

'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.

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