

# Resurrecting the “Black Archives”: Revisiting Benedict Wallet Vilakazi with a Focus on the Utility and Meaning of African Languages and Literatures in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Although viewed (and dismissed) by many as primarily a tool for communication, language (and literature) cannot be understood only in relation to *what* it communicates. A study of *how* it is shaped uncovers the social forces that provide its broad and complex template in the acts of reading and writing. This article focuses on the utility and meaning of African languages and literatures in higher education, with Benedict Wallet Vilakazi’s (1906–1947) poetry at the centre. It argues how, by resurrecting “black archives”, in this article epitomised by revisiting the work of one iconic writer and scholar, Vilakazi, we could give further impetus to the prospect of intellectual efforts in African languages. In this context, the article upholds the value and meaning of this scholar while offering perspectives on the saliency of his work for *inter alia* the meanings and location of African languages and literatures with regard to epistemic diversity, the “transformation” of curricula, tradition versus modernity, gender, the meaning of identity, and the broader humanist project. In essence, therefore, the article suggests that in an academic context, African languages and literatures require a serious engagement with the “implied reader”, “the native subject” and consequently necessitates greater troubling, unsettling in the way we teach, the way we write, and the way we read. It suggests that acts of rereading (albeit preliminary) are an important intervention in the project of the intellectualisation of our discipline.

**Keywords:** African languages and literatures; black archives; Benedict Wallet Vilakazi; Department of Higher Education; curricula transformation



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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Singling out the importance of the humanities and of African languages, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), in the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013, 37–41), advances an understanding of the seminal relationship between language, literature, context and society. The *National Development Plan* (National Planning Commission 2011), another founding document shaping the developmental agenda for South Africa, acknowledges that “major humanist projects which link our heritage and our future as a society” are encompassed by the humanities in general and African languages in particular, and advises that “[o]ur education from basic to tertiary and through the science and innovation system should invest and build capacity and high level expertise in these” (quoted in DHET 2013, 37). Furthermore, the “demise of African languages in the academic sphere poses a serious threat to linguistic diversity in South Africa” (DHET 2013, 38) and must be reversed. The DHET White Paper commits itself to a set of key ideas and strategies to ensure the rejuvenation of African languages through a “cross-disciplinary approach” (DHET 2013, 38).

At a time when “democratisation” and “decolonisation” are popular buzzwords in institutions of higher learning, the uncelebrated works of African intellectual scholars, which I metaphorically refer to “as black archives”, are worth reconsidering. One such writer is Benedict Wallet Vilakazi who, at his untimely death on 26 October 1947 aged 41, had already made an enormous contribution towards the development of African languages and literatures. His three important novels and two anthologies of poetry, as well as the English-isiZulu/isiZulu-English dictionary he co-authored with Doke, attest to this.<sup>2</sup> Recognition of this scholar’s contribution to the scholarly project in African languages and literature is long overdue—possibly because, as has been postulated, South African literary historiography has, “for socio-political and ideological reasons[,] relegated black writers to a marginal position in relation to the English dominated South African literary establishment” (Ngwenya 1998, 127). The work of Vilakazi deserves some recuperation to a central position in the Southern African literary canon. This article explores the utility and meaning of African languages and literatures in higher education, and whether revisiting the poetry of Benedict Wallet Vilakazi enables some perspective in thinking through the issue of utility and meaning.

The article is structured in broadly four parts that should not be viewed as discrete, but rather as interconnected sections. Firstly, it takes us directly to Vilakazi, who, in this study, represents “the black archives”. It then moves to a contemporary set of contextual observations, and then back to Vilakazi, before finally concluding with a set of ideas that speak to a vision of how the humanities can better understand and respond to the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is informed by the recent inaugural lecture that the author delivered at her current university.

<sup>2</sup> An elaborate presentation of his works appears in the third part of this article titled, “Unpacking Vilakazi’s Works”.

South African context, in a time where many are disillusioned by the promise of democracy.

As a prelude and reflection, I engage the first part of the title of the article, namely resurrecting the black archives with a focus on Vilakazi, as a response to the question of decoloniality. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his death, I turn to the figure of Vilakazi (1906–1947). His body of work offers salient perspectives on the meanings and location of African languages and literatures with regard to epistemic diversity, the “transformation” of curricula, tradition versus modernity, gender, the meaning of identity, and the broader humanist project, even though accounting for all of these issues will not be possible.

Vilakazi was a scholar, linguist, novelist and poet who is affectionately canonised as “the Father of Nguni literature” (Ntshangase 1995, 1) and “the founder of modern Zulu poetry” (Ngwenya 1998, 128). Vilakazi (1980, 9) boldly proclaimed in the poem “Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu” (“Tell Me, White Man’s Child”),

*Isikhumba sami siyangiceba<sup>3</sup>*  
*Ulimi lwami lona luhle*  
*Noma abanye bethi luyangehlisa*  
*Ngibulewe ngalo ngiding’ ukwelashwa*  
 (Vilakazi 1980, 9)

(My skin condemns me  
 My language is beautiful,  
 Even though others say it degrades me,  
 I am bewitched, I need to be cured)

Although he expressed pride in his cultural heritage, which was subjected to attempted systematic erasure as demonstrated in the claim *Noma abanye bethi luyangehlisa* (Even though others say it degrades me), he did so in a way that did not romanticise an African past. Vilakazi articulated the voice of the underprivileged, voiceless black masses as part of his calling as a poet crossing ethnic boundaries. This sentiment, which is foregrounded in both of his volumes, is vividly illustrated in “Woza Nonjinjikazi” (“Come, Monster of Steel”) which brings together the notion of how black identity in our midst was systematically erased and silenced. The poem laments the fact that black men’s hard labour in the mines nonetheless failed to improve their livelihoods. The speaker in this poem says the following:

*Shona langa lemihla yonke.*  
*Wen’owanqab’ukukhanyisa*  
*Kithina sizwe sikaMnyama*  
*Imfihlo yomtapo weGoli*

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<sup>3</sup> The English translations draw mainly from those by Florence Louie Friedman, with my own modifications (wherever necessary), as found in my master’s dissertation (Zondi 1995).

*Engilibone licebisa*  
*Izizwe nezinhla zomhlaba*  
*Thina bakaMyama sibuka*  
*Sikhex'izindebe ezinkulu*  
(Vilakazi 1978, 23)

(O set, you daily sun  
You who refused to bring light  
To us, the black nation.  
The hidden mysteries of the caves of gold  
Which I see bestowing wealth  
On nations everywhere on earth,  
While we black people watch,  
Our thick lips gaping)

The issues addressed by Vilakazi in the first half of the 20th century remain relevant social issues today. The safety of black miners is one issue, considering the recent fatalities at Sibanye Gold Mine in Carletonville, where the death toll rose to seven (Times Live 2018) and the Lily Mine disaster in Mpumalanga in 2016, for which families of the victims have not found closure yet (ENCA 2017). Material realities 70 years later attest to the significance of Vilakazi's poems and underpin the perception that, even then, he was already a visionary writer who wrote about the plight of the poor and those who remain disenfranchised from the centre of the South African political economy. I shall later return to this point.

Interestingly, in the poem just quoted (“Woza Nonjinjikazi”/“Come, Monster of Steel”), Vilakazi displays his non-essentialist worldview, evident in his citing of ethnic groups other than the Zulus with whom his works are predominantly concerned:

*Ngizw'abaVenda nabaTshopi*  
*Behay'amahubo*  
(Vilakazi 1978, 23)

(I hear Venda and Tshopi people  
Singing songs)

The mention of other groups such as the Xhosa and Basotho in the poems “Ngizw'ingoma” (“I Hear a Song”) and “Ithongo lokwazi” (“Ancestor of Knowledge”) shows that the example quoted above is no coincidence. It is almost as though he is calling back then already for unity against unsubstantiated ethnic boundaries that, by their very nature, were deliberately orchestrated to divide black people (Mamdani 2005). This he does by avoiding an essentialist mindset which would have seen him concerning himself with Zulu people only. However, this is not the case. Vilakazi sees himself as the voice of the voiceless that takes into account other ethnic groups. This stance manifests itself in other poems as well such as “Imfundo ephakeme” in *Amal'ezulu* (Vilakazi 1980, 6).

In view of the above, and considering that the world's reputed greatest poet, William Shakespeare, is celebrated the world over, including in South Africa, the nation would also find it appropriate if its own giant received due accolades. Moreover, with Shakespeare's works having been translated into more than 100 languages (Estill and Johnson 2015), it is timely that 70 years after his passing the impact of Vilakazi's work should be revisited and centralised in the South African literary establishment (Ngwenya 1998, 127), especially given that although his lifespan was a decade shorter than that of Shakespeare, he nonetheless accomplished a great deal.

Likewise, it is crucial that we begin to critically question the epistemologies and discourses of domination that have created blind spots with respect to how education is structured, with the purpose of beginning to actively unshackle ourselves from the often unquestioned acceptance of what constitutes "a classic". When reading about William Shakespeare, for example, literary historiography and literary theory undeniably underscore that his works are central to the literary canon (of Britain, English literature and world literature). His works are labelled "classic", and he himself a "universal writer". This is an author who, more than 400 years ago, wrote about matters that continue to plague and have bearing on our societies today, be it love, politics, power, or war. Indeed, he continues today to be read, studied and analysed—his works and himself canonised the world over. His works are worthy of the label and the status of "classics". If one considers his depiction of existential issues and the search for meaning<sup>4</sup> which resonate with our very existence, in texts such as *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*, prescribed at all levels from basic education to tertiary education at institutions of higher learning, one can maintain that his works are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them. They have, therefore, been translated into many languages and, in this technological era, been made into films and committed to other media that ensure that Shakespeare has taken on new relevance.

Similarly, the great works of African literary writers and scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mongane Wally Serote and Es'kia Mphahlele are not foreign to students of literature (certainly in the field of African languages and literatures). What the works of these writers have in common is the central truth that literature deals with issues that affect us as people at a particular time.

In line with the father of "decolonising the mind", Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who makes the case that African literature in Africa should be the starting point from which to move to engage other traditions, and in the context of this article, I propose that Vilakazi should, in the same breadth, be brought to the centre and consequently receive attention. This recommendation is informed by the fact that he dealt with issues which are, and continue to be, the most relevant in our context. Vilakazi's lifespan is, to some extent, comparable to that of Shakespeare, even though Vilakazi died at 41 and Shakespeare at 52. In fact, Vilakazi achieved more given that he died 10 years younger

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<sup>4</sup> "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought..." (see Sonnet 30, Shakespeare 1609 [2010], 451).

than Shakespeare. I argue that Vilakazi should be afforded a similar status and that the importance of his works for our times must be recognised. Thus, while I entirely acknowledge Shakespeare's value, I suggest that our institutions of higher learning should begin to shift their gaze to centre more poignantly our contextual specificities.

Vilakazi's works stimulate their rereading. Born in 1906 in KwaDukuza, Vilakazi was named after Bhambatha kaMancinza Zondi, chief of the Zondi clan in Greytown, KwaZulu-Natal. In the same year, Bhambatha led the famous Bhambatha Rebellion against the poll tax imposed by the colonial government under Charles Smythe (SAHO 2011). The poem "Woza Nonjinjikazi" ("Come, Monster of Steel") mentioned above could be said to signal the fact that Vilakazi was continuing the struggle waged by Bhambatha in grappling with the struggle of his contemporary (wo)man, and their fight against the encroaching touch of modernity. Even though the rebellion was unsuccessful, Bhambatha's bravery in attempting to stop his people from supplying cheap labour in order to pay the poll tax would, at a later stage, influence Vilakazi to continue the battle, albeit with a pen instead of a military arsenal. While Shakespeare did indeed deal with issues of power, Vilakazi grew up knowing, learning and living tales that informed his genealogy and that shaped his view of the world and its injustices. This highlights my opinion that Vilakazi deals with similar issues but with validity that is more vociferous. Remembering his initiation to become an *imbongi*, a traditional bard, Vilakazi, in the poem "Ugqozi" ("Power of Inspiration"), refers to himself as Mancinza, which is one of the Zondi clan names, *izithakazelo*. Hereby Vilakazi lays claim to the kinship of Bhambatha and thus perceives himself as rightfully belonging to a Zondi clan. He says the following:

*Namhla kangikwaz' ukuthula noma  
Lapho ngilele ngikwesikaBhadakazi,  
Ngivuswa nguMnkabayi ethi kimi:  
"Vuka wena kaMancinza!  
Kawuzalelwanga ukulal'ubuthongo.  
Vuk'ubong'indaba yemikhonto!  
Nank'umthwal'engakwethwesa wona"*  
(Vilakazi 1980, 2)

(Today I can never be silent  
Because in the depths of the night  
Mnkabayi awakens with the words  
"Arise, O you son of Mancinza!  
Your destiny bids you awaken  
And sing to us legends of battle!  
This charge, I command you, fulfil!")

Not only did Vilakazi rely on his own imagination and creativity, he also cooperated with higher ancestral powers, symbolised in the above poem by Mnkabayi, Shaka's paternal aunt, "perhaps the most powerful woman of her time in Zululand" (Attwell

2005, 105). Central in the lines just cited, Vilakazi associates his poetic inspiration with Mnkabayi. This signifies his conscious appreciation of the status of women—in this case, royal women—even back then when patriarchy, as manifested in (*inter alia*) male writing of female *izibongo* (Zondi 2006, 2), depicted the contrary and when women were generally silenced and marginalised in literature. While there is no specific work of Vilakazi that focuses on feminism, as a feminist I am inclined to see traces of feminism in the poem cited. My observation is informed by Vilakazi’s choice of a female royal figure, Mnkabayi, when he could have selected and charged with success any other royal male figure. In terms of gender, his choice of Mnkabayi can be described as being visionary and revolutionary. This will be elaborated upon later.

Vilakazi’s works continue to exude a superb quality from which new ideas arise with every encounter—and this encounter is in the act of rereading, thus rendering him (and his work) a classic. While in literary contexts the notion of a classic is always in dispute, I am of the view that classics have a way of becoming part of the shared experience of a whole culture or group provided that it is always subject to an ongoing philosophy of rereading and scrutiny which centres the social role of language and literature.<sup>5</sup> Landscape has a purpose in maintaining a holistic way of life that acknowledges the role played by environs in sustaining human life. Influenced by the Romantics, the poem “KwaDedangendale” (“The Valley of a Thousand Hills”), (Vilakazi 1980, 23) invokes the Natal landscape:

*Ngikhumbule kud’ ekhaya  
Laph’ ilanga liphumela  
Phezu kwezintab’ ezinde  
Lishone libomv’enzansi  
Kuze kusondel’ ukuhlwa  
Nokuthul’ okucwebile,  
Laph’ uphuma phandl’ unuke  
Uhogele ngamakhala,  
Uzigqum’ umzimba wonke.  
Ngomoya wolwandl’ omanzi  
(Vilakazi 1980, 23–24)*

(I remember far away at home  
There where the sun rises  
Above the tall hills  
And goes down shining red below  
Until dusk comes  
With its pure silence  
There where you go outside and breathe in,

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<sup>5</sup> The significance of reading, rereading and scrutinising a classic work foregrounds its timeless relevance in each generation’s reflection (s). Generational reflection(s) in the case of Vilakazi’s work signifies the importance of his ruminations even after his untimely departure from the South African academy.

Breathe in deeply with full nostrils  
 And feel your whole body affected by  
 The moist air of the sea)

Let us consider the scientific appeal of the poem by elaborating on *how* it was shaped by and captures the social forces that provide its broad and complex template in the acts of reading and writing. To that end, I take into account a view that reading and writing are inherently linked to the socio-political conditions which shape how we think and what it is that we think about. These claims allude to the fact that we invariably always bring our socio-political ontological and epistemic underpinnings to a text. And so, let us read his works to begin to reveal the insights into the humanities and African languages, and consider, in tandem with the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (DHET 2013, 37–41), what his work advances with regard to the importance of understanding the seminal relationship between language, literature, context and society. This brings me to the second entry point into the article, which provides some contextual markers of the role and relevance of African languages in the transformation agenda of our higher education system.

### Contemporary Contextuality—Observations and Critiques

It may sound clichéd to state that we live in times of profound change, given the malaise of our socio-political context. Ours is a context in which the template of change is deeply embedded in the meaning of a budding democracy. We are regularly directed to questions of rights, expectations, service delivery, the meaning and ethics of leadership, of what it is to be a nation and, at the heart of it, the meaning of embodiment in the context of gender and sexuality. The academy is intricately entangled in a web of several competing social problems and forces. Within this scheme the location, position, utility and meaning of language remain key markers not simply of its current position in the public domain or in higher education transformation, but central to the idea and meaning of a university. There are many drivers of our location as academic professionals within a university. However, what is central to me is (1) the production and harnessing of new knowledge, (2) the building of cultural and political understanding, (3) finding new and innovative applications of existing knowledge, (4) validating knowledge and values through our curricula, (5) providing opportunities for social mobility, (6) strengthening social justice, (7) promoting dialogue and debate, (8) educating and providing skills for a changing labour market, and (9) nurturing the hopes of the world by recognising our interconnectedness with it. These issues inform the thinking in this article. An engagement with African languages in the higher education environment must recognise that we ought to shift paradigms from the deficit view that highlights limitations—what constricts, prohibits and proscribes our languages. This paradigmatic shift interrogates, rather, the possibilities of what enables, enhances, strengthens and facilitates the further development of African languages. If the value of supporting the uses of African languages in the development of science and technology—broadly speaking, the knowledge project—is to be meaningful, we are required to remain critical of how we build, renovate and amplify thinking in and through our disciplines.



More importantly, we need to be critical in the manner in which we navigate our subject disciplines in an evolving higher education context.

The official recognition of African languages in the Constitution represents a groundbreaking intention about linguistic status that takes us beyond symbolism to the importance of identity and identification. Whereas the apartheid regime accorded independent recognition of African dialects with the purpose of dividing the African population along ethnic and linguistic lines, the opening up of South African society after apartheid has created new problems that have turned managing the multilingual situation into a new dilemma. The task of standardising African languages is an ongoing challenge, and the state is unable to cope with the development of official languages on equal terms. The centrality of linguistic citizenship, a notion suggested by Christopher Stroud (2001), is a way to address, spotlight and recuperate the lost semiotics of historically marginalised agency and voices in societies under transformation. This lens magnifies the language politics that shape citizenship while challenging sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, literary scholars and indeed all who are located in the academic profession of languages to make a positive impact on the linguistic discourse that is in line with transformation.

In framing this thinking and in line with the DHET's *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013, 38), the insights of two scholars who in recent publications offer some thoughtful ideas that have a bearing on this argument are apt. In an article titled "The Struggles over African Languages", Peter Vale interviews Pam Maseko, an African languages scholar at Rhodes University, about her understanding of the position of African languages and literature in higher education with a focus on how they were developed in the apartheid state (Maseko and Vale 2016, 79–93). In the interview, Maseko makes a number of key points. She states the following:

The development of African languages was never meant to benefit their speakers. The descriptive grammars were largely aimed at assisting others to understand those languages and using them for purposes of education, whatever that education meant—conversion to Christianity, and so forth. (Maseko and Vale 2016, 82)

Maseko goes further to indicate that the system, which we have inherited, represents African languages that were taught in ways that were completely detached from the people who spoke the languages. She observes that contrary to global scholarship on languages that has shifted, this has not been the case in South Africa (Maseko and Vale 2016, 82). Maseko adds the following critical point:

When the Bantustan universities were established, all they had to fall back on was missionary education. This may sound controversial, but apartheid did a lot to develop African languages, whatever its agenda, which was obviously to subjugate people and all that. But it did a lot for the structural development of the language; the development of its corpus. (Maseko and Vale 2016, 83)

The position put forward by Maseko in the interview draws from her own experience of studying isiXhosa at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in the mid-eighties, which strengthens her claims. She makes a key point:

African languages in higher education were meant to benefit “others”—they were meant to have a utilitarian or functional value for speakers of other languages. So when the entry of African language speakers to these universities accelerated, African language departments had nothing to present to them. (Maseko and Vale 2016, 83)

As the interview progresses, Maseko also speculates on the diminishing numbers of students of African languages in the post-apartheid period. According to her, the reason for this situation is that the numbers of second-language speakers dropped as “[s]ociety did not value the languages. Jobs did not require them in the same way that they required English and Afrikaans during apartheid. There was no demand for universities to produce graduates capable of responding to the linguistic diversity of South Africa” (Maseko and Vale 2016, 85). She further asserts that “speakers of African languages did African languages simply because the one certain thing they could do was to teach” (85). Another reason Maseko ascribes to this drop in mother-tongue speakers “was that these languages were taught in ways that did not relate to their own experiences” and “even the funding systems did not relate to the value supposedly placed on these languages in national legislation” (85). In Maseko’s view, “there was no correlation between policy and what actually happened in practice ... [P]arents and even people in the academy feel that English needs to be promoted even more strongly” (85) and there is lip service paid to the value of multilingualism. For Maseko, “there is a lack of understanding that African languages are alive and relevant for people today, even though English is the dominant language” (85). The rejuvenation of the academic engagement of languages is in her view a goal that should be shared by all stakeholders in institutions of higher learning, to perhaps minimise the emphasis on structure and to centralise the social value of language especially in its intellectual traditions.

However, this is not all. In another robust engagement, Nomalanga Mkhize, in a paper titled “Away with Good Bantus: De-linking African Language Literature from Culture, ‘Tribe’ and Propriety”, suggests that literary regeneration ought to be at the heart of African language intellectualisation (Mkhize 2016, 146–152). In her view, “there appears to be more talk about intellectualisation than actual practice” (146). Mkhize claims that “intellectualisation in African languages is not merely institutionalisation, but a re-framing of the kind of the ‘native subject’ or ‘implied reader’ that the African language literary tradition has historically constructed” (146). In essence, her view is that the “institutionalisation model” of promoting African languages fails because it reproduces conservative scholarly practice associated with African languages and literary culture. In this sense, as argued in the work of Gordan (2014), the academy becomes seduced by “disciplinary decadence”. Mkhize goes further and argues that

[a]t its heart, intellectualisation ought to be a project of literary regeneration, a project to push the boundaries of discourse. This requires that scholars move beyond an

administrative and lexicographic approach that sees intellectualisation endeavours revolve around university signage, dual-language circulars and terminological and lexicographic quibbles. (Mkhize 2016, 147).

At the core of Mkhize’s argument, with which those who honestly acknowledge that African languages should be treated more fairly than is currently the case must agree, is the view that “[i]ntellectualisation should expand the imaginative scope of academic work, and it is new literary production that has the potential to challenge scholarly conservatism and expert gatekeeping that has characterised African language scholarship” (Mkhize 2016, 147).

Remaining with Mkhize, “the major hindrance to the intellectualisation of African languages is that textual production (fiction and non-fiction) has historically been heavily bent towards conservative themes, in which cultural pride, propriety and identity take centre stage—that is—a literature that speaks to ‘Good Bantus’” (2016, 147). Our experience with school and university curricula shows a narratological tradition marked by three characteristics: “(i) the close linkage between ethnic identity and language, (ii) use of African language as cultural reclamation and pride and (iii) narratological stagnation and lack of inventiveness in literary production” (147). Mkhize claims that “intellectualisation efforts that do not effectively de-link African languages from these suffocating tendencies will fail to bring African languages properly into the centre of scholarly production in South Africa” (147). Her observations mobilise perspectives that direct our attention to the prospect that African languages (beyond missionary control and supervision to the Verwoerdian era of linguistic tribalisation) have caused African language writers to struggle to innovate, dissent and break new ground. Second, in her view, resonating with Maseko and Vale (2016) cited earlier, is the rigid and overwhelming emphasis on grammar and orthographies. More alarming is the view that the “print culture of African languages has been largely used as ideological tools of creating ‘good and proper Bantus’” (Mkhize 2016, 147). Essentially, what Mkhize calls for is a literary subversion in African language literature, as she claims “there is a great divide between popular usages of the language and their use in the realm of scholarship, book publishing and teaching” (Mkhize 2016, 148).

While Mkhize provides provocative analytical and conceptual thought, there is a central contradiction to her argument. While she points to a “narratological stagnation” (2016, 147) or the aesthetic rut in which African language writing finds itself, we must realise that her observations are in fact acts of reading and interpretation. Reading and interpretation are also acts of rewriting, directing us to modes of interpretation that can assist in revising meanings. Rereading consists of ongoing and repeated encounters with a text, guided by a particular task so that segments of the text are revisited and rethought. Rereading is the most effective type of reading because it demands of us to recognise that reading is also a way of rewriting a text, as Roland Barthes (1967) informed us in his classic essay, “The Death of the Author”. What he says is that, basically, when the authorial voice is done, the reader takes over, and in doing so recreates the text. This is

all the more relevant in relation to the idea of a canon (a body of literary and cultural production that influences a literary tradition). Hence in the third part of this paper I return to the work of B. W. Vilakazi, an iconic figure in South African literature and a central figure in the canon of isiZulu literature, to suggest that rereading and re-engaging his works is part of an intellectual effort which is both transformative and, indeed, a form of praxis.

## Unpacking Vilakazi's Works

In a period of 12 years, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi wrote three novels and two anthologies of poetry, and completed his master's and doctoral dissertations. He also collaborated with Professor C. M. Doke on the *English–isiZulu/isiZulu–English Dictionary*, which was published posthumously in 1948. Ntshangase (1995, 1) maintains, “[n]o other person in African languages and literature in South Africa has been able to achieve what Vilakazi did”. His impact is still being felt today, as attested by Nyembezi, who avows that “some writers of Zulu poetry, for example, have taken Vilakazi as their model; but not only do they try to emulate his style; they even employ his expressions so that the end product is just another poem by Vilakazi” (Nyembezi 1959, 28). It is against this background that his undocumented life and work require reconsideration. In fact, his works have always been relegated to the periphery of African intellectual history (Ntshangase 1995, 1). This bias might be explained in the context of an academic discourse wherein his contemporaries, such as Herbert Dhlomo, wrote in English. Drawing on Vilakazi's two volumes of poetry, *Inkondlo kaZulu (Zulu Songs)* (1935) and *Amal'ezulu (Zulu Horizons)* (1945),<sup>6</sup> I discuss a few poems to illustrate Vilakazi's significance for the transformative project in higher education. These poems were chosen because they indicate trends, tendencies and applicability to current times.

In the poem, “Imfundo Ephakeme” (“Higher Education”), Vilakazi steadfastly alludes to collaboration. Referring to his own education, which exposed him to various influences, he says the following:

*Ngavakash' izimbong' ezimnyama*  
*Zihay 'imiqondo yamakhosi,*  
*Nezinye zibong' utshwal'emsamo.*  
*Ngafak' ukuhlakanipha kwazo,*  
***Ngakudiyi nokwezabamhlophe.***  
*Namhla zixaben' ekhanda lami.*

*Ongaqondi lutho ngalezi zinto*  
*Nozilalel' ubusuku bonke*  
*Engafundi lutho kuze kuse,*  
***Engamazi uSiza noSisero,***  
***NoShaka, noNgqika noMshweshwe,***

<sup>6</sup> While *Inkondlo kaZulu* was first published in 1935 and *Amal'ezulu* in 1945, the reprinted versions I have used were published in 1978 and 1980 respectively.

*Namhl' uyathokoza ngenhliziyo*  
(Vilakazi 1980, 7; emphasis added)

(I visited black poets  
Praising their kings' wisdom  
And others praising traditional beer at the sacred place  
I took in their wisdom  
**And mingled it with that of the white men.**  
Today they are mixed up in my head.

One who understands nothing about these things  
Who sleeps the entire night  
Not reading anything till morning breaks  
**Knowing neither Caesar nor Cicero**  
**Nor Shaka, Ngqika and Moshesh,**  
Today is happy at heart.)

The above quotation essentially speaks of a man who understood the possibility of what Pratt (in Ngwenya 2008) described as “contact zones” between African traditionalism and Western modernity. He also did not pretend that such encounters had no impact on him. Rather, his poems and critical writings “reflect his awareness of the inherent contradictions underlying the challenging task of having to ensure continuity and preservation of Zulu traditions while simultaneously devising new strategies and forms of poetic expression to suit modern context[s]” (Ngwenya 1998, 129). Moreover, Vilakazi also saw himself as a man who did not neglect or despise the past, but who interpreted it through his own imagination (Attwell 2005, 81). After all, acculturation is an effect, when two cultures cross paths. Vilakazi demonstrated depth by borrowing from values that could enhance his own. It would have been questionable if he had remained indifferent in his outlook on life after having encountered various influences. On the contrary, in an article titled “The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu”, Vilakazi does not leave us speculating about these “contact zones”. Conscious of his environment, he reiterates his intentions, writing that

[t]here is no doubt that the poetry of the West will influence all Bantu poetry because all the new ideas of our age have reached us through European standards. But there is something we must not lose sight of. If we imitate the form, the outward decoration which decks the charming poetry of our Western masters, that does not mean to say that we have incorporated into our poetry even their spirit. If we use Western stanza-forms and metrical systems, we employ them only as vehicles or receptacles for our poetic images, depicted as we see and conceive. (Vilakazi 1938, 127)

In the context of institutions of higher learning today, Vilakazi was advocating for and continues to spur us on with the charge of a recognition of influence, intention and affect (somewhat similar to what has for several decades been viewed in literary studies as intertextuality). Rooted in an African oral tradition, which is dependent on memory, Vilakazi, by writing down his poetry, was already championing the relevance of the

African story, wisdom and experience. Furthermore, he was making these inflections accessible to a broader society and the world, a reciprocal value that is to be expected when diverse cultures meet, sometimes collide and where mutual enrichment is envisaged. By recording his culture through his poetry, he also guaranteed its preservation for future generations. While some critics such as Jabavu (1943) and Ntuli (1984) do not always find his adoption of Western forms desirable, Vilakazi's view of the colonial encounter is largely characterised by a conscious desire to integrate the worldviews of the coloniser and the colonised into a coherent perspective, within which "coherent" does not mean "uncritical". It could be argued that unlike most members of the African petty bourgeoisie of Vilakazi's time, he did not embrace Western culture thoughtlessly at the expense of his own. Rather, contrary to the typical values and worldviews espoused by the black bourgeoisie (a class Vilakazi belonged to) that perceived Western culture as superior, Vilakazi "regarded the two cultures as epistemologically different yet with complementary value systems" (Ngwenya 2008, 57).

Vilakazi was also capable of "borrowing" from the West but yet, at the same time, remaining conscious of issues affecting Africans. Conscious of the influence of the West, Vilakazi understood it as a European "form" in the poetic presentation of a recognisably African "content" (Ngwenya 1998, 135). In his PhD dissertation, Vilakazi accentuates the point: "What future literature needs is not a compromise between the old and the new ideas, but a fusion, as it were, not of a mixture but of an amalgam. The virile elements of both African and western cultures must fuse and give birth to a new life, expressed in new literature" (1946, 372).

In his appraisal of the Western attributes of Vilakazi's essentially African poetry, David Attwell (2005, 89) notes the following:

We can now see that Vilakazi's seemingly obsessive fondness for rhyme, together with his interest in prosody, were essentially means to an end, which was to enable Zulu writing to acquire abstraction, distance, monumentality and perfection—broadly speaking, the qualities of aesthetics.

The fourth and final component of this article touches briefly on a vision statement that promotes African languages. This is then reconnected to the work of Vilakazi. Heads of departments of African languages should take pride in African languages by furthering their development in all areas and finding new ways of addressing the challenges resulting from dynamic changes in the higher education environment. It is critical that African languages be actively involved in the processes of promoting and advocating for these languages as an asset in the broader context of multilingualism and in the context of the country. This they should do by expanding the landscape of their departments, which, informed by the DHET's *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013), should see the development of these previously marginalised languages become a reality rather than wishful thinking. The White Paper as a document that warns of the demise of African languages in the academic spheres highlights the

urgency of the threat this poses to linguistic diversity in South Africa. Consequently, it provides a set of key ideas and strategies to ensure, firstly, the rejuvenation of African languages and, secondly, their development as languages of literature, science and academia. Thirdly, it recommends intensifying the focus on African languages at universities as a way of preventing their extinction. The White Paper also alludes to the creation of a non-sexist and non-racial society and the discovery of Ubuntu as a major humanist project that links our heritage and our future as a society.

Earlier, in this article, I promised to return to the issue of Vilakazi as a transformed man at a time when patriarchy was rife and gender activism an unknown concept. Despite the limits of this context, Vilakazi, albeit very subtly, touches on gender. In a society steeped in patriarchy, Vilakazi's acknowledgement of a female figure as an ancestor from whom he drew inspiration was quite exceptional—a notion we can develop in contemporary South Africa. When at King Shaka's court and while in a trance, Vilakazi could have imagined a male royal figure tasking him to leave a legacy for generations to come. However, it is Mnkabayi that he found suitable to inspire him, as described in the poem cited earlier "Ugqozi" ("Power of Inspiration").

Princess Mnkabayi was the daughter of Jama, son of Ndaba, sister of Senzangakhona and paternal aunt of Shaka. She was one of a set of twins, and for the first time, contrary to Zulu custom, the lives of both twins were spared. As a result, the custom of *ukugingisa itshe*, which entailed causing the death of one of the twins by letting it swallow a small stone, was permanently discontinued. Later, Mnkabayi acted as a regent for the period when Shaka was still too young to take over from his father, Senzangakhona.

According to Freudian theory,<sup>7</sup> the dream Vilakazi had after having fallen asleep outside King Shaka's court suggests that it had been Vilakazi's wish from the outset to receive inspiration from Mnkabayi. We first hear her name in the second stanza of the poem "Ugqozi" ("Power of Inspiration") when told that Mnkabayi, an all-powerful woman with supernatural powers, without opening her mouth had the gatekeeper open the gates to allow Vilakazi to enter the royal court. Vilakazi says the following:

*Kwafika kim'uMnkabayi emuhle  
Wangithatha phansi wangiphonsa phezulu  
Ngabon'umlindi-masango evula*  
(Vilakazi 1980, 1)

(Mnkabayi appeared to me looking beautiful  
She looked at me from head to toe

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<sup>7</sup> As Sigmund Freud argues, what is common in all these dreams is obvious. They completely satisfy wishes excited during the day, which remain unrealised. They are simply and undisguisedly the realisation of wishes.

The gatekeeper then opened the gate)

At the second mention of Mnkabayi's name (in the fourth stanza), Vilakazi opted to say *Ngamfuna uMnkabayi* (I searched for Mnkabayi) rather than *ngafuna uMnkabayi*. The significance of the words *Ngamfuna uMnkabayi* (I searched for Mnkabayi) as opposed to *ngafuna uMnkabayi* illustrates the point put forward in the abstract that language and literature cannot be fully understood merely in relation to what they communicate, but must also be viewed in relation to the context of communication. Providing a precise English translation illustrating the difference between the two versions is impossible because of a lack of semantic and lexical equivalence, but the word *ngamfuna* that Vilakazi chooses, instead of *ngafuna*, emphasises that he wanted the woman Mnkabayi to be the source of his inspiration, not merely any randomly chosen person. It is with a woman that he identified. Indeed, in the final stanza Mnkabayi tasks Vilakazi with teaching future generations.<sup>8</sup> As alluded to in the abstract, the *context* in which language and literature communicate contributes critically to the *content* of the message. Vilakazi uses repetition—a common feature of oral poetry (Canonici 1998, 29), in this instance the repetition of Mnkabayi's name, to enhance the quality and richness of the poem.

Vilakazi's poems not only illustrate the relationship between context and content, but also the link between history and literature. The way in which the 1913 Natives Land Act<sup>9</sup> allocated 7% of arable land to Africans while leaving more fertile land for whites (Modise and Mtshiselwa 2013) speaks to two matters that remain highly contentious to this day: land and conditions in the mining industry. In his protest poems "Ezinkomponi" ("On the Mine Compounds") and "Ngoba ... Sewuthi" ("Because ... You Now Say") Vilakazi engages in intellectual warfare. I only have space for a brief comment on "Ezinkomponi" ("On the Mine Compounds"). In this poem, Vilakazi, speaking on behalf of the voiceless, reflects on a gold mine in Johannesburg in the 1940s. The miners, the mine magnates and the heavy machinery are depicted as three protagonists who struggle to validate their respective roles in the conflict. This famous protest poem remains a cry for help in the face of destructive industrial advancement that pits the values of gold and money against human values that are worth living for (Zondi 2011, 173). To illustrate this point, consider the text (lines 37–38 and 41–45)

*Ngizwile kuthiwa emgodini*  
*Kuy'izizwe ngezizwe zikaMnyama*  
 [...]  
*Ngizwile kuthiwa kwakhala*  
*Imishini kwavela mbil'emnyama*  
*Emqondweni wayo kuhlwile khuhle*  
*Yabanjwa yahendulw'imvukuzane*

<sup>8</sup> There is insufficient semantic and lexical equivalence to precisely render the difference between *ngamfuna* and *ngafuna*.

<sup>9</sup> The 1913 Land Act allocated only 7% of arable land to Africans, leaving the more fertile land to whites. This Act is seen to have "created socio-economic injustices in terms of poverty and dispossession of land from black people" (Modise and Mtshiselwa 2013).



*Yavukuz'umhlabathi ngabon'igolide*  
(Vilakazi 1980, 61)

(I heard that in the mines  
Are found men of black tribes  
I heard that when the machines roared  
There appeared a black rock rabbit  
In its mind, it was night-time  
It was trapped and turned into a mole  
It burrowed deep and I saw gold)

In the extract above, Vilakazi is trying to demonstrate how despite their perceived ignorance, black miners were not oblivious to the wealth they were generating for nations while the pittance they earned kept them deprived. Vilakazi (and others in his league that make up the “black archives”) should be studied beyond departments of African languages. If Shakespeare, Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Soyinka, Serote and Mphahlele appeal to the taste of students regardless of the medium of instruction, why would the legendary Vilakazi not have the same effect, especially given that his poetry has been translated into English.

## Conclusion

This article is a contribution towards the intellectualisation of African languages for higher education. In calling for revisiting “forgotten” African scholars, herein referred to as “the black archives”, the works of one of the country’s literary greats of the 20th century, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, have been studied. With Vilakazi at the centre, drawing on the contents of the DHET’s *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (2013) and the *National Development Plan* (National Planning Commission 2011), the article has demonstrated how African languages can be used in higher education curriculums as the kernel of the academy in addressing national imperatives such as transformation, decoloniality, epistemic success, student success in higher education as well as social cohesion. Vilakazi offers new ideas with every encounter in the act of rereading his works. Moreover, by applying ideas from Maseko and Vale (2016) as well as Mkhize (2012), some contextual markers of the role and relevance of African languages in the transformation agenda of our higher education system were engaged. The article suggested that African languages departments should take the lead in furthering the development of all areas connected to the issues mentioned above and finding innovative ways of addressing the challenges brought about by the dynamic changes in the higher education context. This, I contend, they will achieve by becoming actively involved in the processes of developing, advancing and advocating for these languages as an asset in the broader context of multilingualism and in the context of the country.

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