

## **'What witchcraft is this!': The Postcolonial Translation of Shakespeare and Sangomas in Welcome Msomi's uMabatha**

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### ABSTRACT:

*This article revisits the now-famous isiZulu adaptation of Macbeth, Welcome Msomi's uMabatha, produced at the University of Natal in the midst of apartheid South Africa in 1970. The production has remained critically vexing due both to the uncertain distribution of author-director responsibility for the play's creation between black and white South Africans and to the blanket Western critical response to the play as revelatory of true cultural Zulu-ness. This article therefore traces uMabatha's complex composition and production history in order to answer the most predominant remaining critical question: what exactly was translated in this play, and to what effect? I argue that an answer to this question requires consideration of the ideological intersections between Shakespeare's dissemination in colonial and apartheid South*

*Africa and the production's conscious attempts to construct equivalences between the world of Macbeth and Zulu culture—in particular, between Macbeth's iconic witches and Zulu sangomas.*

*The use of sangomas within the play offers an important lens through which we can understand the play's logic of cultural translation, for sangomas occupy a role in Zulu culture that is quite distinct from witchcraft. Sangomas are rather diviners who operate socially in opposition to the kind of possibly malevolent witchcraft depicted in Macbeth, but who were chronically misread by colonists as witches. uMabatha in fact perpetuates a post-colonial version of this misreading through its derogatory language and through its uncontextualized performance of divination practice before a Western audience almost unanimously unaware of the difference between the functions of sangomas and witches in Zulu culture. As a result, I argue that what the play offers is less a translation of Shakespeare than a translation of Zulu-ness that is simultaneously not a translation at all, but a false confirmation of Western preconceptions about what it means to be Zulu.*

*Keywords: South Africa, traditional healing, witchcraft, theatre, Macbeth*

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As projects like the MIT Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive and 2012's landmark Globe to Globe Festival testify, there has been

no shortage of global Shakespearean adaptations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; a key handful, however, have kept scholars in anxious debate for decades after their initial production. Among these is Welcome Msomi's *uMabatha* (1970), an adaptation of *Macbeth* composed and performed in isiZulu and thereafter commonly but unofficially subtitled 'The Zulu *Macbeth*.' It is not Msomi's isiZulu text, however, that has primarily continued to raise critical questions; rather, scholars have remained fascinated and puzzled by the play's performance, reception, and production history. As a result, critics and scholars have sometimes overlooked the implications of the translation decisions made in the composition of the play—how, why, and to what effect, for example, the show's creative producers translated key images and figures from *Macbeth* not only into the isiZulu language, but into Zulu cultural equivalents. This essay seeks to fill a gap in the critical history by examining in particular the alteration of *Macbeth*'s witches—signifiers as iconic in the play's history as the bloody daggers used to kill Duncan—into *sangomas*, traditional Zulu healers. Although many critics and reviewers of the play accepted the presentation of *sangomas* as Zulu cultural equivalents to witchcraft without further question, this move amounts to a crucial dual translation—of Shakespeare on one hand, and of the cultural and historical realities of ubungoma [divination] practice on the other—into a theatrical space in which their complex respective his-

tories in colonial and postcolonial South Africa are erased. In order to better understand this erasure and its potential to reaffirm British cultural hegemony, it is necessary to briefly trace both the history of Shakespearean dissemination in colonial and postcolonial South Africa as well as South Africa's own historical relationship to the *sangomas* working within it.

Shakespeare's dissemination throughout South Africa during the tumultuous colonial history of the early nineteenth century occurred in two major forms: the first was in the growth of colonial theatre, which began in military performances before receiving official inauguration in the opening of governor Sir George Yonge's African Theatre in 1801, celebrated with a production of *Henry IV, Part One* that the Cape Town Gazette glowingly hailed as a "customary honor paid to our Immortal Bard" (qtd. in Wright, Introduction 15). Despite a sweep of Puritan anti-theatrical sentiment in the 1830s, Shakespeare's plays continued to be performed throughout the nineteenth century for white settlers, for whom being involved in the consumption of Shakespeare offered proof of their "affiliations with the imperial and colonial centres" (Orkin, "The Shakespeare Connection" 235).

The more crucial realm in which access to Shakespeare and, by proxy, to these "imperial and colonial centres" was granted or denied was in early mission schools and later third-grade or work-

ing-class schools. Although from a postcolonial standpoint we might expect missionary educators to have programmatically diffused Shakespeare and other canonical British authors among native South African children in a move toward assimilation, in reality educators who attempted to do so were countered by more utilitarian educational officials who saw little use for poetry and drama in a schooling system increasingly designed to create a middle-class workforce by teaching black and lower-class white South African children “Christianity, the English language, and vocational skills” (Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* 29). Thus, while the English language was maintained as a ‘civilizing’ force in the education of black South Africans, the high-culture English literature that established a connection with the British metropole was withheld from most of the black South African population, save those whose expected vocation required more advanced administrative and technical skills or “exceptional trust and responsibility” in the case of future tribal chieftains (Watson 21). Literary education, then, was tied to the means of social mobility for certain colonial subjects—the selectiveness of its distribution in part defined the social and economic divisions colonists hoped to impose.

The postcolonial education system under the formalization of apartheid in the Bantu Education Act of 1953 deliberately diminished this previously open (albeit rare) social mobility, and the stress on

black African vocational education that had formed a long-standing part of the racist undercurrent of educational policy became, again, overt. H. F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs and later South African Prime Minister, avowed to Parliament that “There is no place for [the Bantu student] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. . . For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community” (qtd. in Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* 163). The result of this anti-assimilatory ideology was that, according to David Johnson, the early years of apartheid saw only a very small percentage of the black student population (0.07 percent) placed in secondary schools where they would be exposed to and take exams on Shakespeare; it was only in the 1960s that Shakespeare was introduced to younger Bantu pupils as well, with “a strong emphasis on being able to summarize the details of the plot” (Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* 170-71). The few interpretive readings of Shakespeare taught to black students seem to have mainly focused on the universality of Shakespearean themes as well as the demonstration in the plays of moral order and harmony, deliberately bypassing “[i]ssues such as those involving language and power, racism or conditions of material struggle,” as Martin Orkin wrote in 1986 (“The Shakespeare Connection” 240). This restriction of interpretive possibilities (reminiscent of the colonial censorship of immoral content in fiction) was, as Orkin

has argued, implicitly if not explicitly connected to attempts to teach black South African children the appropriateness of their social place. Indeed, writer and actor Bloke Modisane acknowledged the educational intent to distance rather than elevate black students by pointing out in his 1963 autobiography *Blame Me On History* that Bantu education had been an “education for a Caliban” (Modisane 179).

For black South African writers like Welcome Msomi, then, exposure to Shakespeare was a carefully monitored part of their schooling as children, inscribed in such a way as to offer the Shakespearian texts as universal treasures while reminding students at the practical level of segregation and censorship that they were not allowed unquestioned access to the cultural and social power that Shakespeare represented. Msomi, for example, recalls encountering Shakespeare through a seventh-grade reading of *Julius Caesar* and an applauded performance of Mark Antony’s oration that inspired him to pursue involvement in the theater; when he attempted to enroll in the University of Natal’s Department of Speech and Drama, however, he was reminded that he “had to apply to the Minister of the Interior to get into a white university” (Msomi, “Why *Macbeth*?” 78). For a writer like Msomi to produce a Shakespearian adaptation in this environment was therefore to produce something already politically complex through its context within the South African apartheid system.

Black South African writers' perceptions and uses of Shakespeare during this time, however, varied enormously. Contrary to British colonial and South African apartheid views that Shakespeare was either above politics or, if necessarily political, then at least committed to the kind of hierarchy and social order that reinforced rather than questioned colonization and apartheid, some South African writers like the late Es'kia Mphahlele, novelist Peter Abrahams, and short-story writer Can Themba argued for a Shakespeare that was, or could be, primarily sympathetic to Africa—an example of white settler culture that might not exclusively “dominate[ ] and impoverish[ ] black people . . . [but] provide[ ] the route to an enlarged self-consciousness” (Johnson, *Shakespeare and South Africa* 174). Can Themba, for example, acknowledged Shakespeare's role in the cultural imperial mission to spread the dominion of the English language—recalling jokingly that *Julius Caesar* was the “starting point in the Shakespearean odyssey for many an African who has staggered through literacy,” as it was for Msomi—while at the same time recognizing that gaining a Shakespearean education could be a form of resistance rather than imposition (150). Themba in fact encouraged black men to take on markers of European high culture like Shakespeare so that, in the face of their oppressors, they could “[t]alk as if the high-brow things came naturally to you” and make their “trembling whiteness look[ ] round at you with that curious mixed reaction of fear, wrath and horror” (Themba 153).

The ‘universality’ of Shakespeare, which seemed to translate on political rather than idealistic grounds as ‘superiority,’ could be co-opted.

In the theater, the appropriation of Shakespeare took on added levels of complexity. Theater was already an available format for commenting on South African political crises; workshop plays, for example, like those of Athol Fugard, explored relationships with the institution of apartheid while also challenging the principles of segregation through multiracial casting and the collaboration of black and white artists—although the collaborative relationship was often somewhat hierarchical in that the plays usually “made use of white directors, devisers and managements” (Crow and Banfield, “South African ‘Workshop’ Play” 98). Shakespearean appropriation, too, could be deliberately subversive, especially within smaller independent and university theaters with the creative freedom to “interrogate[ ] the dominant racist ideology in production choices” (Quince 88). Even in appropriations lacking overt political messages, production choices in performing Shakespeare came with practically unavoidable political import. Given the history of English literacy teaching in South Africa, for example, the choice to perform Shakespeare in English or in another language made an immediate impact: as Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong’o argued in his *Writers in Politics* (1981), the language one in which one writes “predetermines the answer to the most important question for producers of

imaginative literature: For whom do I write? Who is my audience?" (53-54).

This question was crucial for playwrights during apartheid, since theater audiences were racially segregated and English was not the dominant language in South Africa according to the percentage of speakers. In fact, as Natasha Distiller notes, South Africa's lingua franca, if it can be said to have one among its eleven official languages, is isiZulu, the language in which Msomi composed *uMabatha*: as of 2000, Theo du Plessis estimated that isiZulu had the greatest percentage of speakers in South Africa at 23%, followed by isiXhosa and English in only fifth place (Distiller, *Shakespeare and the Coconuts* 29; du Plessis 95-110). English, as the language of power in part because it was not the language of the majority, could be deployed in the theater as part of a claim to cultural authority, especially when combined with the cultural cachet of Shakespeare.

Writing or adapting plays in a South African language other than English makes a different claim: it offers evidence that the black South African, contrary to colonial logic, has "a language, a history, a culture of his own" (Crow and Banfield, Introduction 4). Writing in a non-colonial language may therefore be integrated into a sort of theatrical return-to-roots movement or what Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka has called the "quest for racial self-retrieval", an attempt to recover "an Af-

rican cultural personality,” but, crucially, without activating the impulse to reconstruct national identity through Neo-Tarzanist myth-making whereby “the ‘difference’ inscribed in traditional aesthetics is translated as a simple functionalism derivative of the mechanisms of the primitive mind” (Crow and Banfield, Introduction 6, 10; Price 26). For South African playwrights who wish through their work to achieve conformity and socio-cultural advancement, resistance and subversion, or something else altogether, they have at their disposal the tools of English and other South African languages, Western and indigenous theatrical practices, and Western and South African “cultural texts,” described by Christopher Balme as carriers of cultural meaning that are “only fully comprehensible within the culture that produces and uses it” (4, italics mine). Whatever combination of these resources and codes South African playwrights deploy to create a theatrically syncretic product will almost inevitably be read in terms of political choices. For example, Christopher Balme suggests that the integration of cultural texts considered particularly ‘African,’ like song, dance, masking, oral stories and the like into “the framework of a [Western] theatrical text” from which colonialism denied their appropriateness “involves a process of cultural and aesthetic semiotic recoding which ultimately questions the basis of normative Western drama” (4).

Welcome Msomi’s *uMabatha*, then, raises a host of questions based on its syncretic makeup and

background: it is an adaptation of a culturally exalted English text, written and performed in isiZulu, and staged both in South Africa and most famously in London, the British colonial metropole. Even more strangely, it is a collaboration among black and white South African artists whose contributions to the project have remained contested. Some backstory may be necessary here: when Welcome Msoni chose not to apply to the University of Natal through the Minister of the Interior, he channeled his artistry into the creation, in 1965, of his own company, the Black Theatre Company based in Durban. One of his original plays, *Qondeni*, ran at the University of Natal, where Elizabeth Sneddon, the contemporary head of the Department of Speech and Drama into which Msoni had once hoped to gain entry, saw it and apparently lamented its “‘detrimental’ portrayal of Zulu people” (Wright, “Zulu Play or Shakespeare Translation?” 112). The concept of *uMabatha*, a version of *Macbeth* based on “the tribal history of the Zulu,” was to be a positive alternative to this ‘detrimental’ portrayal, suggested by Sneddon to Msoni after, according to Sneddon, it had been previously suggested to her by P. P. Breytenbach in a meeting with the Performing Arts Council (Wright, “Zulu Play or Shakespeare Translation?” 111-12). Msoni tells the story differently: according to Msoni, Sneddon had not proposed a Zulu version of *Macbeth*, but recommended only that he “do something Shakespearean,” at which point he decided that “out of all the plays of Shakespeare,

the one that would fit in well with the Zulu history would be *Macbeth*" (Msomi, "Why *Macbeth*?" 75). The original production's director, Pieter Scholtz, offers a third narrative: according to Scholtz, he had told Sneddon previously that he "would like to do a production of *Macbeth* using the African Tribal experience in place of the clan system that is evident in the play," and, after the concept for the whole production had been planned out, the two professors recruited Msomi as an 'assistant' (Scholtz 40).

The debates over the roles that Sneddon, Scholtz, and Msomi played in the production of *uMabatha* have raised problems for critics and scholars attempting to determine just what the play was intended to do. Analysis of the production therefore usually falls along dichotomous lines, depending in part on the perceived relative responsibilities of its black and white originators. Was it an effort headlined by a Zulu playwright to stage a return to roots in terms like those described by Wole Soyinka through the unexpected use of Shakespeare? Or was it an exploitation of Zulu culture orchestrated by and for a primarily white community? Was it "syncretic theatre," a conscious use of Western and Zulu cultural texts to produce something new and meaningful, or was it syncretic theatre's more dangerous counterpart, "theatrical exoticism," which by nature "pays no heed to the original textuality of the elements it appropriates," but merely "recode[s] and semanticize[s] [them] in an en-

tirely Western aesthetic and ideological frame”)? (Balme 5). Was this a production of Zulu culture through the medium of Shakespeare, or Shakespeare through the medium of Zulu culture?

Although the show’s producers say little about what they were trying to do beyond acting on the exciting parallels that they noticed between ‘Zulu tribal history’ and *Macbeth*, the show’s production materials offer more explicit evidence about the show’s intentions: according to the program for the show’s premiere at the University of Natal’s Open Air Theatre, *uMabatha* was meant to be viewed as “‘a Zulu drama on the theme of *Macbeth*’”—not merely an adaptation of *Macbeth*, but “‘a dramatization of a fierce and momentous epoch in South African history which uses the plotline and conventions of Shakespeare’s play to give greater resonance to its fable of authority, assassination and treachery’” (qtd. in Wright, “Zulu Play or Shakespeare Translation?” 105). When the play ran in London at the World Theatre Season at the invitation of Peter Daubeny in 1972, the program defined this ‘momentous epoch’ more narrowly as the rise and fall of Shaka, the icon held responsible for the consolidation of the Zulu kingdom in the early nineteenth century—and, according to Mervyn McMurtry, a mere marketing ploy for the performance (McMurtry 313).

There are good reasons to think so. What the play claims to be portraying by casting itself as a sus-

tained allusion to Shaka and a ‘fierce and momentous epoch in South African history’ is, in part, the history of the mfecane, the reconfiguration of Nguni-language tribes in southeastern South Africa through territorial warfare waged by the paramount chieftaincies of the Mabhudu, Ndwandwe, Mthethwa, and Qwabe (Buthelezi 23). It was into this fray that Shaka eventually led the minor Zulu clan, consolidating other clans into the Zulu Kingdom—for this, he was gradually immortalized as the greatest representative of Zulu strength and obstinacy, entering into popular imagination as something like a Zulu Caesar, thanks especially to the publication of E. A. Ritter’s popular and mostly invented biography *Shaka Zulu* in 1955 (Wylie 82-86). One event passed down through literary records that has contributed to Shaka’s mythology is his assassination through the political mechanisms of his half-brother Dingane, who was himself overthrown by another half-brother, Mpande, with the aid of Boer forces (Laband 87-96). Were this narrative to be imposed onto that of *Macbeth*, *Macbeth* himself would most closely resemble Dingane, the assassinator overthrown with foreign aid, but *uMabatha* draws the explicit connection between *Macbeth* and *Shaka*, likely for the sake of the sheer power of the Shaka myth, which was invoked by Mangosuthu Buthelezi as a nationalist symbol for the Inkatha movement for tribal autonomy (Quince 55-56).

The play's claims to cultural and historical authenticity were countered, to some degree, by the observation of viewers that it followed the Shakespearean plot almost exactly. In fact, the production is surprisingly quickly locatable on the spectrum of dramatic adaptation defined by Michael Etherton, in which dramatists can make five general adaptive moves:

- 1) the changing of proper nouns (characters, places, titles);
  - 2) the changing of period or setting;
  - 3) the changing of the framework or context;
  - 4) the changing of the story itself;
  - 5) and the changing of themes or final 'points.'
- (Etherton 102-03)

*uMabatha* translates language and imagery, but not plot: Elizabeth Sneddon affirmed Pieter Scholtz's claim that in preparing the play he "took the European images and found equivalents for them in the Zulu experience of animal images," then asked Welcome Msomi to produce an isiZulu-language text (qtd. in Wright, "Zulu Play or Shakespeare Translation?" 114). And according to Scholtz, the first equivalent he looked for was for Macbeth's three witches: in his first discussion with Sneddon about the possibility of producing a South African *Macbeth*, he says, "We talked about it and I discussed the witches. We would use sangomas" (40). Msomi also claims that the translation of the witches were the first part of his pitch to Sneddon:

upon making up the name *uMabatha* on the spot in conversation with Sneddon, Msomi says that “I went on to tell how the play was going to open with music and dances of the diviners instead of the witches” (“Why *Macbeth*?” 75).

The translation of the witches also played a key part in working with the acting troupe for the production, according to Scholtz, who says that they began rehearsals using the English Shakespearian text, a process which Scholtz has said put him “in despair” because “the cast couldn’t cope with the blank verse,” and even his attempts to explain “what the language was about” failed to improve their performances. So, during the next day’s rehearsal he directed the actors to “‘try the opening witches’ scene, ‘When shall we three meet again,’ but, I said, ‘you do it for me as three sangomas coming together and you do it in Zulu.’ . . . Well, it was an absolute revelation and a miracle” (Scholtz 40-41). The choice to write the play in isiZulu was, according to Scholtz’s narrative, not a cultural statement or reclamation, but a solution to the problem of English illiteracy, while the *sangomas* became the test case for transposition into the Zulu idiom.

Pieter Scholtz, then, did not view *uMabatha* as an original Zulu play, but as “‘a Zulu version of *Macbeth*’”—and viewers of the play’s London run seemed to agree, treating it in reviews primarily as *Macbeth* dressed up in Zulu clothes. This meant that the Zulu cultural texts included in the pro-

duction were, for most audiences, largely matters of spectacle. For newspaper reviewers, for example, aspects of the production like dancing and drumming were interpreted as “instinctive” South African forms of expression that allowed the audience to glimpse true tribal culture, while for some academic scholars like Kate McLuskie, who attended the play’s Globe revival in 1997, these cultural texts were gimmicks that catered to crude audience desire for exotic display while distracting from any attempt that might have been made to give “a more discerning audience an insight into the real social and political relations of contemporary South Africa” (McLuskie 155). Both kinds of responses, as Laurence Wright has pointed out, frequently mistook the Zulu cultural and performance idioms on which *uMabatha* drew (but with different intentions, executions, and results than the idioms enacted in their local contexts). And one thing that both responses tended to take for granted was the translation of the witches into *sangomas*—because *sangomas* are not witches.

*Sangomas* are, rather, practitioners of a particular form of South African traditional healing often referred to in English as divination. *Sangomas* are specifically selected by ancestral spirits, *amadlozi*, to undergo training to become *sangomas*; they have the special ability to communicate with the ancestors, primarily their own paternal ancestors, in order to carry out consultations with clients that may involve determining the source of a per-

son's illness or misfortune and advising treatment or divining the unknown by casting and reading bones that are manipulated by the *amadlozi* to reveal a message. They also frequently have extensive knowledge of *umuthi wokwelapha*, the herbal medicines used for healing that are also made and distributed by *inyangas* ['herbal doctors']. The practice of what we might think of as witchcraft falls under the different umbrella of practices labeled in isiZulu as *abathakathi*. The form of sorcery that perhaps most closely resembles popular Western conceptions of witchcraft is what Zulu social scientist Harriet Ngubane terms "night-sorcery": this type of sorcery is practiced by an evil being who may have familiars like baboons; he may also resurrect corpses to do his bidding and prepare *umuthi wokubulala*, medicine used for harming, which he scatters in the pathway of victims (31-34). But this kind of sorcerer, Ngubane stresses, is usually a man: while women can be sorcerers, she found during her research in the Nyuswa Reserve that women were most commonly accused of "day-sorcery" born out of personal animosity or jealousy and acted upon by poisoning the victim's food, placing dangerous medicines in their path, or stealing portions of the victim's sacrificial animals (35). *Sangomas*, in contrast, were rarely suspected of sorcery, despite their knowledge of medicinal preparation; Ngubane suggests that this is because "the spirits which possess the diviners expect of them a high moral code" (34).

The relationship of *sangomas* to such witches is in fact partially antagonistic. During the period of the Zulu kingdom, the time in which *uMabatha* claims to be set, *sangomas* played a crucial role in witch trials: if someone raised an accusation of witchcraft, the chief and his head *sangoma* would preside over a hearing called an *umhlahlo*, at which the *sangoma* would ‘sniff out’ the alleged witches (Flint and Parle 312-22). *Sangomas* were thus sometimes closely associated with the chief as “arbitrators of justice [who] represented the existence of a judicial and political system that threatened to interfere with the implementation of white rule” (Flint and Parle 314). Moreover, early colonists and missionaries sometimes mistook the practices of diviners as witchcraft—a significant mistake, given the commonly held notion that African belief in and practice of witchcraft demonstrated “‘primitive’ or ‘pre-logical’ thinking” (Moore and Sanders 2). Attempts to wipe out South African superstition led to the outlawing of traditional healing practices throughout Natal and Zululand during the nineteenth century, although in the 1880s, once anti-witchcraft measures had proved unsuccessful, colonial officials in the region issued a Code of Native Law that licensed at least “those African healers who posed the least threat to the colonial state and most closely resembled biomedical practitioners”—primarily *inyangas*, who could then commercialize and professionalize their occupation (Flint and Parle 315).

*Sangomas* continued to cause concern for the colonial and eventually apartheid establishments due to their role in witch trials: colonial attempts to eradicate widespread belief in witchcraft often involved punishing those who raised witchcraft accusations, including the *sangomas* responsible for ‘sniffing’ witches out. The same measures were behind the Suppression of Witchcraft Act No. 3 of 1957, amended in 1970, which “consolidated earlier colonial laws into unified legislation for the whole country” and instituted potential fines, imprisonment, or whippings for individuals who accused others of witchcraft (Niehaus 186). The Act targeted *sangomas* as well, legislating a possible fine of R200 or two years of imprisonment for “those who claim to possess the powers of divination” (Niehaus 186). After the end of the apartheid state, the handling of witchcraft and traditional healing practices remained a matter of importance for at least two primary reasons: the first is that the last decade of apartheid government had witnessed over 389 witchcraft-related killings in South Africa, and the new South African government was unsure how to discourage such violence; and second, the occurrence of HIV/AIDS in South Africa was sometimes attributed by locals to the practice of witchcraft, which could lead to individuals with symptoms of the disease consulting *sangomas* rather than or prior to biomedical practitioners (Ashforth 211-12). One response to both of these issues has been the attempted regulation and registration of traditional healers, including

*sangomas*, combined with collaboration between traditional medicine and biomedicine in combatting HIV/AIDS (Mbatha et al.; Harrison).

*Sangomas* have thus occupied a number of roles in relation to the South African government, in a trajectory that we might call the inverse of Shakespeare's: whereas Shakespeare was a marker of civilizing high culture, divination practices were viewed by colonial powers as evidence of the need for civilizing forces. Yoking the two together on stage could potentially destabilize the cultural hierarchy that has historically existed between them, but is that what happened in *uMabatha*? The convoluted reception of the play, as well as the text itself, suggest perhaps not. First, many contemporary reviews interpreted the *sangomas* as witches: Carole Woddis, for example, glosses the word *sangomas* as "witches," while Ben Brantley similarly refers to the figures as an "athletic trio of witches." For viewers like Greg Doran, the presence of what he perceived to be witches were crucial to *uMabatha*'s success; Doran, having seen the play in Johannesburg in 1995, expressed his pleasure at watching *Macbeth* "in this context, in a society with a real relationship to witchcraft," in contrast to British productions which, precisely because of the death of witchcraft as a matter of "mass popular interest" in the British Isles and America after the 1950s, were doomed to "fail" (qtd. in McLuskie 164). Even The Globe Theatre's own summary of a 2001 revival refers, in its explanation of the

show's ritual character, to "the three witches," who "moved simultaneously, chanting in musical phrases of three, a symbolic number in magic and mysticism" (Jeynes and Ryan 9).

Most other reviewers glossed the sangomas as witch doctors: Greg Evans, for example, confidently asserted in his review of the 1997 production that in *uMabatha* "the bard's witches become witch doctors," and Celesta Billeci wrote in the same year that the play shifts "the three cauldron-tending witches to prescient, dancing witch doctors." The term 'witch doctor,' however, is also disliked by working *sangomas* due to its contemporary association with harmful forms of sorcery or black magic and *umuthi* (Fihlani; Sly)—tourism sites for the communities of Eshowe and KwaNyuswa even advise potential visitors that sangomas are not and should not be called witch doctors ("Zulu Medicine & Healers"). The frequent Western interpretation of the *sangomas* as witch doctors in particular may have been colored by the lingering influence of Orson Welles's famous "Voodoo Macbeth" of 1936, a production structured around the curses of a male witch doctor and similarly hailed for its spectacle of dark magical exoticism and criticized for its supposed Shakespearean illiteracy—Welles himself claimed that his black actors lacked "any special intellectual intoxication," but that they brought to their performances instead a native spiritual connection to tragedy and to magic (Rippy 88).

Certain reviewers of *uMabatha* likewise felt that what the cast brought to *Macbeth* was an ‘essence,’ a readable Africanness defined by violence and superstition in which the Shakespearean language was unnecessary, because the supposedly universal thematic content was somehow still uniquely applicable to Africa. Ian Forsythe, reviewing the play’s first run in the Maynardville Open-Air Shakespearean Theatre in Cape Town in 1974, assured audiences that “[i]t is unnecessary to be able to understand Zulu,” while a reviewer for *The Argus* commented that “[a]mbition, revenge, blood, courage, nobility, a strong belief in hierarchical society and traditional values . . . —these fit themselves naturally into noble Zulu folklore”; the *sangomas* are therefore “very credible, crouching half-naked over their pot” (qtd. in Distiller, “Zulu *Macbeth*” 161-62). Their ‘credibility’ here relates not to how authentic the characters are as *sangomas*, but to how credible they are as strange and exotic figures of superstition. In fact, although *uMabatha* incorporates within its action details that are associated with the actual divination practices of *sangomas*—bone-casting, ancestral communication, ritual singing and dancing—audiences seem still to have read the characters as witches roughly synonymous with the Scottish weird sisters of Shakespeare’s original play. The Zulu production’s text, despite its incorporation of actual divination images, encourages rather than discourages this conflation with witchcraft through its close adherence to the plot and character interactions of *Macbeth*:

as a result, Mabatha and Bhangane encounter the *sangomas* and, like Macbeth and Banquo, immediately hold them in contempt: Bhangane tells them in the English translation that “[y]ou are less than dirt,” while Mabatha frequently refers to them as serpents (1.3). While *sangomas* can have special associations with snakes, particularly in visions through which the ancestors communicate with them, snakes, particularly the mamba, can also be the familiars of the more malevolent *abathakathi*, and Mabatha’s negative use of the snake image points more nearly to the latter (Ngubane 87; Jolles and Jolles 235).

Mabatha and Bhangane’s immediate distrust seems unusual, given the generally respected occupation of *sangomas*, but there are other places within the text of *uMabatha* that suggest an affiliation or identification of the characters with the more malevolent *abathakathi*. In Act 4 Scene 1, as the *sangomas* prepare to meet Mabatha again, they mark the time by the sounds of the jackal, the “Tokoloshe,” and the “evil bird,” all of which are types of familiars: the *tokoloshe* or *Thikoloshe*, for example, is “a small hairy being with prominent sex organs, which has attributes of making itself invisible” (Ngubane 34). Later, once Mabatha has experienced a vision of ancestral spirits through the *umuthi* of the *sangomas*, he shouts at the *sangomas* “what witchcraft is this!” The effect of these associations and accusations is to imply, as is implied in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, that Mabatha’s

downfall is not only foretold but also possibly orchestrated by the craft of the ‘witches.’ The *sangoma*’s occupation and social roles are thus erased and replaced with stark implications of witchcraft due to the need for *uMabatha*’s plot and character interactions to follow those of *Macbeth*.

So, in a production that clearly attempted to stick as close to Shakespeare as possible (which, as has been observed, meant not inserting the kind of discernible political messages that appeared in more syncretic adaptations of Shakespeare or in collaborative workshop protest theatre), what happened to the witches in their translation into sangomas, and what happened to sangomas in their translation into Shakespeare? I suggest that, for Western audiences, Shakespeare’s witches became signifying spaces into which an image of African superstition could be distilled, regardless of the exact title or occupation of the rewritten figure (in this case, the *sangomas*). As Zulu cultural markers they were delivered to audiences without cultural context, leading a Western audience especially with working knowledge of *Macbeth*, but not of Zulu culture, to make false equivalences between the two; the *sangomas* could thus read to global audiences at the most superficial level as the embodiment of homogenized superstition, and their manifold social roles—as arbitrators of justice, as subjects of a colonial justice system, as healers—remained mostly invisible.

Furthermore, because the producers of *uMabatha* wished to create, first and foremost, a Shakespearean production, and therefore held the major framework of *Macbeth* firmly in place without negotiating its potential relationships to Zulu culture besides rather shallow, image-based parallels, the displays of Zulu culture like divination practice presented on stage were primarily understood by uninformed viewers in terms of the Shakespearean plot. The overstated Zulu sameness to Shakespeare, explained by viewers and producers alike as a similarity based on violence, superstition, etc., was therefore actually a perceived sameness to the medieval Scotland described by Shakespeare—not to the English culture that produced the high culture of Shakespearean theater. The dominating presence of Shakespeare in this production subsumed and manipulated cultural specificities like *ubungoma* practice to present something admired, understood, and re-projected by Western audiences as purely Other, in the same moment that Shakespeare's universal transcendence was reaffirmed.

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