

# Two musical and political extremes in the South African society

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During the commemoration year of the Anglo Boer war of 1899 which represented the Afrikaner's struggle against English oppression, the life of the resistance poet and performer Mzwakhe Mbuli, known "the People's Poet", and that of the Afrikaans classical song artist Pieter de Villiers, known as "the composer who made the country sing", represents a typical historic comparison of the South African society before the 1994 elections. It was the privileged white male, who did not need to struggle for recognition and the resistant black male, whose whole musical incentive was to receive political recognition and whose musical existence encompassed this theme. It is therefore not difficult to realize why the texts used by Mbuli is mainly political and he sees "no dividing line between art and politics." (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53)

Both men have instilled a feeling of patriotism in their audiences. Mbuli's followers can almost be described as having made him a cult figure, when one reads the following:

The national craziness about Mzwakhe has been awesome. Some people felt the man walked in Jesus Christ's footsteps. Some said Nelson Mandela was old. . . (Malokeng, 1993, p. 45)

In the same article Malokeng (p. 45) notices and quotes Mbuli . . . "Mzwakhe has heartfelt gratitude to his fans. "The people think about me. They fast for me." De Villiers's followers showed their gratitude in a different manner, they constantly performed and sang his compositions. In the translated words of Sarie Lamprecht: (De Villiers, 1983b) "Ladies and gentleman, it later came out of my ears" ("Dames en here, dit het later by my ore uitgelooop").

There is a huge age gap between these two men, Mbuli will be forty years old in 1999 and De Villiers has just celebrated his 75 birthday on June 19.

These two musicians are further divided in that they represent two opposing musical styles, Mbuli the popular (as opposed to the traditional) African music style and De Villiers a Western Classical style. Mbuli is a poet with words, while De Villiers is a poet with music. Mbuli's works can be regarded as poetry to which the musical accompaniment was added to reach a wider audience, while De Villiers's music forms such a unity with the poetry that it is often referred to as having the character of folk songs.

Mbuli mostly writes in English but at times combines it with Zulu and to a much

lesser extent with other vernacular languages such as Xhosa and Venda. The fact that he mostly used English made him accessible to a wide national and international audience, that can not be clearly defined. De Villiers exclusively uses Afrikaans texts, which is inaccessible to most foreigners. The vocal tradition in a classical choral and solo style further limits his audience to a clearly specified elitist group.

These two men also share the possibility that for different reasons, their music might be of a passing nature and be forgotten not very far into the Twentieth-First Century.

In this paper I will briefly discuss the political surroundings of these two South Africans and provide a short introduction into their diverse musical styles.

**De Villiers** grew up in a musical family where his father, a headmaster, played the violin.<sup>1</sup> De Villiers used his talents in combination with his socially privileged background to the fullest. He studied in Pretoria<sup>2</sup> until 1945, Stellenbosch (1946-1947) and London (1949) obtaining the LRAM and ARCM. He then followed through the university rankings, lecturing at three of the main Afrikaans Universities, Stellenbosch (1948-1953), Pretoria (1963-1967) and Potchefstroom (1954-1961 and 1968-1984), before retiring as professor of Music at the Potchefstroom University in 1984. (Nel, 1986, p. 7) His entire "professional" career was therefore concluded during the apartheid regime.

Joining the South African Broadcasting Corporation for one year during 1962, opened doors for the promotion of his compositions. As an excellent accompanist,<sup>3</sup> his performances were widely broadcast on the airwaves. It is important to stress that the SABC during the apartheid era favoured Western Classical music above all other musics.

Mbuli lived in the Johannesburg suburb, Sophiatown<sup>4</sup> until the family were forcibly removed to Meadowlands when Sophiatown made way for the white suburb of 'Triomf'. He never attended a tertiary education institution.

As a child he was exposed to the black cultural activities, poetry, music and dance, as performed in the migrant labourers' hostels in Soweto, which he visited with his father, a mbube<sup>5</sup> singer (Kozain, 1994, p. 128).

Mbuli started his career performing as a cultural worker at political rallies and mass funerals. Indirectly related to the political situation in Soweto during 1976, he joined a student music band and "began writing social comment poetry and agit prop theatre of the sloganeering and placard kind" (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53). In 1977, this group focussed on the performing and presenting "poetry sessions and drama in townships" (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53), found itself a name as a gesture against ethnic division: they named themselves Khuvangano, Venda for 'unity' or 'solidarity' (Kozain, 1994, p. 129). "His first play, *New Dawn*, was an uncompromising indictment of our times and dealt with post-apartheid South Africa" (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53).

He used to read poetry at memorial services and made an impact the day I read one of my poems at the funeral of one of the black leaders, the Reverend Mashwabada 'Castro' Mayathula. 'People were moved by my poetry. Thousands of mourners stood up, their fists clenched, and cheered to my poem. After the funeral, some people approached me encouraged me to write more poems and prose' (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53).

Although the arts group Khuvangano split in 1981, Mbuli continued writing

poetry, plays and short stories. He revitalized the group Khuvangano, performing the play *Abasebenzi* in Soweto, the Cape Province and in Swaziland, but their performances were stopped when the Government passed the State of Emergency" (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53) in July 1985, preventing them to perform as they wished.<sup>6</sup>

Mbuli was never involved in union activity, but worked for organizations which were 'popular' rather than 'workerist' in ideological orientation. In 1985 he was elected the Transvaal media officer for the United Democratic Front (U.D.F.) and was influential in establishing the U.D.F.'s Cultural Desk in 1986 which formulated a policy around the Cultural Boycott aiming to isolate South Africa culturally. When the Cultural Desk became restricted under the emergency regulations, he became active in the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM)<sup>7</sup>. "He has also taken part in the South African Musician's' Alliance (SAMA)" and in 1991 acted as "vice-president of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW)" (Petersen, 1991, p. 66).

During 1987 he was invited by the independent record company "Shifty Records" to put his poems to music which lead to his first album "Change is Pain", which was shortly after the release banned "for its apparent revolutionary sentiments and only unbanned in 1990." (Kozain, 1994, p. 130) By late 1989, his book, *Before Dawn* (first published in that year), had sold more than 5000 copies, an impressive number for a book of poetry in South Africa.

The period 1990-1995 was the height of Mbuli's performing career. The lucrative period started after the establishment of the band "The Equals" in 1990 (Ewens, 1991, p. 199). The group regularly toured abroad to North America, Europe and Scandinavia and his second album "Unbroken Spirit" (1988/89) was released in Japan, the United States and Europe (Ngwenya, 1991, p. 44). Both albums "Change is Pain" and "Unbroken Spirit" sold more than 25,000 copies despite the lack of radio or television exposure.

## Politics

Mbuli's musical career is his political career and vice versa, the two cannot be separated.

Mbuli is a typical example of a resistance composer who remained in South Africa. During the period 1980-1990, he was detained eight times for political activities in South Africa. He performed at the cultural festival of COSATU just after being released from jail (Video, 1992). The result was the start of a new culture which had as its motto 'Our culture our strength' and in which the workers started producing plays about their working conditions. (Hadland, 1988, p. 25)

One of Mbuli's amazing musical achievements come from this time. In January 1988 he was detained without trial for six months (176 days) and put into solitary confinement under Section 29. Without any stationary he 'wrote' poetry and composed the songs and poems for the album "IZIGI (Footsteps)" (Hadland, 1988, p. 25).

Although Mbuli's music has not received recognition from the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and only appeared on national television for the first

time in 1993 (Seepe, 1993, p. 16), several political events indirectly enhanced his musical career by focussing international attention on him:

the government's refusal of a passport, the banning of his work, six months' detention in 1988 under the Internal Security Act, continued harassment by the South African security forces and his and his wife's arrest in March 1989 and subsequent trial under the Arms and Ammunitions Act (Kozain, 1994, p. 130).

In 1989 several embassies in South Africa supported a concert in solidarity with Mbuli who was eventually granted a passport in 1990. His commission by the BBC "to compose a poem which 'reflects the story of / apartheid in South Africa'" (Kozain, 1994, pp. 130-131) can also be seen as a direct outcome of the political climate at the time.

Politics was never a major interest of DeVilliers. He has, according to colleagues, always been a liberal thinker who allowed all people their human rights. He was never a member of "Die Broederbond" which favoured and helped Afrikaans speaking males. Although he reached the highest level in his career, he had done so through his own competencies as an academic, performer and teacher. He excelled as both composer and accompanist and often participated in Afrikaans Art Song festivals, celebrations of the Afrikaans language and broadcasts on radio. These occasions were often organized by the Federation of Afrikaans Culture Associations (FAK), and he was also involved in the 50 year celebrations of this organization in 1979. (Phono record, 1979) His inaugural lecture as professor was on "Afrikaans as language in singing" (Nel, 1986, p. 8).

It is significant that most of his compositions were composed for the voice, both for the solo voice and for choirs. He directed several choirs such as the Stellenbosse Kweekskool choir, the Collegium Musicum, the "Volksteater" choir, the Potchefstroom University choir, the Cantare mens choir and the Sanglus choir. As an accompanist he worked with leading South African singers such as Cecilia Wessels, Betsy de la Porte, Mimi Coertse, Hanlie van Niekerk, Joyce Barker, Emma Renzi, Werner Nel and Rina Hugo. He also studied singing under George van der Spuy to improve his insight into the voice (Bouws, 1971, p. 350). All these experiences made him an expert on the human voice. His circumstances thus had a direct impact on what he was composing. He collaborated with the cream of the country in the field of the human voice and therefore never experienced a lack of public performances of his works.

## Texts

Although there has been a wide debate and much written on the literary value<sup>8</sup> and the possible izibongo<sup>9</sup> background of Mbuli's poetry, the main concern here will be to determine why he used the texts he used and what does it establish about the historical background?

When shall I write about the daffodils? But how can I write about the beauty of

nature when the ground is daily soaked with the blood of the innocent (Le Chat, 1989, p. 16).

Mbuli's poetry was written mainly to be recited orally at political rallies and mass funerals. These meetings were always of a political, and often, of a highly emotionally charged nature. The task of the poet is to catch the mood of the group and to express their anger and sorrow in a linguistic form which is enhanced, so as to set it apart from other public oral genres, such as political speeches, slogans, etc. (Petersen, 1991, p. 65)

Mbuli wrote his own lyrics, closely interweaving it with the historical South African background. The poetry offers historical insights into both past and present South African life.

. . . It has a particular emotional appeal to many South Africans. It represents a combination of ideology, history and contemporary socio-political commentary. For this reason it remains relevant and powerful (Kaschula, 1995, p. 1).

Mbuli can be regarded as a political historian whose texts depict the yearning of his people for political freedom and the struggle surrounding it.

His poetry verbalizes desperation in the light of the socio-economic and especially political situation at the time of his performance and it carries a message of revolution, liberation and change. (Louw, 1995, p. 220)

Louw, (Louw, 1995, p. 220) further quotes Smith (1990) "Because of its "powerful therapeutic and ideological purposes" it tends "to deflate when put into print".

De Villiers always had musical reasons when choosing his texts. Before choosing a text, the poetry must speak musically to him. Certain texts he regards as not "on his musical wave length" and enjoys them as literature only. He enjoys lyric poetry and is not shy to admit that he is passionate about his mother tongue, Afrikaans. He used the poetry of some of leading Afrikaans poets of the day such as C. Louis Leipoldt, Jan F. E. Cilliers, C. J. Langenhoven, A. D. Keet, T. Wassenaar, A. G. Visser, I. L. De Villiers, Adam Small, N. P. van Wyk Louw, D. J. Opperman, Elizabeth Eybers, and Boerneef (I. W. van der Merwe).

His oeuvre comprise both sacred and secular songs with the majority of the latter texts selected, using verse which describes nature, although the themes of humour, love and nostalgia are also used.

De Villiers regards Boerneef,<sup>10</sup> the Afrikaans folk poet, as his favourite poet, and has to date completed nine cycles of Boerneef songs, five for solo voice and four for choirs. It is interesting to note that De Villiers only uses Boerneef texts as part of song cycles (Van der Walt, 1997, p. 3).

Boerneef interpreted the rural life of the Afrikaner and thereby became known as a cultural historian of the Afrikaners (Meintjies, 1988, p. 2). He experienced the Depression of 1933 when many Afrikaners lost their family farms through the drought. Those themes that were closest to the heart of the ordinary Afrikaner are those in which Boerneef excelled. One of them is the love for nature, especially the farm. Almost every Afrikaner at the time yearned back to the rural life on the farm. This yearning is depicted

in verses using themes such as hunting, home remedies and the many nature verses depicting the close connection between man and nature, living close to the earth. His poetry is of the kind that needs to be heard rather than to be read. His strong sense perception is emphasized in his poems. He creates innovative new words which have a rhetorical musical character (Van der Walt, 1997, p. 10).

According to De Villiers: "the underlying plaintive mood in his texts, is disguised underneath a lighter angle (De Villiers, 1983a). Of him De Villiers says:

"It is not I that have chosen him, but he that has chosen me. Boerneef arouses music in me - as poetry it is so free (self-contained, self-sustained) that it does not need any additions. ("Dit is nie ek wat hom gekies het nie, maar hy wat my gekies het. Op die een of ander manier maak Boerneef<sup>11</sup> musiek in my wakker - dit is so selfstandig as digwerk dat dit niks bykomends vra nie".)

## Musical style

The philosophical outlook how music and poetry interlink is totally different in the work of Mbuli and De Villiers. Mbuli first wrote the text and the music was added later without much thought given of achieving unity between text and music. De Villiers achieved unity between text and music by internalizing the text before putting it to music and then let the music speak through the words.

Mbuli's musical backing draws on a variety of forms such as mbaqanga, isichatamiya<sup>12</sup>, Afro-jazz, reggae and rap. Mbaqanga, also known as African Jazz or township jazz or township jive<sup>13</sup> is the form which Mbuli uses most regularly as accompaniment to his poetry.<sup>14</sup> He is unable to satisfactorily connect his poetry to his music and does not develop the rhythmic possibilities underlying in mbaqanga.

Mbuli's "oral rendition is irrespective of the specific musical backing used - whether mbaqanga, township jazz or reggae" - "the same monotone and declamatory rhythm" (Kozain, 1994, p. 159).

Mbuli's art was initially unaccompanied poetry readings. Adding musical accompaniment or backing to the poetry was not done with a musical goal of accomplishing cohesion between words and music in mind, but as a political and economical goal to popularize the poetry and thereby gaining wide public appeal.

According to Herman (1991) Mbuli "decided to form a permanent group" in 1990 "so that for the first time, singing, chanting, reciting and rapping could be fully integrated with irresistible hard-driving music." . . . "Uncompromising lyrics are set to classic highly-charged township music which has captured the hearts and imaginations of both urban and rural communities."

The albums Izigi (1995) & KwaZuluNatal (1996) can be considered representing the highlight of Mbuli's combined creative output.

## DeVilliers

De Villiers only started composing at the age of 35. At the time, he identified a lack in the Afrikaans song repertoire for a certain type of song which would be accessible to the man in the street. He quotes Arthur Honegger: "My inclination and my effort have always been to write music which would be comprehensible to the great massive listeners and at the same time sufficiently free of banality to interest genuine music lovers" (De Villiers, 1983a).

His philosophical outlook has been that to be honest with oneself as a composer one can only compose what one is, otherwise it will be fictitious ("oneg"). This fact also contributed to his selection of texts. He regarded himself as a romantic who enjoys the lyric and the beautiful.

When a text has been chosen, De Villiers memorizes the poetry by reciting it to himself to internalize the rhythm of the words and the main stresses in the verse, and acquaints himself with the vowel sounds. He tries to depict the meaning of the words in the music (De Villiers, 1983a). In the works of DeVilliers the text generally deepened when music was added.

## Nationalism/philosophy

Nationalism was the philosophy at the root of both composers, both citizens of South Africa and yet they could not have been greater polarity between the two of them, as they were both producing compositions of great national value which have since become cultural heritage.

Nationalism manifested itself in the work of Mbuli through his poetry of political mobilization and resistance. By adding mainly mbaqanga musical accompaniment, which was the music of the people, he touched the heart of the people and captivated their attention towards his political message.

De Villiers has been recognized as having composed songs which had the character of becoming folk songs. The sincere texts with the singable melodies of his songs made them cultural possessions. His two Boerneef settings, "Die Berggans . . ." and "Aandblom . . .", although conceived as art songs they have caught on so well that they have become almost traditional within a decade" (Programme Notes, 1979).

## Finally

One can only speculate whether the music of these two composers will survive into the next century without the main incentives which promoted it.

The western choir tradition is rapidly changing. With funding directed to the "have-not's", the main promoters of songs such as that of De Villiers is quickly changing. The following quote by a third year student during 1996 at Rhodes University, could rapidly become the norm in the South African society: "whatever your background is,

you must also consider our background." Choir directors in South African society had to make changes in their outlook of choosing repertoire to include a wider range of musics. Afrikaans universities are following the general trend of globalization, how much say will demanding students have in the choice of repertoire in future?

The African movement of cultural liberation that was at its height of activity during the 1990's, has since become outdated. It seems that there is little place for the music of the struggle against apartheid, unless being recorded in theses and history books.

Will Mbuli remain the people's poet?<sup>15</sup> "Will his voice of criticism be allowed to persist if and when the criticism affects a new government?" (Kaschula, 1995, p. 16) "One can assume that there will be further shifts in power in South African politics in the future and it will be interesting to observe how the oral poets will fit into the new dispensation." (Kaschula, 1995, p. 25)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The family stems from the same tree as ML de Villiers who composed "Die Stem", the part of the current national anthem taken from the Western tradition.

<sup>2</sup> Not in Music but in Theology, although he started taking piano lessons from his second year.

<sup>3</sup> His nickname was "Piet fingers" which reflected his brilliant finger technique.

<sup>4</sup> Sophiatown was an artistic haven, called by Can Temba "the little Paris of the Transvaal" (Hannerz, 1994, p. 190). It did not only serve as an imitating centre of the outside world, but also displayed creativity in the writings in *Drum* and the Musical, *King Kong*, in which "Mariam Makeba and Hugh Masekela have toured the world" (Hannerz, 1994, p. 193).

<sup>5</sup> Mphahlele, after portraying township culture - 'a fugitive culture: borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, rejecting that' - goes on to argue the importance of migrant labour in extending the continuum into the rural areas. The migrants would bring back to their country homes new gadgets: gramophones, radio sets, concertinas mouth organs. They would bring cloth and styles of dress, and stories of industrial life" (Hannerz, 1994, p. 190).

<sup>6</sup> Mbube or isicathamiya is the traditional "Close-harmony township style" choral singing "based on marabi, or on the songs of migrant workers, or even on traditional songs" (Ballantine, 1993, p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> "Staging the play until the midnight meant transgression of the law" (Ngwenya, 1987, p. 53).

<sup>8</sup> The formal alliance which developed between the restricted U.D.F. organizations and COSATU came to be known in 1989 as the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM).

<sup>9</sup> (Horn, 1994, p. 117; LeChat, 1989 p. 16; Oliphant, 1990, p. 35)

<sup>10</sup> "Oral poetry has been a feature of South African society since the development of the first human communities in the sub-continent, from the lyric poems of the Khoi and Bushmen to the praise poems (isibongo, lithoko) within African societies. ... The influence of the missionaries on the oral tradition gave rise to forms influenced by the harmonies and poetics of the Christian hymn." ... "Migrant workers (especially Xhosa) in mine compounds have used forms of praise poetry for most of this century to praise or criticise indunas or shift bosses." (Brown, 1996, p. 123)

<sup>11</sup> The pseudonym for Izak Wilhelmus van der Merwe 1897-1967, in which he wanted to show that he identifies with the simple, rural Afrikaners.

<sup>11</sup> The first Boerneef volume that De Villiers used was "Ghaap en Kambro". He continued selecting the majority of his subsequent secular texts from the same collection, but also used 'Pallisandryne', 'Malle mole' and 'Sesde Hoepel'.

<sup>12</sup> "From the late 1920s, ...workers in the coal-mining districts of the Natal midlands began forging an extraordinary performance style, vibrantly alive with echoes of American minstrelsy, spirituals, missionary hymnody, Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood tap-dance, . . . /as well as Zulu traditional idioms. ... Isicathamiya - or mbube (lion), as it was often called . . . is inseparable from the history and struggles of the Zulu-speaking working class. Often it has been frankly political - not only because of the lyrics, but also by virtue of its links to workers' organisations" (Ballantine, 1993, pp. 4-5).

<sup>13</sup> The new components which expanded the marabi-based pieces with swing elements to develop mbaqanga are the Zulu acoustic solo guitar, kwela (pennywhistle music) and African melody styles as well as the Sotho and Zulu concertina traditions (Kozain, 1994, p. 155).

<sup>14</sup> "He uses a broader township jazz (sometimes called Afro-jazz) as accompaniment to a few poems (e.g. 'The day shall dawn' (1986 LP), 'Crocodiles', and 'Achimurenga' (1989 LP). In a few instances, poems are also backed by a broad, reggae-influenced sound, like 'Triple m' (1986 LP) and 'Ngiswa ingoma' (1989 LP)" (Kozain, 1994, p. 153).

<sup>15</sup> Both his thirteen year jail sentence on 22 April 1999, having been found guilty of armed robbery and being in possession of a hand-grenade, and the landslide victory of the African National Congress in the second democratic election of 2 June 1999 could possibly have a negative influence on his career as 'people's poet'.

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