

Teachers' notes

Translating 'THE PRAISES OF KING MZILIKAZI' A traditional Zimbabwean praise-poem adapted & performed by ALBERT NYATHI

For Years 7–9



This task asks students to think about how they would go about translating a poem that is not only in an unfamiliar language but also in a cultural form that is unfamiliar and that may itself need 'translation'.

The poem itself is very simple, however. If the teacher can get past the cultural unfamiliarities with the class then students can have fun replicating the dramatic and rhetorical performance style of the poem. There are a number of possible outcomes: a recognizably faithful rendering of the poem, a 'culturally transferred' version which takes a different form or perhaps approaches the subject from a different angle, or even just free and imaginative writing in which students compose poems in praise of icons they may be more familiar with.

Stage I

For most students there will be a bit of 'baggage' to deal with and introducing the activity might need some imagination and preparation in the initial stages. There may be a need to build in some research time – and perhaps stage 1 is a homework activity.

It's suggested that students could divide into groups to research aspects of the cultural background they may need to translate the poem successfully. This could be undertaken cross-curricularly and involve history and geography departments as well as languages/ English.

One group of students (along with the geographers?) should find out about Zimbabwe and its ethnic peoples, focusing especially on the Ndebele people and isiNdebele, the language. There is plenty of information on the web. A starting point might be:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Ndebele_language

They could track down the speakndebele.com channel which now exists largely on youtube, eg:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0N3OKBkf0M&index=2&list=PL5RxGmF0lQ0zhQY6uA0EbdzF6V3eb0>

The isiNdebele language is related to Zulu and therefore has 'clicks' so they could have some fun pronouncing some words with c, q or x sounds ('iqaqqa' = polecat) for the rest of the class.

Another group of students (perhaps in collaboration with history colleagues) should find out who Mzilikazi is and speculate as to why he is a significant figure to the Ndebele people. This might take in a bit of South African history (the Shaka Zulu dynasty, etc, the arrival of the Boers, Cecil Rhodes etc). Again there is plenty of material out there on Mzilikazi and his son Lobengula – start with <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mzilikazi>. Tech-friendly children will not find it hard to find.

A third group might find out about poetry in Africa, particularly traditional oral forms, and specifically the tradition of praise poetry in African societies. Again there is plenty of material out there. If they use search terms like 'griot' they will track down plenty of material about West Africa but directing them to the word 'imbongi' will help them find

out important things about Southern African praise poetry. On the web there are also some schemes of work in regard to writing praise poetry aimed at younger children, eg:

<https://www.youngwriters.co.uk/pdfs/African%20Praise%20Poetry%20-%20Key%20Stage%203%20Lesson%20Plan.pdf>

An obvious outcome for this group might be to write some praise poetry about themselves, their friends, their head teacher, celebs etc and perform it to the group.

Stage II

In stage II the students can encounter the poem in its original form. At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hno7AJmAyaQ> the poem is introduced and performed by Albert Nyathi himself. In this clip he starts by talking to an audience in Kwazulu Natal and explaining the connections between the Zulus and the Ndebele people. It may be the students could listen to this, or just go forward to the poem which starts around 3.40 minutes in. In some ways it is nice to watch him transfer from general chat to his electric performance of the poem.

Students can follow the text which is printed. If they do they need to understand that there is some improvisation involved and it's not word for word. They might discuss the 'performance' elements – the energetic sound effects of the original – and the audience response – cheering and whistling. What needs emphasising is that that is the effect they are after when they write their own versions.

Stage III

In stage III the students are given what we call a 'trot' – a literal version of the poem, which will sound stilted and undramatic to them. There are some exercises and questions that are designed to get them started.

They are asked to think about how they might deal with the repeated 'Bayethe!' word that starts the poem; how they will deal with all those unfamiliar names; how they will deal with some of the vivid metaphors; how they can introduce various sound effects and devices to make their version vivid. They can work on these in groups and perhaps discuss them in a plenary session before they move on.

Stage IV

By this stage we hope the students can go about making their own versions. Before they go any further, though, they need to decide whether it is best to imitate the original – to make a ‘faithful’ reflection of Albert Nyathi’s version, which is of course already a modernization or an adaptation – or whether if they are performing to an audience which is not familiar with the conventions or the story they need to think about it in a different way and transform it in shape as well as language.

Stage V

Once they have written their versions they can complete the task by rehearsing and performing to each other.



A web-search will reveal plenty more information about Albert Nyathi and his work. Nyathi is a poet who customarily performs with a band behind him and there are many clips on youtube.

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