

Songs that shaped the struggle: A rhetorical analysis of South African struggle songs

Sisanda Nkoala

Struggle songs are a fundamental part of South Africa's political past, present and future. Being such significant entities in South African politics, much research has been done into tracing the history and significance of liberation songs. However, to date, not enough scholarly work exists which has discussed struggle songs as musical texts, and which looks at the fundamental argument that permeates each of them as such. The consequence of this is that very few political actors have been able to harness the persuasive power inherent in struggle songs in South Africa's post-apartheid dispensation. Currently it is only the governing African National Congress and its alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist party, that appear to have the monopoly on the use of struggle songs. There have been attempts by the opposing Democratic Alliance to use these songs in campaigning, however because the party does not yet fully understand how these songs function as tools of persuasion, and because the party has not yet managed to effectively utilise the historical memory imbedded in these songs to their advantage, these efforts have not yielded the desired outcome. Thus, a research paper such as this provides a model of how one can begin to analyse the elements that make struggle songs 'work', and then in turn utilise this knowledge to better persuade would-be supporters and voters in future.

Research of this nature runs the risk of coming across as placing too much emphasis on the role of music in South Africa's journey to liberation, at the expense of actual human life that was lost during this period. However as Perkins notes, "inspiration play[ed] an important role in mobilising the hearts and energies of people to strike back at forces which appear[ed] to be insurmountable".¹ Further, as Pring-Mill explains, "the sound of song is described as a blow at the invader, a rampart in defense, a weapon against injustice".² Struggle songs 'work' because in these songs one finds historical "events recorded passionately rather than with dispassionate objectivity, yet

¹ E. Perkins, "Literature of combat: Poetry of African liberation movements", *Journal of Black Studies* 7, 2 (1976): 226. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783968>. (Accessed 2 August 2012).

² R. Pring-Mill, "The roles of revolutionary song – A Nicaraguan assessment in popular music", *Popular Music* 6, 2 (1987): 183. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/853420>. (2 August 2012).

the passion is not so much that of an individual singer's personal response, but rather that of a collective interpretation of events from a particular 'committed' standpoint".³

1 Liberation songs

1.1 Definition of liberation songs

In this paper the terms 'liberation music', 'liberation songs', 'struggle songs', 'struggle music', 'protest songs', and 'protest music' have been used interchangeably. The term 'protest song', became popular in "the context of the anti-war movement in the United States during the 1960s".⁴ It was used to describe songs of "socio-political commitment which... developed out of traditional folksong".⁵ But as Pring-Mill notes the phrase 'protest song' is:

Misleading insofar as it is interpreted to imply that all such songs are 'anti' something, denouncing some negative abuse rather than promoting something positive to put in its place.⁶

A more accurate description is that of "songs of hope and struggle".⁷ This is because over and above expressing 'resistance' to some form of oppression, these songs are about 'projecting hope' for the day when the oppression will be no more.

1.2 Using rhetorical analysis techniques in analysing struggle songs

According to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the discipline of rhetoric in its strictest sense is:

Concerned with the modes of persuasion. Persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated.⁸

If one considers aspects that made liberation art effective as part of a strategy to overthrow oppressive regimes, one can see that the efficacy of struggle songs lies largely in their ability to persuade. Through being functional, inspirational, educational, instructional, ideological and political, they were able to be persuasive⁹. Since the ability to persuade is what informs other rhetorical texts such as speeches and debates, struggle songs can thus also be analysed using rhetorical analysis techniques. As Aristotle notes:

³ *Ibid.* 179.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, W. R. Roberts, trans. (1994) 5. www.bocc.ubi.pt. (Accessed 25 September 2012).

⁹ Perkins, *Journal of Black Studies*, 230.

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word, there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.¹⁰

In liberation music all three modes are indeed present – the singers who fulfil the role of orator, the songs which play the role of the text, and the audience to whom the songs are being sung. However, the manner in which these modes manifest in struggle songs differs from the conventional arrangement of speeches.

1.2.1 Orator

Firstly, unlike instances where a speech is being delivered by a single orator, the delivery of struggle songs often occurs in a group context.¹¹ When one listens to interviews by struggle veterans, one gets a sense that the comradely spirit that was experienced, as people sang in unison about their struggles, as well as their hopes, unleashed a dynamic that would have been unachievable outside of the group context. Thus in the same manner that one would analyse the character and mannerism of an orator, in order to gauge their unique power to persuade, one needs to bear in mind the group dynamics present that made struggle songs such effective tools in the fight against apartheid.

1.2.2 Audience

The second aspect in which the employment of the modes of persuasion used in struggle songs differs from conventional speech delivered, is in the manner in which the orator (or singers of the song, in this case) were often simultaneously the audience to whom the song was being performed. Other than in instances where people were directly marching against apartheid authorities, and thus subsequently singing to these authorities, when groups gathered to sing struggle songs, they were in essence singing to themselves. In these instances, the purpose of the singing was still to persuade, even though the singers were persuading themselves, in a sense. Likewise the songs were a “means used by... people to speak of... poverty... sufferings [and]... exploitation”,¹² to rouse their fellow oppressed peoples to grow even more indignant against the injustices that they were being subjected to. This occurrence is important to note because in conventional rhetorical addresses:

¹⁰ Aristotle, 8.

¹¹ Pring-Mill, *Popular Music*, 181-182.

¹² Pring-Mill, *Popular Music*, 181.

Of the three elements in speech-making—speaker, subject, and person addressed — it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object.¹³

Thus when the hearer is the same person as the speaker, as is the case in the performance of struggle songs, the dynamic changes altogether.

1.2.3 Speech

The final dynamic that one encounters in the analysis of struggle songs using rhetorical techniques is the fact that the struggle songs were not static texts, and were often not written down. With each phase of the struggle, songs were often modified in order to capture the emotions and articulate the conditions of the time. The consequence of this is that the lyrics, and even the structure of the songs, were often subject to change, which implies that the meaning was also often altered. Further, the fact that the actual physical and musical performance of a song were part and parcel of how it was used to be persuasive, implies that one cannot simply read lyrics and then perform a rhetorical analysis on that basis. Rather, one needs to watch the songs performed in order to get a sense of not only what they sounded like, but what kind of actions accompanied them. This is not always mandatory when one analyses a conventional speech because the assumption is that the techniques of persuasion are primarily expressed in the text.

Yet despite these interesting additional dynamics, the fact that struggle songs are texts that were used to persuade implies that they can be analysed rhetorically to come to a better understanding of how they employed rhetorical genres and proofs in order to persuade.

The songs that will be analyzed are *Senzeni Na?* and *Pasopa Verwoerd*.

2 Discussion

By way of lyrical content, *Senzeni Na?* is a very simple song. The lyrics as per a recording of a performance by the Bangor Community Choir are as follows:

Senzeni Na?

Senzenina? (x4)

Sonosethu, ubumyama? (x4)

Sonosethuyinyaniso ? (x4)

Sibulawayo (x4)

¹³ Aristotle, 15.

Mayibuye i Africa (x4)¹⁴
(Translation)

What have we done? (x4)
Is our sin the fact that we are black? (x4)
Is our sin the truth? (x4)
We are being killed (x4)
Return Africa (x4)

In a documentary on the history of South Africa's struggle songs called *Amandla! A revolution in four-part harmony*, one of the interviewees, Duma Ndlovu, a former apartheid activist said:

Senzeni Na? like *We Shall Overcome*, will take her rightful place in society, because at one time a mass body of people related to that song and touched each other's hearts using that song.¹⁵

The song was sung mainly at funerals, protest marches and rallies.¹⁶ Without a real indication of when the song first appeared, it is difficult to speculate on what events may have triggered its composition, however what is clear is that it formed part of the struggle repertoire from the earlier days of apartheid right through into the country's democratic dispensation post-1994.

Three of the four verses of *Senzeni Na?* are posed as rhetorical questions, leading to the conclusion that part of the song's efficacy lies in its approach of posing probing questions that are not meant to be answered, but rather are meant to evoke an internal response from the subconscious of those being questioned. In this regard, a study by Burnkrant and Howard shows that "introducing a counter-attitudinal message with questions leads to more intensive processing of message content than introducing it with statements".¹⁷ Used in this context, where there really were no concrete or logical answers as to what black South Africans had 'done' to deserve the harsh treatment that they were being subjected to by the apartheid regime, the use of the rhetorical questions in *Senzeni Na?* is a way of exposing the absurd nature of the race-based laws of apartheid. Speaking in an interview which is featured on the same documentary singer, songwriter and activist Sibongile Khumalo alluded to the power of the song lying also in the repetitive nature of the lyrics. She says, "if you ask *senzeni na?* (what have we done?) four times, someone is bound to get the message".¹⁸

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sMKm1Ulc0U>

¹⁵ Lee Hirsch, *Amandla! A revolution in four-part harmony* (Kwela Productions, 2004).

¹⁶ Hirsch, *Amandla!* 2004.

¹⁷ R. E. Burnkrant and D. J. Howard, "Effects of the use of introductory rhetorical questions versus statements on information processing", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47, 6 (1984) 1227.

¹⁸ Hirsch, *Amandla!* 2004.

According to Aristotle's principles on rhetoric, *Senzeni Na?* falls into the forensic genre of rhetoric, in that it is concerned about the past, and what the oppressed black nation 'had done' to warrant being treated so unjustly. That is why the employment of the enthymemes, as they are expressed in the questioning form of the song, are so effective. Aristotle notes that "it is our doubts about past events that most admit of arguments showing why a thing must have happened or proving that it did happen".¹⁹ Thus the song is effective because it makes compelling statements by posing these statements as questions, and thereby demonstrates that there are no good reasons why such atrocities, as were perpetuated under apartheid, should have happened.

In his discussion on what makes a statement persuasive, Aristotle notes: "[a] statement is persuasive and credible either because it is directly self-evident or because it appears to be proved from other statements that are so".²⁰ The argument being made in *Senzeni Na?* is posed in question form, but is in fact the statement "we have done nothing to deserve this treatment". Instead of stating this directly, however, the statement is made more persuasive by framing it as a question with an obvious answer that effectively implicates those who were responsible for perpetuating the injustices of apartheid. The syllogism that is being made in this song can be given as follows:

1. Atrocities are perpetuated against bad people,
2. Being black does not automatically make you a bad person, therefore,
3. We do not deserve these atrocities that are being perpetuated against us simply because we are black.

Looking over the structure of the entire song, one observes that *Senzeni Na?* adheres to Aristotle's prescription for the structure of a conventional rhetorical speech, namely that "[a] speech has two parts. You must state your case, and you must prove it".²¹ The question-statements in the first three verses of the song state the claim and prove it simultaneously because they cause the listener to arrive at the obvious conclusion themselves.

What have we done? Nothing.

Is our sin that we are black? No.

Is our sin the truth? No.

Thus, while being simple and somewhat repetitive, these properties render *Senzeni Na?* a text that makes a compelling argument rhetorically.

The last verse of the song is interesting to note because it deviates from the verses preceding it. It is a demand, and somewhat of an instruction, that based on the fact that there really was no logical answer to why black people were suffering, they now need to act to claim Africa back for Africans. It is as though it is compelling the singers that

¹⁹ Aristotle, 44.

²⁰ Aristotle, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.* 166.

now that they have argued and proved the absurd nature of the injustices that they were being subjected to, they must work at reclaiming the Africa that they know and love, in order to restore it to its former glory and its original people. This is an important aspect of how the song manages to be persuasive because without a call to action, it would merely be deliberation of what had happened, and not really a rhetorical text that persuades the audience to some form of action.

Looking at the performance of *Senzeni Na?*, the repetitive lyrics, combined with the somewhat slow and sombre tune, meant that it was easy for a person to speak while the crowd hummed or continued to sing the song softly in the background. This style of performance for this song can be seen in a scene in the documentary *Amandla!* In the segment that looks at *Senzeni Na?* there is footage from a funeral. While *Senzeni Na?* is being sung quietly, two youths break out into monologues. Following in the wake of the questioning nature of the lyrics of the song, they too ask questions such as “how long, mama, will our people continue to die”, as they mourn their fallen comrades.²²

For a song that was not nearly as militant in content and tune as some of the other songs that were composed during the latter years of the struggle, the performance of *Senzeni Na?* in contexts such as these, manages to evoke anger and communicates a sense of frustration at the injustices of the time.

Before considering the second song, *Pasopa Verwoerd*, a brief discussion must be held on the issue of language use and translation when it comes to liberation music. One of the complexities of attempting to translate struggle songs into English is that a great deal of meaning is lost in the translation process. The isiXhosa and isiZulu lyrics that were used when composing these songs were deliberately chosen by the composers because of their political and linguistic significance. Attempts to translate them into English often fail because the ideas embodied are specific to those languages and cannot be adequately articulated in one or two English words. This is not to say that words do not exist to accomplish this, but rather this means that the corresponding English words have different meanings and discourses to their vernacular counter parts. Take for instance the isiXhosa word and concept of *ubuntu*. Simply translated, it means “one’s humanity”. If you ask a Xhosa speaking person to explain it though, you will most likely get a paragraph long discussion which includes aspects such as culture and belief, all of which fail to be captured by the literal English translation. Such is the plight of many of the words used in struggle songs, and hence a great deal of misunderstanding has arisen as South Africans have attempted to discuss liberation music in the post-apartheid era by using English as the primary language when conducting those dialogues in the public sphere.

For the purposes of this research, the translations given have been as literal and as verbatim as possible. This was done for simplicity, so as to avoid drawn out discussions on the translation. Venturing into the realm of interpretative translation would have required extensive discussions on other linguistically relevant topics such

²² Hirsch, *Amandla!*

as grammar and context. Thus, simplicity was chosen, although at the expense of thoroughness. Such a sacrifice is warranted, however, especially in the case of this study which seeks to discuss meaning in context.

Pasopa Verwoerd

Nantsi'ndodemnyama, Verwoerd (x4)

Pasopa nantsi'ndodemnyama, Verwoerd (x4)

Nantsi'ndodemnyama, Verwoerd (x4)²³

(Translation)

Here is the black man, Verwoerd (x4)

Watch out here comes the black man, Verwoerd (x4)

Here comes the black man, Verwoerd (x4)

As with the preceding song, the lyrics to this song are simple and repetitive, making them easily transferable in a group context. Also without delving too deeply into the intricate musical components of the discussion, the stoical tune and almost daring melody of this song, add to its confrontational feel. Lyrically, *Pasopa Verwoerd* is a direct warning to Hendrik Verwoerd who is said to have been the “architect” of apartheid.²⁴ Verwoerd was the Prime Minister of South Africa from 1958-1966. It was during his tenure in the South African government that liberation movements such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress were banned. He is described as the architect of apartheid because it was while he was minister of Native Affairs, and then subsequently South Africa’s Prime Minister, that the policy of racial segregation, as espoused by apartheid, was formulated and passed as law.²⁵

It is interesting to note that the one key word that indicates this warning, namely the Afrikaans derivative *pasopa* (or *passop* in proper Afrikaans), has a Xhosa equivalent, *lumkela*, which means “look out” or using a slightly stronger tone, “watch out”, and yet this Xhosa word is not used. Instead a word similar to the Afrikaans warning word *Passop* is used. Because this song was normally used when struggle activists were marching in direct confrontation to the apartheid police or army,²⁶ it can be assumed that the Afrikaans word was deliberately chosen so that the apartheid authorities could

²³ Hirsch, *Amandla!*

²⁴ H. Kenney, *Architect of apartheid: H.F. Verwoerd, an appraisal* (Johannesburg: J.Ball, 1980).

²⁵ C. M. Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): 31.

²⁶ Hirsch, *Amandla!*

comprehend that a direct warning and challenge was being issued to them. By simply singing “Pasopa Verwoerd” or “Passop Verwoerd” the marches ensured that the apartheid authorities were able to understand that a warning was being issued. As freedom-fighter and current ANC National Executive Committee member Thandi Modise put it: “When you really, really wanted to make the *Boers* (Afrikaners) mad, you sang *Pasopa Verwoerd* because you were almost daring them”.²⁷

Pasopa Verwoerd also falls into the deliberative genre of rhetoric because it warns the audience of an event that is still to come. As Aristotle explains, the deliberative orator “is concerned with the future: it is about things to be done hereafter that he advises, for or against”.²⁸ For the deliberative orator, the end is “establishing the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action”.²⁹ In the case of this song, the warning is that if ‘the white man’ as personified by Verwoerd, continues on the oppressive path that he is on, the black man will retaliate. It is a warning that the black man (*ndod'emnyama*) will one day have his day of revenge. At its core, the deliberative genre is concerned with what actions or choices will result in future good. Some of the advantageous things that Aristotle notes include health, beauty, justice, honour and reputation. Most pertinent to this song, however, is the issue of justice, and to some extent honour and reputation for the oppressed black nation.

The predominant artistic proof used in this song is ethos. This is because *Pasopa Verwoerd* deals strongly with expounding on “human character and goodness”.³⁰ Because the ethos proof functions mainly by drawing on the values espoused by the audience, as opposed to the orator, the song’s direct address to Verwoerd personalises the message being delivered. Further it plays quite strongly on the sense of fear that existed in both black and white South Africans, based on the fact that the conditions under apartheid were so turbulent that at any moment violence could break out on either side. This song warns the apartheid government of a pending day when the oppressed black South Africans would decide to rise up against the regime, and in so doing successfully draws on the fears of white South Africans. This combination of the use of the deliberative genre, together with the ethos proof, renders this a persuasive text.

In conclusion, by considering the songs above, it has been shown that it is possible, through textual analysis, to analyse struggle songs as texts and in so doing to decipher the methods and techniques they employ to make rhetorically sound arguments. The songs have been viewed primarily as texts capable of persuasion. That the history of the songs has also been a key feature of the discussion is a consequence of their meaning being deeply imbedded in where they come from and how they were used in the past. The purpose, however, has been to move the discussion around South

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Aristotle, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Africa's struggle songs from one that focuses primarily on the history and context in which these songs were written and sung, to one that analyses and discusses the actual content of the songs in order to understand them as texts with relevance in relation to the country's political communication field post-1994. What is interesting about these songs is that they do not remain lost in the apartheid days, and still form a very important part of South African political culture, especially in political entities with a strong liberation history such as the governing ANC (African National Congress) as well as parties like the Azanian People's Organisation and the PAC (Pan African Congress).

The second issue that has been unveiled in relation to liberation music is the fact that language will always be a barrier when dealing with South Africa's past, particularly where struggle songs are involved. It is a pity that the national debates around this music, that have occurred since 1994, have been conducted primarily on English media platforms. This issue of translation has been particularly contentious in the South African media, as controversy has arisen as a result of the singing of certain songs that, when directly translated from the vernacular into English, have violent undertones which are not necessarily present in the original isiZulu and isiXhosa versions. It must not be forgotten that even language was contested terrain during the struggle because of the recognition that a people's culture and ideas are intimately linked to the language that they spoke. As such, the exclusive nature of struggle songs was deliberate and must be born in mind, even as some of the lyrics have had to be translated for the purposes of academic writing that can be understood by a larger audience.

For the foreseeable future, struggle songs will continue to play a prominent role in South African political communication. Even though many of these songs are strongly linked with the ANC, it is worth noting that because they are so organic, different political parties that were not around during the apartheid era can indeed begin to appropriate them to communicate their own messages if they educate themselves on some of the issues of meaning discussed in this dissertation. By doing so, they too can begin to draw on the rich historical significance that these songs possess and harness the political clout that these communication tools carry.

Sisanda Nkoala is a lecturer in the Media Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. She is also a Ph.D candidate at the Centre for Rhetoric Studies, University of Cape Town.

This article first appeared in AYOR Volume 4.1