

Book review: "Black mamba rising"

Sitas, A (Ed) (1986) Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle
Durban: Worker Resistance & Culture Publications.

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One of the most important things to remember when reading Black Mamba Rising, a collection of worker poetry by Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Malange, all members of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local, is that the poems by and large are intended for public performance as opposed to private, leisurely reading. Studying the poems quietly in one's study, one is therefore not receiving them as they were intended to be received. Furthermore, in the case of Qabula's and Hlatshwayo's poems, one is reading them in translation as they were originally written in vernacular and therefore some of the resonances and layers of meaning have probably been lost in the transition. Despite these two drawbacks, however, this anthology is well worth reading and it marks an exciting step forward in worker poetry. The three poets in different voices dwell on the same themes: the struggle against oppression and exploitation in

Psychology in society, 1988, 10, 106-110

which the praises of FOSATU, then COSATU, together with those of individual heroes are sung.

This anthology has a very focussed aim which can be roughly summarised as follows: to regain "the dignity of the working class. The dignity that has been slain countless times. The dignity that has been buried in countless forms. The dignity needs strong cultural foundations. We shall build them".¹ It is refreshing to see that the importance of cultural work in the struggle towards liberation from oppression and exploitation is stressed, and, furthermore, that the vital necessity to control one's own cultural work is recognised: "This makes us say that it is time to begin controlling our creativity: we must create space in our struggle - through our own songs, our own slogans, our own poems, our own artwork, our own plays and dances. At the same time, in our struggle we must also fight against the cultural profit machines".²

With the aims clear, how does the poetry in this collection go about trying to illustrate them? Many of the poems fall within the imbongi or praise poem genre with a difference however, in that traditional images are galvanised to the struggle versus racism, oppression and exploitation, bearing witness to a tension or unease unlike the sense of stasis and security conveyed by traditional imbongi. Sitas explains this well:

"Through such 'paradoxes', Hlatshwayo achieves something peculiar: he creates a 'turbulence', a 'restlessness', and through rapid contrasts he undermines the traditional imbongi form. If one compares this with the structures of composition in imbongi poetry (of the poetry of Jama, Dingane, Shaka, etc) what is destroyed is the calm authority of the wholesome world - a world whose meaning were unambiguous; a world whose cosmology was adorned with metaphors comprising of sturdy subjects".³

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Thus is the traditional genre suitably modified to describe present conditions of South African working class life.

Another common thread linking the three poets are the calls to the divine and frequent Biblical references, evidence in Hlatshwayo's case of his involvement in the eCibine (St. John's Apostolic Church). These divine invocations and exhortations marry well with the high formal style of the praise poem resulting in some passages which have a definite biblical ring to them:

"On our side are your
Brothers even at the new
Jerusalem
Let it be workers! They say,
The heaven above also approves".

(from 'The Black Mamba Rises')

While such passages call workers to look forward to a promised land, other poems invite workers to imagine a past, pre-lapserian Africa, notably Hlatshwayo's "workers' Lamentation for Ancient Africa":

The harvest ceremonies
Recall
Marriage ceremonies
Recall in our struggle
That Spirit
When we were a community of concern
One in grief
One in joy
Maye!
Maye Africa!"

The poet looks back wistfully to a (mythical?) time of cultural dignity and social coherence and looks angrily at what has become of this unity. However, by calling on the paradisaical myth of African Hlatshwayo shows a short sightedness not evident elsewhere in his poetry:

"From: our crowded dawn trains
From: the yawning queues of the unemployed
At the labour offices
Can the real African
Resurface?"

The problem arises with the word 'real' - the Africa of today is one version of reality but not the one the poet desires. 'Real' Africa for him is one long lost, which perhaps never existed, but which is nevertheless 'real' for Hlatshwayo in that it is the one he chooses to construct. In comparison Malange, a product of the 1976 student revolts, has no such illusions, preferring a flatter, more prosaic style of writing.

An interesting, if thorny, debate this anthology has raised - as witnessed in the response to one review in Weekly Mail - is that of aesthetics. One correspondent objected to the "patronisingly high praise" bestowed "on passages of very minor achievement. This kind of thing does harm - not least to black poets, both accomplished and aspirant. Its main message to them is: 'The best is not for you'."⁴ This anthology, to my mind, is not so much concerned with crafting 'fine', 'difficult' verse as aiming to share with as many workers as possible creative effort and vision in a tradition that would be familiar to many in the audience. Another voice in the debate refers to these poems as "slogan poetry nothing more than praise poems to selected organisations, like the praise poets of old that sang out to monarchs in blind faith, in spite of their injustices".⁵ This is to deny the rich metaphorical texture of much of the poetry, its freshness and immediacy - so, for instance, in "Praise Poem to FOSATU" which perhaps by nature of its subject could be expected to lean towards slogans and the formulaic:

"You're great FOSATU
Bayetel
Amandla kubasebenzi"

one will also find:

"You moving forest of Africa ...
You are the hen with wide wings
that protects its chickens".

Similarly, "The Tears of a Creator" in praise of COSATU which ends "Woza 'misebenzi; woza COSATU; woza freedom!" also includes the passage

"We have rebuilt its head
We lathed its teeth on our machines.
The day this head rises
Beware of the day these teeth shall bite".

To see these poems merely as slogan poetry is also to deny their flashes of humour - in "Praise Poem to FOSATU" there is a damningly funny interchange between 'baas' and worker conducted in fanikalo

"You are a good muntu
Mina bhilda wena 6 room house
lapha lohomeland kawena.
Thatha lo-machine gun, vala logates
Skathi wena buka lo-union
Bulala lo-union".

Judging from the energy, anger and sense of solidaritority conveyed by these poems, it seems then that this collection is one of what one hopes will be many further responses from the mamba that that has been "tease(d) ... in its/Century old sleep". (The Black Mamba Rises).

FOOTNOTES

1. Black Mamba Rising, p72, extract from talk for FOSATU'S Education Workshop, 1985.
2. Ibid, p69.
3. Sitas, A. (1986). 'A Black Mamba Rising: an introduction to Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo's poetry', Transformation 2, 50-61.
4. Weekly Mail, March 20 to March 26, 1987.
5. Ibid.