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Oral tradition? Verbal art? Traditional literature? Performance? The terms used for oral art in South Africa are almost just as varied as the art forms themselves. While these names represent the way academics view their subject matter, they also represent, to some degree, the state of the subject matter. The varied forms of oral tradition in South Africa span the whole spectrum from extinct and forgotten to emergent and unrecognized. The myriad of school textbooks for oral tradition present the subject with a bias toward genre and form, according to which Zulu oral tradition consists of wisdom lore (sayings, proverbs, riddles), poetry and song, and folktales. Contextualization does not occur often in these textbooks and does not serve as a criterion for setting up a typology for oral tradition. This is not entirely a bad idea since, on the one hand, some forms have become dormant so that there is no context to speak of, and on the other hand, certain forms can appear in almost any context. Yet context remains a powerful determinant for oral tradition. Taking context as the organizing principle, Zulu oral tradition appears as follows.

The names children get at birth or shortly thereafter speak volumes in African society. Names—also of animals—don't merely recall circumstances, they also serve as lifelong praise, encouragement, or even rebuke. Naming is one of the few ways a woman may rebuke a husband; likewise a husband may censure a wife through a child's name. The changed political context in South Africa has also been captured in the names of people. Concomitant with the infant phase are *imilolozelo* and *izilandelo*; the former refers to the lullabies a mother sings and the latter to word games children play. A mother may also compose a poem for her child that she uses to pacify her/him, but, more importantly, she may employ it to speak about her marital situation. Such praises are called *izangelo*. Herd boys in rural areas learn the conventions of praising as they complement the names of livestock with lines of praise. They may also amuse themselves with *imilozi*, the formulas associated with a particular birdcall. Folktales (*izinganekwane*), often forced into the European

categories of myth, legend, and folktale in textbooks, were a popular evening pastime for children as mothers and grandmothers entertained and educated children while also weaving protest into the stories. Today, storytelling and publishing has become a profession for a few individuals.

While male initiation is not practiced in Zulu society, girls may celebrate *umemulo*, the coming of age ceremony. The ceremony generates much singing by groups of young men and girls, respectively. If the practice of using suitor's formulas (*izikhuzelo*) to win a girl over was a prominent feature of courtship in the past, wedding ceremonies remain a productive context for verbal art today. Songs and dancing praises (*izigiyo*) may in terms of their sheer quanity be the main forms of verbal art during these ceremonies, but *izithakazelo* (clan praises) may also take a central position because they perform a sacred role—to call on the ancestors to sanction the bringing of families together.

The adult phase, with its religious and political events as well as singing with modern musical instruments, has been the stimulus for new forms of verbal art in South Africa. Ceremonies during which different types of traditional healers graduate into their profession generate countless songs. Traditional healers also utter formulas as they divine with bones and by other means; they also utter praises for the bones. The Nazarite Church (*amaNazarethe*) is largely a Zulu phenomenon and can be described as a fusion of tradition and Christianity. The movement has generated its own style of singing as well as praising. The political context is probably the most vibrant as regards verbal art. Not a day passes without activists voicing their protests in political songs, sung mostly in Zulu. Political songs even echo through the halls of parliament. One of the most visible occasions for the practicing of praise poetry (*izibongo*) in Zulu is the annual Shaka Day celebrations, but this is by no means the only occasion where this most sophisticated form of Zulu verbal art is performed.

The appearance of the latest CD of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who practice the *isicathamiya* music style, or of Phuzekhemisi (JZ Mnyandu), who practices the *maskandi* style employing praise poetry, often masks the fact that their songs still originate orally before being fixed on vinyl. Many other musical styles have followed and still follow the same pattern.

Apart from the discovery of new forms of oral tradition, scholarship has focused on issues of creative genius and the function of oral tradition. New developments in oral performance and new initiatives in research are inevitably linked to the democratization of South Africa. *Sangoma* (traditional healer) practices have always been vibrant with singing, healing rhetoric, praises, and suggestive names of medicines. Now these practices are finding their way into formerly "white" suburbs. Singing, whether in

various religious groups or in political and trade union forums, now obviously operates in a context of freedom. One result of this situation is that such performances have become increasingly commemorative and celebratory. The function of praise poetry has similarly expanded. The commercial music industry is creating new celebrities in music styles such as *maskandi*, *mbaqanga*, and *kwaito*, styles that have a traditional base, while the songs in these styles are often created orally. Despite prevailing poverty, numerous rites of passage take place all over South Africa. Rural people observe these rites not only to comply with belief and to solicit divine protection, but also to entertain themselves.

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