

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody. This is Louis Mahoney and today and today we have poetry for you - poetry from South Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE

We propose today to take a sampling of the poetry written by Black South Africans from traditional to modern, and I have in the studio with me Anthony Delius of the African Service who recently met some of these poets during a visit to that country. Tell me Tony, have you any theories about why so much energy is being devoted to poetry in South Africa today?

ANTHONY DELIUS:

There's always been a fair amount of writing of verse in South Africa - to some extent it is something to do with the cultural competition between the main languages there: English, Afrikaans (that's a derivation from Dutch), Xhosa, Zulu and so on. The largest and most impressive body of written verse is in Afrikaans, as a matter of fact. But the latest outburst has been largely in English and much of it coming from Johannesburg. And black poets have been expressing the rising feelings there about the conditions under which these urban dwellers have to live. As Wally Serote says, "I have been put in the world backyard too long".

Cut in rural areas, in the biggest of the Bantustan, the Transkei, I met one of the poets publishing in the Xhosa language. He is President Nkloko, an educationalist specialising in the promotion of Xhosa cultural activity. And I asked him to read one of his poems.

PRESIDENT NKLOKO:

I'll select the one on airplanes.

READS "NGWENDO YOMOYO"

MAHONEY: Mm, that sounds splendid. Tell me, Tony, are there any of the African language poets who have established a national reputation?

DELIUS: Well, probably the best-known is the Zulu poet, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi. He was made a Doctor of Literature for his work in the Zulu language, and he died young, just as he was entering his forties in 1947. Not long ago, the Witwatersrand University Press in Johannesburg issued "Zulu Horizons" - a collection of his poems rendered into English by Mrs Louie Friedman. A poet herself, Mrs Friedman was assisted by two prominent Zulu scholars to translate the poems into English as near the original forms as possible and, of course, the original rhythms. Vilakazi was concerned to express abiding love for his beloved Zululand, its history and culture. And here is Vilakazi addressing the Zulu spirit of poetry in his "Umamina". And the poem is read by fellow South African, Alton Kumalo.

ALTON KUMALO:

READS "UMAMINA".

MAHONEY: Tony, I see from the book that the bulk of the poems concern country subjects, the sights and sounds of Zululand. Yet for much of his life he was a lecturer in Zulu at Witwatersrand in the middle of Johannesburg. Didn't urban life and its, sort of, politics rub off on him at all?

DELIUS: Well, perhaps his most famous poem is about what was happening to the black workers in the Witwatersrand gold mines. It's called "Ezinkomponi" and you can see from this extract that he was very conscious of the political position of his people, of all black people in South Africa.

KUMALO: READS "EZINKOMPONI".

MAHONEY: From Benedict Vilakazi's "Ezinkomponi" - the Gold Mines. I wonder what he'd be saying if he were alive today.

DELIUS: Much the same as men like Oswald Nashali, Wally Serote, Sidney Sepamla and other Johannesburg town-bred poets. Their models are to be found among the protesting Black poets of Africa and America and the West Indies. And they use the sort of English such poets use, and many of the same cadences. When Wally Serote writes about trees they are not quite the sort of trees that Vilakazi would write about, nor in the same way that he would write about them. Judge for yourself from his reading of Wally Serote's "Trees".

KUMALO: READS "TREES".

MAHONEY: That was Alton Kumalo again reading "Trees". It's a very different very modern style. I see it's from his second book of poems - I have it here - called "Tsetlo" by Mongane Wally Serote. Tony, "Tsetlo", I see is the name of a very small bird which could lead you to honey or a dangerous snake - and I'm sure the reader never quite knows what to expect in Serote's poems.

DELIUS: I think his readers have grown to expect something pretty powerful and very rarely sweet. Serote's thirty years of life have been passed mostly in the tough and often violent circumstances of the townships - and his poems make no attempt to disguise it whatever. Nor does the poet try to disguise his bitter hostility to the circumstances in which White South African society has placed him and his people. He has political hopes that things may eventually change - as he says in his poem "The Seed and the Saints", read again by Alton Kumalo.

KUMALO: READS "SEED AND SAINTS".

MAHONEY: That's pretty uncompromising, isn't it? Tell me, what does Serote do for a living?

DELIUS: When I met him earlier this year, he was working in one of the biggest of the advertising agencies in Johannesburg.. I suppose he's still there. But there's nothing easy and flashy about his poems or his views, I think you'll agree.

Serote's contemporary, Sidney Sepamla, although concerned with much the same situation, is an altogether gentler poet and personality. Here he is reciting his poem "Sea-Gull".

SIDNEY SEPAMLA:

READS "SEA-GULL".

MAHONEY: Yes indeed. But are you saying that he has a different political outlook to Serote?

DELIUS: Broadly speaking, not at all different. In fact, I would say that he is much more convinced than the pessimistic Wally Serote that change is going to come - he sees a greater inevitability about it all. Almost as if change were something of a cosmic necessity, like changes of weather. Just read the end of his poem "Adriaanspoort".

MAHONEY: READS "ADRIAANSPOORT".

DELIUS: See what I mean.

MAHONEY: I do indeed. And thank you Tony Delius for letting us hear about such an exciting part of African literature.

But it's good-bye now with another programme, of course, next week of "Arts and Africa". But after today's programme I would say there is only one piece of music that we could possibly end with.

AFRICAN MUSIC.