

## **Pleading for clemency through poetry: discursive issues in the 1906 Poll Tax Rebellion**

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The praise-poems are so embedded in Zulu social life that no proper appreciation of them is possible without a knowledge of the social system and culture that gives it direction.<sup>1</sup>

The major thrust of this paper is to analyze a poem (Shwele Baba - 'Forgive us, Father'), published in the isiZulu language newspaper, *Ilanga Lase Natal* (Natal Sun), edited by John Langalibalele Dube.<sup>2</sup> A close and systematic analysis of the poem will be a prism for understanding the 1906 rebellion by the AmaZulu of South Africa against the then imperial British government. In analyzing the poem with the goal of identifying its historical, political, cultural, and even economic imports, I employ the framework of language and power (Fairclough, 1989). The analysis of the poem will also show that the AmaZulu's aphorism of death being about modernity and life, about tradition, is a cultural reality. It is through this tradition that Dube had to plead for clemency after the

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<sup>1</sup> James Stuart. *Izibongo: Zulu praise-poems*. (Translated by Danile Malcom, edited with introductions and annotations by Trevor Cope) Oxford, Clarendon Press, 17.

<sup>2</sup> He was born in 1871. In 1887 he went abroad to the United States of America with a Natal missionary W. C. Wilcox of the Congregation of the American Board Mission. He studied at Oberlin College for five years, doing odd jobs in order to finance his education. While abroad Booker T. Washington profoundly influenced him. He also founded Ohlange Institute Industrial School in 1904 along the lines of Tuskegee Institute of Washington in Alabama. T. V. Bulpin. *Natal and the Zulu Country*. Cape Town, Cape and Transvaal Printers Limited, 1966, 338.

Dube was popular known amongst amaZulu as Mafukuzela. *Fukuzela* (a verb) means: lift the head up continually, as a person bobbing along under a heavy load; hence, be heavily laden, with a burden, load of ornament, passion, be strenuous, exert one's-self, to do any thing; be heavy with clouds, as the horizon, when a storm is at hand=*Hloma*, but be stronger. See Rev. J. W. Colenso. *Zulu-English Dictionary*. P. Davis and Sons: Maritzburg and Durban, 1884. p. 144. uMafukuzela: an energetic person. See R. C. Samuelson. *King Cetuywayo Zulu Dictionary*. p. 111. UMafukuzela: praise-name of Dr. John L. Dube. See *English – Zulu, Zulu – English Dictionary*. Compiled by C. M. Doke, D. M. Malcom, J. M. A. Sikhakhane and B. W. Vilakazi (Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg) p. 475. I feel tempted to point out that, "it is common in Zulu society to have both one's real name and a praise name or names. Praise names often describe one's heroic achievements or outstanding quality of behavior". Thus Dube is referred to as uMafukuzela - the one who works tirelessly or an industrious man. See Mazisi Kunene. *Emperor Shaka The Great, A Zulu Epic*. Heinemann: Johannesburg, 1979, p. xxviii.

genocide of the AmaZulu by the colonial army, when people were massacred for exercising their right not to pay the tax imposed by Imperial Britain for the running of a so-called modern state without an African participation.

As it will be shown in the analysis of the poem, Dube used a western means of communication (writing) but utilized a model from the popular culture of the indigenous people – praise poetry. Dube’s newspaper was widely circulated beyond the borders of Natal and Zululand. Reading the letters sent to him by the readership of the newspaper indicates that the newspaper was most popular amongst the black people. During the period under discussion, people would gather together and listen to those who were literate read the newspaper to them. People were interested to hear what Dube had to say about various issues including the 1906 events. Judging by the letters sent to the editor it is clear that the readership of *Ilanga* newspaper was inspired and mobilized by Dube’s writings. Thus, the editor became the mouthpiece of amaZulu, he represented the voiceless. *Ilanga Lase Natal* provided the black people with a forum where they aired their views/grievances and engaged in dialogue with one another. It served as a new *ibandla* – council/assembly whereby men discussed various issues related to governance, administration, family matters, topical issues and many other matters. Thus *Ilanga* created a space for the voiceless to be heard.

Dube published letters in the newspaper that were critical of the colonial state. People wrote letters, commending him for the good work that he was doing of discouraging them to fight against the colonial state. There were many letters published in the newspaper. Some of the letters were critical of the colonial state, and the publication of these letters might indicate that Dube’s attitude was also highly critical of

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the state. Other reader's letters encouraged Dube with his work of informing the black people about issues that were important to their communities. These letters came from Natal, Zululand and beyond these borders. One letter published in January 7, 1907 was about how black people that could not read and write would gather together for the educated to read to them the news from the newspaper. The letter written by K. Masondo specifically mentioned the 1906 upheavals. Those blacks that were not involved in fighting wanted to be informed about the war. It is within this context that he published the poem because he knew that the newspaper had a wide readership. Letters of protest published in the newspaper became prevalent towards the end of 1907 against the treason trial of Dinuzulu the Zulu king. These letters were in response of Dube's reportage, and most stated that the king was innocent. Through *Ilanga* Dube managed not only to enlighten the Zulu people about the social-political plight, he also suggested the way forward. By considering the social, political, and historical facets of the oppressed people and implicitly condemning the oppressors.

Dube's reportage on the 1906 events is a monumental work which recorded the memories of the people at the time of upheavals. His written words added to the rich culture of orality amongst the black people. Dube's writing in the newspaper about this great event in the history of amaZulu at the turn of the century provides us access today to the African perspective on the events of 1906.

This paper examines how Dube moved to the center of an organized resistance against the killing of black people by the colonial settlers by using his pen. It analyzes the strategy he employed through the use of metaphoric language in engaging the brutal state. His work allows us access to the voices of the past which were silenced. Reading

Dube's rich text is like archeological work by historians in modern times which "has given forgotten voices a place in historical accounts and has helped build new images of ideas about history".<sup>3</sup> Dube's poem was a political protest and also a political mobilization of the oppressed against violence orchestrated by the state against them. The poem is what Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson define as the "political expressions of common people".<sup>4</sup> It must be stressed that the poem has what James Scott called "hidden transcript". The poet pleaded for clemency for the two leaders on one hand. The poet was also critical of the colonial state against black people but in a subtle way. On another level the poem was a prayerful struggle. Through the newspaper the poet had the institutional power of making people listen to him and he knew about it. Dube as a poet was multi-vocal which helped to strengthen the message to his people and also talking on their behalf to the authorities. The poem calls upon public knowledge to strengthen its power.

The poem was addressed to the Governor of Natal Colony, Sir Henry McCullam. Though the newspaper was written in isiZulu and English, the editor wrote the poem in isiZulu because as a Zulu, he decided that the most effective language in which to plead for the rebels, Mjongo and Mjuju, was IsiZulu, their own native tongue. On the other hand it seems that the Governor was not the only intended audience, as it will be indicated below in the analysis of the text. Dube was aware that some of the colonial officials knew the Zulu language and culture and that they would understand the plea for clemency. They knew the popular culture of praise poetry of amaZulu so the poem was an appropriate medium for the plea.

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<sup>3</sup> Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (eds), 'introduction,' in *Rethinking Popular Culture. Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies.*, University of California Press (1991), 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

## **The 1906 Rebellion**

The Poll Tax, the source of the rebellion, was promulgated in September 1905.<sup>5</sup> The £1 annual tax,<sup>6</sup> was imposed on all adult males, 18 years and over, who were not liable for hut tax (this tax was paid by married men). The actual date for the commencement of the collection of the *imali yekhanda* – the poll tax - was January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1906. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1906, Henry Smith, a farmer, was stabbed to death at his home in Umlaas Road at Camperdown because he had forced his workers to pay *imali yekhanda* in advance. On February 7<sup>th</sup>, iNkosi (Chief) Mveli warned the magistrate of uMngeni Division T. R. Bennet, who was collecting the tax, about the presence of twenty-seven men of his chiefdom who were armed with spears. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, the Natal Police arrested the men they were looking for at Trewirgie farm, owned by Henry Hosking, a white settler, in the Richmond area. When the crowd demanded their release, a conflict ensued leading to the killing of one black man by a white policeman. The killing of the black man resulted in the killing of Sub-Inspector Sidney Hunt and Trooper G. Armstrong by the group of blacks who had refused to pay the poll tax.

Two days after the death of the white policemen (February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1906), the Governor, Sir Henry McCallum, proclaimed Martial Law in the Natal colony. One thousand troops, under Lieutenant – Colonel Duncan Mackenzie, were sent to the trouble spot and on February 13<sup>th</sup> the area was searched and the homesteads and crops were

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<sup>5</sup> Shula Marks. (1970). *Reluctant Rebellion: the 1906-08 disturbances in Natal*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 144.

<sup>6</sup> James Stuart. (1913). *A History of the Zulu Rebellion, 1906 and of Dinuzulu's Arrest, Trial and Expatriation*. London: Macmillan, 99- 100.

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destroyed. On the following day two blacks were arrested, tried by court martial, found guilty, sentenced to death and were publicly shot. Another twenty-three were court-martialed in Richmond between March 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 1906. Twelve of them were sentenced to death and were shot in public in the presence of black people (who were summoned by the colonial government to witness the killing) from various chiefdoms on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Their leaders Mjongo and Mjuju sustained injuries during the fighting but were captured and hospitalized. Their prosecution was widely opposed. Even the British government strongly opposed the prosecution. The British government tried to intervene but was prevented by the fact that the Natal Colony had been granted self-determination and could therefore decree its own laws without the approval of the British government. For the same reason, Britain opposed the declaration of the Martial Law but to no avail.

The 1906 'rebellion' by some sections of the AmaZulu against the British colonial administration of the Natal Colony started in the small town called Richmond, in the south-east of Pietermaritzburg in February 1906. The rebellion started because of the defiance in paying the Poll Tax by some chiefs and their people and other black people in various parts of the Natal Colony and Zululand. As it will be elaborated upon later in the paper, there were incidents that took place prior to the open fighting between the colonial forces and the AmaZulu under the leadership of some chiefs. The actual fighting took place in Mpanza valley, 25 kilometers north-west of Greytown. The rebellion then moved across the uThukela River which was a boundary between the Natal Colony and Zululand at the boarder town of Nkandla. Later the fighting came back to the Natal Colony in KwaMaphulo County (see above map for the exact location).

It is vital to give a brief synopsis of Bhambada, and the chiefs and prominent leaders that supported him because they are all mentioned in the poem. Without this synopsis the poem will not make sense, and it will help to put the poem into context. It is also significant to know how these leaders and chiefs were related to the Zulu kingdom because this kind of relationship carries a lot of weight according to the Zulu culture.

### **Bhambada's history**

Bhambada (the protagonist of the 1906 rebellion) was born around 1861, he took over the reins of the amaZondi chiefdom “on 6<sup>th</sup>, June 1890”, and he was in constant conflict with his neighboring white farmers. Most of his people lived on white farms and as a result he had problems with “mainly Afrikaner landlords”. The tension is well illustrated by the historian Marks who notes that “between 1901 and 1906 Bambatha was involved in thirty separate and financially crippling criminal and civil cases, actions, many of them over his failure to pay rent”.<sup>7</sup> On April 5<sup>th</sup> 1906 Chief Bhambada Zondi attacked the white soldiers escorting white women and children from Keate's Drift to Greytown and this marked the beginning of the 1906 fighting. Important *amakhosi* – chiefs - and other influential people supported Bhambada.

### **Chiefs and prominent leaders supported Bhambada**

Among the rebellious chiefs was iNkosi (Chief) Mehlokazulu Ngobese. He was the eldest son of Sihayo, an independent-minded and brave Usuthu supporter who was

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<sup>7</sup> *Reluctant Rebellion*, p. 201.

killed at Mome in 1906.<sup>8</sup> Sihayo and his son, Mehlokazulu, remained loyal to the Zulu kingdom from the days of King Cetshwayo to those of his successor, King Dinuzulu. The name Mehlokazulu means 'the eyes of the Zulu nation'. They both rendered valuable military service to the Zulu nation. Like his father, Sihayo, Mehlokazulu was very loyal to the Zulu monarchy but “had a long history of conflict with the authorities, both Boers and colonial”.<sup>9</sup> The conflict had culminated in the Anglo – Zulu War started because of Mehlokazulu’s ‘conduct’. Stuart, writing about Mehlokazulu’s ‘conduct’, notes, “In July 1878, Mehlokazulu led a party of men into Natal, seized two women who had fled from Sihayo’s territory, took them back, and put them to death. The incident was magnified by Sir Bartle Frere into the pretext for the British invasion of the Zulu kingdom in January 1879.”<sup>10</sup>

Another supporter was iNkosi Sigananda Shezi, who was believed to be about one hundred years old in 1906 “and recognized by some colonial officials as the ‘king’ of his small territory”<sup>11</sup>. He ruled the Shezi people in the amaChube chiefdom in the Nkandla division. He headed a tiny chiefdom with a significant history in regard to its relationship with the Zulu state. The traditional Shezi ruling lineage had never broken up because King Shaka had never conquered them.<sup>12</sup> iNkosi Sigananda was connected to the Zulu monarchy because his grandfather, Mvakela, had married a sister of Nandi, Shaka’s mother.<sup>13</sup> iNkosi Sigananda had taken part in King Shaka’s wars as *udibi* (mat and

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<sup>8</sup> Jeff Guy. *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom: The Civil War 1879 – 1884*. University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1994, 249.

<sup>9</sup> *Reluctant Rebellion*. p. 219.

<sup>10</sup> Webb, B. de C. and Wright, J. B. *The James Stuart Archive*. Pietermaritzburg and Natal, 1976, Vol 4. 234.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Carton. *Blood from your children, the colonial origins of generational conflict in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2000. p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*. 34.

<sup>13</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*, 208, *Reluctant Rebellion*, 210.

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luggage bearer).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the *abakwaShezi* were “traditionally workers in iron and principal spear makers to the Zulu royal house, to whom they were intensely loyal”.<sup>15</sup>

Sigananda’s participation in the 1906 rebellion was very crucial because of his long history with the Zulu kingdom. His support of Bhambada in 1906 implied to the colonial government that Dinuzulu the Zulu king was behind the ‘rebels’. As indicated in the history of Siganda’s chiefdom, he has always been a strong supporter of the Zulu state. He sided with and fought on the side of Cetshwayo’s uSuthu against Mbuyazi’s iZigqoza during the great battle of iNdonakusuka, on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1856. He also fought for King Cetshwayo during the Zulu War (1879). King Cetshwayo fled from his kingdom and was given refuge in iNkandla in 1883, when Siganda “sheltered Cetshwayo”.<sup>16</sup> In 1884 during the battle of Kotongweni (Zulu Civil War) he fought on the side of Dinuzulu in the war against Zibhebhu kaMaphitha. In 1888 he refused the government’s call to ‘furnish a levy’. Furthermore, he was once given refuge “after the Zulu civil war”<sup>17</sup> by Chief Mancinza (Bhambada’s father) when the Shezi chiefdom had problems, for about fourteen or fifteen years. He had “personal knowledge, of the reigns of the old Zulu kings Tshaka, Dingana, Mpande and Cetshwayo”.<sup>18</sup>

INkosi Meseni Qwabe was also one of the prominent chiefs that supported Bhambada in 1906. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, iNkosi Meseni was the head of the amaQwabe chieftaincy in kwaMaphumulo, Lower Thukela, Indwedwe and Inanda divisions.<sup>19</sup> The amaQwabe chiefdom was “one of the most ancient and famous tribes in

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<sup>14</sup> Donald R. Morris. *The Washing of the Spears*. London: The Caur Press, 1966, 611.

<sup>15</sup> *Natal and the Zulu Country*. 427.

<sup>16</sup> *The Destruction of the Zulu Kingdom*, 251.

<sup>17</sup> *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 4, 31

<sup>18</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*, 209 – 10

<sup>19</sup> *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 5.. 22, *Ilanga lase Natal*, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

Natal and Zululand”. Qwabe was son of Malandela, who “flourished probably at the beginning of the sixteenth century”.<sup>20</sup> Although Malandela indicated his wish that Qwabe should be his successor as chief, a dispute arose between Qwabe and his younger brother Zulu, who moved to a new *umuzi* near Babanango. Eventually Zulu became the more prominent chief, and from his lineage came Shaka, effectively the founder of the Zulu royal house. The dispute between Zulu and Qwabe filtered down the generations, and the Qwabe and Zulu chiefdoms were traditionally hostile. It is noteworthy that the events of 1906 had the effect of uniting them (Qwabe and the Zulu kingdoms).

INKosi Ndlovu kaThimuni Zulu headed a branch of the Zulu chiefdom in 1906. He was an *inkosi* of tremendous influence in his chiefdom and surrounding areas, who sympathized with the so-called rebels. His influence emanated from his ties with the Zulu monarchy.<sup>21</sup> Ndlovu kaThimuni Zulu was the chief of the Zulu people in kwaMaphumulo division.<sup>22</sup> He was the grandson of Mudli<sup>23</sup>, whose brother was Senzangakhona (Shaka’s father).<sup>24</sup> He was related to Dinuzulu, and “a Chief with considerable influence in Maphumulo division”.<sup>25</sup>

Another of the prominent leaders who threw his lot behind Bhambada was Mangathi Ntuli. He was from the Ntuli chiefdom, which had a long-standing association with the Zulu kingdom, dating from the time of Senzangakhona (King Shaka’s father). Mangathi kaGodide kaNdlela in his heyday was the “most important personage in the

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<sup>20</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*, 345.

<sup>21</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*, 346.

<sup>22</sup> *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 4. 233.

<sup>23</sup> , “His grandfather Mudli played a prominent role in public affairs in the Zulu chiefdom in the time of Senzangakhona”. See *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 4 , 233.

<sup>24</sup> Robert C. A. Long, *Long ago*. Durban, 1929, 157, *The James Stuart Archive*. Vol. 4 p. 233.

<sup>25</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*. 346.

Zulu nation”.<sup>26</sup> His grandfather Ndlela was a Prime Minister of King Dingane.

Although not a chief of the Ntuli people he was one of the most influential people in the Ntuli chieftaincy because of the role he played in the Zulu kingdom. He once acted as *induna* – headman for King Cetshwayo<sup>27</sup>

Among the many other leaders was Chakijana Sithole. He was a controversial character; he was iNkosi (Chief) Bhambada’s lieutenant during the 1906 events. His real name was uSukabekhuluma but he was better known as Chakijana. The meaning of his name (Chakijana) is “the cunning weasel who shares the honours with Unogwaja, the hare, as the trickster of Zulu folk-lore.”<sup>28</sup>

### **The nature of the conflict**

The war itself was like a guerilla war. Those who did not want to pay the poll tax left their homes and joined the triumvirate (Siganda and Mehlokazulu) leadership under Bambada at Nkandla in Zululand. The actual fight was not resisting the government; it was resisting paying the poll tax. There was no force used by those who did not want to pay poll tax, but the magistrates reported them to the army. The army then attacked the people, which led to the fighting known as the 1906 rebellion. When the group at Nkandla was brutally crushed, the colonials believed that the resistance had been put down, instead the fighting spread to kwaMaphumulo, south of uThukela River on the soil of colonial Natal which was a white settlement area. Siganda surrendered and handed himself over to the colonial army. Mehlokazulu was killed during the fight.

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<sup>26</sup> *Reluctant Rebellion*, 222 – 224.

<sup>27</sup> *Reluctant Rebellion*, 207.

<sup>28</sup> See T. Cope. *Izibongo, Zulu Praise Poems*. (1968) Clerdon, 74. For his history see his biography, Andreas Z. Zungu. *Usukabekhuluma and the Bhambatha rebellion*. (1997). (Translated by A.C.T. Mayekiso). Durban, South Africa : CSSALL

According to the colonial sources Bhambada was killed at Nkandla but the rumors continued until this day that he fled to Mozambique.

### **Who was Dube?**

Dube was not only an *ikholwa* - believer (Christian) was also a politician, journalist, educationalist, author, interpreter (of the desires and ambitions of his people), businessman, nationalist and a human and civil rights advocate. The roots of this highly complex man were traditional, a highly significant factor in understanding his philosophy. He was one of the founding members of the Natal Native Congress, a for-runner of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC). In 1912 he was elected to be the first president of SANNC, which later (1923) became the African National Congress (ANC), the current ruling party of South Africa, since the all-race democratic elections of 1994. He founded the newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1903, which is still in existence. It was a bilingual paper published both in IsiZulu and English, but Dube chose to publish his poem only in isiZulu. This was the only poem that Dube published at this period about the 1906 rebellion. It should also be stated here that there was no other poem from the readers about the 1906 rebellion that was published in the newspaper. This could be attributed to the Zulu culture – there is only one poet for the King or Chief. According the Zulu culture a praise poem is a like a mirror because it reflects everything that has happened. The poet is exempted to state in public everything that the king has done. The poet has a license to speak the unspeakable.

The poem under discussion in the paper was published long after the rebellion was over. The rebellion took place from April to the end of July 1906.

### **Petition on behalf of the nation**

#### ***Shwele Baba*<sup>29</sup>**

1. Sishweleza kuwe baba Sir Henry McCullam,
2. Sitayizela kuwe lu Siba Lukulu,
3. Sitandaza kuwe ndlunkulu,
4. Sikuleka kuwe luhlanga lwezwe,
5. Siti shwele ndlamadoda,
6. Wena odle u Bambata ka Mancinza, kwa ngaba ndaba zalutho,
7. Wadla u Sigananda wa kwa Shezi, kwangaba ndabazaluto
8. Wadla uMehlokazulu eMome, kwangaba ndaba ndabazaluto
9. Wadlokovula ao Meseni ka Musi, wabuye wenza isisa
10. Wabamba ao Ndlovu ka Timuni
11. Nge sidlozana, wabodla,
12. Bubesi elikonye e Mgungundlovu
13. Kwe tuka o Mafukuzela bao Dube,
14. Weza nao Gobizembe nao Kula,
15. Waba wehlisa imifuyana baye
16. Bema emva kwe zintsibi:
- 17. SHWELE NDLUNKULU.**
18. Sishwelezela ao Mjongo no Mjuju,
19. Bodla baba, nangomuso ku
20. Sayozenzela wena, baba.
21. Sicela banga buluwa,
22. Izinja zako baba ziyacela.
23. Pakamisa ingalo ye sihle.

#### ***Forgive us***

1. We appeal for your love and kindness Sir Henry McCallam,
2. We appeal again and again to you a man of authority,
3. We pray to you son of the King,
4. We appeal to you who is the son of the land,
5. We are asking forgiveness you who have power to destroy / wipe out even our men,
6. You who “ate up” (destroyed) Bambatha son of Mancinza, there was no outcry,
7. You who “ate up” (destroyed) Sigananda of the Shezi people, there was no outcry
8. You who “ate up” (destroyed) Mehlokazulu at Mome, there was no outcry
9. And you destroyed Meseni the son Musi, yet you were merciful
10. Afterwards you held Ndlovu the son of Timuni
11. By his throat, and you forgave,
12. The lion who growls at the shelter of the mighty elephants<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ilanga lase Natal*, September 21 1906

<sup>30</sup> This could also be translated as: The lion who growls at Pietermaritzburg. Mgungundlovu is a Zulu name for Pietermaritzburg which was the seat of the Natal Colonial government. As the poem was

13. That amazed Mafukuzela the son of Dube,
14. You came back dragging on the ground Gobizembe and Kula,
15. And you made them cross little rivers
16. And they stopped at the fortresses of ntsibi:
17. ***DISPLAY MERCY YOU OF THE HOUSE OF POWER.***
18. We are pleading for Mjongo and Mjuju,
19. Forgive them man of power, even tomorrow this may
20. May happen, and your kindness maybe called for.
21. We ask for your forgiveness, may they not be executed,
22. Your humble servitors appeal to you.
23. Lift up the arm of mercy.

### **The poetic tradition**

It is important to understand at the outset that this poem is written in the language of a longstanding oral tradition, in which isiZulu oral poets would use the language of powerlessness (made up of terminologies that describe them as dogs line 22 in the Zulu version) in order to show the power asymmetry between them and the Omnipotent Zulu king. To most western critics, the language seems degrading. However, among the AmaZulu, this kind of language shows not only deference but also uplifts the institutional power of the Zulu King as well as the social and political structures of Zulu society. The language is rich in such literary devices as idioms, metaphors, similes, metonyms and proverbs that often defy adequate and appropriate translation into any other language. (A good example is line 22, the literal translation is: Your dogs father appeal to you) The semantic and pragmatic density inherent in the poem renders its analysis inadequate at best.

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addressed to the Governor Sir Henry McCallam whose government was based at Mgungundlovu, “the shelter of the mighty elephants” could be Pietermaritzburg.

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Dube adopted the role of *imbongi*<sup>31</sup> – bard for the amaZulu - but in a more modern way, using the latest technology (print media) of the time. It is interesting to note the difference in various regions in Africa: in Southern Africa this role is the duty of men e.g. amongst the speakers of IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele, (South Africa), SeTswana (both South Africa and Botswana) and SeSotho (both South Africa and Lesoto).<sup>32</sup> It is also a political domain for countries like Swaziland, Mozambique, Malwai and Zambia.<sup>33</sup> However, in West Africa it is duty of both men and women and for specific families to carry on the poetic tradition (in South Africa it is for anyone gifted).<sup>34</sup>

Just like a shield and a spear have come to be an embodiment of Zulu tradition, praise singing is an ancient art, which has been practiced for centuries in Africa.<sup>35</sup> This poem is striking because it brings together the traditional isiZulu and colonial forms of expression. It is a major source of South African historical and political facts because it unmasked the repressed voices about 1906 that were silenced by the mainstream historiography. In the colonial histories there is not a single source that ever mentioned the black petition against the killing of those regarded as the enemy by the settler government. The poem portrays Dube as both the artist and interpreter of reality from the actual knowledge of facts of the 1906 events. In this artistic form of playing with words Dube left the naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves of the brutality of the state and misery and suffering of this people.

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<sup>31</sup> *Imbongi* is a person whose vocation is to utter in a loud demonstratory voice the praises of kings, heroes and ancestors. See R. C. Samuelson. *King Cetywayo Zulu Dictionary*. (1923). Durban: Commercial Printing Company, 34.

<sup>32</sup> See James Stuart. *Izibongo: Zulu praise-poems*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> See Vail, L. and L. White (1991). *Power and the praise poem : southern African voices in history*. Charlottesville London, University Press of Virginia; James Currey.

<sup>34</sup> See D. T. Niane. (1965). *Sundiata: an epic of old Mali*. (Translated by G.D. Pickett). London: Longmans, Camara Laye. (1989 c1954) *The dark child*, (with an introduction by Philippe Thoby-Marcellin). New York : Hill and Wang.

The literary devices in this poem cannot, however, be traced only to isiZulu oral tradition. They are also the products of the author's Christian background and western education, as can be seen in the biblical phraseology of asking for mercy such as in phrase line three "we pray." The combination of traditional isiZulu and Christian/missionary influences indicates one of the apparent anomalies of Dube's situation - the search for a compromise or integration of the two strands—traditionality and western modernity. The rich language of this poem indicates that Dube had not forgotten his roots as a Zulu. This could also be the reason that he was pleading for the nation, and therefore he had to borrow from the elders and use their language. In the rich oral culture of amaZulu, there is no doubt that Dube had a gift of the spoken word as portrayed in the poem. The words in the poem carry weight and eloquence in the sound and he selected them very carefully. They mark Dube's standards, cultural competence, and class identification, yet they are rooted in the African setting.

### **Language and power**

Specifically, I show that Dube uses language to index power. For instance he uses metaphors of power by selecting certain words that express his views about the power structure of the colony. In particular, his use of such words as *Baba* (in several lines and perhaps more importantly in the title of the poem), which means father, to refer to the governor, not only indexes the power relations between him (the governor) and the mass of Zulu (the populace), but also indexes the cognitive and emotional power and cultural relations between a father and his children. In Zulu society, a father corrects but does not excessively punish a rebellious child. His plea for clemency shows Dube

admitting that it was wrong for black people take up arms against the colonial government, therefore the Governor, as father should show mercy to his children.

Through his use of the language of power/powerlessness, Dube gives a voice to the majority of the 'silent' or 'voiceless' black people. Through the use of a 'pen' he gives a voice to otherwise silenced populace. By establishing a newspaper he created a space for the muted not only to be heard by the powers that be, but to make their plight known. A close and systematic analysis of the poem discloses the hidden transcript in the power of language in AmaZulu politics in particular, and Colonial South Africa in general. The analysis of this poem also gives insight into the views of Dube, the mouthpiece and loudspeaker of the disenfranchised black population and it also provides a prism for the understanding of the state sponsored violence that was unleashed on the people in 1906. I think the framework of Jacques Derrida speaks volumes when he argues, "the world of writing has its own life, and its textuality is part of how it communicates. It is spatial and visual, not simply oral. Language use recorded on paper has its own meanings, problems, and possibilities. One of its special features is that it allows repeated study and careful comparisons of different passages within a text".<sup>36</sup> Dube was no fool, he knew about all these aspects of recorded language, but he was making a political statement to the colonial officials.

According to Mazisi Kunene there is a difference between praise names and heroic poems or poems of excellence for the Zulu society or black people. He argues that the Western scholars regarded the poems of excellence as praise singing. He writes:

Poems of excellence are so designated because of their social strategy – namely that of elevating highest desirable qualities in society. They have been wrongly described as praise poems. However they do more than praise and are more complex. Rather, they

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<sup>36</sup> *Rethinking Popular Culture*, 48.

project an ethical system beyond the circumstances of the individual. Thus, individuals are heroes so long as they fulfill the roles defined for them by society. If they become arrogant and disrespectful of elders (guardians of social order) they are mercilessly lampooned and demoted. This is summarized in the saying: 'Never praise anyone when they are still alive'. The greatest exponents of this social doctrine are the poets whose freedom of speech is jealously guarded by society. The national poet is not a court poet who is hired by and speaks for the aristocracy, but a representative of the society.<sup>37</sup>

It is against this background that Dube appears as if he is praising the governor and his colonial forces that massacred AmaZulu. The pattern of the poem is the same as the heroic poems of kings, chiefs and leaders in a Zulu social system. Through the poem Dube is calling for clemency on behalf of Mjongo and Mjuju. Dube also shows how vicious the colonial state was in handling the race relations. The description by Mazisi Kunene that the poems of excellency are complex is very clear in Dube's poem. At a glance one might think that Dube was happy about the killing of his people and sanctioning the actions of the governor. Dube adopted a Zulu cultural, social and political form to persuade the governor not to kill only two people. This seems to be ironic that Dube had to appeal for only two people when thousands of AmaZulu were already dead at this time. It makes one conclude that Dube was not only addressing the governor but also cautioning his people not to fight again. He seems to be suggesting that they could change the political landscape through the use of a pen rather than physical fighting, because European modern weaponry decimated to his people. Dube's strategy of addressing different audiences with one piece of writing shows his intelligence; he did not want to jeopardize his relations with either of the parties. The use of the hidden language was meant for the colonial officials, Dube's readership would have no problem in understanding the message. Dube employed the day-to-day metaphoric language that the illiterate (according the western phenomenon of reading and

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<sup>37</sup> Mazisi Kunene. *Emperor Shaka The Great, A Zulu Epic*. Heinemann: Johannesburg, 1979, xxviii

writing) were familiar with. This is how the ordinary people speak; they do not use the simpler forms because of a rich culture.

### **Writing and performing**

One of the famous strategies in most African languages is the use of indirectness. The speaker will carefully select words that will have a double meaning or use a metaphoric language. The speaker might appear as saying something else especially to those who are not familiar with the culture. In his book, *Black Skin, White Mask*, Frantz Fanon argues that a person's world is structured by his or her language. Access to multiple language broadens a person's awareness of the world. Likewise, a person derives power from the ability to express the world in his or her own terms in a native language. Thus, the editions in the newspaper brought words into life. Dube's words alone cannot do justice to their beauty and the power behind them. He translated the essentials of great design to the requirement of traditional isiZulu praise singing. It must be noted that praise singing in a Zulu culture is of great importance. When it is performed it involves a lot of expression-like movement, the rising and falling of the voice, and other paralinguistic strategies including facial expressions and other forms of body language. All these give a lot of meaning and messages, and Dube was aware of this when he wrote the poem to the head of the colonial government. There is no doubt that subjecting this predominantly verbal art form to writing renders it impotent somehow, due to the fact that tone and paralinguistic aspects of performance are often not adequately rendered in print as they are in oral performance. However, Dube's use of the written medium could be viewed as a strategy of using an important political tool, literacy, often associated with

the west. Thus, by resorting to literacy instead of orality, Dube was able to use the Westerners (colonialist's) own tool against the system that was brutal and oppressive.

One of the strategies that Dube employs in the poem is speaking in we-ness. Dube uses strategic pronoun choice to indicate inclusion or in-group status as he narrates a historical significance of the time. The first five lines use the form 'we', and there are eight total instances of this in the poem like lines 18, 21 and 22. The use of 'We' in the opening lines is very significant. Dube portrays the power he has to speak to the governor. He is not speaking alone but is petitioning on behalf of the nation. It should be noted that the praise singing is not only for the living but it is also on behalf of the ancestors. In Zulu culture not everyone has the right to speak to the ancestors on their behalf, but only an elder who has been chosen by other elders because of his wisdom and honesty. Dube, as an editor, is playing that role. His wisdom also lay in his knowledge of the Zulu tradition, Western culture, as he was educated in the United States, and also being a Christian priest. His use of the plural form instead of the singular makes him a representative of his people, the amaZulu. Thus, he establishes himself as someone speaking for his people and hence acting as a link between them and the colonial government. Though it is a protest poem, the spirit of reconciliation is characterized throughout the poem. Dube's voice in the poem articulated a multilayered struggle of black people.

He combines both Zulu and Christian aspects when he appeals for clemency for the two leaders. In his request for clemency Dube used the word appeal four times, by employing different isiZulu words that denote a plea or appeal. These words can be loosely translated as: appeal, salute, and ask. The governor is referred to as: the father;

pen; great house; son of the land; eater of men; lion; devourer; arm that has mercy; and destroyer. These nomenclatures have several political and socio-cultural implications. They have relevance for Zulu chieftaincy, the power of the chief over lives of the subjects, and the chief's ability to show mercy in the midst of adversity and pandemonium.

Dube alludes to the heroic actions and the mightiness of the colonial forces that crushed the Zulu leaders following the order of the governor – this is a speech form that is unique to amaZulu in particular in poems of excellency for chiefs or kings. By appropriating the historical facts, Dube is able to give credence to the point about the governor's power and his ability to punish at will or to forgive.

The poem maps Dube's engagement with the dilemmas of resistance for black people in their country and documents his response to these dilemmas. Dube found himself engaged in a strategic, religiously, culturally and politically inspired aspiration for his people without alienating his white colonial officials. Teasing out the issues of the poem it trace out Dube as a visionary pragmatic who wanted reconciliation between amaZulu and the white settlers. The richness of the poem is that it offers identity, resistance and reconciliation in times of violence and it charges hope for all.

### **1906 was genocidal to AmaZulu**

The leaders Mjongo and Juju of the Richmond incident were wounded during the earliest (February) fighting and were put in the hospital to heal. It was against this background that Dube appealed on their behalf through the poem. The results of the events of 1906 to Dube were catastrophic. This is well captured in this passage from his

newspaper:

This country has recently passed through a critical period, over 3,000 black people have been killed not accounting for burnt homesteads, confiscated cattle, and hundreds who are orphans by reason of this war which has just ended. Blacks are asking the cause of this war. Some say there was no cause, they say the blacks were well treated and that it was their foolishness that led them to rise against the Government. Some say it is due to the blacks having grievances, and had they been ruled well they would not have rebelled. For all these reasons therefore the Government has selected a Commission to enquire into and to ascertain the truth of the matter.<sup>38</sup>

His appeal could be understood against this background, the damage caused to Zulu society as a whole. The nakedness of the state violence was felt far and wide by the black population. The death toll was half the number of the casualties. Dube attempted to protect his fellow-countrymen against further loss of life, this time, by focusing on the two leaders who were to be persecuted for the incident that had taken place early in February 1906.

He adopted the strategy of using Zulu heroic poems because some of the colonial settlers were linguists who understood this traditional parlance. They (the settlers) would have understood this kind of genre better and might therefore have consider clemency for the two leaders, especially after those who had taken part in the later 1906 events had been brutally trampled upon. Dube was praising the might of the colonial government by praising the Governor, Sir Henry McCullam, and with that praise he put forward a request, asking for clemency, for those charged with the crime.

Through the poem, Dube was able to summarize the history and politics of the trauma of the tragedy of 1906 on behalf of those who had been brutalized and

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<sup>38</sup> *Lelizwe lisandu kudlula esikahthini esinzima, okubulelwe abantu abazi 3 000 ngaphandlthe kwa makaya ashiswayo, nezinkomo ezdhlwayo, nezi nkulungwane ezi izinkedama ngenxa yayo lemp siyini? Abanye bati kwa kungeko sisusa, bati abantu babe petwe kahle kwaba ubupukupuku kubo ukuba bavukele umbuso. Abanye bati kuya ngoba abantu benezikalo, nxa babepetwe kahle babe kahle babe ngeze bahlubuka. Ngako konke loku Umbuso ukete Ibandla loku hlola no fumana iqiniso ngale ndaba. See Ilanga lase Natal, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1906.*

dehumanized, using a reconciliatory tone. He played the role of a rail engine, hoping to pull the rest of the blacks out of their predicament. The powerful message is projected in a manner that implies that the massacre of those who resisted was justified; the editor advocated no vengeance. Like any other forms of black expression, language can be viewed as both political and cultural. Language can either promote group strength and cohesion or contribute to the spread of disunity and confusion. There is no doubt in my mind that Dube attempted the former, which I believe he was able to do after the killing of his people in 1906. In times of adversity, language serves as a survival mechanism to unify people, reaffirm the correctness of their worldview and provide an unconscious defense against the incursions of the brutal colonial system.

The rich tradition of the chiefdoms of Natal and Zululand form the background against which Dube wrote his poem, and by implication he used this powerful tradition to reinforce his plea. Unfortunately, all the pleading and lobbying did not help; Mjongo and Mjuju were also executed like their followers in September, their sentence was passed by the Supreme Court.<sup>39</sup> Even the British government failed to save Mjongo and Mjuju from the violence of the Natal colonial settler state. Six years later (1912) the first liberation movement in Africa was formed – the African National Congress. Perhaps it was realized that the era of chiefs was over, and to fight for the liberation of blacks against colonialism after the crushing of 1906, blacks needed a movement to fight the white domination. As already mentioned John Langalibalele Dube became the first President of the organization. To show his popularity amongst the black population he was elected in absentia as the president.

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<sup>39</sup> *A History of the Zulu Rebellion*. 125.

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