

Mini and the song: The place of protest song in history

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Abstract

Ben Turok gives a very heart rending account of Vuyisile Mini's execution day in November 1964: "murmuring voices reached my straining ears and then the three martyrs broke into a final poignant melody which seemed to fill the whole prison with sound and then gradually faded away into the distant depths of the condemned section." Mini and his two comrades Diliza Khayinga and Zinakile Mkhamba sang to the gallows one of Mini's own compositions. Mini had composed many such songs during his life time as a SACTU organiser and ANC volunteer. This includes the struggle's evergreen; *Naants 'indod' emnyama Verwoerd!* (Here is the black folk Verwoerd!), the one he is said to have sung to the dreadful gallows.

This article explores the role of the struggle songs during those protest years and beyond. It scrutinises the role of the composer in a time of political repression. Currently, debates are brewing whether or not these liberation songs have a role in the "new" South African society post-1994. Some aver that protest songs have a huge place in African heritage, that they are part of public memory and need to be cherished. Others contend that these songs have become obsolete and do more harm to reconciliation. This article explores how protest songs composers' such as Mini need to be remembered, and investigates whether their songs belonged to only a certain time in history. The pertinent question then is; do the liberation songs have any role in South African history?

The genesis of the liberation song: Mini and the freedom song

The freedom song was among the most potent weapons against colonialism and oppression. The song was adopted by the Xhosa warriors as early as the 17th century as they resisted the colonisation against British forces in frontier wars. However, one person that would always be remembered in the history of the 20th century and history of the African National Congress (ANC) will be Vuyisile Mini who composed many freedom songs against apartheid. He became one of the great martyrs in South African politics and was defiant to the end. His poignant last minutes on earth show his unyielding spirit; he went to the gallows singing his composition of a freedom song. Truly, he did not only become Port Elizabeth's son, he was adopted by the entire world as one of the stalwarts of the liberation struggle.

He was born in 1920 in the Eastern Cape where he was to be a selfless leader of the union movement. In 1951 he joined the ANC and was among the Defiance campaign volunteers who were incarcerated in 1953. He became a South African Congress of Trade union's secretary in 1960. In 1963 Mini was charged with 17 counts of sabotage and murder of a police informer. Together with two of his comrades, Zinakile Mkhaba and Diliza Khayinga they were convicted and hanged in Pretoria Central Prison in November 1964. Vuyisile who was also a member of the Eastern Cape High Command of the MK was offered his life in exchange for giving information about underground political activity in Port Elizabeth. He refused.

This paper explores the legacy of Mini, the so called "father of liberation song" in South Africa. Whilst this paper will focus specifically on Mini as a composer of many Congress songs, it will also try and interrogate the general use of other compositions through history.

Liberation songs have become part of memory in public life and many people still sing them even today; these have become part of a rich history against political and cultural domination. Liberation songs had been part of the struggle since the black people first faced colonialism. Long before the formation of the Congress in 1912, warriors sang as colonial bullets riddled their armies. In April 23 1819, 10,000 Xhosa warriors led by Nxele or Makana sang as they approached Grahamstown to reclaim about 23 000 cattle that had been captured by the British soldiers. Of course the might of the gun was more as thousand warriors sprawled lifeless at the base of the hill at Rini's Egazini. They died with prodigious song in their hearts, their fists hugging the impotent spears.

The “new” song: Mini and the Congress

Mini sang in a number of choirs in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth notably Port Elizabeth Male Voice Choir as well as the Port Elizabeth United Artists Choir which was conducted by the composer and writer, Fikile Gwashu. He loved choral music as well as classical music. Among his many compositions, was the famous *Naants'indod'emnyama Verwoerd*. (Here comes the black folk Verwoerd!). This is the song he is said to have sung before the hangman's noose ended his life in 1964. In this song he was warning Verwoerd about the might of the black people. This was a time when the black people had no weapons. The song was the weapon; it was an important factor that reassured the people that despite the bannings, the killings and detentions, victory was certain. The songs were important weapons of history; they were part of the struggle culture and memory. In the absence of leaders when they were incarcerated, the songs kept the fires burning; informing the people that freedom was certain despite the obstacles. Many of Mini's songs were poignant but even betwixt this sadness one got the sense that the black Africans were fighting for a just cause. When Mini

appeared in the political scene in the townships, he became very instrumental in organising people who were scattered. There was no better thing than to use his artistic talents to organise the people.

He was also an able administrator, a secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions and worked closely with people such as Don Nangu and Alven Bennie. SACTU and its affiliate unions enjoyed much support from the workers. “More than just a trade union to protect working class interests, it became an institution of and from the people” (Luckhardt & Wall, 1980). Mini inspired the people with his artistic talents and oratory. As a liberation fighter he was ahead of his times by realising that the song can organise and intensify the resistance against unjust laws. For decades after the banning of the ANC and other liberation movements such as the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) people listened and sang songs hoping even in the might of apartheid that victory is certain. The ANC radio station, *Radio Freedom* used to play songs that made many listeners aware that the freedom dream was still alive. Among the moving songs that one would hear sung by MK soldiers was an Nguni song, *Sobashiy’abazali bethu* which is a very sad but uplifting and nostalgic. Its lyrics are:

Sobashiy’abazal’ekhaya	Our parents we will leave behind
Siphuma sangena kwamany’amazwe	We will tread in foreign lands,
Lapho kungazi khon’ubaba nomama	Where our fathers and mothers never stepped
Silwel’inkululeko	Chasing the freedom dream.
Sithi salani,	We bid you well,
Salan’ekhaya	We bid you well
Salan’ekhaya	At home stay well.

All these were sounds of hope in squalor and uncertainty. This essay will explore why such weapons of history have become cultural threats. Some people contend that some of these songs are shaking the post-apartheid hopes for reconciliation. Debates continue to fill the public platform as to whether these songs are necessary in the current South Africa. The important question though is whether we should forget the legacy of song left by struggle composers such as Mini. We need to explore to what extent can we disregard some memory as we search ways of enhancing the reconciliation.

Collective memory and post-apartheid South Africa

Much oral history in the society is based on subjective accounts of people. Coombes (2003)



Vuyisile Mini

(Sechaba)

points out that all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience, shaped by collective consciousness and as shared social processes. Any comprehension of the representation of remembrances of the past must take into account both contexts (Coombes, 2003). Arguably, there is a need for South Africans to use memory in places such as the museums, understand and bring resolve to the trauma before moving towards the future as matured citizens. Many political activists in South

Africa, although they were scarred by political repression, they have insisted on the productiveness of their years in detention and necessity of working toward a constructive future (Coombes, 2003). The traumatic memory and experience that can be ignited by some of the songs can actually result to a positive consequence; it can show

the singer what freedom means. It can sensitize them in some way; that many people sacrificed, became martyrs for the freedom. These can be both empowering and emancipatory memories. Coming to terms with the past is one crucial aspect when it comes to dealing with history and memory in South Africa. Moving away from concentrating on oppression and atrocities of the past will never lead to liberatory minds and wounds will not be healed. The new cultural institutions such as museums have to deal with these facts. Liberation songs that highlight pain should remain in history as reminders of where the society is coming from. In the absence of leaders who had gone to exile, the struggle continued through song. Even after Mini's execution in apartheid's gallows, his songs continued to live uniting the nation, creating a political culture that pervaded.

The protest song was a form of political communication; to say we want justice, we want peace. Just after the death of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko. I remember seeing a group of students singing:

Amabhulu azizinja

The Boers are dogs

Ambulele uSteve Biko.

They have killed Steve Biko.

Senzeni na? Senzeni na?

What have we done? What have we done?

When the police appeared, they continued singing with their arms in the air showing that they were not fighting. It was a powerful show of solidarity and the sharing of sadness. The song was giving the singers hope to say, let us not despair. For a long time the liberation songs were a personification of leadership. The liberation songs' became pivotal in liberation politics. Forgetting this role would be like a betrayal of history.

As part of the collective memory, the protest songs played a number of roles:

- Cultural role
- Political role
- Mobilising role
- Narrative role

Cultural role - these songs were reflected the culture of the oppressed. They usually showed where the people were and why they needed to fight the domination. Many songs infused culture, they had a cultural aspect. The dance and rhythm also reflected the culture.

Political role – all liberation songs had a political message. They were didactic and showed the oppressed why they needed to shirk off the chains of bondage.

Mobilising role-linked to the political role of the song, there was the mobilising role. The songs' message wanted to reach as many people as possible- calling them to join the liberation struggle.

Narrative role-many songs bore history; they recounted what happened in history. The narrative was contained in the political and the mobilising role of the song.

Vuyisile Mini had compositions that fitted under these categories although many of his songs played mobilising and political roles. The song, *Izakunyathel'iAfrika* was one of the songs where he was addressing the apartheid apartheid Hendrik Verwoerd, the most famous being *Naants'indod'emnyama Verwoerd* cited above. The song *Izakunyathela...* (Loosely translated, Africa will trample on you), was composed in prison during the 1956 Treason Trial.

Izakunyathel'iAfrica, Verwoerd

Africa is going to trample on you, Verwoerd

Verwoerd shuu!

Verwoerd careful!

Uzakwenzakala

You are going to get hurt.

Many songs were composed about Verwoerd and this clearly shows how this apartheid mastermind was regarded by the oppressed. In another composition the Congress Volunteers in the 1950s tell Verwoerd in song to open prisons and free the political detainees. The song *Sikhalel'izwe lakithi* went like this:

Sikhalel'izwe lakithi

We mourn for our land

Elathathwa ngabamhlophe

Which was grabbed by the whites

MZulu MXhosa MSuthu Hlanganani!

Zulus, Xhosas Sothos unite!

Verwoerd, vula la majele

Verwoerd open these prisons

SingamaVoluntiya sizongena

Else the volunteers will storm them.

Verwoerd and Strydom are among the many apartheid exponents whose names were reiterated in protest song. When women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria 1956 they sang:

Wee Strydom!

You Strydom!

Wathint'abafazi, wathint'imbokotho,

You strike a woman, you strike a rock,

Uzakufa

You will die.

These women were disparaged, but the song was lifting them to be resilient. They did not march to kill Strydom. They were highlighting their plight and mobilising one another. The

songs were mighty in that even those people who were initially doubtful about their participation would see the spirit of a song and would go and confront the enemy; with song.

In the 1980s, one of the protest songs powerful for mobilisation was:

Siyaya, siyaya	We will go, we will
Siyaya noba kubi.	We will, even in dreariness
Emabhulwini siyaya,	To the Boers, we will go
Siyaya noba kubi,	We will, even in misery,
Noba besidubula	Even when they shoot us,
Siyaya...	We will go...

The context of most of these songs captured the mood of the singers. One other song that Vuyisile Mini composed was *Thath'umthwalo*. He did this song when he was in prison during the treason trial in 1956. The treason trialists had been in prison for a long time when he composed this one:

Thath'umthwalo bhuti sigoduke	Take up your luggage brother and let's go home,
Balindile oomama noobab'ekhaya	Our mothers and fathers are waiting back there.

This was the nostalgic Mini. He was longing for home. Sometimes this nostalgia will show in song when the singers longed for the days before colonialism. One of the oldest songs is *Thina sizwe esimnyama....* (We the black nation).

Thina sizwe	We the nation
Thina sizwe esimnyama.	The black nation,
Sikhalela,	We weep,

Sikhalela izwe lethu.	For our land.
Elarojwa,	Which was robbed,
Elarojwa ngamabhulu,	Robbed by the Boers.
Mabawuyeke,	They should leave
Mabawuyek'umhlaba wethu.	They should leave our land alone...

Another of Mini's song has a powerful message for the Congress's rise. The song was also popular in the 1950s when the ANC was organising in the Cape:

Mayihambe le Vangeli	Let this gospel spread
Mayigqib'ilizwe lonke	Around the whole world it should be heard.

Many of these songs were addressed to the Boer. It is essential to look at how the composers understood the Boer to be. This is a very crucial question that will help in comprehending the lyrics in many of the liberation songs.

The Boer in the songs

Right from the inception of the Afrikaner Nationalist Government in 1948, it was clear that the black Africans were to be vanquished further. In 1955 the Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom contended:

Call it paramountcy, *baskap* or what you will, it is still domination...Either the white man dominates or the black man takes over...the only way the European can maintain supremacy is by domination.

This is supported by Verwoerd in one of his anti-Bantu speeches:

There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live.

The above shows the kind of privilege the whites were to enjoy under the apartheid system. It also shows how the black people, the “Bantus”, were to be oppressed as nonentities in South Africa. This was the government that was to promote what John Vorster referred to as *Boerehaat*, a reference of hating the English, especially those who belonged to the United Party. It was clear that people such as John Vorster wanted to create a South Africa that was to be a Boere Staat (Boer State). The Times Magazine writing about “White Tribalism” in South Africa in 1972 noted:

Speaking to a gathering of Afrikaners, Prime Minister John Vorster took the Boerehaat (Boer hate) campaign a step further. "Because of the things that threaten us," he cried, "we need a militant youth." Then he quoted a line from an old Boer war song, "I've always been afraid the English soldiers would catch me," adding: "If there's any catching to be done, we will do it, and the time has now come!"

The outbreak of white tribalism seemed especially curious because South Africa's political mood has mellowed in recent years. Opposition leaders suspected that the renewal of Boerehaat could be traced to the troubles of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party, which lost eight seats in the 1970 election and faces continuing

tension between its moderate *verligte* (enlightened) and arch-conservative *verkrampste* (narrow-minded) wings.

Dictionaries refer to the definition of Boer as the descendants of the Dutch speaking settlers in the Eastern Cape Frontier. These are the people who are said to have left the Cape Colony during the 19th century to settle in the Orange Free State and Transvaal which were later they were referred to as Boer Republics. The Boers resisted the British rule and were later to try and defend their republics. During the war against the British in 1899 they tried to defend their independence from the English. The latter is the South African War, usually incorrectly referred to as the Anglo-Boer War. The Boere people are Afrikaners and many were mainly of Dutch origins and included German Protestants and French Huguenots. Among the prominent Boer leaders in the 1900s were Paul Kruger, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts.

Many liberation songs as evident above contained the word, *Boer*. However, many activists would explain that the use of this word in the songs has nothing to do with the white race; that it should not be interpreted literally. Many contend that in liberation songs this refers to the system; the white system that dominated and oppressed the black African people. Derik Hanekom an MP and a long standing ANC member was asked about his interpretation of the *Boer* in the song, *Dubul'ibhunu, ayasab'amagwala-* (Shoot the Boer, the cowards are fleeing). Hanekom pointed out that “this song “was a reference to a period or a system where people took up arms; that the song bore no reference to an ethnic group but referred to a system of racial oppression” (Mail and Guardian, 2011).

Wally Serote, one of the senior members of the ANC and former MK soldier, currently the CEO of Freedom Park maintains that freedom songs need a monument of their own. Furthermore, Serote avers that the songs are as important as the Voortrekker Monument. He argues that this zone should be built between the monument and Freedom Park which is a custodian of the memory of the struggle and democracy. The Voortrekker Monument is built in the city of Pretoria in honour of the Voortrekkers who left the Cape Colony in 1835. It stands at 40 metres high and embodies the Afrikaner memory against British rule. It is such a powerful symbol in Afrikaner history hence Serote likens it to the memory of the freedom songs. There are many from former liberation movements who argue that the struggle songs today should not be perceived as symbols of hatred and incitement but part of a rich memory and struggle heritage.

Memory, Monuments and Heritage

Serote's comment above is crucial when one looks at the South African history. The song enables us to trace the journey of the struggle. Mini, as a poet and composer recorded history through his music. His music is memory and the freedom fighters were to sing his compositions long after he was gone. A point made earlier, without any arms, the songs were a potent form of defiance. Yet looking back at the development of the song one also perceives the development of history. In 1952 Mini with Raymond Mhlaba and other ANC volunteers were among a group of defiers through the New Brighton Railway Station. It was the wintry morning of 26 June 1952 when Mhlaba led 30 volunteers through the "Europeans Only" entrance of New Brighton Station. The volunteers were accompanied by a crowd singing the song, 'What have we done, we African people?' the twenty five men and three women were all wearing Congress armbands and shouting, "Mayibuye iAfrica!" (Benson, 1985). The defiers had all intended to refuse to pay fines and go to prison. Roux (1964)

writes that a newspaper report on 25 July stated that 32 defiance women had been sentenced for using the Europeans Only entrance at the New Brighton station near the Red Location.

The report went on to declare:

Non European defiers of unjust laws are being turned out of gaol against their will by the prison authorities. Money found on them at the time of their conviction has been seized and is being used to pay their fines, although they refused the option of a fine when sentenced.

They went to jail and as they traversed the road they defiantly sang,

Imithetho kaMalan	Malan's laws,
Isiphethe nzima	Are oppressive.
Mayibuy'iAfrika!	Africa must come back!

Many of Mini's songs were short, repetitive and melodious. When women marched to the Union Buildings in 1956, they were singing;

Wee Strydom!	Hey Strydom!
Wathint'abafazi, wathint'imbokotho,	You touch the women, you have shaken a rock,
Uzakufa !	You will die!

Mini had an uplifting voice, his singing of his compositions spread throughout the provinces.

A song close to the one above was directed to Verwoerd and it was also cautioning him that Verwoerd was going to get injured, (See above).

Izakunyathel'iAfrika	Africa will crush you
Verwoerd shuu!	Verwoerd be careful!
Uzakwenzakala.	You will be injured!

In the discussion above we also see his famous, *Naants'indod'emnyama Verwoerd*, which was also telling the government that despite the strengthening of apartheid the Africans were organizing. This is history; this is memory that portrays events of the day. Today Mini, Khayinga and Mkhaba's graves stand in the original Emlotheni Place in New Brighton where the Congress used to gather and Mini would sing his compositions. One composition that was sung in the townships from the 1950s to the 1990s and beyond was *Sizakubadubula ngeembayi-mbayi-* (we will shoot them with cannons), which went like this:

Sizakubadubula ngeembayi-mbayi	We'll shoot them with cannons,
Bazobaleka,	They will flee,
Dubula ngeembayi-mbayi	Shoot with cannons.

This is all history told in song.

These songs are part of collective memory that must be protected as Serote above highlights. Today we need cultural institutions such as museums to cherish the liberation songs. Memory is one crucial aspect utilised in museums to ignite experiences that will affect the users. During apartheid years, especially from 1960 to the 1980s, many cultural museums were established essentially to celebrate the triumphs of white South Africans (Dominy, 2004). However, memory in the current alternative museums is meant to bring about experiences that would be liberating. The alternative museums such as the Apartheid Museum and Freedom Park are supposed to ensure that users reflect a more liberating and meaningful history of the marginalised as well. Memory is used by those who strive for democracy to come to terms with the past as they build a future. The idea of embracing community museums leads to collective memory. Deegan (2001) argues that a process needs to be found through which collective memory of the country could engage in recognising the tragedy of the past. She adds that it is only by looking back that a nation would be able to move towards

normalised multiracial co-existence. The museums can play a crucial role while starting off the memories there would be debates raised about issues as well. Community museums should promote healthy discussions as people embrace democracy and a new future. The museums also need to strive for success where the society not succeeded. Much oral history in the museum is based on subjective accounts of people. Coombes (2003) points out that all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness as well as shared social processes. Any comprehension of the representation of remembrances and of the past must take into account both contexts (Coombes, 2003). Arguably, there is a need for South Africans to use memory from oral accounts, from museums, understand and bring resolve to the trauma before moving towards the future as matured citizens. When one goes to New Brighton's Red Location Museum today you see an immense picture of Mini with a number of hangman's nooses behind, an intimidating and sad spectre. The traumatic memory and experience is ignited by these hangman's nooses but it results to a positive consequence; it can show the user what freedom really means. It can sensitize them in some way that many people sacrificed, became martyrs for the freedom. These can be both empowering and emancipatory memories. The perceiver is empowered through the understanding of history and it will be liberating as the users will understand their own purpose in history. The liberation songs can achieve the same.

Shedding culture for reconciliation?

There are many arguments today in South Africa where people have begun questioning the role of liberation songs. In September 2011 a South African court decided to ban the singing of the song *Dubul'ibhunu*, a song that was frequently being sung by the leader of the ANC Youth League. The lyrics of this song are:

Ayasab'amagwala, ayasab'amagwala,

The cowards are fleeing, they are fleeing,

Dubula, dubula,

Shoot, shoot

Dubul'ibhunu!

Shoot the Boer!

There are people (black and white) who contend that there is no place for the liberation songs in the current post-apartheid society. This group avers that the singing of these songs will only create schisms between races and remind the society of past atrocities. These songs have become weapons of destruction to a society that is trying to heal from past wounds. The paradox though is that these were songs that were sung by people who believed in non-racial society; combatants who were fighting for a free and democratic society. Even with the most pungent of lyrics, the ANC collective yearned for a united South Africa. Gilbert (2007) cites an example of a song sung by Amandla Cultural Ensemble in exile, it is a song that has an unexpected ending:

Kulo nyaka sizimisele

This year we are prepared

Ukugwaza lamabhunu,

To stab the Boers,

NgoMkhonto weSizwe.,

With the Spear of the Nation (MK).

Asikhathali noma sibulawa

We do not care even if we are killed,

Sizolilwela ilizwe loMzantsi.

We will fight for South Africa.

Hlanganani nina ma-Afrika

You Africans unite

Sowanqoba simunye wona lamabhunu.

We'll be victorious over the Boers, when we are one.

The song's conclusion alludes to unity that will be achieved after "stabbing the Boers". Of course, the stabbing of the Boers refers to the killing of an unjust system. The ANC which sung many of these songs had always been a non-racial movement whose struggle was never to literally exclude the Afrikaners, the English and so on. These songs were used on the way to a unified South Africa. It is then an unfortunate interpretation currently, to interpret these songs as alluding that the white farmers have to be killed. There is no proof that farm robberies and killings happen as a result of the liberation songs. The liberation songs continued to be sung after 1994's installation of the democratic government. They have not translated into the murder of farmers and white people.

The happenings in history need to be told time and again; not all South Africans witnessed the history because of the apartheid boundaries of the past. The liberation songs carry history; listening to the lyrics, one will understand the journey of a particular group of people. Achebe has highlighted the Igbo proverb, "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter". Vuyisile Mini and many other composers were historians who chronicled the struggle of the oppressed people in South Africa. Denying people to sing these songs is to kill such historical voices. Mini was a loyal member of the African National Congress who fought for a free South Africa. Even when he was facing the hangman's noose he was determined to tell his story to future generations in song. The conclusion of his statement from the death cell reads as follows:

They then asked me about Wilton Mkwayi-they said I saw Mkwayi in January 1963-I said, 'yes'-they asked me if I was prepared to give evidence against Mkwayi, whom they had now arrested, I said, 'No, I was not.' They said there is a good chance for them to save me from the gallows if I was prepared to assist then. I refused to assist.

They then said, would I make the 'Amandla' salute when I walked the last few paces to the gallows, I said 'Yes'.

(Kumalo, nd)

Mini did not only "make the Amandla salute", he sang his way to his death. The song could not be silenced. The song was his weapon and the song is history.

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