

# RESPONSE TO SPIEGEL

Ari Sitas

My 'vibrant eulogy' of Hlatshwayo's poetry<sup>1</sup> has generated a patronising and hostile set of criticisms by Andrew D Spiegel.<sup>2</sup> Such passions could have produced a resonant debate had Spiegel aimed them better at my totems; but, unfortunately the opportunity was missed. Perhaps others can find it an interesting point of departure to debate 'tradition' and its (ab)uses in South Africa. I shall outline the reasons why, at least for me, in response to Spiegel, this is a non-debate.

I find myself in an awkward position: either I would have to moan at the editors of *Transformation* or Spiegel for not having understood or read my work - which in the field of 'culture' does not either start with the piece in question or end there. And that my notions of 'Zulu-ness', 'culture' and 'tradition' do not tally with his reconstruction. But after the moan I would have to restate my arguments. I find such a prospect both daunting and, energy-wise, not worth the effort. Or, to spend a page or two moaning that I didn't mean this, and that I didn't mean that, and that Spiegel has misunderstood my arguments.

Still, even if the 'vibrant eulogy' that appeared in *Transformation* justified the misunderstandings that Spiegel constructed, I would still have found his criticisms odd. Firstly, I do not understand what Spiegel is defending against me; secondly, I find that he confuses poetry or poetic tradition with 'tradition' and 'culture', and slides from the one to the other without demonstrating his case; and, thirdly, he adds a bit of radical spice through Marx or *Sechaba* editorial comments, whose weight, it seems, he has not digested.

Firstly then: Spiegel's critique, admittedly a cogent critique of a Sitas I have not inhabited, is odd because, after all is said and done, it is unclear, at least to me, what its purpose was. Certainty is not one of its virtues: it is couched in a multitude of qualifying clauses: Sitas 'appears to have ignored'; 'perhaps Sitas's analysis has been influenced'; 'perhaps also Sitas has unwittingly been seduced (ouch) by Inkatha's claims'; 'a probable reason for the problem is that Sitas, like so many others, appears to work' (52-53). I find it difficult except to say: Sitas doesn't, wouldn't and couldn't. Be that as it may, I still had difficulties in understanding what Spiegel is defending: he is not defending the integrity of Hlatshwayo's project - because that would have necessitated an independent study of his poems/orations. It is not the integrity of Natal's *izimbongi* he is defending, because, again what he has to say is general and inapplicable. Furthermore, he is not really concerned with

the political, ideological and cultural debates in Natal and what has shaped the thinking of the progressive movement or Inkatha. Save Harries'(1987) study which is an interesting but rather distant analysis of symbolism here, there is little else which situates his contribution in Natal. The political wrapping of his argument and the concern with contemporary struggles is rhetorical. What remains is a defence of a notion, or a conception of tradition and culture which states on the one hand the obvious and contradicts it: Spiegel has to decide whether 'tradition' is that through which resistance is articulated here, or whether it is an 'invention'. Arguing both, as he does, blunts his intervention. But, anyway, my argument has always been that there is no such univocal tradition in Natal, nor has there ever been one: there have been many.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, when I discuss the formal transformation and revival of *imbongi* poetry, mentioning new contexts, and so on, I am speaking of the ways in which the words hang together, and I demonstrate, badly perhaps, how Hlatshwayo plays with metaphors in a new way. Spiegel has to demonstrate that he doesn't, but he doesn't.<sup>4</sup> The argument is about 'aesthetics', not about 'tradition', 'culture' or 'ideology' in general. Of course, the words draw dividends from the past, from the symbolic capital of the Zulu people. But, Hlatshwayo, as a poet, does so in a peculiar way - a way that will remain obscure unless one understands his 'romantic' communitarianism, his anti-hierarchical bent, his belief in democratic processes and his vision of the future. Spiegel has to argue that perhaps Hlatshwayo, like Sitas, is misguided, but he has to understand all this, if he needs to dare an understanding of the poetry.

Thirdly, I have problems with the tone of the piece: I am rapped over the knuckles with a copy of *Sechaba* to realise, I suppose, the ways of my heretical thinking. I am also lambasted for being a poor Marxist, for ignoring that even Marx argued that: 'the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they (people) seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things ... precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service'. I cannot believe that Spiegel could, or anyone could, read the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and miss the irony of the text being quoted, have a chuckle about the implications of what Marx is saying, for the French Revolution and revolutions in general, and fail to grasp that for Marx all this costume-business, this masquerade, was a problem. If people care to turn a few pages forward in the text, (pp 12-13 of my text) Marx unequivocally declares his hand: 'The social revolution ... cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstitions in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution ... must

let the dead bury the dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase'.

The point is very simple - perhaps Marx ought to be left alone here.<sup>5</sup> In the words of this 'romantic' Hlatshwayo, after all, the path (the *umzila*) hacked open through the thicket by their contributions has to be traced to its own rhythms and heartbeats: 'and they trace our trail to Fidel Castro of Cuba - the great revolutionary/ and they trace it to Karl Marx's scriptures/ for he wrote of the war of the rich and the poor/ as if our trail does not start from our hearts ...' (*The Workers' Trail*).

But any response to Spiegel from the basis of what I have not argued, against what he has criticised that I have, will remain a non-debate. If the attack is against the people who see Nguni society as static, and social life as traditional and unchanging, I would add my venom to Spiegel's. But in Natal, nobody does anymore: not Inkatha, not the progressive movement, not the editors of *Transformation* and not Sitas. I scratched the piece on Hlatshwayo's poetry together in the hope of communicating to a broader community of scribes something dynamic and frail taking place in the black working-class communities of Natal. A thousand and a half lives later both the dynamism and frailty of this project continues and new shifts scar people's poetry here that need to be noted. With minor adjustments, I still feel that my analysis of, and claims about, the poetry hold.

## NOTES

1. See 'A Black Mamba Rising: an introduction to Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo's poetry', in *Transformation 2* (1986).
2. These appeared as 'Transforming Tradition or Transforming Society: Sitas, Hlatshwayo and performative literature', in *Transformation 6* (1988).
3. See, for instance, 'Nation and Ethnicity in Natal's Working Class' (Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Seminar Paper, 1987, London). Also, what might be useful is the more extended piece from which my 'eulogy' was culled for *Transformation*, 'The Flight of the Gwala-Gwala Bird: Cultural Work and Natal's Labour Movement' (History Workshop Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 1987).
4. Elizabeth Gunner, for example, demonstrates such a continuity of symbolism between some of Hlatshwayo's lines and, for example, Cetshwayo's praises. Yet in the same breath she notes some of the 'impurity' of the forms used; she ascribes these to other influences like black consciousness or post-Soweto poetry. But a piece of work, whatever its influences, and the elements that derive from them, is neither the influences nor these elements: it is a barrage of words which pretends to be unified and, with that in mind, I would still insist on the novelty of his work, until 1985. For the later period, 1985-7,

see my 'The Oral and the Written: people's poetry in Natal' (Culture and Working Life Project, 1987).

5. I have used the Progress Publishers (1977) (Moscow, seventh printing) edition of the work. Sections of Hlatshwayo's 'The Workers' Trail' appeared in *Natal Arts Quarterly* 1 (COSAW, Durban, 1988), in Zulu.

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