

Review of the CD *I Mike What I Like* by Kgafela Oa Magogodi

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Poetry is essentially a private matter. Amongst artists poets are perhaps the most private: they write about their laughs, loves, anguish, trauma, etc., which is in large part a function of the immediacy of their genre. Poetry is also consumed in private: either a poet “works” for you or doesn’t. Novels, by contrast, are either almost objectively “good” or “bad”. Apart from reading verse in one’s house, comfortably perched on one’s couch, foot on the stool, cigarette in hand, one might attend those civilized affairs called “readings”. But, in general, verse was a private matter, read perhaps in one’s darker moments. How things have changed! Now poets perform! Worse, they compete with pop stars for attention!

Such might be the “official” version of the story of poetry in South Africa. But, as with all such versions, this leaves out *iimbongi* or praise singers—as they are sometimes called, with spectacular inaccuracy. *Iimbongi* never wrote their work: they performed it, often spontaneously, at public events. For *iimbongi*, poetry was a public matter. They felt their words; they moved audiences into an excited frenzy; they were vigorous and vocative in their delivery; they loved word-mixes and puns; they pursed their metaphors to limitless extents; and, above all, they were proud of their work, of their skill.

Alas, they are little understood in the urban areas today. We catch fleeting glimpses of them, this sparsely-clad crew, at presidential inaugurations and openings of parliaments. They are loud and we can’t understand what the hell they are about, but they invoke in us a shamed and chastened sense of pride: we pretend to like them; we like to think that they make us proud of our culture, but in our heart of hearts, we are happy to see them descend the stage back to the obscurity from which, thanks to our new government, they would never have emerged. They are but mere props in the large national urban stage. Indeed, “praise singer” has become a political swear word, suggestive of the worst excesses of obscene obsequiousness.

Things needn’t have turned out thus. And it would be re-assuring to say that the genre of Spoken Word, with which we will be concerned here, does not share this prejudicial rejection of *iimbongi*. It would be nice to say that those in the Spoken Word movement are the heirs of the praise poetry tradition. But they are not—with a few exceptions, of course. The reasons for this are complex, but a large part of the explanation has surely got to be the fact the Spoken Word genre is, *au fond*, an American genre, and is also a largely urban—particularly Johannesburg—movement. So that if they reject *izibongo*, praise poems, that may have less to do with racism than an uninformed, hip hop-inspired urban insouciance.

But how are we to evaluate the Spoken Word movement: do we use old tools of evaluating poetry, or do we fashion a new critical vocabulary? Well, on one view,

poetry is a special genre developed and identified as such in Europe. It has its conventions and, though styles may differ from time to time, the unity of the genre remains intact. Those European artists who fashioned new poetic forms were, to the extent that they were rejecting old forms, taking part in a peculiarly European conversation. In short, they were part of the European poetic tradition—a phrase that, *ex hypothesi*, might even be regarded as tautologous. It makes no sense, therefore, to talk of other, non-European artistic forms as poetry since, on this view, poetry is a peculiarly European concept. Indeed, those who want to go around the world calling things poetry risk subsuming into European categories things that are, essentially, different.

Another view is that poetry is what it is: be it from Europe, Africa or America. If in Africa there are works of art that, formally at least, satisfy the conditions of “poetry”, then that is poetry. It might be controversial what these conditions are, and it might even be controversial that they are from Europe; indeed, we might want to expand the definition of poetry, but once we settle upon it, no use is served by insisting on poetry’s European origins.

These, needless to say, are ancient critical queries and squabbles, and I shall not attempt to settle them, even if I knew how to do so. Instead, I shall take the Spoken Word movement at its word—that is, to treat what it does as poetry.

We have in front of us a CD by the poet Kgafela oa Magogodi, who, it should be pointed out in the interests of full disclosure, is a friend of mine. The CD to which we have just listened is titled *I Mike What I Like*. The “oa” (pronounced “wâ”) between the first name and the surname is a filial connective familiar to most people, but which, in South Africa, has become a symbol of benign African nationalism. The CD has twenty six poems, a mixture of Tswana and English poems, but mostly English. The poems will soon be available in book form. The CD is self-recorded, self-published, and self-distributed, and it is available from the author himself who can be contacted via his website at www.kgafela.com.

We wondered a moment ago about the possible connections between *izibongo* and the Spoken Word movement. We also spoke about honourable exceptions to the rejection of *izibongo*. Kgafela is, *mirabile dictu*, one such exception: others that come immediately to mind are Masello Motana and Ntsiki Mazwai; no doubt there are more. Take from this album the poem *Warona*. Warona is the name of the poet’s son. The poem is dad’s tribute to his son: it is in Tswana: it is a rumbustious, breathless, rolling, and alliterative evocation of the long and distinguished line of the Magogodi clan:

warona ka ga lo mo itse mmotseng kgafela kgafela ga a kitla a lo
molobela ke tabane wa ga golebane se mo kgotle ke kgabo ya
mollo e tla go gadika monwana gwa sala go nkgga segau e fetile tau
ya le mau-mau warona le mmotseng le mmagwe mabontle ga a

mmoka a re mmollo ga o time ga o timiwe ke lesea ka ditete o tla o
tima jang mollo o bedisa mawatle warona mmolo ga o time ke
thothobolo ya selo.

There are other poems as well, done in Tswana: some funny and frivolous (as in *Sepoko Ntlogele* and *Nama*): others serious and dignified (as in *Mo Faya*). But in the main, the comic element is more distilled in the Tswana poems than in the English ones because—apart from the general problems of translations—the poems are funny because they are in that language and are performed in that manner. But for readers who don't speak Tswana, it is in the English poems that their interest will be engaged.

The title poem *I Mike What I Like*, delivered in a deep voice, is a defiant restatement of the poet's independence from political and other squalid forms of corrupting influences:

i mike what i like
i am not a lick-ass poet
i give no blowjobs to politicians
my tongue can't be bought
to dance in the rot of the king's court
i don't even rap
call me the unwrapper
i unwrap the napkins of this baby nation
to show you slime of the times
i'm nobody's official poet or puppet
i mike what i like
i dis what i dislike

This notion, this idealistic vision of the calling of the poet is taken up in concrete terms in other poems, but the poet goes on in *I Mike What I Like* to assert, in inimitable phrases ("troubled coughs of history's echoes"), that:

i buy no skelm
when i drop a poem
never mind
the head of state
or the state of his head
i soak in the word
of the sage who asked
why swim in the
same soup warmed all over
lefifi tladi
i sample sounds of your soul
for azania's children to hear
the troubled coughs of history's echoes
around us

inside us
in the stink of my ink
when i sound check 1 2 3
i'm free

But poetry is not only a mere matter of words, but also of meaning, of vision. What, then, is the vision of the poetry in the CD? The vision conveyed in these poems is a bleak one: more of a post-colonial *taedium vitae* than a dogmatic and fact-free pessimism: it is reminiscent of the poet's own heroes Ayi Kwei Armah and Frantz Fanon. The state of the nation, the black condition in South Africa, the squalour in which "Sobukwe's flock"—as the poet memorably calls those of darker hue—is the pre-occupation of the poet. This vision, which is in one obvious sense political, but none the worse for it, is captured in the poem *Itchy City*: a poem of wide range, of mixed register, capturing the high and the low of Jozitown, the pretentious and the ridiculous, the callous and the cruel, the sad and the pitiful:

babyjakes come in small packages
they pack dynamites in their trumpet blows
break down the walls of jericho's temples
biblical brimstone and fire
in the city of cold blood flows cheaply
like pavement tomatoes
the streets are red rivers
dead bodies and gold-platted teeth
five-star smile in the face of a corpse
heh banna who stole the red bandana
from the head of ponte city
now we know who's been hiding the blues
itchy city blues deep as the froth of cappuccino
made in nino's kitchen
hot as spicy chicken wings
fry them before the fly
fry them before they fly
scramble their eggs and feed on fowl foetus
spew out vegetarian views at lunch meetings
munch and run to pay the gym to make you slim
in small street you soak
in the sounds of hustlers and hawkers
selling secret socks starter packs and
ama-empty empty empty cassette
two for five rand ama-empty cassette
itchy city people sweet as a pimple
in the heart of a dimple
but not as simple as sorting apples and oranges
choice-assorted like a peacock parade
of sex workers do a quick job

before you get home to wife and family
every tom dick and pipi with cash gets their kuku
in the city of golden wishes
beggars ride horses of small change
“uncle please small change asseblief”
itchy city lights kill the night
not even god is bored
riding the back of a hijack
short left short right
cut a corner
it’s a chase scene down delvers street
the screeching soundtrack
draws tapes of hungry circles around us
hungry circles surround us
but we can’t be swallowed
not even the mouth of a gun
will bury us in the belly of time
we live eternally in the scratch of a dj’s needle
on the skin of a turntable
we write ourselves in soundscapes of the wind
in strobe lights of the sun
we run cables of lyrics in the veins of the
underground
but after sips of black label some show off
their secret socks
every dog has its day of chewing the sweet bone
of a cellular telephone
god is running out of airtime in the city
god is running out of airtime in the city
loan sharks are jesus
save us from landlords of rotten buildings
and busted water pipes stink like killers of
saddam’s sons
they cut your power cables
unpaid electricity bills and riots in san jose
faceless fires and curtains of flames
flagging and roaring through dark caves
in the jungle trees of skyscrapers
their monstrous shadows are blinding
we can’t even see the second coming
of babylon running towards us
garvey’s kids in house of hemp robes
catch a fire of holy herbs
the smoke is red gold and green
red gold and green rings of smoke
to cure the sufferers from babylonchitis
sobukwe’s flock grow cabbages and sweet

potatoes
on street pavements to feed clothe and
school the children
school the children
teach them to walk on fire
who says the fire is fictitious
it's a furious figment of the city's madness
we point fingers at nigerians but who is
shooting poison needles in the arms of
wingless angels
heaven help us
lead us not to babylon by putco bus
at least let us climb to the top of pyramid
schemes
before police tear down these dreams
will we escape these ulcers of fires inside us
ulcers of fires eating up the bowels of our poor
yet television fables say that "we are one"
but we are the ones who know
the itching soul of the city

There are also lines of the highest lyrical and metaphorical beauty, especially in the poem *faya sistah*:

she walks the pavements of my prayers
she smokes the holy grass of poem prose
she rose from the
loins of horizons
sun in her palm she's the searing light burning
spears she changes gears of my universe
she spills her oceans of flaming songs to the
soil she soaks my earth with faya seed
she's the root that sprouts sparks of ancient
shoots through grains of memory
she dances with history's skeletons
she tangos where no man goes
she's a faya sistah

she opens her mouth in parables of lyrical
uprisings
she speaks in tongues of unbroken eternities
her endless miles of lines flow for miles
she dwells in the troubled voice of landless
spirits
she burns tattoos of questions on the skin of
the land

she wants to know
she wants to know who buys the lies
and sells the soil under conference tables
she says we sokol without our soil we are
fokkol
that's why she throws petrol bombs of poems
to free every grain of azania
she's a faya sistah

If there is one thing to say against the collection, or perhaps against the current fashion, it is the view poetry must shock. If, like me, you prefer the cultivation of tender sensibilities and virtues, then you will not like a poem like *Samson and Del(e)ilah*, which strikes me as gratuitously blasphemous; nor will you like some of the imagery and visual invocations which is, to put it mildly, what you'd rather not think about. But then again *de gustibus...* But if you prefer an unblinking, honest look at the South African condition, the "unwrapping of the napkins of this baby nation", then there's no better place to begin. And we may hope, too, that this heralds the beginning of appreciation of *izibongo*.

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