating them) are accepted as potentially relevant contributions to the social discourse.

Thus, it is never the aspect of freedom of speech alone which is emphasized in the concept of 'poetic licence'; *freedom of speech* and *obligation to truth* are two sides of the same coin, i.e. social commitment in public poetry. Creating the verbal art of *izibongo* implies the performer's responsibility and accountability for his performance. This is part of the various intertwining layers relevant to the aesthetics of the genre. In the end, the success of the performance is reflected in the excited and lively reactions of the audience, and in a 'pensive' impact on the ruler (Vail & White: 56).

### 3.2. 'Ritual licence' and what it presupposes

If the discussion of poetic licence had to be linked to freedom of speech, 'ritual licence' must be discussed in the light of freedom of action. But, as we have seen that the *freedom* to criticize can also be understood as an *obligation* to do so, a similar ambiguity is possible for ritual licence. Understood as permission for the 'institutionalized violation on ritual occasions of important rules of behaviour,' ritual licence is at the same time inherently linked to actions which are 'firmly regulated' (Norbeck 1963: 1267; 1274). Thus, the freedom to take certain exceptional actions here is linked to the obligation of taking part in a more or less strictly prescribed performance of such actions.

Gluckman developed the idea of 'licence in ritual' when observing that certain normally forbidden actions were allowed, and even required to be performed, within certain 'political' rituals.<sup>18</sup> He classified the 'inverted action' taking place as the expression of usually suppressed protest against the ruler, who is symbolically overthrown and subjected in a ritually enacted 'rebellion.' This,

<sup>16</sup> In practice, it could probably prevent a violation of these principles as little as any valid social principle of justice can. Opland (1984), Mafeje (1967), and Kashula (1991, 1993) give examples of Xhosa bards being harassed by the authorities for their criticism.

<sup>17</sup> This concept is used by Mazisi Kunene, and within his poetry and theoretical writing seems to point at just these aspects of a socially bound *quest and claim* for truth. This truth in the poetical statement interlinks various realms of society, and is directly related to the personal standpoint and artistic capacities of the 'philosopher-poet'; it is by definition never the only truth (Kunene 1982, esp. 63-64).

<sup>18</sup> These cyclically recurring 'rituals of rebellion' in South-Eastern Africa emerged, together with centralized kingship, during Shaka's construction of the Zulu nation (ca. 1820-1860).

contends Gluckman, acts as a socio-psychological security-valve against a fundamental breakdown of society, since a catharsis is enacted, in which energies of conflict inherent in society can be expressed and social solidarity thereby reaffirmed. *Rebellion* aims to 'attack the personnel of office and not the offices themselves,' and all protest action following this principle of attacking the ruler for the sake of rulership belongs to this category (1959: 46). In contrast, *revolution* (according to Gluckmann not to be found within these societies) constitutes a destruction of the principles of office, and thus of the existing social structure itself (1959: 28). Rebellion is conceived as a positive action, a kind of self-cleansing of society, since it is in the attack on the person of the ruler that the traditionally valid principle of good rulership is reaffirmed. 'Rebels were not seeking to establish a different kind of political society,' but 'to re-establish the kingship in all its ideals' (Gluckman 1959: 43). Since social structure is focused towards the central office, and the authoritative ruler is regarded as representing society as a whole, in times of crisis a *licence to rebel*, to overthrow and replace a ruler, seems implicitly granted, because social malaise of any kind can always be linked to the 'bad rulership' of the person in power. This signifies a 'frailty in authority' (1959: 28) in centralized societies like the Zulu. The principle of rulership invokes responsibility of the ruler who is accountable for the well-being of society. His rule is thus veritably secured by his *good rulership* which follows reasonable criteria established in social discourse.

Within the political system of Zulu society as Gluckman describes it, rebellion always expresses social conflict and is a legitimate or even necessary means to restore social peace. This can be done either in ritual action or in serious political action. The latter creates a 'real' rebellion and is the legitimate way to dispose of a ruler who has violated the principles of responsible rulership, 'the tradition of good rule' (Gluckman 1940: 42) – what I shall present and discuss later as 'reasonable rulership.' Thus, rebellion displays the ultimate supremacy of the will of the people over the ruler, the dependency of the king on public opinion (cf. Krigé 1936: 219, 223). In ritual, rebellion is only metaphorically enacted, symbolizing the principle of the people's rule. Rituals of rebellion remind the ruler of his possible loss of authority, and they remind the people of their power. But in reminding them, the ritual dramatization may actually be deluding the people that they are 'in charge' while the ruler is in fact as powerful and dominant as ever.

One should bear in mind the two levels of meaning of *licence to rebel*. Only in the case of social crisis is a 'real' licence to action against the ruler granted, since due to his failure the sanctity of rulership is lost and has to be restored. 'Ritual' licence to rebel however includes no factual freedom to raise protest or criticism of the ruler. In fact, quite the opposite is the case: since a prescribed inverse action is required of the subjects, the ritually enacted protest is actually a symbolic statement of consent to the current ruler as well as to the principle of good rulership. In this sense, rituals of rebellion are really acts of submission. The existing power relations are re-affirmed and the prevailing ideology is enforced. Thus, 'ritual licence' can be claimed to be no licence for the



individual's liberation at all, but an illusion of it – in the same way as the ritual of rebellion can be read as a deluding symbol of the people's will. Instead of the freedom to protest it really results in an obligation to consent, i.e. submitting to power and thereby reaffirming it.

This clearly supports the position that ritual action follows the ruling ideology. In truth, licence to prescribed actions entails no freedom worth the name. Therefore the enactment of these formalized actions cannot be seen as part of a process of liberation. Nevertheless, individual participation in ritual action which is reaffirming the social order and power structures can, at least partly, also be understood as the outcome of an individual decision to do so. Then, it could be understood as an active expression of a basic and conscious consent to the principles governing social life.

However, not all types of formalized actions are wholly prescribed; some, such as the performance of *izibongo*, can be shown to have distinct liberating traits. This seems to hint at the essential difference between the performance of art and of ritual, and between art and ritual as such. While in art, the framework of possible 'formalizations' (stylistic, expressive means) is predetermined, it seems significant that the actual meaningful acts of expression, i.e. turning potential into specific meaning, can never be precluded from the outset. Art is essentially 'free' in a way that ritual is not. Free in fact in a way that ritual seems essentially 'unfree,' i.e. defined by a set of predetermined actions (Bloch 1989; Turner 1977: 183). While in the case of *izibongo* the freedom of expression in verbal art is linked to and restrained by social obligation and as such is following an appeal (by responding to and re-creating normative expectations), social obligation in ritual action is characterized by the opposite of freedom: following an order. Thus, a hardly determinable quantity and quality of freedom in art distinguishes a potentially 'moral' sphere from a 'mechanical' one, and a 'regulative' discourse from a 'regulated' one, art from ritual – at least as far as the examples discussed here are concerned.

Although a self-induced perpetuation of the ruling ideology by the subjects, in consenting to their own subjection, can be observed, this seems to involve more ambiguity in regard to the decisive forces of this 'consent' (cf. Althusser 1971). Looking at the rituals discussed, it can be seen that the acts of submission have a double sense: in symbolically rebelling, the people submit to a ruler who symbolically submits to them. Both acts of submission, which are aimed at one another and thus interdependent, are linked to the ultimate principle of 'good rulership.' This can be defined as the idea of personal rulership in accordance with social consensus, representing 'the just.' If traditional authority can be conceptualized in such a way as well, good rulership has to be regarded as the decisive principle for a reasonable regulation of social life. Thus, the *authority of tradition* can, aside from determinants of pure power relations, also be built up by pragmatic, reasonable and historically flexible calculations. If this functions well, a *tradition of authority* within society is initiated; this can be a tradition of

reasoning as well as a tradition of power. Authority, then, is placed on the limits between power and reason.<sup>19</sup>

To summarize: the concept of rebellion indirectly marks a basic principle of Zulu politics which I would like to call good or rather *reasonable rulership*. This means that the ruler has full authority and responsibility as long as he accepts his 'subordination to the political order' (Gluckman 1963: 134); his particular rule is subject to being in accord with the socially defined standards of rulership, and thus to a form of public *consensus*.<sup>20</sup> Such consensus would be constituted more by a decision on the procedural form of the social constitution of norms than by a decision on any concrete contents of norms, which would thereby be set absolutely beyond their contextual historical scope. We are thus concerned with a formal, procedural consensus, as an underlying, historically transmitted and reaffirmed agreement in society that the validity of specific social norms is, in the end, the outcome of the discursive processes on which even the ruler is dependent (while also able to influence them). In other words, consensus here states that social discourse is responsible for itself: from an internal point of view, the reasonability – either of reasoning or of power-orientated strategies – can be viewed, *contested* and reformulated. With this, I intend to point out that the concept of 'consensus' itself does not necessarily imply an inherent dogmatism in society, though it does not exclude its possibility. In general, and definitely in the context of this paper, it points to the minimal discursive presuppositions for something like 'peaceful' social life in a specific cultural context.

In terms of the internal framework of Zulu social knowledge, the existence of rituals of rebellion could indicate a healthy state of affairs. They required the principles of social order to be 'unquestioned and indubitable' (Gluckman 1959: 134) and their exercise indicated social stability. Consequently, with the beginning of 'white rule' in South Africa, these rituals, unlike *izibongo*, reportedly vanished from the surface of Zulu society.<sup>21</sup> Before, accord had been possible between ruler and the ruled, the ruler was secure in power as long as the people he represented supported him. Due to this, the ruler within Zulu political tradition could be praised – and criticized. But a foreign ruler governing from without was incompatible with the traditional political model: he could neither represent nor be part of the people, nor could his decision-making be influenced in the required ways, nor would he feel obliged to follow the sensitively

<sup>19</sup> This seems generally true, but particularly worthwhile highlighting in an African context since the conceptual duality creating this field of tension has, in my view, been largely repressed or neglected in Africanist discourse.

<sup>20</sup> Current approaches within African political philosophy emphasize the value of this principle for the attempt to formulate an African alternative to a 'Western' model of democracy (cf. Wiredu 1997). I think that for such a project a first necessity is careful and empirically informed consideration of what 'consensus' means, and how it is constituted in the specific African societies treated. This essay, while not focusing centrally on the concept of consensus, can be seen as working in such a direction.

<sup>21</sup> Gluckman for ethnographic details also drew from H. Kuper's description of such rituals (ncwala) still occurring in the Swazi kingdom.

expressed will of the people formulated by the imbongi. However, within the political discourse of the Zulu and other South African communities, the genre of *izibongo* continued to be of central value; in contrast to the rituals of rebellion it did not vanish but was reapplied to the altered political field.

#### *4. Surface and basis – performance and political model*

The discussion of licence in both cases has led to insight into some regulative ideas in Zulu social life underlying public performance of *izibongo* and structurally related social action in ritual: 'truth,' 'justice,' 'good governance,' 'reasonable rulership.' All these concepts as such are formal, but within the respective historical context of a given society, they are embedded in and constituted by social consent, and they have empirical impact. The 'people's will,' which (although it might be manipulable) is, in principle, described as the ultimate authority in matters of social conduct, transmits concrete meaning and utmost practical relevance to these ideas by defining them contextually (not necessarily explicitly) as binding principles for each member of society. This includes even the ruler who, though he is personally in power, can only secure the long-term duration of his reign by acting in accordance with these socially defined normative concepts. It might sound odd, but – if the descriptions I have relied upon are adequate – in a sense a basic political principle of the famously authoritarian and ruler-centred Zulu society can plausibly be presented as being rooted in a kind of sovereignty of the people. The respective currently valid social norms then, can be seen as permanently reformulated and publicly expressed in a potentially pluralistic discourse in which, due to the principle of 'poetic licence,' all members of society can engage.

##### *4.1. Izibongo and ritual action*

On ceremonial occasions, whether marriage, funeral, sacrifice, calling on the ancestral spirits, formal reception of an honoured guest, festivals of the whole community, the recitation of praise poetry is a constitutive element of the event itself. In these cases, the performance of *izibongo* has to be qualified as part of ritual action. But the recitals cannot *per se* be described as rituals, especially the performance of *izibongo of rulers* with its functions of public criticism and mediation of power. They are, however, always situated within public ceremonies – also called 'secular rituals' (Falk-Moore & Myerhoff 1977: 21) – and take place in ritual context.

Evolving out of Zulu ethnographical context, Gluckman's differentiation between ceremonial and ritual action is linked to 'mystical notions,' able to influence the outcome of events, which distinguish ritual action only. However, Gluckman still calls ceremonial action 'a type of ritualization,' characterized by the concrete reference to 'particular social relationships' (1959: 119-120). In this way, it often leads to a dramatic representation of a current social incident which it publicly marks as noteworthy, and comments on it. Thus, in a kind of aesthetic enactment, ceremonial action is said to 'signalize' a temporary capacity within the community, whereas ritual action 'symbolizes' underlying, ahistorical

principles of society while aiming to (re-)secure social solidarity and prosperity (Gluckman 1971: 253).

Taken as a relative contrast – since one ‘cannot in any *absolute* way separate ritual from nonritual’ (Tambiah 1985: 125) – this differentiation can help to illustrate the ambiguous status of *izibongo*: in being performed they both ‘signalize’ and ‘symbolize.’ Their performance is artistic dramatization and commentary, constructed in reference to *concrete social incidents*. This ‘signalization’ happens on the approachable plane of aesthetics. But *izibongo* performance enforces an overall process of reaffirmation of social identity as well;<sup>22</sup> and this social foundation of *izibongo* aesthetics is reaffirmed in each recitation – ‘symbolization.’ It is, in my opinion, not helpful to call this process mystical, magical, or specifically ritualistic, for in its varying emphasis of meaning, it relies on the poetical force of each specific performance. The *magical power of words* in *izibongo* derives from the art of poetry.<sup>23</sup>

A certain transsubstantive effect is possible since each performance follows a perpetuative motion of social ‘self-assertion’ – like the ‘Amen’ in Althusser’s description of Christian ideology (1971: 169). The rather mundane, technical abilities of the artist reconcile individual and society into an ‘imagined,’ poetically constructed, community. Additionally, they reconcile ruler and ruled, under the principle of *reasonable rulership* (which I shall discuss further below), for a desirable balance of social life. In this way, the eminent socio-regulative contribution of art, which has the potential to interrelate all different aspects of society, becomes once more obvious. For Zulu society and *izibongo* it is then true to say, as Gell does for art in general, that ‘aesthetics is a branch of moral discourse’ (1992: 41). The aesthetics of *izibongo* construct a form of verbal art which in its performance is at once binding *and* liberating. If society itself is constituted by ‘a discourse within which speech both liberates and enslaves’ (Parkin 1984: 348), *izibongo* are an adequate art form to both depict and intensify such a discourse. This fits well for a poetic *topography of society*. Concrete and flexible as social life itself, internal guidelines are followed while mapping social experience and mediating between power-relationships in the social field.

#### 4.2. *Izibongo in political discourse to the present*

Today, in the post-apartheid era, the poetic task of *izibongo*, to strive for the correct and morally appreciable depiction of society in relation to its leading figures, continues and seems to be as central to public political discourse in South Africa as ever (cf. Brown 1996). Various accounts indicate that *izibongo* are still valid and active mediators of social critique, and their influences on new poetic forms of protest are often mentioned. Thus the principle that ‘the poet is the conscience of the nation. He cannot be censured’ (Mzamane 1984: 147) is confirmed. But with the conditions for an all-over stabilizing effect of the

<sup>22</sup> As remarked above with reference to Vilakazi and Dhlomo.

<sup>23</sup> For a general discussion of the ‘magical’ power of art, created by the technical mastery of the artist, see Gell (1992).

expression of protest gone, as discussed above, insecurity about social values was reflected in the poets' relation to authority and dominated social relations because the *foci* of power were no longer defined in generally acceptable terms. Whether a 'chief' was really in power was often unclear in the times of white political supremacy (cf. Mafeje 1963). These insecurities prevailed at least until the breakdown of apartheid; 'revolution' in Gluckman's sense (i.e. including the destruction of society's political model) became possible then, while with the advent of political change the chance for *izibongo* to be a force for affirming a national South African identity evolved.

The historically established 'direct relationship to power' of *izibongo* has been crucial in making this genre useful in the struggle for a political 'conscientization' and unification of the 'black' people during apartheid (Sole 1987: 264). On the other hand, due to this direct relationship to power, *izibongo* have also been used as ideological instruments of those 'black' South Africans in coalition with 'white power.' Thereby, some rulers of the 'homelands' created by the doctrine of apartheid attempted to totalize their specific political outlook and suppress controversial political utterances – which would again be presented in *izibongo*. This meant, for instance, that at festive occasions only some loyal and pre-selected *izimbongi* were allowed to perform their praises of the ruler. Such violations of the principle of poetic licence as the basic right to public criticism were however noted as such and expressly condemned by large parts of the people (cf. Mafeje 1967, Opland 1984, Kashula 1991). The shift of the bards' allegiance that has been noted during these times of uncertain political power, from a 'traditional' allegiance to regional chiefs to the support of 'modern' political organizations and their leaders (Kashula 1993: 74), is in fact not a real shift but rather an indicator of the institutional redirection of political power, away from a culturally definable ruler of a certain social group and towards national figures, both under apartheid and in post-apartheid times.<sup>24</sup> With a remarkable flexibility, the genre of *izibongo* maintains the functional continuity of its inherent regulative model of political mediation.

The 'tradition of performance' of what have here been called *izibongo of rulers* is thus maintained, due to the formal and flexibly adaptable traits characterizing the genre. Consequently, the role of the *imbongi* is the same over history. He is still 'praiser, critic, educator, mediator and political commentator' (Kashula 1991: 38/39; cf. Jordan 1959: 74). Since form and function of *izibongo* determine no political contents but, in the cultural context of southern Africa, are, as seen, constitutive elements of the creation of social identity, praises are used 'as a vehicle for contemporary consciousness' by all various political groups which in their utilization in political debate and election campaigns of course find it helpful to draw from traditional genres and often claim to formulate the only true and authentic political vision (Gunner & Gwala

<sup>24</sup> Both foci of power, 'chief' and 'party leader' have often been present in personal union (e.g. Mandela or Buthelezi). The use of the terms 'traditional' and 'modern' here is, strictly speaking, misleading since there is no necessary opposition between the two.

1991: 36). Thus, an observation made twenty years ago, that there is 'no necessary break in the continuity between traditional political poetry and modern politics,' still seems to fit neatly for part of the current political discourse in South Africa: '[*Izibongo*] have proved remarkably adaptable to the circumstances of the twentieth century' (Emmett 1979: 75).

#### 4.3. 'Reasonable Rulership'

In conclusion, I will outline a model of *reasonable rulership*, following the nomenclature of the ethnographic sources ('chieftainship,' 'kingship,' 'ideal kingship,' 'good rule,' 'leadership,' 'rulership').<sup>25</sup> As observed, ruler and ruled have power claims over one another, both linked to the idea of a common social identity and an obligation to the common good. Thus, power is granted to the ruler, and rule accepted by the people only when responsibility and accountability of the ruler are assured; according to the perspective on Zulu political theory which has been followed here, the executive authority of the ruler is subject to the constitutive power of public consensus. Accordingly, the poets' role is to help mediating between the two parties so that such a consensus is possible.

Mafeje seems to point at something like this when he emphasizes the 'general standard of social behaviour' to which the *imbongi* appeals publicly, which acts as the guideline for whether he primarily praises or criticizes (Mafeje 1967: 221). This socially defined *general standard of social behaviour* is directly linked to the principle of *reasonable rulership*: as long as the ruler adheres to such a general standard, his rule, in full authority, is granted and supported by the people. The principle thus is found on the normative side of social knowledge, and is 'reasonable' in the way that Gluckman has argued in regard to law-processes (1963: 178ff): formal as such, it is contextually embedded in the present and thus determinable in each situation of social life, in which it is constantly debated and redefined. 'Reasonable' marks current norms and presupposes a social platform on which these are negotiated. For ruler-centred societies the presence of such a common platform is especially crucial in order to shield the people from an arbitrary rule. *Reasonable rulership* is thus the reverse side of the constantly redefined notion of a *principal consensus* on the basic rules of Zulu society, marking social norms as social norms and the common good as 'common' and 'good.'

This concept underlies the *izibongo* of rulers as well as the rituals discussed. Being crucial to the same society, both social forms have the same structure. The 'rituals of rebellion' disappeared from the Zulu scene with the advent of 'white' rule (bringing 'revolution' against rulership as a new option), probably since the common social basis of reasonable rulership had become obsolete in the political reality of social life. Mafeje, commenting on the social situation, expressed worries that *izibongo*, too, as a politically mediating art-form, might face a

<sup>25</sup> These terms are almost exclusively used in the regulative sense, as 'norm' (Mafeje 1967: 220).

breakdown. As soon as 'the same set of ideals and values' is no longer followed by ruler and ruled, the balancing function ceases and forces the *imbongi* to take sides in a fight between the two – in this, the *imbongi* is obliged to side with the people (1967: 221). Thirty years later it can be said that *izibongo* have retained their status of mediating political power in form of praise and criticism. Historically, rulership has changed; consequently, standards of reasonability of rulership have changed; but the underlying principle of reasonable rulership has stayed as a continuous reference-point over time.

To sum up, one might say that while *izibongo* as a form of social discourse has first been seen as 'speaking sense' and 'mediating power,' the last section showed that it is also 'speaking power' and 'mediating sense.' In their task of achieving an adequate depiction of society, apart from truth and justice, *izibongo* also transmit the powerful and the reasonable as defined by current social discourse. The ever-competing discourses of power and reason are inherent in this multi-layered *topography of society* created by poetry. Thus, the characteristic trait of *izibongo*, affirming identity in a multifarious verbal 'picture,' is underlined and enforced from various angles: social reality in this picture encompasses truth, justice, ideology and reasonability. These seem to be the four major aspects under which social knowledge can here be presented.

Knowledge remains confined to the two levels of the descriptive and the normative, but two competing modes of evaluative language can be used on the latter level in order to approach and make claims for 'the just': ideological speech and reasonable speech. Regulative issues in society are dealt with by power or by reason. In both cases, *reasonable rulership* is referred to as the regulative principle for orientation, for the ideological discourse also links itself to the commonly accepted norms. The general ideological aim of *izibongo* is directed at the creation of identity, keeping society together, the subjects true to the current ruler. Ideally, this overlaps with the aim of the reasoning discourse: making current rule match the social conceptions of reasonable rulership, for the good of society. Both are at the same time inherent in the poetical language used. *Izibongo of rulers* are 'multivocal,' analogous to the way that the multiple applicability of symbols in a ritual context has been explained (Turner 1977). The notable ambiguity of poetical language makes poetry a perfectly effective medium for balancing conflicting social forces and opinions. As may be seen, *izibongo* are more multi-referential and thus 'more purely' artistic in times of social balance. In times of crisis, the ideological bias will predominate and mirror the fight for power in society. In the first case, the multiplicity of possible meanings expresses freedom of art as well as it reflects freedom in society, while in the second the strategic univocal use of language indicates restraint and may announce a possible breakdown of freedom and society. Linked to the discussion of poetic performance and ritual action above, this means that *izibongo* may fulfil instrumental functions, but they are never simply 'signs and tools' of power, as has been generally claimed for formalized speech in the political discourse of so-called 'traditional societies' (Bloch 1989: 43).

If reasonable rulership can be adequately conceived of as a kind of regulative idea in relation to which society and individual social actors form themselves, Zulu society can, from one viewpoint, be properly described as fundamentally discursive, since it is a continual process of debate which defines the currently valid reasonability of reasonable rulership. Such a discursive society can be called pluralistic at least in principle (poetic licence granting practically everyone the right to speak up), thus we may have, in the case of the Zulu, an African example where, under the surface of authoritarian, person-centred rule, a specific form of 'pluralism' (cf. Hountondji 1983a) might actually be influential in social life. Although Gluckman was aware of the principle we have arrived at, the king's obligation to 'the tradition of good rule' (1940: 42) which is socially defined, he never interpreted it, as it is done from within Zulu society, as representing 'social order' built up by 'egalitarian principles' (M. Kunene 1979: xxiii).<sup>26</sup>

In this understanding, the tradition of good rule leads to a revised conception of traditional authority from that commonly used. And the order that is affirmed might indeed be called 'traditional authority,' but with inverted meaning: flexible, created by social discourse and, in a way, the power of the people. Traditional authority, like the concept of tradition itself, is never *per se* static, fixed, or irrational, even in a ruler-centred society like the Zulu. Then, it becomes fertile to say that *izibongo* are 'signs and tools' of a flexible and historically adaptable structure of traditional authority: they signify and support reasonable rulership, for the good of society. For this, *izibongo*-poetry, as oral art, is a crucial instrument – and much more.

Thus, for the case of *izibongo* I have shown in detail that in Zulu society reason and tradition are by no means incompatible concepts, but interlinked. They constitute a dynamic tradition of reasonable discourse which has grown historically and evolved specifically within its cultural and social dynamics. As such they, as well as similar genres of poetry in other African societies, are in various respects interesting for research from a philosophical perspective (cf. Hountondji 1983a, 1983b), in regard to the historical reconstruction of philosophical traditions as well as in respect to political philosophy, a discussion of basic aesthetic principles in social life, the 'ethical discourse' in artistic language and possibly other topics. If this paper has been able to encourage sensitivity towards this interdisciplinary field in which history, literature and anthropology are mutually dependent on one another, or to provide a reliable starting point for further theoretically interested and empirically rooted research, its purpose has been fulfilled.

---

<sup>26</sup> How 'egalitarian' these principles really are (or even Zulu society on the whole is), is not to be decided here; but it is surely important that they are presented as such from within society itself, and gaining a perspective from which this claim is understandable is of interest here.



KAI KRESSE can be contacted at Department of the Languages and Cultures of Africa, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, or by email to [kk28@soas.ac.uk](mailto:kk28@soas.ac.uk).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, idem, pp. 123-173. London: NLB.
- Appadurai, A. 1990. Topographies of the self: praise and emotion in Hindu India. In *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, ed. by C.A. Lutz & L. Abu-Lughod, pp. 92-112. Cambridge: University Press.
- Appiah, K.A. 1997. What is African art? *New York Review of Books* 44 (7): 46-48.
- Barber, K. and P.F. de Moraes Farias (eds.). 1989. *Discourse and its Disguises*. Birmingham: Centre for West African Studies.
- Bauman, R. and Ch. L. Briggs. 1990. Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19: 59-88.
- Berglund, A.-I. 1976. *Zulu Thought Patterns and Symbolism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bloch, M. 1975. Introduction to *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society*, ed. by M. Bloch, pp. 1-28. London: Academic Press.
- . 1989. Symbol, song, dance and features of articulation: is religion a traditional form of authority? In *Ritual History and Power*, idem, pp. 19-45. (Monographs in Social Anthropology 58). London: Athlone Press.
- Brown, D. 1996. South African oral performance poetry of the 1980s: Mzwakhe Mbuli and Alfred Qabula. In *New Writing from South Africa*, ed. by E. Ngara, pp. 120-148. London: James Currey.
- Bryant, A.T. 1949. The Zulu people. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter.
- Cope, T. 1968. *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Derive, J. The function of oral art in the regulation of social power in Dyula society. In *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, ed. by G. Furniss and E. Gunner, pp. 122-130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dhlomo, H.I.E. 1977. Zulu Folk Poetry. *English in Africa* 4 (2): 43-59. (Special issue: 'Literary Theory and Criticism of H.I.E. Dhlomo'.) [First published *Native Teachers' Journal*, April 1948, pp. 84-87.]
- Doke, C.M. 1948. The basis of Bantu literature. *Africa* 18: 284-301.
- Emmett, T. 1979. Oral, political and communal aspects of township poetry in the mid-seventies. *English in Africa* 6 (1): 72-81.
- Falk-Moore, S. and B. Myerhoff. 1977. Introduction to *Secular Ritual*, idem (eds.), pp. 3-24. Amsterdam: van Gorcum.
- Fardon, R. 1983. A sense of relevance. Introduction to *Power and Knowledge: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches*, ed. R. Fardon, pp. 1-20. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- Finnegan, R. 1970. *Oral Literature in Africa*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Furniss, G. and E. Gunner 1995. Introduction to *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature*, idem (eds), pp. 1-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gell, A. 1992. The technology of enchantment and the enchantment of technology. In *Anthropology of Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by J. Coote and A. Shelton, pp. 40-63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gluckman, M. 1940. The kingdom of the Zulu in South Africa. In *African Political Systems*, ed. by E.E. Evans-Pritchard and M. Fortes, pp. 25-56. London: Oxford University Press.

- . 1959. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- . 1963. *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Africa*. London: Cohen & West.
- . 1971. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Africa*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grant, E.W. 1993 [1927]. The izibongo of the Zulu chiefs. In *Foundations in Southern African Oral Literature*, ed. by R.H. Kaschula, pp. 85-128. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press. [Reprinted from *Bantu Studies* 3: 201-244.]
- Gunner, E. 1976. Forgotten men: Zulu bards and praising at the time of the Zulu kings. *African Languages/Langues Africaines* 2: 71-90.
- . 1979. Songs of innocence and experience: women as composers and performers of izibongo, Zulu praise poetry. *Research in African Literatures* 10 (2): 239-267.
- . 1983. New wine in old bottles: imagery in the izibongo of the Zulu Zionist prophet, Isaiah Shembe.\* In *Genres, Forms, Meanings: Essays in African Oral Literature*, ed. by V. Görög-Karady, pp. 99-108. Paris: Fondation de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme & Oxford: Anthropological Society of Oxford.
- . 1984. Ukubonga nezibongo: Zulu praising and praises. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London.
- . 1989. Orality and literacy: dialogue and silence. In Barber and de Moraes Farias (1989), pp. 49-56.
- . 1995. Clashes of interest: gender, status and power in Zulu praise poetry. In Furniss and Gunner (1995), pp. 185-196.
- Gunner, E. and M. Gwala. 1991. *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*. East Lansing: Michigan University Press.
- Hodza, A.C. and G. Fortune. 1979. *Shona Praise Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hountondji, P.J. 1983a. *African Philosophy. Myth and Reality*. London: Hutchinson.
- . 1983b. Reason and tradition. In *Philosophy and Cultures*, ed. by H. Odera Oruka and D.A. Masolo, pp. 132-139. Nairobi: Bookwise.
- Jordan, A.C. 1957. Towards an African literature II: traditional poetry. *Africa South* 2 (1): 97-105.
- . 1959. Towards an African literature VII: poetry and the new order. *Africa South* 3 (2): 74-79.
- Kashula, R. 1991. Power and the poet in contemporary Transkei. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 10 (2): 24-43.
- Kashula, R. 1993. Imbongi in profile. *English in Africa* 20 (1): 65-76.
- Krige, E. 1936. *The Social System of the Zulu*. London: Longmans, Green.
- Kunene, M. 1976. South African oral traditions. In *Aspects of South African Literature*, ed. by Chr. Heywood, pp. 24-41. New York: Heinemann.
- . 1979. Introduction and notes to *Emperor Shaka the Great: a Zulu Epic*, pp. xiii-xxx. London: Heinemann.
- . 1982. Introduction to *The Ancestors and the Sacred Mountain. Poems*, pp. xi-xix. London: Heinemann.
- Kunene, D.P. 1971. Introduction to *Heroic Poetry of the Basotho*, idem, pp. xi-xxiii. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 1993. Review of: *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises*, ed. by E. Gunner and M. Gwala. *Research in African Literatures* 24: 211-215.
- Mafeje, A. 1963. A chief visits town. *Journal of Local Administration Overseas* 2: 88-99.
- . 1967. The role of the bard in a contemporary African community. *Journal of African Languages* 6: 193-223.
- Moore, H.L. 1996. Introduction to *The Future of Anthropological Knowledge*, idem (ed.), pp. 1-15. London: Routledge.
- Mzamane, M.V. 1984. The use of traditional oral forms in black South African literature. In *Literature and Society in South Africa*, ed. by L. White and T. Couzens, pp. 147-160. Harlow: Longman.

- Norbeck, E. 1963. African rituals of conflict. *American Anthropologist* 65: 1254-1279.
- Nyembezi, C.L.S. 1948. The historical background to the izibongo of the Zulu military age. *African Studies* 8: 110-125; 157-174.
- . 1958. *Izibongo zamakhosi*. Pietermaritzburg: Shuter&Shooter.
- Opland, J. 1984. The isolation of the Xhosa oral poet. In *Literature and Society in South Africa*, ed. by L. White and T. Couzens, pp. 175-195. Harlow: Longman.
- Parkin, D. 1984. Political language. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 13: 345-365.
- Rycroft, D. 1974. Zulu izibongo: a survey of documentary sources. *African Language Studies* 15: 55-79.
- Rycroft, D.K. and A.B. Ngcobo. 1988. *The Praises of Dingana (Izibongo zika Dingana)*. Durban: Killie Campbell Africana Library & Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Sapir, E. and B. Crocker. 1977. *The Social Use of Metaphor*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Shapera, I. 1965. *Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Sole, K. 1987. Oral performance and social struggle in contemporary Black South African literature. In *From South Africa: new writing, photographs, art* (special issue of *TriQuarterly* 69), pp. 254-271.
- Sundkler, B. 1961. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Tambiah, S.J. 1985. A performative approach to ritual. In *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: an Anthropological Perspective*, idem, pp. 122-166. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Turner, V. 1977. Symbols in African ritual. In *Symbolic Anthropology*, ed. by J.L. Dolgin, D.S. Kemnitzer and D.M. Schneider, pp. 183-194. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vail, L. and L.White. 1991. *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History*. London: James Currey.
- Vilakazi, A. 1962. *Zulu Transformations: a study of the dynamics of social change*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.
- Vilakazi, B.W. 1938. The conception and development of poetry in Zulu. *Bantu Studies* 12: 105-134.
- White, L. 1989. Poetic licence: oral poetry and history. In Barber and da Moraes Farias (1989), pp. 34-38.
- Wiredu, K. 1997. Democracy and consensus in traditional African politics: a plea for a non-party polity. In *Postcolonial African Philosophy: a Critical Reader*, ed. by E. Ch. Eze, pp. 303-312. Oxford: Blackwell.