

# *Benedict Wallet Vilakazi: Poet in exile*

## **Introduction**

‘And now ... the untimely death, on 26 October 1947, of Dr. Vilakazi, cut off in the midst of further researches and literary activity, has deprived the African people of a brilliant son, one who not only achieved high academic standing, but whose life and personality gained for him a lasting place in their affections. This dictionary of his mother-tongue—the language he loved—will stand as a monument to a great African.’

With these words, Professor Clement M. Doke of the Department of African Languages at the University of the Witwatersrand paid tribute to his late colleague, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, born a hundred years ago. The words appear in the Introduction to the *Zulu-English Dictionary* co-authored by Doke and Vilakazi, which first appeared in 1948, barely a year after Vilakazi’s death. Doke’s words ring as true today as when he penned them, for nearly sixty years after his death Vilakazi is revered as the father of modern Zulu poetry, and as *the* literary giant of the Zulu language of the first half of the twentieth century. His two volumes of poetry, and his three novels are never missing from the list of required reading in Zulu literature courses, at school level, and at colleges and universities wherever Zulu is studied. His two post-graduate theses on Zulu poetry and Nguni literature are continually quoted. The Doke and Vilakazi dictionary is an essential on the shelf of any serious student of Zulu.

Benedict Wallet Vilakazi was born on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1906 in the little village of Groutville, close to the town of Stanger (officially changed to KwaDukuza in the early 1990s), approximately sixty kilometres north of Durban on the Natal coast. The location of this village, close to the coast, and close to the main headquarters of the nineteenth century Zulu king Shaka kaSenzangakhona, provided Vilakazi with geographical and historical images which occur again and again in his poetry. His parents were recent converts of the American Board of Missions (Congregational Church), and Vilakazi grew up in this faith, although later in life he would convert to Roman Catholicism.

After attending the Groutville Primary School, Vilakazi was sent to St. Francis College at Mariannhill in Pinetown near Durban, and emerged from there in 1922, aged 16, with a Standard Six qualification and a teacher’s certificate. He first stayed on at Mariannhill as a teacher, then moved to a Catholic seminary near eXhobho (Ixopo), came back to

Mariannhill again for a short spell, and then in 1933 moved to the famous Ohlange School near Inanda, then under the principalship of Dr John Langalibalele Dube.

While at Ohlange in 1934 he was awarded his first degree, a University of South Africa Bachelor of Arts with a distinction in Zulu. A year later, in 1935, his first volume of poetry *Inkondlo kaZulu* (The Zulu Song) and his first novel *Noma Nini* (No Matter When) were published. A year later he was awarded the degree of BA Honours (in Zulu) by the same university, and the same year he accepted a post as ‘Language Assistant’ in the Department of African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, under Professor Doke.

This move from Natal to Johannesburg marked a turning point in his life, and he accepted the post with much misgiving, captured in his poem ‘Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu’ (‘Wo, Tell me, son of the white man’) (*Amal’eZulu*, page 8), where he details his feelings on arriving in the strange environs of the university in central Johannesburg. In the first stanza we find the lines

Ungiletheleni lapha?	<i>Why have you brought me here?</i>
Ngingen’ amadol’ angisinde	<i>I enter with heavy knees</i>
Ngicabang’ ikhanda lizule	<i>I think and my head spins</i>
Ngibona kuhlw’ emini,	<i>I see the sun set at midday,</i>
Ilanga liphenduk’ inyanga.	<i>The sun turning to moon<sup>1</sup>.</i>

The poem ends with the lines:

Lapho ngibona konke lokhu,	<i>And when I see all this,</i>
Namhla ngikholwa ngempela	<i>Today I truly believe</i>
Ngilahlekile, ngizogana.	<i>I am lost, I will marry.</i>
Isizwe sikaSobantu	<i>The nation of Sobantu</i>
Singibophel’ inkatha yenkangala	<i>Has woven for me a head carrying-ring of open-veld grass</i>
Sithi: “Thwala, usikhonzele njalo.	<i>Saying: ‘Take up the burden, and always be our representative’.</i>

Vilakazi’s use of the verb *-gana* for ‘to marry’ is significant. The word is used only of a female marrying<sup>2</sup>. Vilakazi refers here to the fact that when a woman marries, she leaves the safe secure environment of her own home to join the household of her husband, where rules of etiquette and behavioural norms may differ strikingly from those she was used to, and where she must learn all the personal names and praises of her new male kin in order to avoid using them in speech. It is a tough time for the new *umakoti* (bride). The reference to Vilakazi’s own situation in leaving the province of his birth to take a new post in a new city in a new province is obvious. Note also the reference to the Zulu idiom *ukufika enkatheni yenkangala*, lit. ‘to reach the grass-ring of the open veld’, i.e. to get into a difficult or impossible situation. (Doke and Vilakazi, 1953:383)

Vilakazi was never very happy in Johannesburg. Ntuli (1984:4) quotes Dhlomo (1952:30) as saying:

“[Vilakazi’s reactions to city life] ... must have been those of a shocked and disillusioned man. He found a sophisticated African society little interested in

<sup>1</sup>This image, of the sun setting at noon, and the sun turning into the moon, is a favourite of Vilakazi’s when he wishes to express mental confusion and turmoil.

<sup>2</sup>Males are “ganwa-ed”—the passive form of the verb is used.

academic degrees as such, but in talent and achievement in all walks of life. A talented jazz band leader or a successful businessman were ranked higher than an unproductive graduate, and were more popular and respected.”

Vilakazi’s poem ‘Imfundo Ephakeme’ (‘Higher Education’) is filled with references to his disillusionment with the status of academics:

*‘When I was young and foolish I used to think I would get joy from ... [education] ... [but] ... today I have merely a throbbing head’*

*‘I have wasted much time turning over the pages of books and studying until dawn ... Today I merely have throbbing eyes’*

*‘Those who have never sat up all night studying.. today are happy in their hearts’.*

*‘When I meet today with my childhood friends they despise me ... they leave me barefoot in the dust as they drive past in their cars’* (My translation)

Nonetheless, Vilakazi continued with his studies and his literary work. In 1937 he was awarded an MA with distinction for his dissertation *The conception and development of poetry in Zulu*. Two years later, in 1939, his novel *uDingiswayo kaJobe* (Dingiswayo, son of Jobe), was published. In 1943 his third novel, *Nje Nempela* (Just Because), came out. In 1945 his second volume of poetry, *Amal’ ezulu* (Zulu Horizons) appeared, while a year later he was awarded a D. Litt. for his thesis entitled *The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni*. During all this time he was working with Professor Doke on the Zulu-English dictionary, but Vilakazi never lived to see its publication. As we saw in the introductory quotation to this article, he died in 1947, a year before the dictionary appeared.

In this article, I consider only Vilakazi’s poetry, and use his poetry to show how the move from Natal to Johannesburg in 1936 was a turning point in his life.

### The exile

Scholars of Zulu literature in general, and of Vilakazi’s poetry in particular, are in general agreement that Vilakazi’s second volume of poetry, the 1945 *Amal’ ezulu*, is of a greater literary and poetic standard than its predecessor, the 1935 *Inkondlo kaZulu*. Ntuli (1984:7) states that ‘critics are unanimous in praising the second volume, *Amal’ ezulu*, as an improvement on the first one’, and quotes a number of critics in support of this statement, including Nyembezi (1961:66) who says of the first volume that ‘I find the poems in *Inkondlo* lack sustained balance. They are not of the same standard.’ and Cope (1974:57) who sees *Amal’ ezulu* as a more advanced volume and says of it ‘Here Vilakazi expresses a deeper philosophy and emotional experience, employing the fullness of the Zulu language to do so.’

It is not the intention of this article to compare the two volumes in order to try to establish which is artistically the superior. Rather I intend comparing the two volumes in order to show that it was only after Vilakazi left Natal that he really started writing about it in his poetry. I want to explore the idea that while he was actually resident in Natal, he felt no need to write about it, and it was only when he had exiled himself to Johannesburg that his deep love for the place of his birth and his home for his first thirty years of life manifested itself in poetry. In looking at the poems which show this love of Natal, I would like to show that Vilakazi’s sense of identity as a Natalian realised itself in at least three different ways. There are pure descriptions of the Natal landscapes: memo-

ries of sight and sound, of smell and taste; images that evoke for the reader vignettes of seaside and mountain, of thorn trees and coastal bush, of birdsong, waterfalls, and the smell of a sea-breeze. There are the use of anthroponyms and toponyms to map the Natal landscape. And there are ancestral references which link Vilakazi both with the past and with the land.

### **Evocation of the Natal landscape**

Vilakazi's poem 'KwaDedangendlale' ('The Valley of a Thousand Hills') (*Amal'ezulu*, page 23) is rich with descriptions of the Natal landscape. Like Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', the first part of the poem is a description of a landscape, while the second half internalises the landscape and it becomes an inner, mental landscape, a 'landscape of the mind', allowing the poet to escape from the problems of the real world. We will return to 'KwaDedangendlale' later when discussing the role of the ancestral spirits in Vilakazi's poetry, and only look here at the first half of the poem. The first stanza<sup>3</sup> is worth quoting in full:

Ngikhumbula kud' ekhaya	<i>I remember far away at home</i>
Laph' ilanga liphumela	<i>There where the sun comes up</i>
Phezu kwezintab' ezinde	<i>Above the tall hills</i>
Lishone libomv' enzansi	<i>And goes down shining red below</i>
Kuze kusondel' ukuhlwa	<i>Until dusk comes</i>
Nokuthul' okucwebile,	<i>With its pure silence</i>
Laph' uphuma phandl' unuke,	<i>There where you go outside and breathe in,</i>
Uhogele ngamakhala,	<i>Breathe in deeply with full nostrils</i>
Uzigqum' umzimba wonke	<i>And feel your whole body affected by</i>
Ngomoya wolwandl' omanzi.	<i>The moist air of the sea.</i>

Stanza 2 introduces us to the country of the Qwabe clan, with its paper-bark acacias, its cliffs, and the steep slopes where huts have been built; stanza 3 describes the babbling streams which run down the valleys between the hills. In stanza 4 the poet imagines himself on top of eMkhambathini (Natal's Table Mountain), while the clan elders point out the landmarks in all directions. Stanza 5 introduces the agricultural element, with descriptions of ploughed lands later blooming with maize and sorghum, with the tracks of cattle crisscrossing the hills. In stanzas 6 and 7 Vilakazi watches the young men and women courting, and stanza 8 returns us to the setting sun, the distant haze on the mountains, and the cooling breeze from the sea. At this point, the poet uses his own reflection in the waters of the stream below him to turn the external landscape into an inner one. We will return to this poem later under a different heading.

Vilakazi's thoughts often turned to the sea, as he sat in his office in distant Johannesburg. The poem 'Ukuthula' ('Quietness') (*Amal'ezulu*, page 15), is a delightful, short (single stanza, seventeen lines) poem which describes how the soothing sound of the waves on the shore can lull a person to sleep without his/her realising it. Indeed, the reader only becomes aware at the end of the poem that the poet is now asleep and dreaming, so smooth is the transition between wakefulness and sleep in the poem. The dream, however, still incorporates seaside images, as the people of Vilakazi's childhood are transformed into dolphins:

<sup>3</sup>There are 18 stanzas altogether in the poem.

Kuyona ngizw' amazwan' abantu bekhuluma,  
 Abant' abahamba ngezinyawo nangomoya,  
 Abanye bentanta nangaphezulu kwamanzi.  
 Bayasikhohlisa bathi ngamahlengethwa ....

*Amongst [the noise of the waves] I hear the voices of people speaking,  
 Some going by foot, and others in the air,  
 While yet others float on the water.  
 They deceive us by saying they are dolphins ...*

Sea, waves, and the coastal bush with its green mambas often fuse into composite images in Vilakazi's poetry. In the poem 'Nayaphi' ('Where did you all go?') (*Amal' ezulu*, page 16), a poem where Vilakazi fruitlessly searches for his recently deceased brother and wife, we find the lines:

Ngisho neTheku phansi	<i>I mean even down in Durban</i>
Emanzini aluhlaza	<i>By the blue-green waters</i>
Lapho wazalwa khona.	<i>Where you were born</i>
Ngihlale phansi kwemithungulu	<i>I sat below the green imithungulu<sup>4</sup> trees</i>
Eluhlaz' ecash' izimamba	<i>Which hide the mambas</i>
Ezidl' abantu nezinyoni.	<i>That conquer both humans and birds</i>
Ngiphons' amehlo phakathi	<i>I cast my eyes below</i>
Olwandl' olumagagasi.	<i>To the sea with its waves.</i>

The title 'Izinsimbi zesonto' ('The bells of the church') (*Amal' ezulu*, page 20) refers to the bells of St. Paul's Anglican Church in central Durban. In this poem Vilakazi casts doubt on the validity of the teaching of the Christian missionaries. The threat of the mambas in the trees is a metaphor for the threat of Christianity to Zulu culture:

Lezizinsimbi zikhala ...  
 ... bekundind' uZulu ebuka,  
 Ebukana nomtat' ucwebile,  
 Uyakazel' amanz' aluhlaza,  
 Uhlaz' olwang' imamba yemithi  
 Engiyibone ngaqhaqhazela,  
 Ngathi ngihlomile kanti ngize.

*These bells called ...  
 ... While the Zulu people wandered about aimlessly, looking on,  
 Looking also at the quiet lagoon,  
 Shimmering with blue-green water;  
 Mirroring<sup>5</sup> the forest mamba  
 Which when I see it I tremble  
 Thinking myself armed whereas I am defenceless.*

Part of our memories of the birth-place we have left behind includes familiar sounds, and for Vilakazi this is often the sound of birds calling. In the poem 'Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu', mentioned in the Introduction above, Vilakazi is struck by the curious sound made by the feral pigeons of urban Johannesburg—birds so apparently like

<sup>4</sup>The Natal Plum, *Carissa grandiflora*

<sup>5</sup>'Uhlaza olwanga imamba': Literally: 'the blue-green that kissed the mamba'

the familiar doves of Natal in appearance, but so different in their call (*Amal' ezulu*, page 10):

Ngithi lapho ngizibheka	<i>I mean that when I look up above</i>
Ngizw' amajuba kwelenyoni	<i>I hear the doves in their roosting places</i>
Ekhonyis' okwawomalunda.	<i>Sounding like the roaring of hump-backed beasts.</i>

For Vilakazi, the familiar sounds of the birds of his childhood include the quails:

Ngalalela kud' ongoqo	<i>I listened to the distant quails</i>
Benikezelan' igama	<i>Calling to each other with the song</i>
Abalicula ngokuhlwa.	<i>Which they sing at dusk.</i>

(“KwaDedangendlale”, *Amal' ezulu*, page 28)

In the next stanza it is the turn of the Natal nightjar to evoke memories:

Ngabon' uzavol' engikha	<i>I saw the nightjar, which I took a fancy to,</i>
Ngasengel' abantabakhe.	<i>I milked for its children<sup>6</sup>.</i>

In the poem ‘Mamina’ (a personal name) (*Amal' ezulu*, page 48), we find a similar reference. Amongst the shadows of the summer dusk, at the confluence of the iziMfolozi rivers, he listens first to an owl, and then to the nightjar:

“... ngezwa kuvum' umabhengwane  
 Phezu kwesiduli ekubukela, ngama.  
 Nami ngayilalel' ingoma yakho,  
 Ngayibhanqa nekazavolo  
 Esengel' abantabakhe ngokuhlwa.  
 ... And I heard the owl answering  
 Sitting on top of an antheap, watching you, and I stood still.  
 I too listened to your song,  
 I likened it to that of the nightjar,  
 Milking for its children at dusk.

### Mapping the Natal landscape with anthroponyms and toponyms

In a previous article (Koopman: 2000) I tried to show how Vilakazi maps the location and boundaries of the Valley of a Thousand Hills in his poem ‘Kwadedangendlale’ by using selected toponyms (place names) and anthroponyms (personal names). Vilakazi marks the broad area of southern Natal by using the following names:

the eastern boundary is marked by *kwaLulwandle* (lit. ‘the home of Mr Sea’);  
 the western boundary is marked by *oKhahlamba* (the Drakensberg Mountains);  
 the southern boundary is marked by the *uMkhomazi* River; and  
 the northern boundary is marked by the *uThukela* River and the *Ndondakusuka* Flats.

In the stanza referred to above when Vilakazi pictures himself standing on top of Natal’s Table Mountain, his eye stretches to *eMgundlovu* (abbreviated form of **eMgungundlovu**, a name for Pietermaritzburg) to the west, to *uGundlovana* (*eMgungundlovana*

<sup>6</sup>In Zulu the call of the Natal nightjar is verbalised as “Zavolo, zavolo, sengela bantabakho!” (‘Zavolo, zavolo, milk for your children’), a reference to the belief that the nightjar comes at night and suckles from the cows. Cf. the American name for this bird—goatsucker—and the genus name *Caprimulgus* (‘goatsucker’)

‘Greytown’) to the north, and to *eMhlali* to the north-east. A later reference to the *uMlazi* River to the south completes the closer boundaries of the Valley of a Thousand Hills. In the closing stanzas of the poem, the core of the Valley of a Thousand Hills is established with the toponyms *eNtshangwe* (Inchanga) and *kwaBhota* (Botha’s Hill). Anthroponyms and ethnonyms (names of clans) are used to reinforce the geographical references. Stanza 29 introduces the names of *Shaka* (whose headquarters were at *kwaDukuza* on the eastern boundary of the Valley of a Thousand Hills, and *Langalibalele* of the Hlubi people, who were located on the western boundaries. In the last stanza these two are joined by *Mafukuzela* (the praise name of Dr John Dube, principal of the Ohlange Institute located in the Valley of a Thousand Hills). The inclusion of the *Qwabe* and *Qadi* clans, both located well within the boundaries of the Valley of a Thousand Hills, further cements the location of *kwaDedangendlale*.

Finally, the listing of three fanciful names for the area establish this place not only within the geographical boundaries of KwaZulu-Natal, but also in the ‘landscape of the mind’:

*KwaBuhlebungayindawo* — ‘the place of unsurpassable beauty’  
*KwaMfulisagcwelamanzi* — ‘the place of ever-flowing rivers’ and  
*KwaTshanibuseluhlaza* — ‘the place of eternally-green grass’.

The poem ‘*KwaDedangendlale*’ is certainly Vilakazi’s most meticulous lesson in onomastic geography, but it is by no means the only one of his poems where Natal place names and personal names of those associated with Natal are found.

The poem ‘*Imifula Yomhlaba*’ (‘The Rivers of the Earth’) (*Amal’ ezulu*, page 30) is packed with names resonant of Natal. The names in stanza 4 are perhaps not so well-known to Natal residents who are not Zulu speaking:

<i>Sengindize ngabon’ uMvoti</i>	<i>Now I have flown over<sup>7</sup> and seen the uMvoti</i>
<i>Oza neHlimbithw’ eMthandeni,</i>	<i>Combining with the Hlimbithwa at eMthandeni,</i>
<i>Unqum’ uQwab’ eMkhovane</i>	<i>And dividing the Qwabe people at eMakhovane</i>
<i>Laph’ uBhambatha kaMancinza</i>	<i>Where Bhambatha son of Mancinza</i>
<i>Wawuncel’ amanzi ngobhaqa,</i>	<i>Once asked for water by lamplight</i>
<i>Washaya wacashashel’ umLungu,</i>	<i>He struck and then hid from the Umlungu</i>
<i>Waye wabanjwa phans’ eNkandla.</i>	<i>[But] was eventually caught down at eNkandla</i>

The river names in stanza 11 are perhaps slightly better known:

<i>Yimiful’ emikhulu lena,</i>	<i>These are the big rivers,</i>
<i>UThukela nal’ uPhongolo,</i>	<i>The Thukela and also the Phongolo,</i>
<i>NoMzimkhul’ ufulathelene</i>	<i>And the uMzimkhulu turning its back on</i>
<i>NeSangqu sigobhozela</i>	<i>The Orange River flowing</i>
<i>NgaseThalant’ eTshonalanga.</i>	<i>Towards the Atlantic in the north.</i>

In stanza 33 of ‘*Imifula Yomhlaba*’ Vilakazi combines the names of rivers with the names of Shaka and his palaces, together with the cardinal points:

“*Ngikuphuke ngamanz’ omfula,*  
*Ngezwa kusinw’ eNingizimu,*  
*Ngezwa ngoShaka kwaDukuza,*

<sup>7</sup>In this poem Vilakazi imagines himself an eagle flying over the rivers of Natal, then over the major rivers of southern Africa, and finally over the major rivers of the world.

Ngezwa ngoShak' uMlambongwenya,  
 Ngambukel' ekwa Bulawayo,  
 Namanzi oThukela abukela.  
 Ngabhek' eNyakath' oPhongolo,  
 Lwafike lwangiphic' ikhanda  
 Ngokugobhoz' eNtshonalanga.”

*I ascended by the waters of the river,  
 I heard there was dancing in the south,  
 I heard about Shaka at kwaDukuza  
 I heard about Shaka at uMlambongwenya<sup>8</sup>,  
 I looked on at him at the Bulawayo palace,  
 And the waters of the Thukela looked on, too.  
 I looked up to the Phongolo in the North,  
 At first it puzzled my head  
 By flowing towards the West.*

There are many more references to Natal place names and the names of persons and peoples in some of Vilakazi's other poems, but nowhere else do they occur in such concentration as they do in 'KwaDedangendlale' and 'Imifula Yomhlaba'.

The mention of kwaDukuza—the main palace of Shaka which stood on the site of the present town of Stanger—leads us to the third way in which Vilakazi establishes a sense of identity as a Natalian: the links with the past.

### **Borne from the earth: land, identity and the ancestral spirits**

The first poem in *Amal' ezulu* is entitled 'Ugqozi' ('Inspiration'). In this poem the poet dreams he is at the gateway of Shaka's main palace kwaDukuza. As he waits at the gate, the figure of Shaka's aunt Mnkabayi appears and takes him into the palace. But he finds himself tongue-tied and unable to speak. This, he says, is in contrast with his present situation when he is unable to keep silent even in sleep. This refers to Vilakazi's belief, often stated in his poetry, that his poetic inspiration comes from his ancestral spirits. This inspiration is often couched in terms of a duty, even as a burden, which he must carry. We recall the poem 'Wo, Ngitshele Mntanomlungu' when his decision to leave Natal and go to Johannesburg was accompanied by the lines

“The nation of Sobantu  
 Has tied for me a carrying ring of grass  
 Saying, Bear the Burden and always be our ambassador”

The notion of the burden and inspiration from the ancestors is nowhere more clearly and graphically described than in the poem 'Mamina' (*Amal' ezulu*, page 48) when Mamina (his muse of poetry) comes to him in his sleep:

Yebo Mamina, sengiyavuma.  
 Amathong' angethwes' umthwalo,  
 Ngiwuzwa ngiphapheme nakwabuthongo.  
 Ngithi ngizumekile ngixoxiswe ngawe,  
 Ngivuke ngokhel' ubhaqa ngiqoshame,  
 Ngiphenduke ngelul' isandla,

<sup>8</sup>**uMlambongwenya**: lit, 'crocodile river', yet this is not the name of a river, but of one of Shaka's military kraals, close to present-day University of Zululand.

Ngikulolong' emagxalabeni.  
 Ngizw' ikhambi lingen' ekhanda,  
 Lingiphethul' ingqondo ngibamb' usiba,  
 Kanti sekuyilapho ngihay' inkondlo.

*Yes, Mamina, indeed I do agree,  
 The spirits have laid this burden on me,  
 I feel it even when asleep at night.  
 I mean even when fast asleep I am made to talk by you,  
 I wake, light the lamp and squat down,  
 Turn and stretch out my hand,  
 And mould you between the shoulder blades.  
 I feel the inspiration enter my head,  
 It arouses my mind and I reach for a pen,  
 And it is then that I sing my song"*

In the poem 'Imfundo ephakeme' ('Higher Education') (*Amal' ezulu*, page 8) the same reference is made to the spirits inspiring Vilakazi to write at night is made, but whereas the description of this process in 'Mamina' is lyrical, as befits a love poem (and the poem 'Mamina' is quintessentially a poem about Vilakazi's love of poetry), the poem 'Imfundo ephakeme' is, as we saw earlier in this article, a bitter poem about Vilakazi's disillusionment with education, part of his general disillusionment with life in Johannesburg. In 'Imfundo ephakeme', the contact between Vilakazi and the spirits at night is expressed thus:

Nezint' engazibhala ebusuku,  
 Ngingazange ngizisukele ngibhale,  
 Ngibeleselwe yinina mathong' ohlanga,  
 Ningixabanis' ingqondo ebusuku.  
 Kuleyonkathi ngiyobe sengafa.

*And the things I have written at night  
 I have never simply of my own accord started to write,  
 I have always been pestered by you, the spirits of the reed,  
 You set my mind in turmoil at night.  
 And so it will always be with me until my death.*

This negative and bitter version of Vilakazi's nightly sessions with the spirits of inspiration is rare in his poetry. Normally the tone is one of simple acceptance, as we see in coming back to the poem 'Ugqozi'. Stanza 5 reads:

Namhla kangikwazi ukuthula noma  
 Laphi ngilele ngikwesikaBhadakazi  
 Ngivuswa nguMnkabayi ethi kimi:  
 'Vuka wena kaMancinza!  
 Kawuzalelwanga ukulal' ubuthongo.  
 Vuk' ubong' indaba yemikhonto!  
 Nank' umthwalo engakwethwesa wona'.

*Today I am unable to be silent even  
 When I lie asleep at midnight,*

*I am woken by Mnkabayi who says to me:  
 'Wake up son of Mancinza!<sup>9</sup>  
 You were not born to lie in sleep.  
 Wake now and give praise to matters of the spear!  
 This is the burden which I lay on you.'*

Inspiration and the power of the spirits becomes linked to the land, especially the land of Natal, in the poem "KwaDedangendlale". When we left the poem earlier in this article, Vilakazi had used his own reflections in the water of the river to start a process of internalising the beauty of the natural scenery of the Valley of a Thousand Hills. He continues from this point (Stanzas 9 and 10, *Amal' ezulu*, page 27):

Uyovakashela khona	<i>You should visit there</i>
Uzibone lezizinto.	<i>And see these things.</i>
Ziyokuvul' inhliziyo.	<i>They will open your heart.</i>
....	
Um' unenhliziy' egcwele,	<i>If your heart is full,</i>
Uyohlala phans' ubonge	<i>You will sit down and thank</i>
Amathong' oyihlomkhulu	<i>The spirits of your grandfathers</i>
Akuzalela kwaZulu.	<i>For causing you to be born in KwaZulu.</i>

The internalising of the landscape continues in the next stanza (stanza 11) when Vilakazi likens himself to the paper-bark acacias of the area:

Imikhambathi yakhona	<i>The acacias of that place</i>
Nasebusik' iyathela,	<i>Are fruitful even in winter,</i>
Kant' imith' iphundlekile,	<i>Whereas other trees are bare of leaves,</i>
Kayinamandl' okuvuka	<i>With no strength to awaken.</i>
Yebo, nami ngiyothela	<i>Yes, I too will be productive</i>
Ngigcwal' amajikijolo,	<i>Become full of berries,</i>
Ngiyethe njengamasundu	<i>Be weighed down like the branches of the</i>
	<i>isundu palm</i>
Agcwele izihlekehleke.	<i>Full of its own fruits</i>

It is a fact that acacia trees bear their pods in the winter months, unlike other trees. Vilakazi likens himself to these trees for he perceives that in the barren landscape of Johannesburg he is in the winter of his poetic life. Only by taking his mind back to the beautiful valleys of KwaDedangendlale can he bear fruit. Earlier in this article I made some small comparison of this poem with Wordsworth's 'Lines written above Tintern Abbey' and we remember that in that poem, too, when Wordsworth finds himself 'in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din of towns and cities' and 'in hours of weariness' he is able to cast his mind back to the banks of the River Wye and find 'tranquil restoration'. Well might Vilakazi have said, exiled from the soothing landscapes of Natal:

*'These beauteous forms,  
 Through a long absence, have not been to me  
 As is a landscape to a blind man's eye.'*

<sup>9</sup>**Wena kaMancinza:** Mancinza was the father of Bhambatha. Vilakazi's childhood nickname was Bhambatha, as he was born in 1906, the year Bhambatha kaMancinza became famous. Here Vilakazi lays claim to the kinship of Bhambatha of the Zondi clan through his (Vilakazi's) pet name.

Vilakazi further links land, ancestral spirits, and his poetic burden in stanza 16 of ‘KwadeDangendlale’”:

Ngiqh’ indaw’ enjenga lena	<i>Give me a place like that</i>
Wena Thongo likababa,	<i>You the spirit of my father</i>
Lapho ngiyoba namandla,	<i>Where I can become strong,</i>
Ngiqoq’ umqondo kaZulu,	<i>Collect up the thoughts of the Zulu nation,</i>
Ngiwuvalel’ embizeni.	<i>And store them in a large clay pot.</i>

To conclude this section on land and history, I take a single phrase from stanza 15 of ‘KwaDedangendlale’, the phrase ‘ngibeletwe ngumhlabathi’. The verb *beletha* (‘bear’) is in the passive here, and so the phrase means ‘I am borne by the earth’. In the context of the stanza, where Vilakazi pictures himself lying beneath the night sky watching turning of the stars, with ‘grass as his kaross’ and ‘tussock as pillow’, the phrase ‘ngibeletwe ngumhlabathi’ simply means ‘the earth is my bed’ or ‘I am lying on the bare ground’. But within the context of his poetry, and indeed, within the wider context of African identity, the phrase takes on deeper meaning.

Western thinking generally perceives life as starting at birth and ending with death (excluding here adherents to notions of ‘eternal afterlife’ and re-incarnation). In Zulu thinking one’s own life is simply a small chunk in an ongoing process of life that starts as far back as one can remember one’s ancestors, and continues almost infinitely in the confident belief that one’s sons will beget sons who will continue to beget sons. Ancestors are alive in memory as long as their names are remembered, and with Zulu clan *izithakazelo* (clan praises) still a feature of Zulu life, ancestors may be remembered in this manner for many generations back. When an Mkhize father teaches his son the Mkhize *izithakazelo* ‘Mkhize! Wena kaKhabazela! Wena kaMavovo! Wena kaZihlandlo kaGcwabe kaSiyingele kaSibiside!’ (‘Mkhize! You the son of Khabazela! You the son of Mavovo! You the son of Zihlandlo son of Gcwabe son of Siyingele son of Sibiside!’) he is referring to chiefs and heroes of the Mkhize past who go back to the time of Shaka and even further back. These ancestors, as we know, are in the ground, under the earth, which is why they are often referred to as *abaphansi* (‘those below’). When Vilakazi says ‘I am borne by the earth’, he does not just mean he is sleeping on the ground. He is saying that generations of Vilakazi ancestors, all sleeping below the ground, bind him to the earth and the soil of his homeplace as nothing else can.

## Conclusion

When Vilakazi left Natal to move to Johannesburg, he did so in the full knowledge that he was leaving behind the place where he was born and where his ancestors lay buried. He knew he was cutting himself off from those links of time and place. He knew he would only be able to return ‘in his mind’s eye’. And yet he made the move, believing that he had a duty to his own people to serve them as an educator and through his own education. That he was unhappy there we know through many reports. And indeed from many of his poems. That he sought escape from this unhappiness is also often expressed in his poems, never more so than in the final stanza of his poem ‘Ezinkomponi’ (‘in the mines’) (*Amal’ ezulu*, page 66)

... kengilal’ ubuthongo,  
 Ubuthongo bokucimez’ amehlo,  
 Ngingacabangi ngelakusasa nokusa.

Ngish' ubuthongo bokulala ngivuke kude,  
 Kud' ezweni lamathongo nokozela;  
 Ubuthongo bokulala ngingavuki  
 Ngisingethwe yizingalo zawokoko.

..... *let me lie in sleep,  
 The sleep that closes the eyes,  
 Not thinking of tomorrow and the next day.  
 I mean the sleep of going to sleep and waking up far away,  
 Far away in the country of the ancestors and drowsiness,  
 The sleep of going to sleep and never waking up  
 Enfolded in the arms of the ancestors.*

Vilakazi, as we know, died relatively young, at the age of 41. He had been in Johannesburg for only twelve years. Death was his final escape, but we know through his poetry that at least for those twelve difficult years in Johannesburg, he was able to escape to the province of his birth, if only through his poetry. All the extracts I have quoted in this article have been from his second volume, *Amal' ezulu*, published after his move to Johannesburg. This is not through any deliberate selection process of mine, it is simply that the mentioning of Natal—the descriptions, the naming, the locating, the peopling with those alive and dead—is found almost exclusively in *Amal' ezulu*. Vilakazi had no need to write nostalgically about Natal while he still lived there. *Amal' ezulu* is a volume of poetry written by an exile.

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