

Translating an African Praise Poem

‘IPHI INKOSI U MZILIKAZI’ (THE PRAISES OF KING MZILIKAZI)

adapted for performance by ALBERT NYATHI (1962–)



In this unit of work you will read and translate some poetry in a language that you probably do not know and may not even have heard of. The language is called isiNdebele and it is spoken by about one million people in southern Zimbabwe and some parts of South Africa.

Although most modern African poetry is written, there is a strong oral tradition that persists to this day. One traditional form of poetry is the ‘praise poem’ in which a performer sings the praises of an important living or historical person. The poem you are going to translate in this activity is an adaptation of a traditional Zimbabwean poem in praise of Mzilikazi, who was a King of the Ndebele people in the 19th century.

I

Before we can start looking at the poem we need to understand the background to it.

Divide into groups to research the following topics:

Group 1 should research Zimbabwe and its peoples, especially the Ndebele people. The group should find out what they can about isiNdebele (the name of the Ndebele language) and present the class with some examples of isiNdebele speech.

Group 2 should find out as much as they can about who the historical figure of King Mzilikazi was. You will need to find out where he was born, about Tshaka Zulu and Dingane, the story of his journey from South Africa and settlement in Zimbabwe, and why Mzilikazi might be an important figure to modern Ndebele people.

Group 3 should find out about traditional poetry in Africa so that the class can understand what praise poetry is. You should report particularly on what a 'griot' or 'imbongi' is and give the class some examples of what a praise poet might do.

Your teacher will suggest some websites where you can begin.

Research your topic, then make an interesting presentation to the rest of the class.

II

Now it's time to 'meet' the poem you will be translating.

Your teacher will play you a clip of Albert Nyathi, who wrote this adaptation of the traditional poem, performing his version of THE PRAISES OF KING MZILIKAZI in Ndebele.

The text of the poem is below. (You need to know that it changes slightly from performance to performance.)

The first time you hear the poem, just listen. Then listen to the poem again. This time see if you can identify the parts of the poem when the pace quickens and slows, grows louder or softer, or other parts where the performance is particularly dramatic. Discuss in your group when these moments happen. What is the general impression you get of Mzilikazi from the tone of the poem?

IPHI INKOSI U MZILIKAZI

Bayethe!

Wena weZulu

Ndabezitha

UMzilikazi kaMatshobana

Utshobatshoba lingangoyise uMatshobana

Ndabezitha

Bayethe!

We makhosi abeNguni

Lin oButhelezi

Lin oZwelithini

Lin oMswati

Lin oKhayisa

Uphi uMzilikazi kaMatshobana

Utshobatshoba lingangoyise uMatshobana

UMzilikazi kaMatshobana

Umkhatshwa wakoZimangele

Okhatshwe ngezind izinyawo langezifitshazanyana
wal ukudl umlenze koBulawayo
Inkubela abayihlabane ngamanxeb uZulu

Inyang abathi ifile Zulu
Kanti ithwasile
Ithwase ngonyakana kaMpeyana
Ubando abalubande balutshiya Zulu
Inkomo ezavulinqama ngezimpondo
Ngoba zavul iNgome zahamba
Wena owathi usagodla weluleka
Mzilawegazi kawulandelwa
Owulandelayo uyazibambelela
Kwahlehla uTshaka
Kwahlehla uDingane
Abanye bakhwela izintaba
Kwathi abofokazana bangena ezimbalwini
Bayethe! wena weZulu
Ndabezitha.

Utshobatshoba lingangoyis uMatshobana
Ibhidi elimnyama ngomlomo
Elithethwa ngezinyembezi zamadoda
Umfitshane wakithi onjobo kazinyathelwa
Kanti ezabade ziyanyathelwa
Ezabade nguTshaka kaSenzangakhona
Ezabade nguZwide kaLanga
Inkwenkwez ende ilesilimela
Ilang elaphum endlebeni yendlovu
Laphum amakhwezi abikelana
U mzaca omnyama otshayizinkomo, watshaya amadoda
Utshani bude busemahalihali
Bothi nyakana butshayo
Buyotsha lemitsha yamadoda
Imbabal egxakaz ematsheni

Iyesab inzipho zay ukonakala
Wemba ngomkhonto
Wemba ngenduku
Bayethe!

Inkal umahamba lugege
Ezindlini zika baba
Yithi laba esesidliswa imbuya ngoluthi
Ikanti layo inyama sesiyidlela eluthini
Bayethe Mzilikazi!
Bayethe nkosi yamakhosi
Ndabezitha
Wena weZulu

III

Now you can start working on your own translation (or 'version') of the poem in your groups.

To help you, here is what translators sometimes call a 'trot' – a literal translation. The paragraphs of the trot match the stanzas of the poem but the language is not very poetic!

Praise be to you, man of Zulu ancestry whose name is Mzilikazi, son of Matshobana – we salute you!

All you Nguni kings – Buthelezi, Zwelithini, Mswati, Khayisa...

We ask you, where is King Mzilikazi, son of Matshobana? Where is he gone to, King Mzilikazi of Matshobana? Mzilikazi, son of Matshobana, who was born of Simangele, who was filled with wanderlust. Accompanied by those with both long and short feet, he went to Bulawayo. He refused to eat meat from the hindquarters of animals pierced by Zulu spears.

The moon they said was in eclipse arose. It arose a long time ago, during the time of Mapeyana. He is the Zulu firebrand. He is the bull that fought and gored open the ram's stomach, because he opened the Ngome forests and left. The trail of blood was not to be followed. Those who dare (to follow) do so in vain. Tshaka retreated. Dingane retreated. Some went to hide up into the mountains. Others not of royal blood sought refuge in caves. Praise be to you, man of the Zulu people...

As tall as his father Matshobana is our short one. His apparel and chief's insignia are not to be tampered with. He dares to trample on the mighty ones. The mighty ones are Tshaka, son of Senzangankhona, and Zwide, son of Langa, the night star with a long trail. The sun rose in the ear of the elephant, and black birds spoke to each other. The cattle prod was turned on men to scourge them. The tall grass that is found in the Kalahari desert – the day the tall grass burns, it will burn together with the men's regalia. A gecko that plays in between the rocks is scared of spoiling its fingernails. You who dug a hole with a spear, you who dug a hole with club – praise be to you.

The crab moves sideways in our fathers' houses. Is this really us, who are now living in squalor, eating meat with sticks, our pride taken away? Hail Mzilikazi. Hail king of kings! Hail, royal Zulu.

Translating this into English that works well will present us with a few problems. In your group, see if you can come up with some solutions to the following issues:

- The word BAYETHE is frequently repeated. In our 'trot' it is translated as 'Praise be to you...'

Are you happy with this as a phrase that will come up several times? If not, try to think of a better phrase that might catch the listener's attention.

- There are lots of names in the poem – not only Mzilikazi, but also the names of his father, of other kings, other important historical Zulus, etc. Some names have synonyms also. Make a list of all the names you can find.

In your group discuss whether you feel these names are important to the sound of poem. If so, think of the best ways to bring them across to a listener in English. If not, think of ways that you could shorten those sections of the poem.

- There are several unusual phrases in the poem. Read the following phrases back to each other:

He refused to eat meat from the hindquarters of animals pierced by Zulu spears.

The sun rose in the ear of the elephant, and black birds spoke to each other.

The cattle prod was turned on men to scourge them.

A gecko that plays in between the rocks is scared of spoiling its fingernails.

The crab moves sideways in our father's houses.

Discuss what you feel these phrases may mean. In your group agree how you might translate these phrases in your English version.

You can feel a little bit free to interpret these phrases – isiNdebele is a very metaphorical language and even people who speak the language might disagree on the exact meaning. So you have some freedom when you make your English versions.

IV

Now you can go back to the top of the poem and see if you can write a version that works in English.

Before you start, you might want to discuss in your group how you want to proceed. Do you want your version to sound like an exact and faithful imitation of the original? Or are you going to change the style – to a more European style of poem, a more modern poem? Are you going to let the poem speak for itself, or do you feel you need to build in some explanations for an audience that might not be familiar with the story of Mzilikazi?

Translators always have freedom – freedom to change the shape of the poem, and in this case freedom to alter it to make it work as an English poem. And what you want, in the end, is a poem that ‘works’ as a poem in English.

Draft out your English version. Then, work back through your poem thinking about what devices work in a performance poem. You might like to introduce sound effects like alliteration, or use repetition, or choose language that helps the reader speed up and slow down at different points in the poem.

At this point you could go back to the original and see if the bits that really work in your version match the ‘intense’ parts of Albert Nyathi’s original.

V

As the final stage of seeing if your poem works: in your group, rehearse and perform your poem to the rest of the class.

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