

poetry in business

ability to be truthful that the front line of freedom of speech is eroded in society. This is what happened to poets who were exiled under apartheid."

Kaschula, whose main areas of expertise are poetry and inter-cultural studies, says the events surrounding the popular poet ZS Qungule's exile are a good case in point. "The *imbongi* or praise singer's right to speak freely and without censure came under serious pressure in the 1980s, when the voice of protest that characterised Xhosa *izibongo* was driven underground to serve small-minded

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politics," he says, describing how Qungule was arrested for his protest against the manner in which Sebata Dalinyebo, then King of the Tembus, was detained and deposed in favour of a pro-governmentbantustan chief.

A similar fate befell Melikhaya Mbutuma, who was repeatedly harassed by the police because of his protest poetry. "The descriptor 'praise poet' is something of a misnomer, because praise poetry isn't always about worship. Praise poets have the ability and the licence to be critical," observes Kaschula, who adds that poets are often a barometer for freedom of speech. "When politicians interfere with the ability to be truthful or critical, freedom of speech is eroded. If you can censor the oral word, the written word is next."

While politics and poetry have enjoyed a relationship knitted with barbed wire, the connection between poets and business has been less direct. This is largely because poets have operated outside the realms of traditional business, and corporate institutions have not considered poetry as relevant. This looks set to change for a number of reasons. Poets are making inroads into corporations as consultants and harbingers of meaning and leadership development, while in another context poets are taking aim at corrupt corporations, extending their role as a societal watchdogs to embrace economics.

In South Africa, praise poets are becoming a part of labour relations and, with the surge of black economic

Ezra Pound eloquently summed up the role of the poet with his urging them to "make it anew". Throughout time, great poets have sought to see society and the world with a new lens, carving a courageous, challenging and at times dangerous role for themselves. History is littered with the bodies of dead writers or exiled poets who dared to speak the truth. Chinese-born poet Jun Feng was imprisoned and forced into exile, and Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet died in exile after being the only major writer to speak out against the Armenian massacres. In South Africa, many poets were imprisoned or exiled during apartheid. The poet's voice is often one of social conscience and because of their ability to see things from a different perspective, poets are often verbal activists in the face of corruption and exploitation.

Nigerian activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa spent much of his life protesting the exploitation of his native people, the Ogoni, who came under threat when their homeland was targeted for oil extraction by Shell in the late 1950s. In his book, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*, Saro-Wiwa tells how the Ogoni had "been gradually ground to dust by the combined effort of the multi-national oil company, Shell Petroleum Development Company, the murderous ethnic majority in Nigeria and the country's

Two years later Saro-Wiwa was honoured by receiving the Right Livelihood Award for exemplary courage in striving non-violently for the rights of the Ogoni people. Scarcely a year later, despite an outcry from the international community, he was hanged in what was largely seen as judicial murder by the hands of the Nigerian military government.

"Dance your anger

and your joys

dance the guns

into silence.

Dance. Dance. Dance. Dance...."

- Ken Saro-Wiwa

"Poets serve as watchdogs," says Russell Kaschula, Extraordinary Professor at the University of Stellenbosch and visiting professor in communication and media studies at Goucher College in the US. "The language of poetry is passion and truth. Poets have the ability to be open and criticise society, and it is when politicians interfere with that

