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In praise of the Zulu muse: The portrayal of BW Vilakazi in modern Zulu poetry

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This paper examines the portrayal of BW Vilakazi in selected contemporary poems written in isiZulu. What emerges from a close and judicious analysis of these poems is what seems to be a shared belief among established and budding Zulu poets that Vilakazi plays the role of a sustaining and inspiring muse. Therefore, the main concern of this paper is to examine the conception of the muse that is both implicitly and explicitly articulated in these poems. While focusing specifically on Zulu poetry, the paper examines the conventional and historical conception of the literary muse and its re-interpretation in the context of modern African literature. The main purpose of this article is to show how the selected poems reflect a conscious re-definition and re-conceptualisation of the Western concept of the muse to suit the African (in this case Zulu) culture and belief systems. With remarkable consistency, the spiritual figure of the departed poet emerges as a national source of imaginative and creative writing in the poems selected for this article. In the poems selected for this paper, the notion of the muse, which is traceable to Greek culture, has been successfully re-interpreted to resonate with the African experience and context.

Introduction

Benedict Bhambatha Wallet Vilakazi (1906–1947) is generally regarded by literary critics as one of the pioneer writers who placed Zulu literature on the literary map in the 1930s and 1940s. Although he also wrote novels and critical essays, it is primarily as a poet that Vilakazi is remembered and admired (Nyembezi, 1961; Ntuli, 1984; Ngwenya, 1998; Peterson, 2000; Attwell, 2002). My central aim in this paper is to examine the ways in which Vilakazi is portrayed in modern Zulu poetry.¹ In particular, the paper focuses on the representation of Vilakazi as an inspiring spiritual figure or ‘muse’ in contemporary Zulu poetry. As CT Msimang reminds us in his book *Izimbongi Izolo Nanamuhla Vol 2* (1988), more than fourteen poems on Vilakazi have been published in different anthologies and volumes of Zulu poetry (Msimang, 1988).² Zulu writers who have composed poems on Vilakazi’s monumental achievements as a writer and scholar include prominent Zulu poets such as HIE Dhlomo (in Visser & Couzens, 1985), EHA Made and HIE Dhlomo (1949); JC Dlamini (1988); DBZ Ntuli (1975); Mazisi Kunene (1982); TM Masuku (1989) and ZLM Khumalo (1990).

For the purpose of this exploratory paper, I have selected a few poets who have tackled the theme of Vilakazi’s symbolic immortality and his perceived role and function as the ancestral spirit (*idlozi* or *ithongo*) who inspires, nurtures and encourages the younger generations of Zulu poets in their creative endeavours. In a critical essay on the poetry of Vilakazi, Ngwenya (1998) dealt exhaustively with Vilakazi’s own prescient understanding of his role as an inspirational and ground-breaking pathfinder in Zulu creative writing. Vilakazi was acutely aware of the role of the muse in inspiring his own creativity as shown in the

second stanza of his poem ‘The Muse of Learning’ (*Ithongo Lokwazi*):

*Ngiphe, ungcaphunele namuhla
Kuleyo ndebe oyigcin’ ethala lobuzwe,
Ikhono lokugcoba phansi lokhw’ engikuzwayo,
Ngibekel’ izimfaba nezinkedama zikaNdaba.
Udum’ akulwami, kodwa ngolwakho wedwa –
Laph’ umuntw’ ebeyini, angazith’ udumo
Engaluphakelwa nguwe kulawo magobongo
Nezimbiz’ ezithule, zingakathintwa muntu?
Niyacela Thongo likaNdaba!*

‘Dear Muse! Impart to me today
Your knowledge of my people’s heritage,
That I, endowed with power to record it,
May pass it on to Zulus yet unborn!
No fame I covet! – Glory is yours alone,
For what is man that he should merit honour!
So let me drink this nectar from your vessels
And calabashes never impaired or tarnished!
O, hear me, I implore you, Muse of Ndaba!’

(Vilakazi, 1973: 34)

Part I: Short poems

The central argument in this paper is that, in contemporary Zulu poetry, Vilakazi is often presented as playing a role that is equivalent to that of the muse or muses in classical literature and art. He has acquired an almost mythic status as ‘the ancestor of contemporary Zulu poets’ (*Usethathwa njengedlozi lezimbongi zesimanje*), to use Msimang’s (1988: 163) words. That Vilakazi has become the Muse of Zulu poetry is confirmed by HIE Dhlomo, another gifted Zulu

writer who was his contemporary, but who chose to write in English. This is how Dhlomo describes Vilakazi in his elegiac poem, *Benedict Wallet B. Vilakazi, M.A.*

How beautiful and mellow are the tones
Of tribal bards! Who sang, unsung, unknown,
Melodic strains that stand memorial stones
Upon their bones ... so proud to call our own!
.....
But in these latter days feared we the Muse
Our country had forsaken, and the fuse
Of Inspiration damped, removed and shattered!
Until thou Poet of rare genius uttered
Word-wrought fireworks! Amazed, we stood to scan!
Then felt we like a barren sour old man
To whom in his despair is given a son;
Entranced, we boasted, 'Look! At last, the Sun!
(HIE Dhlomo, in Visser & Couzens, 1985: 339)

Significantly, in this poem Vilakazi's emergence as a 'Poet of rare genius' who utters 'word-wrought fireworks' is attributed to an unidentified muse or inspirational force. The poet's use of the sun metaphor suggests the phenomenal power of Vilakazi's own creative talent. In the myths and belief systems of most ancient and contemporary cultures the sun is often depicted as having boundless power to sustain and nurture growth in a variety of contexts. In short, Vilakazi the beneficiary and protégé of the muse, has been transformed into a muse in his own right. Thus he is rightly described as the 'great Vilakazi, Scholar, & deathless name!' in Dhlomo's poem.

Mazisi Kunene, another Zulu writer who wrote both in isiZulu and English, captures Vilakazi's inspirational and nurturing role majestically in his poem entitled 'A meeting with Vilakazi, the great Zulu poet':

Sleep tried to split us apart
But the great dream created a new sun.
Through its towering rays two worlds emerged
And our twin planets opened to each other.
I saw you descending from a dazzling hill,
Your presence filled the whole world.
I heard the drums beat behind your footsteps
And the children of the south began to sing.
They walked on the ancient path of the goddess
Nomkhubulwane
And the old dancing arena was filled with festival
crowds.
Your great songs echoed to the accompaniment of
the festival horn.
It was the beginning of our ancient new year
Before the foreigners came, before they planted
their own emblems.
I came to the arena and you held my hand.
Together we danced the boast-dance of our
forefathers
We sang the great anthems of the uLundi
mountains.

(Kunene, 1982: 56–57)

As shown in Kunene's poem which evokes both the Zulu cosmology and belief system, in ancient cultures of both Africa and the Western world, creativity had a significant dimension of divinity.

The idea of an inspirational spiritual figure called the muse is traceable to Greek and Roman mythology and to Hebrew culture. In Greek culture the concept of the muse refers to one of the nine goddesses who were daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (or Memory). Each presided over one creative activity or art. For instance, Erato inspired love poets, Euterpe was responsible for lyric poetry and Melpomene had tragedy as her field of specialisation (Hamilton, 1940: 37; Cuddon, 1979: 406; Spentzou & Fowler, 2002). The centrality of the divine in Greek culture is further confirmed by Chester Starr in his informative study of the lives of the ancient Greeks:

Into all aspects of life the Greeks interwove a deeply religious spirit to a degree which most of us today would find hard to understand. The drama, both tragic and comic, was directly connected with festivals of the god Dionysus at Athens; and much of the earliest poetry was composed to be sung at religious ceremonies. [...] In art as in daily life, Greek religion was essentially sane and encouraging, and it was a dominant force (Starr, 1981: 15).

Many Greek and Latin writers regarded inspiration as having some form of divine origin, and it became a literary convention for writers to invoke the assistance of the muse in composing epic poems. As Schwager rightly points out:

Poetic inspiration has something to do with the divine. The Greek tragedies are classic examples of that. The poets regarded themselves as inspired by the divine Muses, and in their works the gods are quite naturally present in the lives of human beings (Schwager, 1993: 2).

This convention is used to good effect in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as well as Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Hebrew culture, to which Western and African cultures are indebted in significant but largely unexamined ways (Mbiti, 1997), the *Holy Bible*, the greatest book ever written, is a product of divine inspiration. In both the Greek and Hebrew scriptures the muse takes the form of the Holy Spirit, as stated in 2 Timothy 3:16.

It is also worth noting that the themes of creativity and inspiration as well as the functioning of the creative imagination are central to the work of the British Romantic poets like Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats, to whom Vilakazi is indebted in various (also largely unexamined) ways (Nyembezi, 1961; Ntuli, 1984; Zondi, 1995). As Bloom and Trilling (1973) point out in the Introduction to *The Oxford anthology of English literature: Romantic poetry and prose*, High Romanticism in British Romantic poetry revolved around the idea (or complex set of ideas) called the Imagination:

Bewilderingly as all these poets used the term, what seems central is a common tendency in them (at their most concentrated and intense) to insist that the Imagination or creative power is autonomous. The implications of this autonomy are still being worked out in modern literature, but each major High Romantic poet either argues or sometimes

verges on assuming that the Imagination can both perceive and at least half-create reality and truth, far more reliably than any other mode of apprehension (Bloom & Trilling, 1973: 5–6).

Like the British romantic poets, Vilakazi seems to have been preoccupied with the source of his own inspiration as a poet as evidenced in his poems such as *UMamina*, *The Poet*, *Power of inspiration* and *The poet's prayer* (Koopman, 1980; Gunner, 1988; Ngwenya, 1998). It is hardly surprising therefore that he should be remembered as a figure that inspires other poets.

As shown in the poems selected for discussion in this paper, the idea of the muse takes on a slightly different meaning in Zulu culture and mythology as the muses in the Zulu belief system are not gods or mysterious spiritual forces, but the spirits of the ancestors who derive their power and authority from their achievements before their death. To be a subject of *izibongo* in Zulu culture, a person must have accomplished some heroic feat. The Zulu word *ingwazi*, which may be loosely translated as 'hero' in English, in its unmistakably military associations, captures the essence of heroism in traditional Zulu culture. As Msimang (1988) rightly points out, Vilakazi seems to have anticipated his own role as powerful inspirational figure in Zulu literature. This is particularly evident in his poem entitled *Isenanelo Eminyakeni Emashumimahlanu* (In celebration of fifty years):

*Lapho siyobuya sime,
Singen' ezinhliziyweni
Zabanye phakathi kwethu,*

...

*Siyobuya njengomoya
Wamathongo namadlozi,
Sifukamel' isikole.
Lapho wena mfana uzwa
Umoy' uwahlaz' ihlamvu,*

...

*Yebo kobe kuyithina,
Sikuphuphisa amaphupho
Amamathekis' ingane
Oyibon' izelw' ihleka
Engathi kuvulek' izulu
Evela kulona futhi.*

'Then shall we in truth return
And, like our own ancestral spirits,
Become the guardian angels of the college.
Therefore young reader, hear my voice
In echoing winds that stir the leaves
And whisper in the night around the house! -
For thus do we come back again
And bring to you the blessed dreams
That causes an infant's smile;
And is not such a smile divinely pure,
Brought by a glimpse of heaven whence it came,
Opening wide and wider yet?'

(Vilakazi, 1973: 73–74)

As mentioned earlier, there are many Zulu poems in which Vilakazi features as the main subject. Could this be a sign

that he has actually returned as promised? As we shall see, most of these poems are elegies in which Vilakazi is implicitly or explicitly identified as a beneficent spiritual force presiding over the growth and development of Zulu literature in particular, and African literature in general. Most of these poems use Vilakazi's full names as their titles. Titles such, as *UBhambatha kaMakhwatha*, *Bhambatha*, *U Dr B.W. Vilakazi*, are common. There are also references to his academic qualifications either in the titles or in the body of the poems. Characteristically, these poems begin with references to Vilakazi's untimely death and the irremediable loss suffered by the Zulu nation as a result; Vilakazi is then praised for his ground-breaking achievements in the fields of creative writing and literary scholarship. The speakers in these poems often refer to Vilakazi's symbolic immortality and his spiritual role of proving guidance and creativity to aspiring poets. It is also worth noting that in some of these poems Vilakazi is shown to be in the company of other distinguished writers including Greek, Roman and English poets.

A poem which best exemplifies the recurrent thematic features of these eulogistic or elegiac poems is MM Ndlanzi's poem, which has as its title the name of Vilakazi's first volume of poetry published in 1935, *Inkondlo kaZulu*. Utilising the literary convention of direct invocation, the speaker in Ndlanzi's poem addresses the spirit of Vilakazi directly:

*Mnumzane Bhambatha kaMakhwatha,
Nakhu ngimi ngikhuluma nawe,
Ngikhuluma noma ngingakwazi,
Ngingenakukubona ngesiqu,
Dlozi lamazwi obuhlakani.
Ngibonga umthombo phambi kwami,
Umthombo ogcwel' amanz' olwazi,
Uyamincika ngaphambi kwami,
Ungenza nginxanele ulwazi,
Ungenza ngizondelele' ukwazi*

'Bhambatha of Makhwatha
Here I stand talking to you,
Talking to you although I don't even know you,
Although I cannot see you in person,
Spirit with the words of wisdom.
I am grateful for the stream in front of me,
The stream is overflowing with the waters of
knowledge,
It is gushing forth in front of me,
It makes me yearn for knowledge,
It makes me want to know more.'

(Nyembezi, 1962: 55–56) (my translation)

In this poem Vilakazi's inspirational capacity is likened to a perpetually flowing stream from which poets can drink the invigorating and refreshing water of knowledge. Using the extended metaphor of the spring or fountain, the speaker in the poem describes the effect the work of Vilakazi has had on him as an aspirant poet. In the same poem Vilakazi is referred to as the spirit of the words of heroism (*Dlozi lamazw' obuqhawe*) and the ancestor of the book (*Dlozi lencwadi*).

The symbol of a water spring is a recurrent feature in most of the poems on Vilakazi. For instance, the spring

functions as an organising metaphor in Msimang's sonnet about Vilakazi. The epigrammatic couplet of the sonnet which encapsulates its central theme revolves around the symbol of the spring or ever-flowing stream:

*Lomthombo awusoze washa noma nini.
Lomthombo ungashiswa yini nje nempela.*

'This spring will never dry up, ever.
How can this spring ever dry up?'
(Msimang, 1980: 19) (my translation)

Msimang's short poem also conforms to the structural pattern of the Vilakazi poems outlined above. Its title implies that Vilakazi's achievements have rendered him immortal (*Vilakazi awuseyikubhubha*). The speaker in the poem tells the children of the Zulu people to stop mourning for Vilakazi, and cautions them not to seek him among the dead in Mariannhill, where he lies buried, but instead look for him on the mountain tops where he continues to inspire creative writers and scholars in Zulu culture and literature.

Like Ndlanzi, Msimang ingeniously plays on the titles of Vilakazi's works to develop ideas about his role as an inspiring muse. The following titles are mentioned in the poem: *Inkondlo KaZulu, Amal'ezulu, Noma Nini, Nje Nempela*. Msimang's deliberate use of these titles suggests that it is these works which guarantee his immortality as a trailblazing writer.

The well-known and respected Zulu writer and scholar DBZ Ntuli also acknowledges his indebtedness to Vilakazi in his poem published in 1969 entitled '*Bhambatha* (Dr B.W. Vilakazi)' from which the last two stanzas are quoted below:

*Kwathi phansi kwetshe lontunto nosizi,
Kwaqhum' isiphethu esingomiyo,
Kwehl'ubisi obelungenukwe,
Zasimama izintombi nezinsizwa zikaNdaba.
Ngiqhamuke zincwaba ziphum'imikhaba,
Ngabuza ukuthi kusindwaphi, zakhomba,
Ngaya ngindiza, ngampempehela,
Kanti ngizoloyeka, ngithwal'ishoba*

'Under the stone of deprivation and pain,
Gushed a spring that will never dry up,
And milk in abundance,
The lads and maidens of Ndaba were nourished.
I saw them looking content and well-fed,
I enquired about their source of sustenance and this
was pointed out to me,
I rushed to the spring and drank unceasingly,
Then I was bewitched and became a disciple.'
(Ntuli, 1969: 51) (my translation)

The notion that Vilakazi is an inspiring muse is perhaps most vividly presented in AG Khathi's poem entitled *Ngo-Vilakazi Esemafwini*, (On Vilakazi in the clouds). To provide a practical illustration of the rather elusive process of poetic inspiration, Khathi uses the image of a bird that is perched on the highest branch of a tall tree and is beckoning to its young to come up:

*Phezu kwamagatsh' emid' imithi le.
Uthe cwasha okwenyoni yezulu
Iqhweb' amaphuph' asenezimpikwana
Ebhahhalele phezu kotshan' ebuka phezulu
Lapho unin' ethe cosho ekhal' eqhweba kunje.
Nawe qhawe ubuqhweba, usasiqhweba Zulu.*

'On top of the branches of tall trees
Perched liked a bird of heaven
Beckoning to its young with small wings
Trapped in the grass below and looking up
Where their mother is calling them
You great hero, continue to call Zulus.'
(Nkabinde, 1971: 149) (my translation)

Part II: Longer poems

In 1949, two years after Vilakazi's death, EHA Made composed a long elegy simply entitled *UBhambatha KaMakhwatha* in his memory and honour. The main purpose of this long elegiac poem was to collect funds for the newly established Vilakazi Memorial Fund, which would be used to sponsor African students who wished to pursue their studies at tertiary institutions. The poem, originally written in isiZulu by Made was subsequently translated into English by his friend and contemporary HIE Dhlomo so that the copies which were sold to the public had both the English and isiZulu versions. What is remarkable about this poem is its eclecticism in terms of its imagery, symbolism and allusions. The speaker in the poem deliberately foregrounds Vilakazi's status as a poet who has set himself the task of combining the world views of traditional Zulu culture and Western modernity. Accordingly, the speaker in the poem sees no incongruity in juxtaposing heroes of classical Greek, Roman, British and African cultures.

On the strength of his achievements as a writer, Bhambatha (Vilakazi) is shown as having joined the company of other heroes in this poem. Thus the speaker pleads with him, in the opening section of the poem, to provide him with the necessary guidance and inspiration for the demanding task (composing the poem) he is about to undertake:

*Babikele wena,
Bhambatha, mnawami,
Makube nguwena
Othi wabenami
Sisahlab' insema
Silandela o Thema
Batshela oMilton
Batshela oDryden.
Ngibike kobaba,
Bikel' uMakhwatha,
Uthi ngiyesaba
Ukuwusingatha
Umsebenzi wakho,
Mangxa ngingenakho
Ukuvikelwa,
Nokunxuselwa.*

'Declare to them, make plea,
Bambatha, O my younger brother,

For thine the liberty
 The humble to defend:
 "Together we were young",
 Tell Milton, Dryden, all:
 That together we pierced the ball,
 Aped Thema mould our tongue."

.....

I pray for inspiration,
 Support and your protection.'

(Made & Dhlomo, 1949: 2)

Like other poems on the same theme, Made's poem is essentially a supplication or prayer for inspiration. There is no doubt in the speaker's mind that Vilakazi has joined the illustrious company of Greek, Roman, English and Zulu poets who preceded him and who influenced him in various ways. Thus the speaker mentions writers who have attained almost mythic status in the history of world literature such as Cicero, Milton, Dryden and others. The central assumption of the poem is that there is ongoing communication between the spiritual world of the departed poets and the physical world of living poets.

However, the notion of the muse in Made's poem, as in Vilakazi's own poetry, has distinctively African mythic and symbolic underpinnings. For instance, the communal ethos, which is a notable feature of African culture, is central to the concept of the muse in Made's poem. Although the poem is essentially about Vilakazi, his achievements as a writer and scholar are seen as forming part of the communal achievements of other black South Africans. Thus poetic inspiration and other manifestations of heroism are attributed to the collective effort of all departed African heroes, not just one individual, as shown in the following lines:

Mqhayi nawe Ntsikana!
Mafukuzela ninoMnganga!
Bokwe nawe Rubusana!
Plaatje ninokaMantshonga!
UBhambath' usengowenu,
Oselele nabakwenu!
Baprofethi nabaprofethikazi!
Memezani ivuk' iAfrika!
Zimbongi nezimbongikazi!
Qubulani yethuk' iAfrika!
Umhlab' owab' uxabene
Namuhla sewuhlangene!
Vumani ngezwi elikhulu
Kuze kudum' amazulu!
Hlokomani kuvume izintaba,
Kuvume nezingane zomhlaba!
Imibango ishabalale.
Izitha ziyokhophoza.
Sukumani nisivulele,
Sesivukile, siyeza!

'Thou Mqhayi and Ntsikana,
 Mafukuzela, Mnganga,
 And Rubusana, Bokwe,
 And Plaatje and Mantshonga,
 Your company now is Bhambatha;
 He rests asleep with blest your brethren.

Ye prophets gone, both men and women,
 Lift high your Voice, let Africa awaken.
 Ye poets of the Race, both men and women,
 Roar forth in thunder, Africa to [sic] shaken!
 Now here on earth where reigned confusion,
 We see fruits of fusion.
 With mighty voice break ye in music,
 Let heavens all resound in thunder!
 Ah! sing ye all till mountains echo;
 Yea, sing till earth-born children answer;
 Ah! then will cease our useless wrangling,
 And shy our enemies will stand confused.
 Arise! The gates for us all open!
 Awake is Africa and coming!

(Made & Dhlomo, 1949: 14)

There are obvious thematic and structural affinities between the stanza quoted above in Made's poem and Dhlomo's own elegy on Vilakazi in which the latter is described as 'sitting on the clouds and riding the ceaseless waves, immortal and at peace'. In its allusions this poem recalls Vilakazi's own poem titled *Imfundo Ephakeme* (Higher Education) in which the speaker refers to Cicero, Caesar, Shaka, Ngqika and Mshweshwe as heroes whose achievements are worth emulating. Like Made's poem quoted above, Dhlomo's is decidedly eclectic in his imagery and allusions:

'The Beauty that he loved and sang is one
 With him. He is beyond the stars and sun.
 Mamina, his imagined Love, doth kiss
 Him with immortal kisses, not of bliss!
 Like Beatrice guide she stands to him who made
 Love hermit pure while others love degrade;
 Goddess of Love, Nomkhubulwana, shakes
 His hand, while heaven with music wondrous
 quakes!
 Black bards and heroes greet their friend and peer;
 Great Shaka, Magolwana there appear,
 Mbuyazi, Aggrey, Dube, Mqhayi, ache
 To meet him – so Bambatha, his namesake;
 Not these alone, for here below he loved
 And spoke with long-haired bards, among them
 moved;
 Now Keats, his idol, whom he prayed to meet,
 Chaste Shelley, too, come forth our Bard to greet,
 And Catholic great Dante, Comedy
 Divine enjoying, smiles to meet and see
 A Catholic bard mate.'

(Visser & Couzens, 1985: 353)

The most recent and perhaps most substantive contribution to the growing repertoire of Vilakazi praise poems is ZLM Khumalo's *Igwalagwala LikaMakhwatha*, included in his collection of modern praise poems called *Amabhosho* (1990).³ Predictably, in this poem Vilakazi features as a 'writer' (*ithongo*) who has opened the gates of creativity for the budding Zulu writers to enter the realm of creative writing presided over by Vilakazi and other poets who preceded him. Accordingly, the young Zulu poet (*imbongi*) in Khumalo's poem triumphantly proclaims:

Avuliwe!
 Avuliw' amasango
 Evulw' inkunzi yakoGovu
 Ivulela izinkumbi zikaNdaba
 Izivulel' aluhlaza ukuklaba
 Aklaba ezeNkinsimane kuphela
 Besifanel' ukungadleli Mphephethwa
 Kakad' esihle kasidleli
 Sidlel' amaThongo oHlanga
 Besiyini ukudlela kuso
 Sikhala singashayiwe.
 IThongo loNsibande
 Elisu'susinga namadlingozi
 Elivul'umthombo wesizwe
 Wampompoza waphenduka uSiba
 Usiba lwesizwe sikaNtu
 Usiba lwesizwe se-Afrika
 Lwaphakel' amagugu kaZulu.

'They are open
 The gates are open
 They were opened by the bull of Govu
 For the multitudes of Ndaba
 Allowing them to graze in green pastures
 Formerly preserved for the stock of Inkinsimane
 It is hardly surprising that we were soon deprived of
 the beautiful vessel
 As the saying goes, a good vessel does not last
 It is soon snatched by the ancestors
 Who are we, poor mortals, to eat from such a
 precious container?
 The spirit of Nsibande
 That arouses determination and resolve
 That opens up the fountain of the nation
 That overflows and turns into a mighty pen
 The pen of the black race
 The pen of the African nation
 The pen that preserves the pride of the Zulu.'
 (Khumalo, 1990: 14) (my translation)

The last twenty-two lines (lines 600–622) of Khumalo's poem make a direct reference to his own role as a young Zulu poet and scholar who, like his contemporaries, is looking up to Vilakazi to sustain and inspire him:

Nyenyeza Thong'elikhulu
 Ilalel' inceku yakho
 Imi ngomumo nosiba
 Ukucobelel' ethongwaneni
 Ithongwana lamaThongo
 Ithongwana lendl' emnyama
 Ithongwana lezingane zakaNtu
 Ithongwana lamabuth' e-Afrika
 Iyohlal' ikhongozel' emafini
 Iyohlal' ikhokh' umkhonto
 Ukugwaz' amankengane.

'Whisper your thoughts, great spirit
 Your disciple is listening
 Ready with a pen
 To take down and preserve

In the great store of the ancestors
 The store of the black race
 ...
 The store of the children of Africa
 Your disciple will always look for you in the clouds
 Always ready with a spear
 To drive away predators.'

(Khumalo, 1990: 16) (my translation)

Conclusion

What emerges with striking clarity from this brief exploratory analysis of selected poems on Vilakazi is that the concept of the muse in Zulu culture is synonymous with *amadlozi* or *amathongo*. Therefore Vilakazi, together with poets who preceded him, had the task of shaping the growth and development of African literature. To accomplish this task, he had to work through young men and women who were prepared to listen to the whispers of the muse and turn those whispers into poetry.

Notes

1. While the main focus of the paper is on the poets who write in isiZulu, Zulu writers such as HIE Dhlomo and Mazisi Kunene, whose poems were published in English, will only be included to illustrate particular pertinent points.
2. Recent research on the work of Vilakazi indicates that there could be more than fourteen poems on the work of this prominent Zulu writer and scholar if one includes the poems of Zulu writers who chose to write in English and poems on Vilakazi published by lesser known publishing houses in the past six decades (1947–2007). It is also worth pointing out that Ntuli's (2007) anthology of poems on Vilakazi titled *uBhambatha KaMakhwatha eminyakeni eyikhulu* contains twenty poems.
3. Khumalo's collection of praise poems is truly pathbreaking in Zulu literature. Khumalo, a modern *imbongi*, has transformed the traditional genre of oral praise poems meant to be recited or performed into a written form while retaining the standard conventions of the traditional *izibongo*.

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