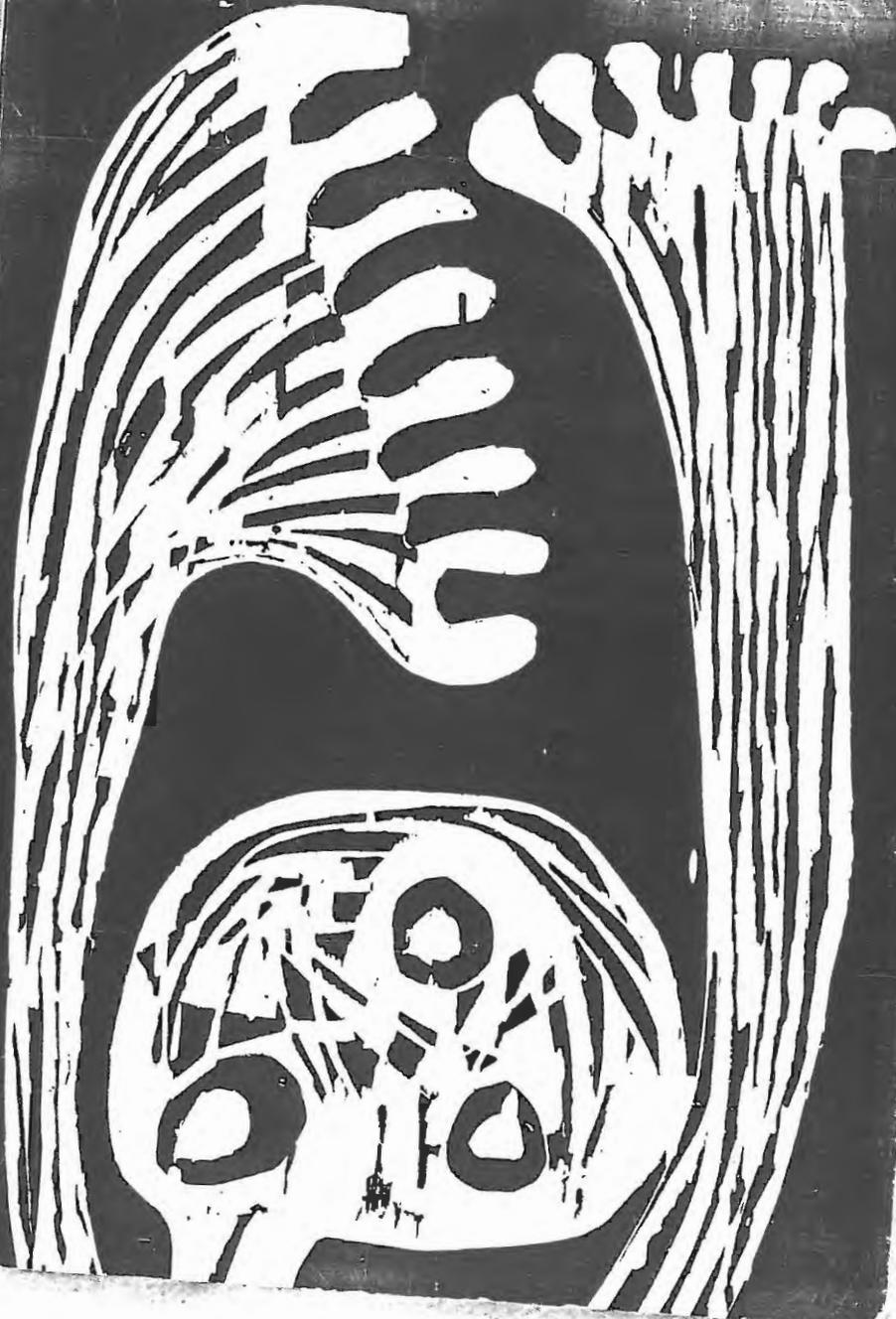


SOUNDS OF A COWHIDE DRUM

Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali



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Cecelia Scallan Zeiss, "Landscapes of Exile in Selected Works by Samuel Beckett, Mongane Serote, and Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali," Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature: Aspects of Language and Culture, ed. Birgit Bramsback and Martin Croghan (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1988): 219-227.

(17 January 1940 -)

Cecily Lockett
University of Natal, Durban.

BOOKS

Sounds of a Cowhide Drum (Johannesburg: Renoster, 1971; London: Oxford University Press, 1971; New York: ^{Third Press,} ~~Okpaku Communications~~, 1972; Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1982);

Fireflames (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1980); Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill

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"Mtshali on Mtshali", Bolt, ~~Durban~~ No 7 (March 1973): 2-3.

"Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What it Means", A Quarterly Journal of Africanist Opinion, Brandeis University, Mass., Vol 6, no 1, (Spring 1976:) in Aspects of South African Literature, ed. Christopher Heywood (London: Heinemann; New York: Africana, 1976), pp. 121-127.

Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's volume of poetry Sounds of a Cowhide Drum appeared in 1971, and gave original impetus to what became known as the New Black Poetry or Soweto poetry during the decade of the seventies in South Africa. It was a poetry closely aligned with the rise of the Black Consciousness movements in the late 1960s, and it reflected the temper of protest and resistance which was given expression in the Soweto uprising on 16 June 1976. Mtshali's work also helped engender a climate of radical revision in thought about South African literature in local university English departments, as the forthright, sometimes crude, but always powerful nature of his poetry challenged accepted "Western" notions of "good taste". The collection was, in 1971, awarded the Olive Schreiner Prize for poetry by the English Academy of Southern Africa. Hailed in the South African press as the first black voice in Southern African English poetry since H.I.E. Dhlomo in the 1940s, and as a Zulu "scooter-messenger" Gof

who could write poetry, Mtshali gained wide recognition both at home and abroad. Sounds of a Cowhide Drum was later published in Britain and the United States, where it was received as the voice of a black man speaking out against his oppressors. It has sold a record number of copies for a book of poems from South Africa.

Mtshali was born of Zulu parents in the village of Kwa-Bhanya near Vryheid in the province of Natal, South Africa. He was educated at Kwa-Bhanya Primary School and St Joseph's College, from which he matriculated in 1958. He was refused entry to the University of the Witwatersrand on the basis of the University Education Extension Act of 1959 which made provision for separate educational facilities for the different race groups. Like so many talented black people in South Africa whose aspirations are thwarted by apartheid legislation, he was then forced into a series of menial occupations - labourer, clerk, messenger, driver and chauffeur. In 1969 he enrolled at the Premier School of Journalism for a diploma in creative writing and journalism which he completed in two years. By this time his poetry, highlighting the plight of black people in the townships surrounding Johannesburg, was appearing in local journals as well as in international publications such as Playboy. In 1971 Mtshali was accepted by the University of South Africa (an 'open' correspondence institution), and he commenced a BA degree, which he completed in the United States at the New York School of Social Research. He followed this with an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University, and the MEd degree, which he obtained in 1979. On his return to South Africa in 1980 he worked briefly as a reporter and art critic for a Johannesburg newspaper. In 1981 he was employed as Deputy Headmaster at a Soweto Commercial College, where he is currently the Acting Principal. He is married to a medical doctor, and they have four children.

Mtshali's collection Sounds of a Cowhide Drum was first published by a small concern called Renoster Books, as no established publisher would at the time consider the writing of an unknown black poet. Renoster's founder, the writer Lionel Abrahams, operating on a shoe-string budget, was prepared to give Mtshali's poetry the opportunity to be read by a wider audience, and Nadine Gordimer wrote an appreciative introduction to the volume. The immediate success of Sounds of a Cowhide Drum among a largely white, probably "liberal" readership can be ascribed to both the lyrical intensity of the poems and to their appeal to humanist ideals of justice and dignity. Mtshali's poetic skill is evident in his powerful combination of simple yet vivid images of black urban existence and his colloquial appeal for the recognition of individual value in a distorted society. In "Always a Suspect" Mtshali reveals the predicament of the black man living on the periphery of the "white" city of Johannesburg:

I trudge the city pavements
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are defying the Separate Amenities Act by perching on "Whites Only" benches. Mtshali also notes a more fundamental aspect of apartheid: besides demeaning blacks the laws also destroy families, and in the poignant 'Boy on a Swing' the poet conveys the bewilderment of a child whose father has been imprisoned:

Where did I come from?
When will I wear long trousers?
Why was my father jailed?

Sources
p. 17

If he is sensitive to individual suffering among blacks, Mtshali knows that the exploitation of black workers by racial capitalism in the South African market^y place results in extreme hardship and the need for resilience. In 'An Old Man in Church' the poet's voice is ironic and bitter as he satirizes a society that propagates christian humility as a religious and social doctrine while ensuring that blacks remain in humble and poverty-stricken surroundings. The old man is described as "a machine working at full throttle" during the week to make a profit for his master, and he goes to church on Sundays to "recharge his spiritual batteries":

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The acolytes comes round with a brass-coated
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Then the preacher stands up in the pulpit,
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With its ironic ending alluding to the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the widow's mite the poem censures an exploitative and materialistic society that claims to be christian. Religious imagery is again used ironically in 'An Abandoned Bundle^u' where Mtshali examines the distortion of the human psyche under the pressures of apartheid. The mythic figure of the virgin Mary is juxtaposed against that of a young black mother who has dumped her newborn child on a rubbish heap. The poet's intention is

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Further comment on the social and psychic sickness of township life is found in poems such as "Intake Night - Baragwanath Hospital^U, where the casualty ward at the hospital serves to mirror a violent society: "So! It's Friday night!/Everybody's enjoying/in Soweto^U. Similarly "Nightfall in Sowetoⁿ" portrays a society where "Man has ceased to be man/Man has become beast/Man has become prey^U.

In Sounds of a Cowhide Drum Mtshali is also concerned with what he terms the preservation of his "shattered culture^U. This produced poems such as "The Birth of Shaka^U, "Inside my Zulu Hut^U, "I will tell it to my Witchdoctor^U, as well as the title poem, where he appeals to blacks not to forsake their African heritage:

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 of your glorious past trampled by the conqueror,
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 Boom! Boom! Boom!
 That is the sound of a cowhide drum -
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As has already been noted, Mtshali's first volume of "township poetryⁿ (as it was referred to at the time by several critics), was enthusiastically received by white readers in South Africa. Jean Marquard,

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for example, suggested that Sounds of a Cowhide Drum was one of the most worthwhile publications to have appeared in South Africa. Yet Mtshali was severely criticized by some black commentators who were disappointed at the lack of revolutionary fire in the poems. Njabulo S. Ndebele articulated a radical criticism when he pointed out that Mtshali seemed to portray an utterly hopeless situation with no possibility of change. He accused the poet of merely confirming the fact of oppression without offering a challenging alternative, and of ignoring the black man's struggle to re-create himself both psychologically and socially. It seems that Mtshali was sensitive to such criticism, for he was later to comment that he ascribed the success of his book to the curiosity and scepticism of whites who were amazed that a black 'scooter messenger' could write so well. In an interview given to Ursula A. Barnett in 1973 he appeared to repudiate the type of poetry he had produced in Sounds of a Cowhide Drum when he noted that although he had once thought that on behalf of black dignity he could evangelize and convert whites, he now realized that he had been naive. His new direction lay in inspiring his fellow blacks to be proud and to strive to find their true identity in group solidarity.

This statement marked a change in the tenor of Mtshali's work. His second collection, Fireflames (1980), showed the influence of the radical and revolutionary climate of the 1970s in South Africa. Although it contained poems written during his stay in the United States as well as some English translations of Zulu lyric poems, the collection is composed mainly of heroic poems of resistance to oppression, characterised by what Es'kia Mphahlele termed a "hard apocalyptic tone". The organising metaphor is fire, representing the anger of blacks as an agent of destruction, cleansing and renewal. In "A Big Question Sonnet" the poet likens the struggle for freedom to the fireflame on the tail of a "relentless

firefly^U, one that acts as a "torch of freedom in the darkness^U, and "I'M a Burning Chimney (A Militant's Cry)^U fire defines black anger:

I grow blacker and blacker by the day
as my heart crackles with fires of fury,
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Mtshali dedicated Fireflames "to all our heroes, especially the brave schoolchildren of Soweto, who have died, been imprisoned and persecuted in the grim struggle for our freedom^U, and he includes poems to the new heroes of black resistance, to "Hector Peterson - the Young Martyr (whose death triggered the Soweto uprising)^U, to "Abram Ongkoepoetse Tiro, a Young Black Martyr^U, and to "The Raging Generation" of young people whose rallying cry is "Amandla! Ngawethu!", or "Power! To the People!"^U. The struggle for freedom is portrayed in terms of traditional black life, for the freedom fighter is compared to the glorious African warrior in "Weep Not for a Warrior":

a warrior never perishes;
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and awaits his canonisation in the realm of heroes,
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their numerous names are inscribed for posterity
in the massive girth of the baobab tree.

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As the clouds of war gather,
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and the mountains quiver like broth,
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the death knell will echo to every corner.

Whereas Sounds of a Cowhide Drum had depended largely on the techniques of irony and the vividly precise image, Fireflames turns from "protest" to "resistance" in favouring the rhetorical devices - repetition and parallelism - of traditional African oral poetry; thus the shift of style and diction is in itself part of the political statement.

Fireflames
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Marxist historicist thinking (which co-existed with the nationalist directions of Black Consciousness in black politics of the 1970s) comes to the fore in in "The Dawn of a New Era". Here Mtshali highlights the inevitability of social change. "History is spring cleaning", he claims, "the cobwebbed corners of the earth", and the poem concludes with a list of countries where the colonial regimes have been eliminated in favour of a new order: Vietnam, Cambodia, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola. South Africa, the poet intimates, will soon be added to the list. Such a desire for revolutionary change in the land of his birth involves Mtshali in a rejection of First World intervention in Africa, as he explains in "Flames of Fury":

you heard the prattle and cackle
of the so-called Super Powers,
and I beg you, for the cause of our liberation,
ignore the two cackling hens of senility -
Mr Tear-him-apart from the West,
Mr Look-at-the chin from the East -
sitting at the conference table in the House of Monkeys,
dishing to the Third World a porridge of lies called detente,
cooked in a broken pot of empty promises.

"Back to the Bush" is a similarly virulent attack on Christianity which, according to Mtshali, has destroyed the fabric of black life and replaced it with lies, falsehoods and double standards. He suggests that the black nation should turn its collective back on Western religion and return, metaphorically, to the bush, to its own culture and religion, as a means of re-establishing true identity and communal authenticity.

Given the revolutionary nature of Fireflames with its glorification of the black struggle and its violent rejection of Western and Christian values, it was not surprising that it was banned in South Africa soon after publication, and only recently unbanned in 1986. Critical reception of Fireflames was mixed. White critics who had previously championed Sounds of a Cowhide Drum were disappointed by what they felt to be a lack

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of poetic resonance and achievement in the later collection. Es'kia Mphahlele, by contrast, considered that the early Mtshali had been overrated, and that Fireflames presented a new voice, that of a poet-spokesman for his people. In an essay entitled "Black Poetry in Southern African: What It Means", written in 1976, Mtshali had defended his work, and that of fellow black poets, when he said that black poets did not have time to embellish their urgent message with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments such as rhyme, iambic pentameter, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style. Such poetic devices he considered to be the luxuries of a free people, luxuries which the blacks could ill afford at a time when harsh realities were the tenor of their lives.

Although he has not published many poems since Fireflames Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali has continued to be active in the field of education. In 1982 he enrolled in a Doctoral program^e at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, and he has recently completed translating into Zulu three English classics, Oliver Twist, Moonstone, and Silas Marner. The manuscripts are at present being prepared for publication. He is currently working on a Zulu translation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. As far as creative work is concerned, he is engaged in writing a one-act play entitled Black Dawn-White Twilight which he describes as "a socio-political skit on township life".

INTERVIEWS

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Njabulo Ndebele, "Artistic and Political Mirage: Mtshali's Sounds of a Cowhide Drum", in Soweto Poetry, ed. Michael Chapman

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cooked in a broken pot of empty promises.

"Back to the Bush" is a virulent attack on Christianity, which, according to Mtshali, has destroyed the fabric of black life and replaced it with lies, falsehoods, and double standards. He suggests that the black nation should turn its collective back on Western religion and return, metaphorically, to the bush, to its own culture and religion, as a means of reestablishing true identity and communal authenticity.

Given the revolutionary nature of *Fireflames*, with its glorification of the black struggle and its violent rejection of Western and Christian values, it is not surprising that it was banned in South Africa soon after publication and only unbanned in 1986. Critical reception of *Fireflames* was mixed. White critics who had previously championed *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* were disappointed by what they felt to be a lack of poetic resonance and achievement in the later collection. Mphahlele, by contrast, considered that the early Mtshali had been overrated, and that *Fireflames* presented a new voice, that of a spokesman for his people. In an essay titled "Black Poetry in Southern Africa: What It Means," written in 1976, Mtshali defends his work, and that of fellow black poets, when he says that black poets do

not have time to embellish their urgent message with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments such as rhyme, iambic pentameter, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style. Such poetic devices he considers to be the luxuries of a free people, luxuries blacks can ill afford at a time when harsh realities are the tenor of their lives.

Although he has not published many poems since *Fireflames*, Oswald Mtshali has continued to be active in the field of education. In 1982 he enrolled in a doctoral program at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, and he is working on a Zulu translation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. He is also writing a one-act play, "Black Dawn—White Twilight," which he describes as "a socio-political skit on township life."

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