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## uMabatha: Decolonizing Shakespeare Using a Multi-Accentual Medium

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Despite being remembered as a key cultural work of the 1970s and as a popular work in Africa and abroad, as Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (2000) note, formal scholarship on Welcome Msomi's play, *uMabatha*, is scarce (164). Moreover, the scholarship that exists generally involves debates that result in irreconcilable viewpoints. Scholars are divided concerning how *uMabatha* operates; while some argue that *uMabatha* is part of a revival of Zulu culture (Fischlin and Fortier 2000, 166; Gunner 2000, 272), others contend that the play's connection to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* perpetuates white European cultural hegemony over South Africa (Etherton 1982, 106; Horn 1986, 214; Mlama 1991, 29). Meanwhile, Laurence Wright (2004) examines whether *uMabatha* is local given its incorporation of traditional Zulu practices, or global because of what he considers the simplification of Zulu traditions for the performances at the Globe Theatre (97). Yielding equally contradictory perspectives is the debate concerning whether the play is a traditional Zulu story or a translation of *Macbeth* (Wright 2009, 105). Although generating discussion, these debates often simplify and dichotomize the role of *uMabatha*.

By examining *uMabatha* in terms of binary oppositions (e.g. as *either* local or global, as *either* a Shakespearean translation or a Zulu play, etc.), some of the play's complexities are overlooked. For instance, these debates neglect the consideration of what Liz Gunner (2002) calls the "multi-accentual nature" of language, which she explains is its ability to assume various meanings depending on the social and historical context (260). Extending Gunner's argument, this paper will also consider the multi-accentual nature of *uMabatha* in terms of the social and historical context of its medium. It is important to note that *uMabatha* exists not as a static script, but rather as a dynamic work that has evolved from a script into theatrical performances and even into a radio drama. By exploring the social and historical context not only of the script's creation, but also of the medium of radio drama (into which *uMabatha* eventually evolved), it becomes clear that Msomi's work manipulates – rather than consents to – the colonial masters' controls over South Africans, namely Shakespeare and radio, in order to revive Zulu culture.

Although Shakespeare is an instrument of colonization, Msomi uses Shakespeare as a vehicle through which to rekindle Zulu culture and even take the colonizing force out of Shakespeare. Msomi's work negotiates a complex relationship between *uMabatha*, Shakespeare, and South Africa. Inescapably, Shakespeare embodies the culture of one of South Africa's former colonial masters. As Andrew Horn (1986) notes, "Shakespeare represents the literary and cultural pinnacle of the British Empire from whose colonial yoke the new nation had recently extracted itself" (209). Thus, Shakespeare's position in South Africa – as an icon of white European domination – became even more controversial

during apartheid, when *uMabatha* was written. After all, the similarities between *uMabatha* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are unequivocal. In fact, during an interview Msomi acknowledges that his script began with *Macbeth*, not the Zulu story of King Shaka (Newstok 2009, 75). He explains that he wanted to write something Shakespearean, and it followed that "[the Shakespearean play] that would fit in well with the Zulu history would be *Macbeth*" (Newstok 2009, 75). In short, *uMabatha* translates stories of the Zulu royal family into *Macbeth* (Newstok 2009, 76, emphasis in original). Despite the fact that the plot of *Macbeth* mirrors infighting of the Shaka royal family, such a blatant use of Shakespeare – especially during apartheid – raises questions about the extent to which Msomi simply acquiesces to the white European cultural capital of Shakespeare.

Linguistically translating and culturally transposing *Macbeth* from English to Zulu traditions is one way in which Msomi decolonizes *Macbeth*. In an interview, Pieter Scholz (Msomi's colleague) explains that actors would not speak Shakespeare's lines in English "with any assurance and conviction" (Wright 2009, 112). Scholz implies that the Zulu translation of the play resonates better with black African actors and audiences (Wright 2009, 112). Another way in which Msomi avoids simply yielding to the colonial masters' culture is that he does not sacrifice Zulu culture and history by translating the story of King Shaka into *Macbeth*. In fact, the Shaka family is "very happy, because [Msomi] never deviated from the traditions and the customs of the Zulu people" (Newstok 2009, 76). Speaking more broadly about Zulu audiences, Msomi suggests that his play receives positive responses because of its focus on Zulu history and cultural traditions (Newstok 2009, 76). For instance, the opening scene of *uMabatha* is not only localized through the use of the vernacular, but also by replacing the three witches (from *Macbeth*) with three sangomas, which are African healers (Wright 2009, 113). All of these Zulu transpositions contribute to how *uMabatha* decolonizes Shakespeare (Fischlin and Fortier 2002, 165). Again, as Gunner suggests, the meaning of a work is dependent on its social and historical context. Thus, although elements of Zulu language and culture operate within a scaffold of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it must be noted that during apartheid it would be unlikely (if not impossible) for Msomi to use anything but the colonial masters' instruments (e.g. Shakespeare) for the purposes of decolonization.

As previously noted, *uMabatha* does not exist solely as a script and, in fact, its evolution into a radio drama further emphasizes the way in which Msomi's work uses the colonial masters' instruments of control to revive Zulu culture. Like Shakespeare, radio was a part of South African cultural life that was dominated by whites and was typically used to serve the interests of the colonizers. As a result, Zulu radio became a "political pawn" (Gunner 2000, 224)

and a way of disseminating propaganda (Horn 1986, 214; Gunner 2000, 226). More specifically, during the 1970s, Zulu radio was “a heavily racially stratified and radically hierarchical organization with African language radio securely ... in the hands of the architects of apartheid” (Gunner 2002, 263). Structurally, for instance, each radio station corresponded to the language of a different nation in South Africa; in this way, radio encouraged a heightened linguistic consciousness and, in turn, a national consciousness of segregation (Gunner 2000, 244). Radio censorship was particularly strict when *uMabatha* was produced during the early 1970s, because language was a means of social control (Gunner 2002, 268). The radio station on which *uMabatha* aired during the early 1970s, Radio Zulu (now called UKhozi FM, one of nine publically-owned stations in South Africa) was no exception to strict censorship; for instance, one of the station’s newscasters, Thokozani Nene, warned listeners that he was reading prepared scripts, not expressing his own opinion (Gunner 2002, 269). Given the apartheid-driven censorship practices and segregationist policies during the early 1970s, Msomi’s choice to use radio (i.e. the white elite’s means of control) as a medium through which to revive Zulu culture and decolonize Shakespeare must be more closely examined.

Given strict censorship, radio might seem like an odd medium through which Msomi attempted to rejuvenate Zulu traditions and culture. Radio in South Africa, however, is what Gunner (2002) describes as a resistant medium. Radio drama in particular is not as heavily censored as news broadcasts and even popular music because of its marginal existence as a lower art form and less-politicized genre (Gunner 2000, 228). During the 1970s, censors did not realize the impact these dramas were having on listeners; for instance, it was not anticipated that *uMabatha* would be “remembered by many South Africans both black and white as a key cultural event of the 1970s” (Gunner 2002, 259). Furthermore, many radio dramas employed techniques that were considered “escapist methods” that were merely tolerated by the white controllers at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (Gunner 2002, 271). Amidst the harsh political climate of apartheid, these transgressions or “escapist methods” likely contributed to the fact that radio drama serials in Zulu were more popular than anywhere else in Africa. Gunner suggests that other countries have their own forms that accomplish the same “releasing of cultural energies outside the nexus of the elites” as radio dramas do for Zulus (Gunner 2000, 236). Overall, Msomi’s choice to air *uMabatha* on the radio does not indicate his subservience to white-imposed systems (e.g. radio), but rather demonstrates how he capitalizes on the opportunities for transgression available through the medium of radio drama.

More specifically, Msomi uses the technology of the radio (despite the fact that it was controlled by white elites) in order to revive Zulu oral traditions.

Msomi, the director of *uMabatha*, and Eric Ngcobo, who was cast as MacDuff in the musical, were both involved with serial radio dramas in the 1970s (Gunner 2002, 262). Both men used the radio to revive praise poetry or *izibongo*, a traditional Zulu oral genre (Gunner 2002, 262). In fact, praise poetry allows Radio Zulu to bypass some instances of censorship. For instance, Zulu praise poetry can often circumvent censorship because of its multi-accentual nature, or its multiple layers of meaning (Gunner 2000, 225). Basically, praise poetry is particularly effective at “exploiting multiple levels of signification” (Gunner 2000, 229), which makes it difficult to censor. In fact, one newscaster from the 1970s, Thokozani Nene, is remembered for ending the news with snippets from praise poems of Zulu kings, like King Shaka; white authorities called his liberal use of language incitement (Gunner 2002, 269). Praise poetry allowed Nene to “[voice] his opposition while appearing to be ‘His Master’s Voice’” (Gunner 2002, 269). This is important to note because Msomi’s *uMabatha* is also the story of a Zulu king, King Shaka, and its adaptation as a radio drama also capitalized on the multi-accentual nature of Zulu praise poetry. Thus, like Nene’s broadcasts, *uMabatha* would be considered incitement by white authorities, but an incitement outside of the controls of censorship. Furthermore, by airing *uMabatha* as a radio drama on Radio Zulu (which was known for transgressing apartheid censorship) and using traditional oral forms like praise poetry, Msomi – like Nene – manipulates the colonial masters’ controls over South Africans (e.g. radio) in such a way to revive aspects of Zulu culture (e.g. praise poetry).

On another level, *uMabatha* sidesteps white domination by evading the intended linguistic segregation of radio stations, even while deploying radio (a system underpinned by apartheid policies). The country’s “multiple African language channels ... were seen as part of the National Party government’s conception of different ‘nations’ within South Africa and had the brief ... of encouraging language consciousness ... to encourage a national consciousness” (Gunner 2000, 224). Despite this mandate of encouraging a linguistically-segregated national consciousness, the radio dramas that aired on Radio Zulu bypassed this segregation. To begin, Radio Zulu’s black commentators of football became famous even across linguistic boundaries, attracting “speakers of SeSotho, SeTswana and SePedi” (Gunner 2002, 264). Furthermore, there was *significant* overlap between football commentators and radio dramatists, just like between the director and actors of *uMabatha* and practitioners of radio drama (Gunner 2002, 262-63). Given that these commentators were also involved in radio dramas like *uMabatha*, it can be inferred that Msomi’s radio drama – which drew upon the voices of football commentators – also circumvented the linguistic segregation intended by the structure of African radio stations. Again, *uMabatha* does not exist as a static script, but rather as a work that has evolved into a radio

drama. By examining the subtleties of the medium of radio drama, such as the crossover between football commentators and radio dramatists, one can begin to understand how Msomi's work uses the colonial masters' controls over South Africa (e.g. radio) without simply acquiescing to those controls, but rather subverting those controls (i.e. sidestepping linguistic separation).

Although airing *uMabatha* as a radio drama allows for transgressions of white-imposed controls like censorship, its success in reviving Zulu culture relies at least in part on the audience's reaction. As previously noted, the radio drama of *uMabatha* has been remembered quite positively. The connection between football broadcasters and radio dramatists can help explain the listenership's positive response. As previously noted, football commentators, who were also radio dramatists, drew audiences from across linguistic groups. It is important to note that one of radio dramas' most important roles during apartheid was to create an imagined community or nation of listeners (Gunner 2002, 262). Some broadcasters were quite successful at creating this nation. For instance, referring to Theatha Masombuka, a football commentator at Radio Zulu (the station that aired *uMabatha*), Gunner (2002) notes that his commentaries facilitated

a binding together of listeners into an imagined community quite beyond the reach of any ethnic programmer [and] created a free space that may have been particularly cherished in a time of heavy censorship, and restrictions on the free movement of black people. Moreover among the commentators themselves there was a sense of a constituency, of 'serving the nation', partly because of the range of listeners drawn from the different language groups ... (264-65)

This linguistically amalgamated (rather than segregated) nation of listeners is drastically different from the audiences that attended theatrical performances of *uMabatha* at segregated playhouses. Brian Crow (2000) notes that audiences at white playhouses in South Africa would often be confronted with their own systems of violence in adaptations of Shakespeare, yet they would criticize the black African cast for their "violence" and "barbarism" (293). In fact, although not segregated, the performance of *uMabatha* at the Globe Theatre received similar responses; critics like Laurence Wright (2004) perceived Msomi's incorporation of Zulu traditions as "exploiting the exotic, the wild, the 'primitive' Zulus" (108). In this way, it becomes evident that Msomi's use of radio drama – given its opportunities to attract an amalgamated, rather than segregated, audience – contributes to the way in which his work manipulates white-controlled radio in order to revive Zulu culture even across linguistic groups.

In summary, it is not only the script of *uMabatha* that decolonizes Shakespeare, but also Msomi's decision to deploy Shakespeare on radio. Considering the multi-accentual nature of *uMabatha* not only in terms of the political situation of the country, but more specifically in terms of the social and historical context of its medium (i.e. radio drama), the complexity of the cultural work *uMabatha* performs becomes clear. Because of the subtle ways in which Msomi transposes Zulu culture into colonial controls – such as Shakespeare and radio – *uMabatha* does not simply consent to the colonial masters' controls over South Arica, but rather harnesses cultural capital from those sources in order to revive Zulu culture. Making *Macbeth* accessible to Zulus through writing of his script, and even to members of other language groups through the use of radio, Msomi has begun a process of decolonizing Shakespeare. *uMabatha*'s hybridity in using colonizers' means of control to decolonize Shakespeare is possibly the start of a trend in South Africa.

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