



Exploring Orality: Decolonizing knowledge through the praise poetry of Zulu Kings, Shaka and Cetshwayo

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored the praise poetry of two Zulu kings, particularly King Shaka and King Cetshwayo, as a profound expression of indigenous knowledge and oral artistry. Employing qualitative methodology, through an analysis of the oral features embedded in these praises, the study demonstrated how the deliberate selection of language, imagery, and metaphor often incorporate elements such as wild animals, everyday objects, and the physical attributes of the kings, function as carefully crafted "nuggets of history," designed to be transmitted orally across generations. Through the lenses of orality theory, the paper highlights the role of praise poetry as a dynamic medium for cultural preservation and communication. It argues that such indigenous knowledge systems are essential to the project of decolonization, particularly through the revitalization and integration of African languages and oral traditions into contemporary education systems. By centering these forms of knowledge, the study advocates for a reimagining of curricula that prioritizes African epistemologies and challenges the marginalization of indigenous ways of knowing. The paper calls for the inclusion of Zulu praise poetry in teaching and learning, emphasizing its potential to foster a deeper understanding of African history, identity, and cultural values. Drawing on both academic literature and oral sources, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the importance of reclaiming and celebrating African oral heritage as a vital component of global cultural and intellectual landscapes, while advancing the decolonial agenda in academia and beyond.

Keywords: Orality, Praise Poetry, Decolonization, Epistemology, Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

INTRODUCTION

The present age characterized by paper and technological methods of preserving knowledge. Individuals are no longer evaluated by their capacity to memorize information, but rather by how quickly they can access it. In contrast, ancestors relied on oral traditions to preserve knowledge, using the artistry of words to present information in memorable ways that could be passed down through generations. This leads to the central question of this study: "What methods and strategies were used to preserve knowledge by ancestors? This study will focus on the praise poems (izibongo) of Zulu kings and other significant figures in the history of the Zulu nation. Using a qualitative approach through literary analysis, this study will examine the praises of both King Shaka and King Cetshwayo. The discussion will center on various topics, including praise poems, the preservation of history, oral memorization,

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mnemonics and formulas, and additional characteristics of orally based thought and expression, emphasizing aggregative rather than analytic approaches. This study will be grounded in the Orality Theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in the Orality Theory, which examines how oral traditions function as dynamic systems of knowledge transmission. Orality theory examines how cultures without reliance on written texts preserve, transmit, and interpret knowledge through speech, performance, and memory. It challenges the assumption that literacy is the primary or superior mode of communication, instead highlighting the sophistication of oral traditions.

Orature, more expansively known as oral literature, is an area of research that was historically marginalized and neglected in most transmitted societies.¹ As knowledge production systems elsewhere, orality is an encoded system exemplified in the stories, traditions, customs, and archival documents of any collective. Therefore, orality is a category of knowledge and an activity that continues to exist and shapes the social relations of our present modern context. It occupies the greater portion of human history.² Villagers worldwide are the embodiment of this kind of knowledge, reflecting on the ethical and cultural principles, as well as the economic strategies that constitute the foundation of their cultures. Each society has its own different ways of remembering and transmitting knowledge. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o asserts that orature challenges the hegemony of written texts, affirming that oral systems possess their own aesthetics, logic, and authority.³ This study places greater emphasis on orality theory, given that praise poems originate from oral traditions and were historically not documented in written form.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the oral features, linguistic choices, and historical narratives present in Zulu royal praise poetry (izibongo). Considering the oral and performative nature of izibongo, the methodology combined oral literary analysis with historical and cultural interpretation to reveal the epistemological and decolonial significance of these poetic traditions. The study relies on two primary sources. Recorded and transcribed praise poems of King Shaka and King Cetshwayo sourced from archival materials, oral performances, and published collections (such as the works of Mazisi Kunene and James Stuart). The study will analyse the praise poems of the two selected Zulu Kings. Secondary literature that included scholarly works on orality, African literature, indigenous knowledge systems, and decolonial theory. The primary data gathering technique was a literary analysis, which involved close reading of praise poems to identify linguistic patterns, metaphors, and historical allusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of orality theory emerged as a critical intervention in challenging the dominance of literacy-centric models of knowledge production. Walter Ong's foundational work, *Orality and Literacy*, delineated the cognitive and structural distinctions between oral and literate societies, arguing that primary oral cultures rely on mnemonic devices (e.g., repetition, formulaic expressions) to preserve knowledge.⁴ While Ong's framework has been influential, scholars like Ruth Finnegan critiqued the rigid oral/literate binary, demonstrating the fluid interplay between speech and writing in societies

¹ R. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1977); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203328064>.

² R. Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1988); Jan M Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985); I. Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Oxford: James Currey, 1986).

⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

globally (Oral Poetry).⁵ This debate is particularly relevant in African contexts, where oral traditions such as praise poetry (izibongo) have long functioned as dynamic historical and political archives.⁶

Within African scholarship, praise poetry has been analysed as both an artistic form and a repository of indigenous knowledge. Mazisi Kunene's *Zulu Poems* and Liz Gunner's studies of *izibongo* reveal how these compositions encode history, identity, and power through metaphor (e.g., likening kings to lions or storms) and performative nuance.⁷ Isabel Hofmeyr further expands this analysis by examining how oral narratives adapt to colonial and postcolonial disruptions, resisting erasure ("We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told").⁸ These works collectively emphasises orality's agency in preserving counter-narratives to Eurocentric historiography.

The decolonial turn in orality studies, led by thinkers like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Achille Mbembe, critiques the epistemic violence of colonial archives and advocates for the revitalization of African oral traditions as legitimate knowledge systems.⁹ Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* emphasizes language as a site of resistance, arguing that *izibongo* and similar forms must be centered in education to dismantle colonial hierarchies. Boaventura de Sousa Santos extends this argument globally, framing orality as part of the "epistemologies of the South" that challenge Western hegemony (Epistemologies of the South).¹⁰

Contemporary scholars have also explored the performance and hybridity of oral traditions in modern contexts. Karin Barber examines how oral texts circulate in digital and urban spaces (The Anthropology of Texts), while Russell Kaschula documents how *izibongo* is adapted in post-apartheid South African media and pedagogy.¹¹ However, critiques by Dlamini caution's against extractive methodologies, urging scholars to engage oral traditions through indigenous frameworks rather than imposing Western analytical lenses (Decolonizing the Study of Zulu Oral Poetry).¹²

Oral Artistry

It is prudent first to define what oral artistry entails before delving deeper. Various scholars and authors have identified oral artistry as a form of knowledge that serves as the foundation for this study. Although there are many definitions used to describe oral artistry, this study focuses on those that align with its objectives. Ntuli and Makhambeni describe oral artistry as the skilful use of words, found in the spoken expressions of people, which are not written down.¹³ Goody defines oral artistry as a high form of communication through which knowledge is transmitted. He states: "Orality is the quality of being oral or orally communicated or as a preference for or a tendency to use spoken forms of language. Means through which we exchange information."¹⁴

This form of knowledge was used by various societies worldwide at different times. For instance, the Sumerian civilizations along the Red Sea began preserving knowledge through writing around 3400 BC.¹⁵ In contrast, in Southern Africa, written publication only began after the arrival of European settlers

⁵ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context*.

⁶ L. Gunner, *Politics and Performance in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994); Leroy Vail and Landeg White, "Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History," (*No Title*), 1991.

⁷ M. Kunene, *Zulu Poems* (Tukwila, WA: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1971); Liz Gunner, "Politics and Tradition: Zulu Oral Poetry and the Ambiguities of Representation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20, no. 2 (1994): 255–72.

⁸ I. Hofmeyr, "*We Spend Our Years as a Tale That Is Told*": *Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chieftdom* (Witwatersrand University Press, 1993).

⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Writer in a Neocolonial State," *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 4 (1986): 2–10; Achille Mbembe, "Planetary Entanglement," in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 7–41, <https://doi.org/10.7312/mbem16028-003>.

¹⁰ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Routledge, 2015).

¹¹ K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Russell Kaschula, *African Oral Literature: Functions in Contemporary Contexts* (New Africa Books, 2001).

¹² S. N. Dlamini, "Decolonizing the Study of Zulu Oral Poetry," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46 (2020): 475–90.

¹³ Deuteronomy Bhekinkosi Zebon Ntuli and M N Makhambeni, *Izimpende: Ubucikomazwi Besizulu Kuze Kufike Ku-1993*, vol. 18 (Unisa Press, University of South Africa, 1998).

¹⁴ J. Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

in 1652. The spread of technological methods of recording or writing down knowledge led to the devaluation of oral artistry. Ong comments on this, stating:

Oral verbalization was essentially the same as the written verbalization they normally dealt with, and that oral art forms were to all intents and purposes simply texts, except for the fact that they were not written down. The impression grew that, apart from the oration (governed by written rhetorical rules), oral art forms were essentially unskilful and not worth serious study.¹⁶

Oral artistry was seen as similar to written forms, particularly in how it was received, and it was considered a simple way of preserving knowledge. It was not held in high regard, except for the fact that it was not written down. Furthermore, oral artistry was viewed as a less skilled method of preserving knowledge and was unworthy of in-depth study. Ong argues that this was the prevailing mindset in the past and dedicates his research to highlighting the importance of oral artistry, which was often dismissed as insignificant. Consider the skill of a praise poet who can encapsulate a war that lasted weeks into just two words, and when those words are recited, they evoke the entire history of the event. Ong simplifies the understanding of these methods of preserving history by categorizing them into distinct characteristics, and this study adopts Ong's approach to analysing praise poems using the framework of oral artistry.¹⁷ To fully grasp these characteristics, one must mentally return to a time when writing did not exist, and people relied on preserving their heritage, history, customs, and skills through language. Ong explains:

Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back 'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events.¹⁸

Here, Ong emphasizes that to understand oral artistry better, one must return to a time when written records or methods of preserving knowledge through writing did not exist. Another key point in Ong's words is that oral artistry does not rely on tangible elements like written agreements, communication, or repetition. He outlines the foundational principles of orality, including mnemonics and formulas, oral memorization, and further characteristics of orally based thought and expression. These are not all of Ong's principles from his work on orality, as this study focuses primarily on the praise poems of kings and examines characteristics relevant to them.

DISCUSSION

This section of the study presents the analysis of Praise Poems Through the Framework of Orality. The focus is on the two Zulu Kings (Shaka and Cetshwayo):

Praise Poems (Izibongo)

In Zululand, no king ruled without having praise poems composed for them. Praise poems served as a mirror of a king's reign, from birth, through ascension to the throne, until their passing. Everything that happened before and during their rule, up to their death, is encapsulated in their praise poems with artistic skill. Hammond-Tooke describes the praise poems of kings as a common form of traditional literature among Southern Bantu societies, stating: "Praise poetry is a form of traditional literature

¹⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.10

¹⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

¹⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 31.

common in all clusters of Southern Bantu.”¹⁹ Ntuli and Makhambeni define praise poems as poems that praise or honour a specific person, touching on aspects of their life, commenting on their history, and their lineage in a particular manner.²⁰ These definitions confirm that praise poems reflect the person being praised, highlighting their positive attributes and characteristics.

Praise poems are not limited to kings alone; anyone can be praised. Hammond-Tooke elaborates on praise poems:

They are composed of not only about chiefs, headmen, famous warriors, and other prominent tribesmen, but about commoners also, including women; there are, in addition, praise poetry of tribes, subdivisions of tribes, of domestic animals, of trees and crops, of rivers, hills, and other scenic features, and such of inanimate objects as divining-bones, in modern times some have even been composed about schools, railway trains, and bicycles.²¹

Praise poems are composed not only for kings, headmen, warriors, and other prominent figures but also for commoners, women, animals, rivers, mountains, and other elements of human life. In modern times, praise poems have been composed for schools, trains, and even bicycles. Ntuli and Makhambeni also confirm that praise poems do not focus solely on kings but cover other subjects as well.²² These include praise poems for animals, war cries, dances, heroic figures, and Zulu warriors. This demonstrates that praise poems are not exclusive to one gender but encompass all people and elements within a kingdom. Praise poems are not just poetic expressions but are historical records, as the Zulu people, lacking written language, used poetry to preserve their history. Ong notes that in Homeric Greece, where this sort of political information could be found verbally in a narrative or a genealogy, which is not a neutral list but an account describing personal relations.²³

In ancient Greece, political information was typically found in oral narratives or genealogies rather than written records. Ong highlights that this method of preserving history and knowledge was also used in other Western societies. What is significant about the praise poems of kings is that they serve as a repository of everything that happened during the life of the person being praised. Nxumalo states that praise poems were stored in memory, not written down, and were often based on events or incidents related to the person being praised, rooted in their history from birth to prominence.²⁴ To conclude the discussion on praise poems, researchers deemed it fitting to highlight the praise poets who composed for various kings. These include Tholudaba, who praised Senzangakhona kaJama; Mxhamana kaShaya Sibisi, who praised Shaka (Ilembe); Magolwana kaMakhathini Jiyane, who praised Dingane kaSenzangakhona; Mhlangeni Khumalo, who praised Cetshwayo kaMpande; Sehla kaDengezi Zungu, who praised *Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo*; Hoye kaSoxhaka Ndlela, who praised Solomon *kaDinuzulu*; Mathambo Gwala, who praised *Bhekuzulu kaSolomon* and Buzetsheni Mdletshe, who praised Zwelithini kaSolomon and the current sitting King Misuzulu kaZwelithini.

Preserving History

It is common for people to be unaware of the history of the kings who ruled before them. Msimang expresses shock upon hearing a man tell his companion that his king was Shaka, who was supposedly

¹⁹ W D Hammond-Tooke, “Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs. Translated and Edited with an Introduction by I. Schapera. Oxford: Clarendon Press (Oxford Lib. Afr. Lit.), 1965. Pp. vi, 255, Map. 45s.,” *Africa* 36, no. 4 (1966): 459–60.

²⁰ Ntuli and Makhambeni, *Izimpende: Ubucikomazwi Besizulu Kuze Kufike Ku-1993*. 59.

²¹ Hammond-Tooke, “Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs. Translated and Edited with an Introduction by I. Schapera. Oxford: Clarendon Press (Oxford Lib. Afr. Lit.), 1965. Pp. vi, 255, Map. 45s.”

²² Ntuli and Makhambeni, *Izimpende: Ubucikomazwi Besizulu Kuze Kufike Ku-1993*. 59.

²³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 42.

²⁴ O. Nxumalo, “Ziyini Izibongo? Nantu Ugqozi Olusha,” Bayede News, 2021, <https://bayedenews.com/2021/05/14/ziyini-izibongo-nantu-ugqozi-olusha/> [Accessed 4 May 2025].

born to Cetshwayo.²⁵ But how did these kings succeed one another? It is understood that King Senzangakhona kaJama ruled in the early 1800s or earlier, but passed away in 1810. After his death, Sigujana was expected to ascend the throne, but this was disrupted by one of Senzangakhona's sons, Shaka. Born in 1785, Shaka seized the throne in 1816. Shaka kaSenzangakhona ruled and became the founder of the Zulu nation as it know it today.²⁶

In 1828, Dingane kaSenzangakhona, along with his allies, succeeded in a plot to assassinate Shaka kaSenzangakhona. Dingane, another son of Senzangakhona, then took the throne. His reign was tumultuous, particularly due to conflicts with the Boers who had encroached on Zulu land. Dingane fought the Boers in the Battle of Blood River in 1838, where he was defeated, leading to a rebellion in 1839. The following year, Dingane was killed by the Swazi, paving the way for Mpande kaSenzangakhona to be crowned in 1840. Mpande ruled peacefully, though he manipulated his children. He was the first Zulu king to rule for an extended period. He fought a few battles, including the Battle of Maqonqo against his half brother Dingane kaSenzangakhona. Mpande passed away in 1872, and in the same year, Cetshwayo kaMpande ascended the throne, having already established a reputation among the Zulu. During Cetshwayo's reign, he fought the Battle of iSandlwana, one of the most significant battles in world history, as it marked the first time an African nation defeated the British. Due to disagreements with his advisors, the Zulu kingdom fragmented, leading to its division into 13 chiefdoms under British rule. Njininindi Omnyama passed away in 1884, and since his heir was still young, his mother, okaMsweli, acted as regent. This heir was Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo. Dinuzulu's reign was challenging, as he inherited a fractured kingdom, and British laws hindered his ability to maintain peace. He faced hardships, living in the Ceza Mountain caves, striving to reunite his father's nation. Dinuzulu passed away in 1913 at Thengisangaye palace, where he had been detained for allegedly meeting with his great-grandfather, Luzumane's people.²⁷

The history of the kings continues beyond what is presented here, but due to the scope of this study, it is wise to pause the historical account here. The next section will examine praise poems, exploring how history is embedded within them and how oral artistry has been preserved through language. It will not only focus on history but also on the characteristics of oral artistry that make history easy to remember and recall through a single line of praise poetry.

You Know What You Can Recall (Mnemonics and Formulas)

It has been established that in ancient times, history and customs were not written down but preserved orally. This does not mean that people memorized everything of value; rather, they could recall what was necessary. Ong confirms this, stating:

You know what you can recall. When we say we know Euclidean geometry, we mean not that we have in mind at the moment every one of its propositions and proofs, but rather that we can bring them to mind readily. We can recall them. The theorem 'You know what you can recall' also applies to an oral culture.²⁸

This principle applies directly to oral artistry. Ong explains this clearly, even for a child to understand: if someone is said to be a praise poet who knows the praise poems of kings, it does not mean they can recite Shaka's praises on demand without preparation. Instead, with sufficient time, they can recall them when the moment requires it. This brings us back to the core question of this study: how were praise poems structured to preserve history in a way that is easy to remember, as oral artistry exists without being written down? Ong poses and clarifies this question eloquently:

Suppose a person in an oral culture would undertake to think through a particular complex problem and would finally manage to articulate a solution which itself is relatively complex, consisting, let us say, of a few hundred words. How does he or she

²⁵ C.T. Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala* (University of Virginia: Shuter & Shooter, 1975).370.

²⁶ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*. 371.

²⁷ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*.

²⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.33.

retain for later recall the verbalization so painstakingly elaborated? In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not.²⁹

Consider a praise poet returning from Shaka kaSenzangakhona's battle against Zwide kaLanga. The poet must report to the king everything that happened in the battle. Ong states that the poet must record the events in a rhythmic, repetitive manner, using alliteration, assonance, and formulaic expressions.³⁰ Thus, upon Shaka kaSenzangakhona's warriors returning from battling Zwide's, the poet reports:

*Laduma lazithatha izihlangu zamaPhela;
Wamudla Unomhlanjana ezalwa uZwide
Wamudla uMphepha ezalwa uZwide
Wamudla uDayingubo ezalwa uZwide
Wamudla uNombungula ezalwa uZwide
Wamudla uMpondophumelela kwezinde eMaPheleni
Wamudla uMntimona ezalwa uGaqa eMaPheleni
Wamudla Mdandazi ezalwa uGaqa eMaPheleni
Wamudla uNomakhwela kaGaqa
Wamudla Nozigaba kaThatho
Wamudla uNkayishana eCwecweni
Msimang (1975:413)*

It thundered and took the shields of the amaPhela;
He devoured Nomhlanjana, born of Zwide
He devoured Mphepha, born of Zwide
He devoured Dayingubo, born of Zwide
He devoured Nombungula, born of Zwide
He devoured Mpondophumelela of the tall ones at MaPheleni
He devoured Mntimona, born of Gaqa at MaPheleni
He devoured Mdandazi, born of Gaqa at MaPheleni
He devoured Nomakhwela, son of Gaqa
He devoured Nozigaba, son of Thatho
He devoured Nkayishana at Cwecweni.³¹

These praise poems clearly illustrate Ong's point about the use of repetition, such as the word "Wamudla" (He devoured), which creates rhythm. The sequence of people mentioned follows their lineage, status, rank, and gender. The poet begins with Zwide's children, then prominent figures in the Ndwandwe kingdom, and finally women who survived the battle.

This method of mnemonics and formulas is not limited to Shaka's praise poems but is also found in Mpande's:

*Izulu elidume phezu kwaMaqongq'omabili
Laduma lazithatha izihlangu zombebele
Lazithatha izihlangu zikaBulawayo
Lazithatha izihlangu zeZinyosi
Lazithatha izihlangu zoMdlambedu
Lazithatha izihlangu zikaNomdayiyana*

²⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 34.

³⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 34.

³¹ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*. 413.

*Lazithatha izihlangu zoMgumanqa.*³²

The thunder that roared over Maqongqo'omabili
It thundered and took the shields of Mbelebele
It took the shields of Bulawayo
It took the shields of Zinyosi
It took the shields of Mdlambedu
It took the shields of Nomdayiyana
It took the shields of Mgumanqa.³³

Before describing the battle, the poet first introduces the conflict being referenced. Above, the text references the Battle of Gqokli Hill between Shaka and Zwide kaLanga, while here, the events listed detail the Battle of Maqonqo, where Dingane kaSenzangakhona faced his brother Mpande kaSenzangakhona. The poet uses the word “Lazithatha” (It took) to create rhythm, and the regiments mentioned are listed by their formation years: *Mbelebele* (1816), *Bulawayo* (1817), *Zinyosi* (1823), and *Mdlambedu* (1843) (Msimang 1975:345-346). Thus, the poet does not randomly list events but follows a specific sequence.

Oral Memorization

This aspect of oral artistry focuses on how knowledge is recalled and passed down to future generations without omitting or altering anything. In the praise poems of kings, when a poet composes about Shaka's conquests in Zululand, they must use words that are easily memorable to ensure that no part of the history is lost or altered as it is transmitted across generations. Ong refers to this method as “verbatim repetition.” According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, verbatim repetition is the act of recalling something exactly as it is, word for word, and in its original sequence. Ong notes: “In a literate culture, verbatim memorization is commonly done from a text, to which the memorizer returns as often as necessary to perfect and test verbatim mastery.”³⁴ In Zululand, this process of preserving history was followed in oral artistry. Ong continues:

How such repetition could be verified before sound recordings was unclear, since in the absence of writing, the only way to test for verbatim repetition of lengthy passages would be the simultaneous recitation of the passages by two or more persons together. Successive recitations could not be checked against each other.³⁵

How could such repetition be verified without writing? The only way to confirm the accuracy of lengthy passages was to have two or more people recite them simultaneously. In Zululand, this method was followed, though slightly differently from Ong's description. For other forms of oral artistry, such as folktales, this process ensured that stories and riddles remained unchanged. In praise poetry, however, it differed slightly, though the principle of repetition was still applied. The poet used visible, everyday objects to record and recall specific events. They used body parts, clothing, livestock, and other tangible items to describe events in detail. This allowed the poet to consistently repeat the praises when performing for the king without forgetting, as they were composed using easily recognizable elements. For example: *Uzitho zimagwegwe ngokugwegwa abakayise* (The limbs of the crafty one, craftily twisted).³⁶

These praise poems for King Cetshwayo were composed after his attack on Mbuyazwe and Mantantashiya, his brothers. The poet uses Cetshwayo's body parts to preserve the history, making it easy to recall and repeat without confusion. Ong cites Somali poets:

³² Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*. 388.

³³ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*.388.

³⁴ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 56.

³⁵ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

³⁶ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*.393.

The Somali poets do not normally compose and perform at the same time, but work out a composition in private, word-for-word, which they afterwards recite in public themselves or pass on to another to recite. This again is a clear instance of oral verbatim memorization.³⁷

Ong's words align with Msimang's description of the role of praise poets: "When the battle heats up, the poet takes cover, observing and analyzing, ensuring they see the engagement clearly and noting who struck first. They also observe the heroes who remain on the battlefield to compose the king's praise poems based on their actions."³⁸ This method of preserving history remains relevant today, even with written records, as the process is still followed.

Further characteristics of orally based thought and expression: aggregative rather than analytic

The poet does not stop at comparing a person to an animal but specifies a characteristic that sets that animal apart. Ong explains: "The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight".³⁹

This method of composing praise poems is highly effective in Zulu praise poetry. For example, King Shaka kaSenzangakhona is called "*Usishaka kasishayeki*" (The unyielding isishaka). The poet does not merely liken Shaka to the disease "*isishaka*" but goes further to describe its unique quality. This is not a random creation but is rooted in Shaka's birth story, where his mother, Nandi, reported her pregnancy, but Mudli kaNkwelo, the prime minister at the time, dismissed it as "*isishaka*," a disease that caused abdominal swelling in women. The phrase "*kasishayeki*" (unyielding) refers to the Mhlongo clan's failed attempts to cure Nandi of this supposed disease. Thus, the poet uses the aggregative rather than analytic technique to encapsulate this history in two words.

This method is not limited to Shaka but extends to warriors as well. For example, Ndlela kaSompisi is called "*Umanxeba angamanxuluma*" (The wounds that are a homestead). The poet does not stop at calling him "wounds" but highlights what makes his wounds unique. These praises were earned during the Battle of Gqokli Hill, where Ndlela relentlessly attacked Zwide's forces, sustaining numerous wounds, earning the name "*angamanxuluma*" (are a homestead). The poet even humorously asks Shaka how large a medical thread is needed to stitch Ndlela's wounds, emphasizing their abundance. Remarkably, the poet condenses this history into two words, making it memorable and easy to recall.

Subsequent kings were also praised using this method. For example, King Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo is called "*Umamonga woSuthu*" (The gatherer of uSuthu). Instead of using the word "*ukuqoqa*" (to gather), the poet uses "*ukumonga*," which means the same. Dinuzulu earned these praises after taking the throne in a fragmented Zulu kingdom, divided by the British into 13 chiefdoms, with some Zulus converting to Christianity and adopting Western customs. He faced the challenge of reuniting his father's nation to its former glory. Other kings also have praises composed in this manner: Cetshwayo kaMpande is called "*Njininindi omnyama*" (The dark destroyer), and Dingane kaSenzangakhona is called "*Mbomboshe omnyama*" (The dark deceiver).

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully demonstrated how the framework of orality relates to the praise poems of kings. By using the principles of orality, it examined how oral artistry in Zululand is preserved. It has

³⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 62.

³⁸ Msimang, *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*.368,

³⁹ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 188.212.

explored how history is embedded in the praise poems of kings, including their births, battles they fought or formed alliances in, and wars the Zulu nation lost. The praise poems have been analysed through the lens of orality, using principles such as Mnemonics and Formulas, Oral Memorization, and Further Characteristics of Orally Based Thought and Expression, specifically the aggregative rather than analytic approach. Thus, the study has successfully illustrated how oral artistry is preserved without being written down, using the framework of orality to gain a comprehensive understanding.

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