

# *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete': Recovering history and heritage through the influence of Xitsonga disco muso, Obed Ngobeni*

**Author:**Vonani F. Bila<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**<sup>1</sup>Department of Languages,  
Faculty of Humanities,  
University of Limpopo,  
Polokwane, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Vonani Bila,  
vonani.bila@ul.ac.za**Dates:**

Received: 03 May 2021

Accepted: 12 July 2021

Published: 03 Nov. 2021

**How to cite this article:**Bila, V.F., 2021, '*Ku Hluvukile eka "Zete"*: Recovering history and heritage through the influence of Xitsonga disco muso, Obed Ngobeni', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 77(2), a6806. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6806>**Copyright:**© 2021. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work  
is licensed under the  
Creative Commons  
Attribution License.

This article explores the influence of the musician Obed Ngobeni (1954–2002) and his backing singers the Kurhula Sisters. It catalogues his significance as a pioneer of Xitsonga disco that helped shape South Africa's 'township bubblegum' sound of the '80s. The author argues that Ngobeni defied apartheid's social engineering in an attempt to foster and affirm African cultural values. This form of resistance is exemplified by the influential 1983 track *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'* (There is Progress at ZZZ), later entitled *Kazet* which has become a recognisable classic and anthem. Veteran musicians such as Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, Harry Belafonte and several deejays have recorded versions of *Kazet* and toured the world, thus extending its reach beyond racial and ethnic confines – placing it on the continent and world music circuit. Ngobeni's music serves as an example of excellence emanating from the so-called backward and 'unbookish' pockets of our country. Hence, the author argues that music on the periphery is central in shaping critical perspectives, cultural affirmation and conscientising people around the issues of labour exploitation, cultural and historical marginalisation. Through the song *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'*, Ngobeni reimagined a new, humane and egalitarian society way back in the '80s before the advent of liberation and democracy in South Africa. Through oral testimonies and interviews of men and women who worked on the ZZZ farms as well as musical archives and other phenomenological approaches, the story of Ngobeni is revealed with sensitivity to the factors that foregrounded his music.

**Contribution:** This article records, preserves, popularises and studies the role of resistance music through Ngobeni's song *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'* within the multidisciplinary fields of social sciences, using, in the main, oral history techniques to document the untold rural story of an unheralded artist.

**Keywords:** Obed Ngobeni; *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'*; Xitsonga disco; resistance; ZZZ tomato farms; people's consciousness; paradise in Gazankulu; conditions on farms.

## Introduction and personal background of Obed Ngobeni

According to Afrosynth Records (2019), Obed Ngobeni and his backing singers the Kurhula Sisters were amongst the originators of Shangaan disco, a genre that helped shape South Africa's burgeoning 'bubblegum' sound of the '80s.

Ngobeni came to prominence in the early 1980s (from the 'unbookish' N'wa-Xinyamani village, in Limpopo province – author's emphasis), with his 1983 hit *Ku Hluvukile ka 'Zete'*. The hit was produced by Peter Moticoe (Heads Music), later re-recorded by the same artist in 1986 as *Kazet* (Teal Sounds). Afrosynth further notes that this song gained international recognition as *Kazet*, and it is the first in Xitsonga music history, to attract scores of artists around the world to record their versions. French R&B and pop star, poet, actress and painter Lizzy Mercier Descloux (1956–2004) released *Mais ou sont passés les gazelles* [*But where have the gazelles gone?*] (ZE Records:1984). Simon Nkabinde (1937–1999) – the groaning lion of Soweto and king of mbaqanga better known as Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens released his version as *Kazet* in the album *Paris –Soweto* (Gallo Record Company:1987), the venerable West Nkosi as producer. Civil rights activist and humanitarian Harry Belafonte from the United States of America versioned it as *Paradise in Gazankulu* in 1988. DJ Tira collaborated with the Mahotella Queens on another funky *Kazet* house beat. A house version called *Kazet* was done by Vinny Da Vinci (Gallo Music/Universal Music Publishers: 2001), with Bob Sinclair as producer. Jimmy B had his

**Note:** Special Collection: Social Memory Studies, sub-edited by Christina Landman (University of South Africa) and Sekgothe Mokgoatšana (University of Limpopo).

**Read online:**Scan this QR  
code with your  
smart phone or  
mobile device  
to read online.

hip hop Boom bap-styled version in 2010, called *Make Me Bounce*. In 2020, the South African Traditional Music Awards (SATMA) winning artist, Dr Bone (featuring Zakwe) released his hip hop single titled *KwaZet*. This track is available on several Digital Service Providers (DSPs) such as Apple Music, Spotify, Deezer and YouTube. According to SA Music News (2021), *Kwazet* reached number 1 on Ukhozi FM Top20 charts.

Sevhani (pers. comm., 19 March 2021) asserts that his father was born on 27 December 1954 to Daniel Ngobeni and Mamayila Ndzove. He started his primary school at Rivolwa on the hill that overlooks N'wa-Xinyamani, Chavani and Shirley villages. N'wa-Xinyamani is the former Headman of Chief Bungeni, but now under Hosi Chavani Mukhari. The village is one of the largest settlements of Vatsonga in the Levubu river valley. It is made up of predominantly Vatsonga and Vhavenda, and symbolises deprivation 27 years since the 1994 political miracle. This populous village has no factories. The economically active men seek employment in the big cities of Tshwane and Johannesburg. The less-educated women eke out a living on farms like ZZZ or as nannies in the households of the village's middle-class segment – the teachers, nurses and the police. The village roads are impassable, especially when it rains. They compare well with cattle trails and grottos! Yes, there are more brick houses built by individual households as well as a sprinkle of government's low cost housing called the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The grass-thatched mud huts and paraffin lamps of the '70s seem like history. Those who can afford to drill for their boreholes do so to mitigate against the acute shortage of water so that they do not share water with animals in streams littered with soiled baby nappies called Pampers.

In the '80s, N'wa-Xinyamani was labelled '*hala minkoveni*', implying a place of impious heathens riddled with fear, anxiety, suspicion and bedeviled by the primitive and dreaded sorcerers. That was the careless dogma we had inherited from the sadistic and scornful Christian missionary relics. Thinking about poverty and underdevelopment of this village reminds me of Reverend Cosmass Desmond's book (1971), *The Discarded People*, in which he describes the forced removals and the creation of Bantustans in late 1960s, to ensure, as Lee and Colvard (2003:1) asserts, 'that eventually there are no Africans who are citizens of South Africa'. Besides relative peacefulness, N'wa-Xinyamani, epitomizes a neglected community with very little to celebrate. Desmond (1971) asserts:

The people were taken and dumped in the veld without even a tent. The sick and the old were moved in the same way. One man suffering from pneumonia was transported on the top of a lorry. He died two days later. A pregnant woman was taken in the same way and gave birth under a tree at the new place. The people who had to stay behind to look after the cattle were also without shelter for two or three weeks... (p. 184)

One of Ngobeni's sons has built a big brick house, and the family is delighted. His daughter Mumsy (pers. comm., 09 March 2021), says the new house is a sign of progress

compared to the substandard housing that characterised her father's place during his heydays as a superstar.

Common resources such as arable and grazing land, thatching grass, wood and water are fast diminishing because of fire, deforestation and climate change. Indicators of progress in N'wa-Xinyamani and the broader Chavani area are embodied in the Tribal Office and a Community Health Centre built around the late 1960s, public schools and household electricity despite the ongoing and irritating Eskom power outages.

Key village personalities include musicians Obed Ngobeni and Samson Mthombeni – the latter revered as a pioneer of Xitsonga traditional music. A rare jewel is Dr Dakalo Muavha – one of South Africa's four urogynaecologists who grew up in the village, raised by a single mother who supported her family by selling sweets in street corners. He too, grew up inspired by Ngobeni's music of hope. On the political front, the village brags about Deputy Minister Dr David Maseko and a prominent ANC leader and founder of Topisa Foundation. Importantly, the village is known for preserving and celebrating African cultural practices such as new baby celebrations, ceremonial feasts for harvests, *ngoma* [male circumcision], *vukhomba* [female circumcision], cultural dances, wedding ceremonies, ancestral worship, purification rites (including fasting, shaving of hair, washing with rushing water or blood on significant or sacred occurrences), tombstone unveiling rituals, grieving together during tragic events like funerals which includes social and financial support for the bereaved. These age-old practices seem to contribute to peace, happiness, trust and the general welfare of the village, despite the obvious disturbing challenges of acute unemployment, low literacy levels, poor diet and nutrition, alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS diseases, and the now widespread COVID-19 deaths. Like many rural villages, traditional beliefs still hold sway in as much as Christian values and practices are embodied.

The rural outpost of N'wa-Xinyamani is the place that shaped Ngobeni's outlook of the world before his relocation to Pimville, Soweto, to live with his father who was working for the South African Railway Services. In Soweto, Ngobeni went to Orlando High School until Standard 8. In the song *Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'* and its later version *Kazet no 2*, Ngobeni raves about the imagined express economic activities in his forgotten village, and the then Gazankulu bantustan in particular. According to Wikipedia (2021a), the total length of the then Gazankulu (1973–1994), from Elim Hospital to Hazyview, was 317 km long, which is a distance equivalent of travelling from Pretoria to Bandelierkop in Limpopo. The homeland consisted of the 'Mainland Gazankulu' which were Elim, Giyani and Malamulele, with three large exclaves, which were Bushbuckridge, Tzaneen and Phalaborwa.

*Ku Hluvukile eka 'Zete'* was produced by Peter 'Hitman' Moticoe in Johannesburg. It brought unusual freshness into the Xitsonga sound. The known Xitsonga sound before Ngobeni was neotraditional music of M.D. Shirinda and

Gaza Sisters, Thomas Chauke and Xinyori Sisters and Elias Baloyi and Mamba Queens. It was dependent on guitars, percussions, human voices of the leader and chorus, and sometimes wind instruments. Ngobeni was different. He yearned to be unique. His music was loaded with voices, strophic, rhythmic, blended with the voices of women in chorus, imaginative variation, synthesizers and strong bass. His son and musical genius Sevhani (pers. comm., 19 March 2021), believes that his father always wanted to create unique music which would appeal to a diverse audience beyond the narrow taste of Xitsonga traditional music. The study explores and describes the attitudes, perceptions, observations and lived experiences of ZZZ farmworkers and dwellers towards the idea of change and transformation in the former Gazankulu homeland.

## Methodology and ethical considerations

The researcher employs Obed Ngobeni's song, *Ku Hluvu-kile eka 'Zete'* as a measure to consider the gains or losses of post-apartheid environment. By explaining the influence of Ngobeni's song, the study highlights the factors that consider music, as Mngoma (1987:199) citing Harm et al., points out 'as an entire product of a whole people. .... viewed as a chain of history in which each event causes another'.

This is a qualitative study conducted in the rural villages of N'wa-Xinyamani and Bungeni in the Vhembe district, as well as the city of Polokwane, Capricorn district, in Limpopo province. Apart from the absorbing desk-based research, the data was principally collected using interviews of the bearers of knowledge and practitioners. Eight respondents, which include two former backing vocalists of the Obed Ngobeni and the Kurhula Sisters band, two respected land rights activists, two children of Obed Ngobeni, one former ZZZ seasonal employee, one award-winning Soweto-born novelist with Vutsonga heritage were purposefully selected for semi-structured informal interviews. All the respondents were speaking Vatsonga who appreciate Xitsonga music and care about farmworkers' rights and freedom. Each interview was conducted in a safe and secure environment, in the main, face to face, and via the phone. Interviews were conducted in Xitsonga and English. One interviewee responded to the questions through email. All respondents gave consent to participate in this exploratory study and agreed to have their full and correct names used in the article. No respondent was coerced or materially bribed to take part in the study. The respondents were interviewed between February and April 2021. In addition to the interviews, the researcher knew the artist Obed Ngobeni, familiar with his body of music, and lives near Ngobeni's birth place, N'wa-Xinyamani. To deepen the study, the researcher examined relevant information in books, newspapers, magazines, online sources and audio-visual material on the subject of history and music as an instrument of change. These include, amongst others, listening and analysing the original *Ku Hluvu-kile eka 'Zete'* as

well as versions of *Kazet* by various artists. The researcher critically analyses the recently and widely screened documentary, *ZZZ Abuse* by eNCA's *Checkpoint* programme about the conditions of the ZZZ workers. The study uses the exploratory research methodology and does not pretend to offer final and conclusive solutions to the existing problems. However, the researcher is convinced without any doubt that the investigation is comprehensive enough, accurate and relevant to the concerns and sensibilities of the exploited and abandoned artists and farm communities.

## Making music: From a petrol attendant to a superstar

Ngobeni [nee Hlungwani] (pers. comm., 09 March 2021), who eventually became Ngobeni's first wife met her husband when they were both young. They lived in Pimville, Soweto, next to Kliptown, south west of Johannesburg. In Pimville and other Soweto townships such as Chiawello, Meadowlands, Orlando and Diepkloof, there is a substantial number of Vatsonga who migrated from Gazankulu and Mozambique to eke out a living in Johannesburg. Whilst at Orlando High School, Ngobeni was known as the boy who rode a bicycle. He lived with his father in a crowded house. In 1971, he left the school when he was in Standard 8, and his father helped him get a job at an engineering company in Johannesburg. The company specialty was making light globes. He also had a stint as a petrol attendant. With his first salary, in 1972, Ngobeni bought his first electric guitar, and later on he bought drum kit, bass, electric keyboard piano amongst other musical instruments. Before securing a decent job, he would sit on the verandah and play his six-string acoustic guitar all day long. That led to the formation of the band – Obed Ngobeni and the Kurhula Sisters. Jane (pers. comm., 09 March 2021) describes her husband as an adamant fellow whose commitment to music was unquestionable:

'His word was final. He was focused and determined. Above everything else, we were family. We became the backing vocalists. It was me, Dinah Ngobeni, Johannah Makhubele (now deceased) and Rose Maboko. We lived under one roof, with our children at house 4005 in Pimville. We had rehearsals every day that attracted audiences. Obed's father was also crazy about his son's music. He rarely missed our rehearsal sessions.' (Jane, pers. comm., 09 March 2021)

According to Jane, Ngobeni was discovered by Peter Moticoe – producer, songwriter and instrumentalist. Moticoe was informed of a novice musical talent called Obed Ngobeni, who would bask behind his house and strum the guitar. Moticoe then took a trip to Pimville to visit Ngobeni and his newly formed music band. He listened intently to what the band was playing. He taped the music into a cassette. He left for his studio in Johannesburg with their raw music. The next day Moticoe was back, and Ngobeni and the ladies were asked to get into the kombi to record their debut album. Jane (pers. comm., 09 March 2021) remembers this extraordinary day in the studio:

'I was so excited and full of insatiable energy, but anxious too. I had never been inside a music recording studio. Seeing all the studio gadgets like monitors, headphones and condenser microphones, and guitars, keyboards and drum kit was awesome but equally scary. We were asked to sing behind a window with headphones strapped over our heads. We were not used to that. We knew how to sing for ourselves in the comfort of our Pimville environment or back home at N'wa-Xinyamani during ceremonial and ritual functions. At the studio, we often sang out of tune, and the producer Moticoe and the engineers Ian Osrin and Phil Audoire would be red and frustrated because they wanted the best voices. We were given sugar-free gums as vocal remedy to clear our voices. One of the singers ran away, discouraged that she was not singing according to the wishes of those two men. But she was exhausted, and singing on an empty stomach was unbearable! Moticoe was kind but firm. He assured us that we had beautiful voices, but we were getting exhausted after being asked to have several takes on one song, the *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'*. Obed played the lead guitar and was on lead vocals. After recording, we happily left for Pimville. After a month, Moticoe came to our home driving a kombi which was fitted with a speaker on the deck. There was this gum-gum sound, blaring and reverberating throughout the township streets. It was around dusk, and the people were dancing and screaming with joy. As the music played in Moticoe's kombi, we couldn't believe our blended voices. Our voices had changed. They were so sweet and melodic. We didn't fear to be banned or arrested. Although the political environment in the early 80s was tense especially in Soweto, that night we didn't fear to be beaten or detained by the police. Our songs were not overtly political nor sloganeering. They mainly commented on life as we saw it. We urged the people to come together, strive for peace and celebrate humanity.' (Jane, pers. comm., 09 March 2021)

Obed Ngobeni and the Kurhula Sisters had churned out accessible blend of traditional Xitsonga rhythms moulded to a disco beat. *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* had announced its arrival, produced by the 'Hitmaker' Moticoe – the same man who had worked on the successful albums of Brenda Fassie, William Mthethwa and the Young Five, and later Paul Ndlovu. Part of the 1986 version *Kazet no. 2*, available on *YouTube* goes like this:

Hayi ku hluvukile leka hina n'wina, tshwaa!	(Yeah, there is development here,)
Hayi ku hluvukile le ka Gaza, yaa!	(Yeah, Gazankulu is developed.)
Haa aaa haaa aaa he wenoo	(Oh yes, it is true,)
Ku hluvukile le ka Zete	(There is progress at Z22)
Wa nga langutani sweswi ku na tibazi	(Look now, there are buses.)
A mi tsakeni n'wi tintombhi	(Girls, show some happiness.)
Se hi hluvukile ku na tibazi	(We are really developed, there are busses now)
Se tsakani n'we Magaza	(People of Gazankulu, show some happiness)
Haa aaa haaa aaa he wenoo	(Oh yes, it is true)
Ku hluvukile le ka Zete	(There is progress at Z22)
Gaza loko ku tsaka wena,	(When you are happy, Gaza –)
Ku tsaka matiko hinkwawo.	(All countries find joy.)
Loko ku cina wena,	(When you dance –)
Ku cina misava hinkwayo.	(The whole world dances.)
Teka, teka, teka, teka, teka!	(Yeah, yeah, yeah, celebrate!)
Ndzo ku byela,	(I tell you,)
A hi fambi hi ya vona eka Zete,	(Let's pay Z22 a visit,)

Hi ya famba hi mabazi.	(We shall ride in buses.)
Teka, teka, teka, teka, teka!	Yeah, yeah, yeah, celebrate!
A hi fambi sesi hi ya vona eka Zete,	Baby, let's go see Z22
Hi kuma kofi na titiya eka Zete,	We sip coffee and tea at Z22
Teka, teka, teka, teka, teka!	Yeah, yeah, yeah, celebrate!
Hayi ku hluvukile le ka hina n'wina,	(Yeah, there is development here,)
Hayi ku hluvukile le ka Gaza.	(Yeah, Gazankulu is developed.)
lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, oh yes	(Yip, yip, yip, oh yes!)
Ina!	(Oh yes!)
Oh yes!	(Oh yes!)
Inaa!	(Oh yes!)
lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, lil, oh yes!	(Yip, yip, yip, oh yes!)
Oh yes!	(Oh yes!)
Oh yes!	(Oh yes!)
Oh yes!	(Oh yes!)
Oh yes!	(Oh yes!)

This hit marked the beginning of a beautiful and crazy Afrocentric music journey for Ngobeni and the Kurhula Sisters. Before being engrossed in music, the Ngobeni's backing vocalists eked out a living by selling fruits and vegetables and hawking peanuts in Soweto's busy markets. Besides being self-taught and musically driven, the women were wives who also had to take care of children. But they had to multi-task. For Dinah and Jane, showbiz meant that whenever they were required to perform, they had to be there. The band had gigs in lodges, hotels, pubs, nightclubs, community halls, theatres in Johannesburg, Pretoria and the Vaal, and back home in Gazankulu. Their glowing faces were gracing album posters which were pasted to street electric poles and telephone booths, and on the walls of buildings around the city – with fashionista Ngobeni wearing his trademark straw cowboy hat, boots and stylish red overalls, and the Kurhula Sisters in loin cloths (*swibelani*), leg rattles, bangles and pearl belts. Ngobeni had arrived with a new sound, unapologetic and singing in Xitsonga – a black sheep language of the country. His mission was not limited to entertaining the crowds, but also to affirm the cultural pride and dignity of Vatsonga and the black majority, whose voices had been relegated to nothingness by the gruelling apartheid system. Although some may argue that Ngobeni's *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* is apolitical with less subversive content, that can only be strange and naïve, a closer examination of the song reveals lyrics of resistance through social commentary. A cardinal fact is that Ngobeni sings about young women being transported by buses to the farms not as flattery or loyalty to Gazankulu homeland, but as a dramatic irony to indicate the perpetual and primitive enslavement of the rural black folk on the white-owned farms like Z22. For Ngobeni, that was not freedom nor development, but the worse living conditions for the rural poor and disenfranchised.

Stylistically, Ngobeni produced a different sound compared to Vatsonga musicians of the time who were committed to either neo-traditional sound like that of General M.D Shirinda or strictly indigenous sound like that of Khatisa Chavalala, Mararaza and John Mayengani who played indigenous instruments. Ansel (2004:329) describes neotraditional sound as 'music where elements derived from tradition

dominate, but played on modern instruments and adapted to (often stylised or clichéd) modern performance or recording formats’.

Growing up in Soweto, Ngobeni walked through the streets of the eclectic township and cosmopolitan Johannesburg and heard the sounds of jazz, marabi, blues, American jazz and American disco. He also heard traditional Xitsonga sounds by MD Shirinda and Gaza Sisters (Modjadji) – the first Mutsonga artist to incorporate and infuse women as backing vocalists; *Xinengani xa N’wampfundla* by Mthombeni – the first Mutsonga artist from N’wa-Xinyamani to play in England in 2005; and *Nyoresh* by Thomas Chauke, the first Mutsonga artist to be conferred with an honorary doctorate by a university. He also heard *marrabenta* music by John Tsonga and Xidimngwana from Mozambique. But his rural upbringing taught him to appreciate music. His father was a sangoma, and drumming was integrated in everyday life. Ngobeni’s wife, now a practicing sangoma, is a gifted percussionist and gutsy dancer. In the village, Ngobeni grew up hearing the elderly men and women playing *xizambhi* [notched vibrating bow] while they were enjoying beverages. Others would play *xitendze* – a bow with a calabash attached to it which acts as a resonator. Around N’wa-Xinyamani village, the independent churches, especially those known as *tikereke ta swigubu* [churches of the drum], had drumming as central in their practices and rituals. Perhaps that is why Ngobeni composed one of his celebrated songs, *Ndzi lava lowo nghena kereke* [I like the one who goes to church]. Despite the flurry of these churches, Jane recalls, ‘Ngobeni wasn’t a member of any, but you wouldn’t pray with him. His prayer reached the depths and grottos of your heart’.

Whereas the ‘80s bands like Harari and Kabasa may have pioneered pop jive and Afro rock, Moticoe, the producer of Obed Ngobeni’s hits says that Ngobeni pioneered Tsonga disco before the arrival onto the scene by Lucky Paul Ndlovu. Ndlovu hailed from Namakgale in Phalaborwa. Moticoe, quoted in Madalane (2015), actually says that Ndlovu begged to be produced by him after Ngobeni’s infectious hit *Ku Hluwukile eka ‘Zete’*. Ndlovu’s music did well, selling over 500 000 copies of his first album. His single, *Khombo ra Mina*, remains one of the greatest hits in Xitsonga disco. Ndlovu tragically died in a car accident in September 1986 in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng (Madalane 2015).

Ngobeni’s music, like that of Harari, ‘is characterised by call and response, chants, invocatory yells and whoops, and psychedelic improvisations’ (Ansel 2021:36). Ngobeni’s groove attracted lovers of music across ethnic and racial lines, making such music refreshing to listen to whether you are at the comfort of your home, in a taxi, bus, train or at a beerhall. Upon release, his music, especially *Ku Hluwukile ka ‘Zete’* was given sufficient airplay on Radio Tsonga. It topped the charts and sold more than 25 000 units, thus reaching the gold status. Backing vocalist Ngobeni (pers. comm., 16 March 2021) remembers the golden days of their band at the Jabulani Amphitheatre in Soweto.

‘Throng of people would come to watch us, filling the amphitheater to rafters, with others crowded outside the walls. The performances were great. We were always the best. Obed had presence on stage. He was flamboyant, and buoyant but not elitist nor esoteric. As the dancers, we would freeze on stage, and suddenly rise as if we were dancing *domba* – the python dance. Although Obed was not as dramatic as Brenda Fassie of the *Weekend Special* fame, we knew that there’s no party without *Ku Hluwukile eka ‘Zete’*. The audience couldn’t resist our sound. It was unique with a strong rhythm. The sound that was unheard of. The mixed audience of blacks and whites would sing along and dance to the rhythms of the song freely, shouting the melodic refrain *haa, aaa, ku hluwukile kazet*. The frenzied crowd wanted Obed Ngobeni, our band leader, because of his unusual guitar playing ways, exuberance on stage, immeasurable energy and charm. The riffing of the guitar. Wow! Sometimes he would carry it over the shoulders. Sometimes he would bite it, strum with his teeth and toes. People would go crazy, coming on stage to airlift him. And with us the dancers, in our short *swibelani*, *switlhekutani* and sneakers, we really mesmerized the crowds. Artist General MD Shirinda akin of wearing his panther skin and ostrich feathers, once remarked after the crowd had yelled and booed him that he should step off the stage because his music had expired. He got so upset, and shouted: ‘I am still around, “*a ndzi phuphanga. A ndzi xisibi!*” (I haven’t fizzled out. I am not soap!)’ I don’t remember the audience booing Obed and our group while in performance. Instead they wanted more, mesmerized, stunned, and we had the stamina to give more. We were the music dynamos.’ (Ngobeni, pers. comm., 16 March 2021)

According to Spotong (2017), Jabulani amphitheatre was the hub of music festivals in the ‘80s and early ‘90s in Soweto. Artists dished out umbaqanga, isicathamya, disco, Afro-rock, soul, marabi, pop jive, whatever was regarded as township music/jazz. It was here, on 10 February 1985, that Nelson Mandela’s daughter Zindzi read a defiant, smuggled message from her father from Pollsmoor Prison, in which he refused PW Botha’s offer of conditional release from prison if he renounced violence.

Despite the violence, insurgency, ungovernability of the youth, necklace killings and mob justice that characterised that turbulent era of the ‘80s, *Ku Hluwukile eka ‘Zete’* and its later versions, especially Harry Belafonte’s *Paradise in Gazankulu*, provided some refreshing moments of ‘ungovernability’ and defiance to the scores of party-goers that defied Apartheid’s grand plan of separatism. Ngobeni created happy music in Xitsonga for all ethnic and racial groups with subtle radical politics, highlighting the essence of unity, determination and struggle against poverty and want. It was in Soweto on June 1976 when the youthful rebellion against oppression burst into flames. Unarmed schoolchildren marched against the imposition of Afrikaans as a language of instruction. It is music rooted in Black Consciousness tradition of self-pride, self-reliance, dignity, resistance and nationalism. Ngobeni wanted his audience to understand the circumstances that led him to compose this hit, but at the same time, he envisaged music to be a platform to create cultural harmony between economic and social classes, and not to fan the fires of violence.

## The resonance of *Ku HluvuKile eka 'Zete'* as a statement against oppression

Mngoma (1987:199) points out the power of African music: 'This music is closely connected to African history and belief, is by nature esoteric, and is known and performed by the initiated both in rural and urban areas'. You would come across a man walking with a portable tape blaster playing the song. Another would hang the stereo radio over a tree branch, as boys play madice, listening to the song. It was played over the radio – in fact, all South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) radio stations. But according to Max Mojapelo, in Madalane (2015), 'Radio Tsonga came late to the party – questioning why the producer was a white man and not Tsonga'. Whether this was reinforcing apartheid stereotypes of ethnic separatist ideology, or indeed the Vatsonga had a right to produce their own music, is a complicated matter.

Internationally, the Anti-Apartheid Movement was intensifying. Veteran cultural activist, song writer and actor Harry Belafonte, known as the 'King of Calypso' released the album *Paradise in Gazankulu*. The studio track featured Obed Ngobeni on guitar, Jane and Grace Ngobeni and Selina Khosa on vocals. Belafonte worked with many South African artists on the album.

### The illusive paradise in Gazankulu

The folk track *Paradise in Gazankulu* (EMI Records 1988) was a reflection of Belafonte's continuous pursuit of social justice for the poor people of South Africa. By being opposed to the apartheid and acts of racism, he wanted justice for all. Interestingly, as Skeef (2021:268) observes, Belafonte was [like] Paul Simon (of the *Graceland* fame) who contravened the cultural boycott and travelled to South Africa to experience the magnetic sounds first hand, recording songs with township musicians. Belafonte acted against the tide of the cultural boycott but with a progressive and redeeming purpose to record songs with township musicians, including Obed Ngobeni. According to Wikipedia (2021b), Belafonte had been Martin Luther's confidant. His vision was that music is the people's weapon, for now and for the future. *Paradise in Gazankulu* was therefore not a mere entertainment, or a bubblegum that would quickly fizzle out. It was layered with cultural activism – the force and wave to mobilise the people out there to overthrow the apartheid regime. It is as if Belafonte was out there with Ngobeni's song to rehumanise Vatsonga and the oppressed black majority and create a global Xitsonga identity through music. In Belafonte's (1988) words:

*Paradise in Gazankulu* is politically overt as it has never been an album like that. Gazankulu is a place [*Bantustan*] in South Africa, a very oppressive place. And like all oppressive places, people just live by their wits to try to get out besides their oppression. ... *Paradise in Gazankulu* is the ability to be able to get outside of Gazankulu. *Paradise in Gazankulu* is to be able to get those mechanisms and those experiences that will help you escape from this oppressive place.

According to the website of Alexander Street (2021), *Paradise in Gazankulu* gave Belafonte an opportunity to make a statement, to say things about South Africa, to get information out to people who, otherwise, perhaps, didn't know, what they should know, and was taken to a place where what was unfolding would bring to them some greater sense of self. Belafonte has always felt that the role of the artist is not just to show life as it is but to show life as it should be.

## Shaping people's consciousness through song

The political message behind the song *Ku HluvuKile eka 'Zete'* is obvious, but it is easy to ignore because the musician is not shouting slogans *Amandla*-style. He is not calling upon people, like revolutionary Bob Marley or Thomas Mapfumo did with their songs, to take up arms against the oppressor. His is asking us to observe and internalise the unfolding social circumstances of the people. Composed during the period of political violence in South Africa of the '80s, the melodic rhythms somehow stimulated the appetite for hope that one day the new South Africa would be possible. In his book, *Fine Lines from the Box*, Ndebele (2007) extensively quotes events of the '80s, well captured in the book called *Mandela, Tambo, and the African National Congress*.

... a new pattern of protest grew [*in South Africa*]. It consisted of stay-at-homes, roving demonstrations challenging the police patrolling the townships, and attacks on the businesses, houses, and persons of Africans charged with collaborating in the new Community Council system. Local grievances became the vehicle for protest against the apartheid system as a whole, spreading from township to township through a population thoroughly mobilized by student participation in school boycotts and roader involvement in the anti-constitution campaigns. At the same, the existence of national bodies such as the UDF provided new means for coordination or protest, epitomized in the Transvaal stay-at-home of November 5–6, in which an estimated 800 000 participated. ... We witnessed the state of emergency, necklace killings, economic sanctions, rent and rates boycotts, the calls for "liberation now, education later", increasingly successful ANC guerrilla attacks against the apartheid state ... (p. 210)

Award-winning novelist Mhlongo (pers. comm., 17 April 2021) first heard of the song *Ku HluvuKile eka 'Zete'* in the early 1980s. It used to play a lot on the then Radio Tsonga, which his mother used to listen to religiously. The song gave him such a feeling of nostalgia every time it played. At first, he just loved the beat because he could not make sense of the lyrics:

'Later when we visited Giyani with my mother from Chiawelo, Soweto, she would point at a huge tomato farm of ZZ2 near the Moeketsi train station as *Kazete*. This was where we used to get off the train from Johannesburg. The farm was green with vegetables such as tomatoes and cabbages, amongst others. Sometimes we would get a glimpse of the labourers tilling that land. But as I was growing up and listened to the same song over and over again, I realised that the song had deeper meaning that cannot be taken literally. I started to understand the deeper political message in the song about the former homeland of

Gazankulu. I could hear social and economic commentary or messages within the song which cannot be interpreted literally. Sometimes I laughed when I heard people singing it phonetically around the world without even understanding the lyrics. I'm almost transferred to another time and another place each time I hear it. I feel like dancing and singing to it while at the same time being visited by memories of the past—memories of life under apartheid, train and bus trips from Soweto to Giyani. *Kazete* makes me feel glad and hopeful. It also influenced the title of my latest novel, *Paradise in Gaza* (Kwela Books 2020), which seeks to make us reimagine our past as Africans.' (Mhlongo, pers. comm., 17 April 2021)

In the '80s and '90s, the townships were burning, and Boipatong, Soweto, Alexandre, Sebokeng, Thokoza and Voslorus in the East Rand were in the centre of the political storm. Holland (2012:169) points out that the outbreaks of violence, beginning in the latter part of 1984, spread through townships nationwide. Initially ignited by local grievances, they were intensified by thousands of black youths known as 'comrades', who saw themselves as the vanguard of the revolution and defied and attacked the police and the army with stones and home-made petrol bombs. Ansel (2004) describes this bleak and gloomy political instability that impacted heavily on the jazz scene, and generally the music scene overall:

Bands of well-armed hostel dwellers, with police-issue rifles mysteriously prominent in their arsenals alongside traditional clubs, sticks, and pangas, launched murderous nighttime attacks on township homes, killing men, women, and children. Although the ANC had declared in August 1990 that it was suspending the armed struggle, it nevertheless had to back the creation of armed township self-defence units: too many people were dying. Many parts of South were effectively at war. ... It was not safe for people to walk the township streets, certainly after dark and often even in daylight. Trains became too dangerous to ride. A township music scene that had survived liquor raids, pass laws, and worse suffered its death blow, and music in the city centres, just beginning to open up again to black patrons and players, had audiences diminished. (p. 262)

## Deplorable farm worker conditions at the ZZZ tomato farms

When listening to Obed Ngobeni's lyrics in *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'*, one would imagine that the ZZZ farms and life in the homelands, especially in Gazankulu was hospitable and having the features as if in a fairytale. According to the website of ZZZ (2021), the ZZZ Group of companies are owned by the Van Zyl family who started their farming operations more than a 100 years ago. Today ZZZ is the largest tomato producer in the southern hemisphere and supply consumers with tomatoes throughout the year, operating mainly in the Limpopo province, as well as in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Namibia. ZZZ tomatoes are produced in different areas of the Limpopo province, including Mooketsi, Polokwane, Waterpoort, Pontdrift, as well as near Tshipise along the Limpopo River. ZZZ also grows mangoes, avocados, onions, garlic, dates, cherries, weaners, apples, pears, stone fruit, almonds and

blueberries. During the reign of Gazankulu, the ZZZ tomato farms, although not located within this homeland, drew exceedingly multitudes of unionised cheap labour from the villages that were battling with unemployment, illiteracy and poverty and were paid meagre wages. Such villages included N'wa-Xinyamani, the birth place of Obed Ngobeni. We can assume that the relationship between ZZZ and Gazankulu rested on economic opportunities for farms like ZZZ and political stability that the so-called self-governing territory needed to ensure.

The so-called bubblegum music of Ngobeni helped shape the political awareness of the people. In *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'*, Ngobeni mocks the lack of infrastructural development in the rural areas, with reference to the Gazankulu homeland, established in 1969 under the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, with Giyani as its capital. Desmond (1971:190) describes the early years of Giyani (or Bendstore as it was then known) as a neglected veld with no sign of development or even proper roads.

Despite this grim description, *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* has served as a cultural glue for the local people. The Vhavenda and Vatsonga of N'wa-Xinyamani all recognise Ngobeni as their own prodigal son. The lines from the song *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'*, *Gaza, loko ku cina wena/ ku cina misava hnkwayo* [*Gaza, when you dance/ the whole world dances*], echo the Arab proverb: 'When one plays the flute in Zanzibar/Africa dances all the way to the Great Lakes'. The above attests to the energetic musical influence of Ngobeni across ethnic, racial and class boundaries and cultural laagers.

Makhubele (pers. comm., 25 February 2021) from *ka* Chavani, worked at the ZZZ farms in Mooketsi in 1984 as a seasonal cultivator and harvester. She found the working conditions deplorable, and in contrast with what *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* was literally raving about:

'There was overcrowding. Most of the workers had little education, with many young women dating older men – their stubborn supervisors who, enjoyed having multiple sex partners. There were many women than men. These men had a field day. We didn't have HIV/AIDS then, there was drop and gonorrhoea! At ZZZ, compared to many farms, there was relative order and less drinking and noise over the weekends.' (Makhubele, pers. comm., 25 February 2021)

Advocate Shirinda (pers. comm., 18 February 2021) from *ka* Bungeni, is a land rights activist with massive experience in restitution, redistribution, tenure reform and labour practices. He argues that *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* celebrates the visible changes in the lives of farmworkers and dwellers at the ZZZ tomato farms. In his own words:

'In the past farmworkers travelled long distances to places of work. The transport that was made available by farmers were rickety tractors, especially on farms like Borchers and New England in the Levubu belt. Workers were bundled in there like logs of timber. At the ZZZ farms, however, Ngobeni realized that workers were no longer being transported in dangerous tractors, but in reliable and safe lorries and buses. Oftentimes, they would

be evicted without pay, especially if they were foreign nationals. ZZ2 was different. Although its workforce wasn't getting a lot of money, their wage and benefits were enticing than most farms in the province.' (Shirinda, pers. comm., 18 February 2021)

Shirinda notes that the tradition to grow food in Bungeni and N'wa-Xinyamani was pathetic. Thus Ngobeni felt that he needed to promote the local by-the-road Mahlavezulu vegetable market which was the brainchild of Viking – an entrepreneur who had a vegetable field by the N'wanancila river in N'wa-Xinyamani village, and also who, during his active working years, worked in Johannesburg and knew about successful fruit and vegetable markets in the city. The Mahlavezulu market, which Ngobeni raves about in his *Ku Hluvuikile eka 'Zete'* song, sold fresh tomatoes brought by the local ZZ2 workers, thus making life bearable for the local villagers who were constantly battling malnutrition and food insecurity.

Shirinda (pers. comm., 18 February 2021) presupposes that through the song, Ngobeni was celebrating the achievements of people from the often-undermined villages run by chiefs who were regarded as backwards, unbookish and trapped in laughable traditional practices:

'*Ku Hluvuikile eka 'Zete'* dispels the notion that villages like N'wa-Xinyamani and Bungeni are inhabited by the so-called backward heathens who cling to useless cultural traditions like ancestor worship and African cultural practices. In contrast, *Ku Hluvuikile eka 'Zete'* is critical of the ways of *majagani* – the early Christian converts in the areas of Elim and Valdezia mission who held a view that the only way to mark progress is by embodying western practices. He was celebrating tradition and proving that villagers can do it on a large scale beyond their condemned grass-thatched mud hamlets.' (Shirinda, pers. comm., 18 February 2021)

When Shirinda was a DJ under his outfit Shirhami Sounds, *Ku Hluvuikile eka 'Zete'* was one of the tracks that was loved by the party goers. Why? Shirinda explains:

'It is not fast like neotraditional Tsonga music; nor slow like jazz. It is accommodative and not monogenic. Both the young and old from the urban and rural environs can dance to it. It is call and response, secular, esoteric and has a strong rhythm. The bass sounds like that of the Soul Brothers.' (Shirinda, pers. comm., 18 February 2021)

Despite ZZ2 bosses advocating for better farm worker conditions, nature farming, ethical practices and fair labour practices by supporting the local communities by building schools, a clinic and providing housing to its workers, these claims are not necessarily in harmony with the lived experiences of the workers and land rights activists. Mnisi (pers. comm., 15 February 2021) is an officer in charge of the Farm Dweller programme at Nkuzi Development Association, a land reform support organisation in Polokwane, whose objective is to empower the landless and marginalised rural poor to assert their land and tenure rights. She argues that little has changed, especially for women farmworkers and dwellers. In her own words:

'Ngobeni dreamt of freedom for the farmworkers way back in 1983, but years later, after South Africa gained its freedom, that utopia remains a far-fetched star. ZZ2 is white-owned. So yes, the land is in the hands of a settler colonial white minority that has benefited immensely from apartheid and sadly even now. ZZ2 is like the god of the Modjadji area. He rules over the expanse of that land like Jacob Zuma rules Nkandla.' (Mnisi, pers. comm., 15 February 2021)

Mnisi's perspective on how the state, white farmers and mine owners dispossessed black people of their land is a reminder of the unequal power relations between the farmer and labourer. In *Native Life in South Africa*, Plaatje (1916:21) commences with the sentence: 'Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African Native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth'.

The influential positions at ZZ2 such as management, distribution, agricultural science, technology and finance are expanded by the white males. The scores of workers who plant, cultivate, fertilise, pick and pack tomatoes are the black, and get a pittance, whilst the bosses walk to the bank smiling. The best ZZ2 tomatoes go to hyper stores in the big cities. They hardly find their way to the village and township spaza shops and vegetable markets. The trucks that deliver tomatoes don't belong to the workers either. Black workers are mainly drivers, planters, cultivators, pickers and harvesters.

Mnisi laments that the bulk of ZZ2 workforce is seasonal with little benefits such as pension and UIF. According to Mnisi (pers. comm., 15 February 2021), workers live in despicable compounds, and to rub salt into the wound, they are expected to pay rent for accommodation, water and ablution facilities. The brave and smart workers with some education are often victimised whenever they complain about the disturbing conditions. They are instantly shown the door. Worse still, when the uneducated workers (who constitute the bulk of farmworkers) report cases of abuse by the farmer to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) far away in Polokwane, they are told to complete certain forms despite their inability to read and write. No official is availed to assist them. The aggrieved workers return home without any assistance from the CCMA officials. Such disregard for people's rights cannot make the farmworkers smile and shout as 'There's progress at ZZ2'.

In the eNCA's *Checkpoint* documentary *ZZ2 Abuse* (2020) and produced by Nkepile Mabuse, the deplorable living conditions at the ZZ2 tomato farms in Mooketsi during the COVID-19 lockdowns are highlighted. In the documentary, farmworkers and dwellers describe their working conditions on the giant tomato farms as appalling, inhospitable and precarious. The angry black workers are portrayed as crammed in unhygienic compounds and dormitories that are poorly ventilated. Some workers are shown sprawled on the floor, sleeping with their groceries next to their mattresses. When confronted why workers sleep on the cold floor in

winter, ZZ2 CEO Tommie van Zyl is heard saying 'at least the workers are not living in shacks!' He tells the eNCA journalist, 'If you look at ZZ2's facilities and compare them to the squatter camps where you live, there is no comparison'. Van Zyl further says, 'If a person decides to sleep on the floor because they don't want to spend money for a mattress or bed, I can't force them to do so'. In the documentary, workers claim they use pit latrine toilets instead of flushing toilets, and Van Zyl argues, 'When I was a kid we used pit latrines when I used to visit my grandmother'. The documentary shows workers separated according to race – the whites living in habitable and spacious rooms with their families, while the blacks share the rooms and are crowded, with some using unclean linen and rickety beds called *skholokholo*. These are planks or floorboards layered with a folded blanket. Workers claim that about 60 workers share four showers, water often cold, necessitating some workers to fight over the cold shower or risk going to work without washing. Electricity is reported as intermittent. One worker says power outage can run for 2–3 days, and under those circumstances, workers cook outside using fire wood and tins to heat water. In the same documentary, workers claim that the outside kitchen doesn't have a sink nor utensils or cupboard to store the food groceries. One worker says that the multi-million Rand farming conglomerate is exploitative and uses them like tools. Elvis Pilusa, a community leader in Politsi near Modjadji where the farm is found, says that ZZ2 is a living hell for the workers. According to the documentary, Ernest Motsa, an ZZ2 employee, was dismissed after insisting that the workers who were being moved from one compound in Gomondo to Triangle hall should be allowed to view the new place before accepting the housing offer. After insisting to view the place, Motsa discovered the disgusting conditions:

'We were up to fifty, I thought to myself we won't fit. The other option was a hall where pesticide was stored, and they said we should all stay in there. That (white) man even said the place was decent. I refused and said it won't be suitable for all of us. ... the white man said, "F#k, whether you like it or not, you are going to that place on Wednesday."' (Motsa, pers. comm., 29 September 2020)

Two weeks later, Motsa was called for a disciplinary hearing by the ZZ2 management. According to the documentary, they alleged that he had acted in an insulting behaviour by intimidating the management on the farm. Furthermore, they claimed that he had disrespectfully entered the morning meeting and acted with total disrespect toward the management. He was also charged for allegedly providing false information to fellow employees by telling them the housing at Triangle was not up to standard. Consequently, Motsa was fired. In the documentary, he is shown looking after his chicken and livestock at home, feeling resentful inside.

Miller (2010:525) affirms the 'right in land' as enshrined in the *Restitution of Land Rights Act 22 of 1994*. Motsa as a labour tenant living on a farm and exchanging labour, for part of the year, should at least be granted some rights to land for use for residential and agricultural purposes, instead of continuing this racial prejudice.

During the first COVID-19 lockdown in the country, workers at the ZZ2 tomato farm in Mooketsi were restricted to the compounds, and were hardly allowed to go home despite some coming from nearby villages within walking distance. Sadly, from the worker testimonies in the eNCA documentary, it is clear that many farm workers and farm dwellers at ZZ2 tomato farms experience precarious tenure, poor housing and unfair labour conditions.

Wegerif, Russel and Grundling (2005:7) postulate that the black people living on farms in South Africa remain amongst the most vulnerable people in the society.

## Conclusion: Ngobeni's death and legacy

Ngobeni's health deteriorated after returning home to N'wa-Xinyamani from Gauteng. His wife Jane (2021) says he complained of stomach pains, cramps, fever and would constantly vomit. Before his death, he had had three major operations. He died on 23rd May 2002 at the Tshilidzini Hospital in Shayandima, near Thohoyandou, at the age of 48. Tshilidzini is one of the poorly serviced rural hospitals in the Vhembe district. His death certificate states Ngobeni died from peritonitis – perforated bowel. The dictionary defines this infectious and life-threatening disease as the inflammation of the membrane lining the abdominal wall and covering the abdominal organs. It is caused by leakage or a hole in the intestines, such as from a burst appendix. Even if the fluid is sterile, inflammation can occur.

At Ngobeni's funeral, praises were sung as his coffin lay in public for viewing. His music, especially his trademark harmonic song, *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'* was played out loud. The proceedings to the N'wa-Xinyamani cemetery were unusual; his frenzied fans were dancing to the antiphonal and melancholic song *Salani, se udza famba* [*Bye bye, I am leaving*], from his 1983 album *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete'*. As Ngobeni's coffin was lowered, one of the aunts, according to Jane (pers. comm., 09 March 2021) leapfrogged and rendered a family poem, asking the Ngobeni ancestry to receive him and protect his family. She burst into a full poetic cry, unrehearsed:

The son of Skheto Daniel Ngobeni

*wa Maboko*

*wa Breakfast*

*wa N'watanya*

*wa Xifuvayila*

*wa Malengani*

*wa Ximanimani*

*wa Masiya yi govile yi govela vurhena*

Mulambya

*Va le mukasanini*

*Va le vungiringiri*

*Nkuwa ro ta ri ku tenga-tenga*

(*A hanging-dangling fig*)

*Ri fika ehansi ri ku phyandlaa*

(*That crashes on the ground*)

*Ku sala ku nonile!*

(*Fertilising the soil*)

Ngobeni's funeral showed the concerns faced by traditional artists. The fellow musician Dr Thomas Chauke lamented

the lack of pension and means to sustain families, poor airplay in radio stations, piracy and grinding poverty. Three years earlier, in 1999, the deep-voiced 'Lion of Soweto', Mahlathini, had succumbed to illness and the psychosis of exploitative music industry, bowing out as a muso without cash. Ngobeni was not different. The high funeral costs demonstrated that the artist had little reserves to take care of himself and the family. The tyres of his Mazda 323 sedan were flat. Mumsy (pers. comm., 09 March 2021) is adamant that her father's name should be celebrated. When people ask for directions, she proudly says 'Hi le ka Obed – This is Obed's place of abode'. N'wa-Xinyamani residents know Ngobeni's yard as 'eka nqambhi – that is, at the artist' – referring to the well-dressed man with short dreadlocks who liked his briefcase. That is a reminder that Ngobeni is one of the key musical exports from N'wa-Xinyamani. In his music career that spanned 19 years, Ngobeni recorded several albums, namely, *Ku Hluwukile eka 'Zete' – There is progress at ZZ2* (Heads Music, 1983), *Xikwembu xa hina – Our God* (Jive Wire, 1985), *Mchoza – Pantsula Girlfriend* (Jive Wire, 1985), *Gazankulu* (Heads, 1984), *Tshiketa – Leave it* (Teal Sound:1986), *Eka Diza – At Diza* (released on Colombian label Discos Perla: 1988), *Shangaan* (Fen Records, 1985), *My Wife Bought a Taxi* (released on US label Shanachie: 1987) and *Ta Duma* (Afrosynth 2019).

Ngobeni's son, Sevhani (pers. comm., 19 March 2021), a promising Afro-pop musician composed a song, *Tinyiko ta Mina* [*My talents*], lamenting the state of social and personal strife. He pleads with God to help him break the curse and cycle of poverty in the family. His wish, perhaps like all the nine children that Obed left behind bereft, is to witness his father's music legacy fully recognised by the government and cultural formations globally. Sevhani is glad that his father was awarded the *Mapungubwe Lifetime Award* in 2005 by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture under the leadership of MEC Joe Maswanganye; and a similar posthumous award by Munghana Lonene in 2015. But he feels that the country can do better, to memorialise and immortalise this giant of Xitsonga disco music. Clearly, if streets, parks, shacks, hospitals, roads and days can be named after politicians – some too useless to remember – surely there is no harm in building an arts centre, music academy or making films and writing books in Ngobeni's memory. Such cultural resources would remind the nation of the artist's long and arduous pursuit for a better South Africa, especially for those on the periphery of development like the farmworkers at ZZ2 tomato farms as well as the neglected rural multitudes. Such an honour would amplify Biko's (1978:52) assertion that as black people we should cultivate self-love and dispel the notions of 'false understanding of ourselves'.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Author's contributions

V.F.B. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

All respondents gave consent to participate in the study and agreed to have their full and correct names used in the article. No respondent was coerced or materially bribed to take part in the study. Respondents were interviewed between February and April 2021.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grants from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Afrosynth, 2019, *Ta Duma by Obed Ngobeni and the Kurhula Sisters*, viewed 27 May 2021, from <https://afrosynth.bandcamp.com/album/ta-duma>.
- Alexander Street, 2021, *Tony Brown's journal, the music of Harry Belafonte*, viewed 23 March 2021, from [https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C,2113481?](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/preview/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C,2113481?)
- Ansel, G., 2004, *Soweto blues & jazz, popular music & politics in South Africa*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London.
- Ansel, G., 2021, 'Harari: A union of music, defiant politics and African pride', *Mail and Guardian* 19–25(March), 36–37.
- Biko, S., 1978, *I write what I like*, Heinemann Publishers, Johannesburg.
- Da Vinci, V., 2001, 'Kazet', in *Africanism*, CD-ROM, House Afrika Records, Johannesburg.
- Descloux, L.M., 1984, 'Mais ou sout passes les gazelles', in *Zulu Rock*, CD-ROM, ZE Records, Johannesburg/London.
- Desmond, C., 1971, *The discarded people: An account of African resettlement in South Africa*, Penguin Books, Sussex.
- eNCA, 2020, *Checkpoint | ZZ2 Abuse | 29 September 2020*, viewed 25 March 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tiXLf2JFio>.
- Holland, H., 2012, *100 years of struggle: Mandela's ANC*, Penguin Books, Johannesburg.
- Lee, M.C. & Colvard, K., 2003, *Unfinished business: The land crisis in Southern Africa*, Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Madalane, I., 2015, 'From Paul to Penny: The emergence and development of Tsonga Disco 1985-1990s', *African Music* 10(1), 150–179. <https://doi.org/10.21504/amj.v10i1.1230>
- Mahlathini & Mahotella Queens, 1987, 'Kazet', in *Paris-Soweto*, CD-ROM, Gallo Record Company, Johannesburg.
- Mhlongo, N., 2020, *Paradise in Gaza*, Kwela Books, Cape Town.
- Miller, D.L.C., 2010, *Land title in South Africa*, Juta, Claremont.
- Mngoma, K., 1987, 'The teaching of music in South Africa', *Africa Insight* 17(3), 199–203.
- Ndebele, N., 2007, *Fine lines from the box*, Umuzi, Roggebaai.
- SA Music News, 2021, *Dr Bone takes it to the top with 'KwaZet' ft. hip-hop general Zakwe*, viewed 27 May 2021, from <https://www.samusicnews.co.za/local-music/dr-bone-takes-it-to-the-top-with-kwazet-ft-hip-hop-general-zakwe/>.
- Skeef, E., 2021, 'Exiled South African cultural activists advance the liberation struggle in foreign lands: The London experiences', in L.L. Nawa (ed.), *Culture and liberation struggle in South Africa: From colonialism to post-Apartheid*, pp. 247–269, Sali Publishing House, s.l.
- Spotong, 2017, *Jabulani Amphitheatre Heritage Project, Bringing the iconic amphitheatre back to life*, viewed 18 April 2021, from <https://www.spotongmag.co.za/articles/jabulani-amphitheatre-heritage-project-6157.html>.
- Plaatje, S., 1916, *Native life in South Africa*, Picador Africa, Northlands.

- Wegerif, M., Russel, B. & Grundling, I., 2005, *Still searching for security: The reality of farm dweller evictions in South Africa*, Nkuzi Development Association, Polokwane.
- Wikipedia, 2021a, *Gazankulu*, viewed 15 April 2021, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gazankulu>.
- Wikipedia, 2021b, *Paradise in Gazankulu*, viewed 15 April 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise\\_in\\_Gazankulu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradise_in_Gazankulu).
- YouTube, 2010, *JIMMY B - MAKE ME BOUNCE*, viewed 13 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDZkIRIF3Ss>.
- YouTube, 2013, *Belafonte, paradise in Gazankulu, LIVE 1987*, viewed 15 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UsVqCwM8sB4>.
- YouTube, 2015, *LIZZY MERCIER DESCLOUX - Mais Où Sont Passées Les Gazelles (1984)*, viewed 15 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRkvKoQ6aMI>.
- YouTube, 2015, *#XMA10 OBED NGOBENI PROFILE*, viewed 13 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TthjKb2SRsE>.
- YouTube, 2020, *Dr. Bone - KwaZet (feat. Zakwe)*, viewed 15 April 2021, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT\\_dn8tSfPE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AT_dn8tSfPE).
- YouTube, 2020, *Mahlathini & Mahotella Queens - Kazet Gazette (Official Music Video)*, viewed 13 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR7UbvVhVT8>.
- YouTube, 2020, *The Mahotella Queens feat Dj Tira - Kazet (Official Video)*, viewed 15 April 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfpAXEnhSvl>.
- YouTube, 2021, *#harrybelafonte #belafonte Harry Belafonte in concert - Global Carnival (1988)*, viewed 27 May 2021, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_jXgTwMhjbU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jXgTwMhjbU).
- ZZ2, 2021, *Home page, ZZ2*, viewed 17 March 2021, from <https://www.zz2.co.za/ourstory/about-us>.