

Some new perspectives on the Soweto uprising: H. M. L. Lentsoane's poem "Black Wednesday" ("Laboraro le lesoleso")

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Some new perspectives on the Soweto uprising: H. M. L. Lentsoane's poem "Black Wednesday" ("Laboraro le lesoleso")

The epic poem about the Soweto uprising, "Laboraro le lesoleso", written in Sepedi (Northern Sotho) by H. M. L. Lentsoane has only recently been translated into English by Biki Lepota as "Black Wednesday" and published in the anthology *Stitching a whirlwind* (2018). In this article I suggest that, by discarding English, some crucial shifts from the bulk of protest poetry written in English must have taken place. Lentsoane wants to speak directly to fellow mother tongue speakers and not a national or broader African or international ear. It becomes clear that, by deploying various strategies based in orality, the poet manages to contribute new material and new approaches to creative texts of black protest during the apartheid years, e.g., a release from specific apartheid content about their oppression that every indigenous speaker had common knowledge of; an adherence to orality in terms of presentation, vocabulary, and form; and a linkage with the ancestors and a release from trying to reach the conscience of whites. This manifests through the poem's particular perspective and emphasis as narrative, as telling, combined with vivid visceral poetic imagery of the event. The poem evocatively captures the unfolding of incidents while at the same time shifting the focus to an ancestral demand to stand up for righteousness in a universal field of justice. **Keywords:** H. M. L. Lentsoane, "Laboraro le lesoleso", "Black Wednesday", Soweto uprising, Black Consciousness poetry.

Introduction

On 16 June 1976 school learners of Soweto gathered in the streets to protest new education policies of the white minority government, especially against the requirement to study various subjects through the medium of Afrikaans. The police reacted by opening fire on protestors, killing several people. The demonstration spread to other parts of the country throwing South Africa into weeks of turmoil and came to be known as the Soweto Uprising—a pivotal moment in South African history which is often researched, written about, and revisited.

One of the teachers in 1976 at Orlando High, the epicentre of the rebellion, H. M. L. Lentsoane witnessed the event first hand. He was already known as a young poet, having published two poetry volumes, *Direto tša mang le mang* (1971) and *Ga se ya lešaka le* (1973), and was being referred to as the “Northern Sotho poet of the future”.¹ The year after the uprising, he left Soweto to settle in rural Lebowakgomo, where he wrote an epic poem about the event, “Laboraro le lesoleso”, which was translated into English by Biki Lepota as “Black Wednesday” and published in the anthology of South African poetry in the African languages, *Stitching a whirlwind* (2018), edited by Megan Hall and myself. Lentsoane’s burgeoning talent and personal witnessing lead to an unmatched account of the Soweto uprising, perhaps enhanced by conflicting emotions about being a teacher teaching the inferior apartheid education to learners.

But despite his stature in Sepedi literature, and a special mentioning of the impressive qualities of this specific poem by S. Maje Serudu (Chapman *et al.* 243) as well as D. B. Z. Ntuli and C. F. Swanepoel, and the single reference by Miriam Ditaba Lehong of Lentsoane’s effective alliteration in the poem, there is no evidence of a full analysis of the text, either in indigenous languages or in English. One also suspects apartheid censoring in the standard work by W. J. Pretorius’s *Aspects of Northern Sotho Poetry*, because despite ample reference to Lentsoane’s poetry, this particular poem is not even mentioned. Serudu indeed confirms that indigenous poets did not escape censorship for their critique on the apartheid state: “They had to smuggle their messages to the readers in order to avoid the sharp teeth of the censorship machinery” (Chapman *et al.* 242–3). In other words, this article would appear to be the first attempt to analyse the whole poem, albeit in the English translation.

The title of the poem “Laboraro le lesoleso” is in itself an interpretative act by Lentsoane.² In the Sotho languages *laboraro* means Wednesday (*tharo* means three, thus Wednesday, the third day of the week), but the term “*le lesoleso*” is most often linked to gospel songs and Psalm 107:14: “*ba ntšha swiswing le lesoleso, a kgaola ditlemo tša bona*” (He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces). The repetition of a specific sound, in this case “*leso*”, is often used to intensify something, so literally the title means: “Wednesday of (darkest) Darkness” or “Darkest Wednesday”. Linked to the Biblical verse it also suggests that people who had been brought through the shadow of death found their chains broken.

The first published oral poem in Northern Sotho deals with darkness and massacre (Maahlamela 21), an interesting correlation which warrants further research. In a 1935 published biographical account by M. A. Serote, “Tša Bophelô”, E. M. Ramaila included a dirge written by Serote about the massacre of 10 May 1864 where the missionaries teamed up with the amaSwazi, and murdered hundreds of Bakopa and Matebele a Mapogo. The title “Sello sa Thaba-nthso” means “Black Mountain Dirge” (qtd in Maahlamela 21).

The poem “Black Wednesday” has no stanzas. The event on 16 June 1976 is presented as a torrent of 137 lines leaving no time to re-think, regroup, re-analyse, or take a breath. It is a prime indication that the poet deliberately

situates his poem in the oral tradition where the listener is unaware of stanzas, but pulled into the narrative, processing as quickly as possible whatever reaches the ear. M. J. Mojalefa proposes that there are “no pauses during the performance of the praise song. The longer the reciter continues without breathing, the more effective his delivery becomes” (87). The absence of stanzas may also indicate that the revolt happened so fast and with such intensity, that there was no time for pause.

However, within this orally directed format the poet ignores some well-known oral poetic features such as the recognisable introduction of the oral poet by himself—the kind of opening that was so often used by Lentsoane’s fellow Sepedi poet, O. K. Matsepe:

Kgomo e a tsha!
E gangwa ke mang?
E gangwa ke mang ge e sa gangwe ke nna

The cow is burning!
 Who will milk her?
 She will be milked by me (1)

In “Black Wednesday” the poet literally falls unannounced through the door into the house in the first two lines:

The rumours were already circulating on that Tuesday evening,
 they left people astonished,
 though the real truth remained a mystery.

The scene is immediately set: the community is alive with astonishing rumours but nobody could verify anything.

In these opening lines, Lentsoane establishes the same space identified by Pretorius as the space most often used in traditional Northern Sotho praise poems, namely the battlefield. “The events on the battlefield may also unfold within a certain atmosphere of revenge, hatred, jealousy, pride etc. [...] The specific atmosphere of [the battlefield’s] space may be reflected in a poem’s structure and form”, rhythms, long and short lines, as well as images (13). The battlefield also suggests that the ‘soldiers’ are ready, but the outcome not yet determined.

For the purpose of discussion, I distinguish four time-shifts in the poem “Laboraro le lesoeso”: Part A (lines 1–22) is a preamble which deals with the day before the main event, how unsure everybody was about what was going to happen, the preparation, and anxiety among the police scurrying around until the next morning; Part B (lines 23–89) is the longest part of the poem with its 66 lines moving into Wednesday with a lot of threatening and challenging until the vivid eruption and devastation; Part C (lines 90–121) deals with the aftermath that evening and the following day; and Part D (lines 122–37) uses the first person direct voice of the poet.

Systematic analysis of the poem

Part A

According to Baruch Hirson's research, the uprising in Soweto on 16 June 1976 was not the first protest against the Minister of Bantu Education's decree that half the subjects taught in standard five and in the first year of secondary school be taught through the medium of Afrikaans (175). The protests of parents, teachers, and pupils who had been stirred by the ideas of Black Consciousness grew during the closing months of 1975 and, by early 1976, demonstrations became evident in some schools. In contrast, the demonstration sparking the famous uprising was comprehensively planned at a meeting on 13 June by the students and their representative body, the South African Students' Movement (SASM). They decided on the route, the slogans, and participants (181).

Lentsoane reflects this pre-event turmoil in his powerful account of the effect of media reports, not only on the aggravated community but also on the regime:

Messages were received with scepticism,
they were vomited by the newspapers,
the faithful messengers.
Eyes were glued to the newspapers,
they were analysed with disbelief
then they received attention from Those-Who-Expressed-Loudly-Their-Thoughts-
of-Scorn. (lines 4-9)

The result of these talks and rumours was finally accepted for what it was: "We were on the brink of death; the time for the covenant of the forefathers had come" (line 11).

Within ten lines, the poet links the actions of the youths to the ancestors as obeying a solemn pledge—the youths had no choice, the fate of the day had been determined by the forefathers who had implicitly promised that they would protect their offspring in the valley of death and from this moment the ancestors are with them.

The police were also caught up in the rumours and reports:
The Blood-spillers pricked up their ears,
their mouths befriended telephones,
their ears refused to be left in the dark.
Experts worked through the night;
they gathered Those-with-the-Red-Beards.
Their eyes looked bruised, glittered as if invaded by rumours,
they slept with one eye closed.
They became aware of a coming darkness,
they grazed while others were asleep.
Those-with-the-Red-Beards worked tirelessly in the middle of the night,
they worked until the early hours of the morning. (lines 12-22)

Linking white people with the colour red is an established image within indigenous poetry. The term Red-Beards as a synonym for Blood-spillers has its precursor in an isiXhosa praise poem written in 1946, “UNkosi Rholihlahla Nelson Mandela (Aa! Zweliyashukuma!)”, by D. L. P. Yali-Manisi, published with translation in the anthology *Stitching a whirlwind* (Hall and Krog 164). In it, Yali-Manisi says:

*Maz' ungaboyik' ooSiswana-sibomvana,
OoSobindeka nooQhinga-libhentsile.*

Do not fear the whites,
Their indecencies are now in the open.

Literally “*ooSiswana-sibomvana*” means Those-With-the-Red-Stomachs, red or sunburnt bellies because of gluttony (Krog, “Indigenous Texts, Rich Points and Pluriversal Sources of Knowledge: *Siswana-sibomvana*” 47). In Lentsoane’s poem, the face of the apartheid regime is described as tirelessly vigilant, trying to get information about “the darkness” that was being planned, and the police as anxious, their eyes concerned (bruised), yet determined (glittering).

Part B

These Redbeards worked tirelessly until the *early hours of the morning*, so Part B opens with: “The sun rose with no sign of the calamity” (line 23). In her discussion of the language of Lentsoane’s poetry, Lehong points to his technique of defamiliarising a common phenomenon: “he uses it as if it has some hidden functions that are being overlooked or ignored”, thereby forcing one to attach to the rising of the sun “a value very much personal to oneself” (14) so eventually “[...] the day arrived that everyone had been waiting for” (line 24). After the police rushed around consulting and assessing:

The Red-Beards spread themselves throughout the township,
they gathered themselves in various groups. (lines 27–8)

At this point the poet makes a crucial reference to language. At the heart of the protest of the day was language, specifically Afrikaans. Simple and down to the point, slogans were written on pieces of cardboard or stiff covers of old exercise books: “Down with Afrikaans! Afrikaans is the oppressor! Abolish Afrikaans! Blacks are not dustbins! Afrikaans stinks!” (Hirson 181). Afrikaans was also the language predominantly used by police, prison warders, government officials, township administrators—indeed, the entire bureaucracy (75). Lentsoane does not use the word Afrikaans, but refers to it in stringent synonyms: “As for language, they used the one known to them” (line 29)—in other words, a language which excludes, which is only known and spoken by “them”—“the language spoken of the cloth” (line 30), i.e. legal language. In the Afrikaans translation of “*Laboraro le lesoleso*” these phrases were translated by various mother tongue speakers as “a language of dirty linen” or “speaking to others as if they are bundles of washing” (Krog, *Met woorde soos met kerse* 178, own translation from Afrikaans). Furthermore it is “the language spoken by

documents” (31)—administrative language—and “the language spoken with the mouth sewn shut” (line 32)—secret language, also spoken through clenched jaws.

There were definitely high levels of panic. As the students converged from all directions on that Wednesday morning at Orlando West High School, the police hurriedly prepared to counter them. Reconstructing the Cillie Commission Report as quoted in the overview of the Soweto Uprising (Ndlovu, Nieftagodien, and Moloi 345–7), the detail reads as follows:

07h45: Col. J. A. Kleingeld, Station Commander of the Orlando Police Station, ordered all available policemen to be on stand-by. A Black sergeant reported several groups of marchers [...] proceeding along Xorile Street from north to south.

07h50: Brig. S. W. le Roux, Divisional Commissioner for Soweto, received information concerning the marchers from the local Chief of Security and ordered six station commanders to send out patrols.

08h00: Scholars carrying placards gathered at the Naledi High School, Tebello Motapanyane led the student march to Orlando West past Thomas Mofolo school. Scholars from the Tladi, Moletsane and Molapo Secondary Schools also arrived [...]

In her account, Helena Pohlandt-McCormick says that by 10:30 that morning six thousand pupils in school uniforms sang, shouted, and waved placards bearing slogans, their only weapons the stones on the streets. Opposing them were 48 policemen under the command of Colonel Kleingeld, “duty bound” to stop them and to restore order. They carried revolvers, pistols, three automatic rifles, tear-gas grenades, and riot batons. They arrived in four police cars, three heavy armoured vehicles, and two patrol cars with police dogs (“I Saw a Nightmare ...’: Violence and the Construction of Memory (Soweto, June 16, 1976)” 26).

At this point, Lentsoane again calls forth the sun, underlining its neutrality as it soars into the sky observing all the unrest. Then the poet strikes with full creativity:

That day, at midday, the tortoise-shell burst open,
the situation turned ugly,
the smell defiled everything. (lines 35–7)

Hirson recounts a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter as writing:

I did not hear the police give any order to disperse before they threw tear gas canisters into the crowd of singing school children. The children scattered in all directions [...] The pupils then regrouped and when the police charged again, they threw stones at the police. The police then fired a few shots, some in the air, the others into the crowd, I saw four school children fall to the ground. (182)

According to Hirson, there was conflicting evidence on almost every incident and aspect of what happened next (182), but within the hour at least two African children lay dead: 17-year-old Hastings Ndhlovu and 13-year-old Hector Pieteron.

Keeping pace with the humans, being fully interconnected, the sun joins as a shocked witness:

The sun eclipsed during daytime, as it did once long ago,
a new sun rose. (lines 30–9)

A border had been crossed. Something had changed forever. The youth united in their power. Lentsoane refers to them using the powerful traditional concept of initiates:

The male and female initiates united with one voice.
Petitions were handed over,
the newspapers shouted silently,
they revealed the concerns of their chests,
they did not beat about the bush.
One rhythm was heard,
the chant became mesmerising,
it shook everybody's understanding (of freedom). (lines 40–7)

One of the objectives of traditional initiation schools, according to Nomhle N. Sitole, is to provide a rite of passage to adolescents in order to bring them into formal and explicit relations with their peers and their community. A profound aspect of the traditional initiation school is the acquisition of cultural knowledge regarding social responsibilities and assumption of responsibility within the community. A rite of passage also fosters a sense of belonging; “adolescents and adults become part of community life, not persons alone, lacking support, sanction, and purpose” (11–2).

Hirson describes how, in the months before the big protest, students became sensitised to their plight and politicised in their thinking about action.

Normal lessons were replaced by debates on current affairs or on the shape of things to come. Essays were attempted on the shape of South Africa twenty-five years hence. Teachers joined pupils in these discussions and there were few signs of the supposed age gap between the generations. The students discussed the US, the role of the Black Power movement, and Martin Luther King (a much admired figure). They spoke of orderly change in the country leading eventually to majority rule and there was, it appears, little talk of revolution. [...] Naledi and Orlando West (amongst others) were developing a very conscious student leadership and were to provide many of the leaders in the months to come. Young men and women were drawn into the vortex of politics and learnt, within the space of weeks, what might otherwise have remained outside their experience. (178)

The metaphor of initiates is, therefore, exceptionally apt. Young students were drawn into a larger concept of community and responsibility. Daniel Sechaba Montsitsi, fourth president of SASM, said in an interview that, until he joined SASM, he knew nothing of the ANC or the PAC (Hirson 178). But this kind of “initiation” was not without a challenging agony:

There was an atmosphere of rivalry,
a strong wind was blowing.
Telephones were mounted on human ears,
vehicles moved up and down.
Sibi and Mole, the spies, were seen amongst the initiates,
they were unashamed, they betrayed the initiates. (lines 48–54)

The initiates' peers and their fellow comrades, Sibi and Mole, spied on them, tried to undermine their action, and betrayed them. (This was the only reference in protest literature that I could find about such betrayal.)

After the big clash, the youths surged through Soweto, taking revenge for the murder and attacks on their fellows. They stoned passing cars, set up barricades and stopped delivery vans and buses, burnt down the major administration buildings, and attacked shops. The beerhalls were gutted, the bottle stores destroyed, and slogans attacking drink appeared on the walls. There could be little doubt that the object of the attacks was to destroy symbols of state control (Hirson 182).

The Cillié commission reports:

10h55: A West Rand Administration Board (WRAB) official, J. B. Esterhuyzen, was driving along Khumalo Street (Orlando West) when he was attacked by youths. He tried to escape from his car, but was surrounded by youths and beaten to death. During this period delivery vehicles, government buildings and cars were pelted with stones and set on fire. Trains were also attacked. (Ndlovu, Nieftagodien, and Moloji 345–7)

Under this new sun a full-scale war was raging:

Assegais-with-Small-Dark-Mouths—rifles—were used,
heavy gun sounds boomed from those wearing helmets,
the sounds shattered the whole country.

Pandemonium ensued at midday:
the smell of human flesh was everywhere.

The pandemonium worsened when people realised the hardship befalling the initiates (lines 55–60).

Cillié reports:

11h20: As word of police brutality spread around Soweto, WRAB was launching a new sheltered employment workshop at Orlando East. The function was attended by among others Dr L. M. Edelstein, the chief welfare officer. Word reached them of the uprisings and Edelstein left by car for the youth centre in Central Western Jabavu. By then his car had been damaged by stones. He ran to his office and locked the door. Another WRAB official, R. Hobkirk, was trapped in another office. The protesters forced their way into Edelstein's office, and dragged him outside. Hobkirk escaped and was protected by members of the local community. Edelstein was beaten to death. Two 18-year-old scholars, K. Dhlamini and L. J. Matonkonyane, were later charged with the murder of Edelstein but acquitted. (Ndlovu, Nieftagodien, and Moloji 345–7)

It was time for a new language, says the poet:
a new language was used in speaking to the people.
The language used was that of fire,
this extended to the neighbouring villages: what remained were ashes. (lines 61-3)

This fatal movement towards a scorched earth raged, spreading and leaving ashes behind. This is followed by an even more excruciating description of the devastation achieved by vividly personifying everything caught up and destroyed in the protest:

A Volkswagen squatted nakedly in the fire,
then a Ford went to lie on its side,
a Bedford was burned to ashes.
The owners were visibly upset,
weeping while gazing at the charred bones.
The sky was adorned with thick black smoke,
tufts of tail exploded with Air-That-Made-One-Sneeze,
people were left crying helplessly.
A small iron bird tilted to and fro in the sky,
it hovered but never sat down,
it kept vigil, controlling the day's riots,
it made us inhale a thick wind,
it left us with a bitter taste,
a deadly smoke. (lines 65-78)

According to Pretorius, personification is a deliberate strategy used in traditional Northern Sotho poetry to give “human qualities to inanimate objects” with an “often intentional ambiguity in the comparison” (42). So the readers who were on the side of the initiates would find themselves empathising with the suffering of the vehicles and their owners.

We see how the poet presents graphic core moments of individual destruction against an enormous canvas of arson and deadly turmoil, while he drives the telling through with what Isabel Hofmeyr formulates as “the syntax of narrative” (106), combining several tales (the youth, grownups, police, armour, reporting) to lift the epic dimensions of the event to the surface (lines 105-9).

12h30-13h00: Bottle stores at Phefeni/Orlando West were looted and set on fire. WRAB buildings were also targeted. Police continued to use tear gas and live ammunition to control the situation.

14h00: A large contingent of para-military police reinforcements arrived at intervals as looting and arson continued with criminal elements/tsotsis taking advantage. A senior police officer undertook an inspection flight by helicopter over Soweto. People were scattered and gathering in several places. There was chaos; vast parts of the area were under smoke, with buildings and cars on fire. (Ndlovu, Nieftagodien, and Moloi 345-7)

The vividness of Lentsoane's descriptions makes it clear that he must have personally witnessed a lot of what was happening, especially in light of an immediate severe information clamp-down, the ban on journalists and television, and the confusion of a slew of rumours. How the poet made sense of it all, determined the flow of events, and distilled fact from rumour so early on is quite remarkable. Pohlandt-McCormick says that the official report of the one-person commission of Justice Petrus Malan Cillié was so overwhelmed with evidence that it could only table its contested report in 1980 ("Official Stories: Telling Soweto, June 16, 1976—The Appropriation of the People's Story into Official Histories" n. p.). Lentsoane describes the chaotic confusion:

Pandemonium was the order of the day in the communities,
the elderly were not distinguishable,
the infants were not distinguishable.
The big bulls, armoured tanks, turned hastily and kicked up dust.
Their tails, scorpion-like in the air,
They hop-hopped howling from distress. (lines 79–84)

Hirson notes that township planners were well aware that the width of the roadways should be sufficient to allow a Saracen tank to do a U-turn. There had to be a certain minimum distance between the houses, which had to be aligned, so that "there is no shelter for a fugitive". Witnesses afterwards testified about the "ease with which they could move through the main roads in their Hippo armoured cars and the ability to direct their firepower between the houses" (line 184).

Cars, buses, even trains were set alight: The trains were confused,
they were unsure how to manoeuvre,
and decided to retire. (lines 85–7)

And finally, after the horrors of the bloody confrontation, the sun was still silently observing:

Eventually the sun set,
it overlooked the deep and dark wells. (lines 88–9)

Part C

Like the sun, the poet heartbreakingly takes stock of the devastation and notes how the language of fire became a "new nameless visitor" spreading across the country:

Blood vessels had been cut,
blood was left gushing from the wounds!
it flooded heavily like hissing rivers.
The powerful had killed,
the youth were dead.
Buildings were burned,
they were left naked.
Fire overran the country,
becoming a new nameless visitor,
spreading day and night,
swallowing the rightful ones. (lines 90–100)

A doctor working that day in Baragwanath Hospital testified:

I was met by a grisly scene: a rush of orderlies wheeling stretchers bearing the bodies of bloodied school children into the resuscitation room. All had the red 'Urgent Direct' stickers stuck to their foreheads that allowed them to bypass queues and admission procedures ... I stared in horror at the stretcher bearing the body of a young boy in a neat school uniform, a bullet wound to one side of his head, blood spilling out of a large exit wound on the other side, the gurgle of death in his throat. Only later would I learn his name: Hastings Ndlovu. (Ndlovu, Nieftagodien, and Moloji 343)

The poem continues:

The hospital was filled with distressed people,
Baragwanath turned into a sea of tears,
it turned into a sea of blood.
The injured had been stabilised,
the unfortunate victims,
the blameless victims,
those who stood for truth.
They persevered and writhed in pain:
in the end, they died for truth. (lines 101–7)

The poet gives an eyewitness account. According to Hirson (183), buses returning parents from work were stopped by the police, angering the adults into joining the youths. While the media was splashing and screaming, spreading and showing, the riot police withdrew:

Those with bloody hands had disappeared,
they hardened their hearts.
This story will not go unreported.
The newspapers splashed the events of the day,
spread them fully everywhere,
they showed frightening pictures,
they disturbed the feeling of parents,
they touched the hearts of the unmarried.
The radios screamed,
they informed the nation.
The newspapers and radio were intermingled with rumour and hearsay,
almost overshadowing the truth. (lines 110–21)

Part D

In the final phase of the poem, the poet suddenly steps forward, revealing himself no longer as an all-seeing eye, but as a shocked, traumatised, and deeply harassed individual being driven, like the initiates, by the ancestors to record:

My ancestors, I am thankful to you,
thank you for giving me the strength,
you made it possible for me to witness the events of this Wednesday. (lines 122–4)

He confirms what can be deduced from the text already:

I saw them with my naked eyes,
Although my eyes were weak, my mind was alert. (lines 125–6)

It has been established that oral histories have that special quality of allowing space for the expression of intangible and sensitive emotions of personal desire like talking to the forefathers about the trauma that was witnessed (Field 250).

Witnessing took its toll on the poet, even indicating that he suffered post-traumatic stress:

When it started, I thought I was dreaming
only to discover that I was vomiting deep emotions.
The day's events left me depressed,
I tried unsuccessfully to ignore them.
I tried to forget them, but failed,
the ancestors directed me to share with the world what I saw.
I do not want to be blamed tomorrow,
I do not want to keep the memories only to myself,
I wish to die in peace one day. (lines 127–35)

This moving conclusion presents what Field describes as a special characteristic of oral histories, especially within a literary context. It “re-introduce(s) the emotionality, the fear and fantasies carried by the metaphors of memory, which historians have been anxious to write out of formal accounts” (250).

The last two lines of the poem are a state of fact, a declaration:
Oh world, these were the events of that black Wednesday in Soweto.
I shall never forget the events of 16 June, 1976. (lines 136–7).

“Black Wednesday” and protest poetry

After tracing this cascade of description, I want to explore whether the poem, for more than forty years known only in Northern Sotho literature, adds, even in the smallest way, something to the oeuvre of apartheid protest poetry existing in English.

Thengani H. Ngwenya says that the Sharpeville massacre (21 March 1960) is seen as marking the beginning of black protest poetry (511) which was well-known for its strident criticism of the apartheid regime. Superb poets like Mafika Gwala, Siphso Sepamla, Oswald Mtshali, and Wally Serote wrote “more than protest poems”; their work marked “an unprecedented political consciousness and self-assertiveness”. They regarded themselves as the self-appointed spokespersons of the oppressed black community and believed that black poets had to be not only “a creator of aesthetic beauty but also an astute student of history” (511). Ngwenya points out the importance of remembering that, apart from influences of the black American poets of the Harlem Renaissance (506), “the themes, imagery and symbolism of what is generally referred to as Black Consciousness Poetry [...] have their origins in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of Peter Abrahams and H. I. E. Dlomo, both who were continuing a trend initiated by J. J. R. Jolobe, S. E. K. Mqhayi, B. W. Vilakazi” (511).

Although Ngwenya does not explicitly say so, the older tradition of protest poetry he refers to was written in *indigenous* languages with orality as a strong feature. Discussing the novel and black writers, Bhekizizwe Peterson emphasises that the oral narrative was “one ideological site that the African intelligentsia felt was, firstly, under its relative control, and, secondly, allowed for contesting historiography” (298). Johann Lenake found it necessary to coin the term “transitional form” to capture this combination of traditional orality and Western convention in contemporary indigenous literary work (Pretorius 89).

Lentsoane’s biography captures his passionate engagement with Northern Sotho (oral) literature from a very young age. While using strands of protest-writing, “Black Wednesday” is clearly rooted in the oral narrative which is precisely what enables him to create a unique contribution to black protest poetry. By discarding English, Lentsoane shows no interest in reaching the white and/or international and/or non-Sotho ear, but wants to speak directly to fellow mother tongue speakers. This must imply some crucial shifts, some of which I try to identify: an adherence to orality in terms of presentation, vocabulary, and form; a calling forth of ancestral guidance; a release from specific apartheid content that every indigenous speaker had common knowledge of; and a release from trying to reach the conscience of whites.

Although “Black Wednesday” has specifically dropped many of the usual features associated with praise poetry like greeting, calling for attention, obvious repetitive phrases, and being propelled by the logic of images, the poem has retained a few important oral elements: it uses mnemonics to distil potential plot segments of the Soweto protest in the way that Hofmeyr describes in another context (109), but in the gradual shift from Tuesday to Wednesday evening, Lentsoane infuses the poem with a sense of the past by periodising the flow of time as well.

An important feature of orality is repetitive phrases. Lentsoane uses an intensifying reference to the sun which establishes a haunting, almost Biblical empathy from the universe:

The sun rose → the sun soared → the sun eclipsed.

The sun displayed no sign of calamity → the sun brings a new day → the sun has no cunning → the sun is saturated with secrets → The sun eclipsed during daytime, as it once did, long ago (as in the times of the Old Testament).

A new sun rose.

Engaging with mother tongue speakers, Lentsoane does not need to think about the aesthetic mores of English poetry (as the black English protest writers had to) in order to convince those who are called “Literary Critics” (Ngwenya 520) because he is working within a respected aesthetic tradition that has produced revered poets, well known in African language circles. He writes in an established vocabulary of the kind that entices poets to play with literal and figurative meanings enriching the imagery: “Assegais-With-Small-Dark-Mouths” (rifles); “Tufts of tail exploded with Air-That-Made-One-Sneeze” (teargas). Images like these lure the poet to produce his own images: “the small iron bird” (helicopter); “scorpion tails” (tanks with guns); car “lying down” (overturned car); car “squatting nakedly in the fire” (car being burnt). The beauty of these images is that they evocatively combine innocent and unexpected objects into this valley of darkness and death.

A further freedom provided by working in Sepedi, and not in a language that he first and foremost feels “belongs” to somebody else, is that he could broaden the concept of language itself into a philosophical metaphor: the language of the protest differs from that of the oppressors; the language of petition is blotted out by the language of bullets; the language of contempt overrides the informative language of the media. Of course, several media outlets used indigenous languages and therefore could openly “reveal the concerns of their chests” (line 43).

But when nobody could hear the others’ language anymore, another kind of language was needed, the ultimate universal language of fire. In an unforgettable cluster the poet sketches the Red-beards, the Blood spillers, their eyes anxious with vigilance and fear, their ears glued to strategies to get hold of information, but incapable of communication as their own language was one of scorn, was muffled, was clenched in angry orders. This armoured group is

placed in contrast to a language that reveals what is in the heart and stands for truth, a language that has one voice, that is receptive to the language of the sun, the language of the air—despite smelling of smoke and human flesh.

Lentsoane narrates freely. He combines several strands in order to reveal the depth of an event that projects the full power of the initiates to endure under the guidance of the ancestors. He moves from the single comrade to a group of initiates; from the revolution to a battlefield of justice; from the individual's consciousness to a larger awareness of how the connectedness of language, nature, and youth ensures the continuity of society. Elsewhere Hofmeyr quotes Paul Connerton's idea of social memory: "an individual's consciousness of time is to a large degree an awareness of society's continuity, or more exactly of the image of that continuity which the society creates" (97).

According to Ngwenya, by writing in English the Black Consciousness protest poets attempted "to bolster a new and radically politicised collective identity of the black community by citing examples of racial oppression" (509). The protest poets saw writing as a cultural weapon of which Ngwenya gives several examples: Gwala writes in his poem "In Defence of Poetry":

Tell me,
what's poetic
about shooting defenceless kids
in a Soweto street? (94)

Mtshali writes that the white madam looks at him with eyes that say:

Ha! Ha! I know who you are;
beneath those fine clothes
ticks the heart of a thief. (qtd in Mba0 43)

In "The Actual Dialogue" Serote writes "Do not fear Baas" and Sepamla writes:

Yes sir I have arrived
walk the night if you dare. (qtd in Ngwenya 513)

I know my history damn well
I'd need you to stand back so I tell it
By God you've breathed down my neck for too long
Your ominous shadow cast over all my events blurring details of it
This same history of bloody wars and bitter tears
Whose pain sears through the body of our nation. (qtd in Ngwenya 505)

Lentsoane does not address any Baas or Sir or Madam. He does not need to cross racial and cultural barriers, but depends on a familiar and intimate collective. For the initiates, he keeps score. For the spies, he names the incidents. For the community, he focuses on their successful endurance, but does not allow anybody to shy away from the fact that a language of oppression has led to a language of fierce destruction.

By focusing on descriptions, not analysis, on particular vivid images rather than collective oppression, the poet creates narratives that become

representations of the existing large bulk of material on the Soweto uprising. Particularly striking is how, through the strength and beauty of his images, Lentsoane celebrates a coherent depiction of the drive for a just dispensation for the oppressed. Through narration the detail in the poem is in conversation, in reciprocal dialogue with the stark utterances of anger in protest poetry—they add to one another, enhance, differ.

Towards the end of the poem the poet even goes into dialogue with ancestors. He does not need to spell out the cruelty of the Baas: the ancestors know that, so he rather thanks them for not only urging him, but “directing” him towards a safe space to turn his trauma into writing. Like the Black Consciousness poets, he feels strongly “called” to give account of what he saw, but unlike them, not in an effort to change the Baas, but in an effort to capture in a celebratory, vivid way the actions of a people pushed beyond endurance, and to praise them in an exercise of moral imagination and political communication (see Coplan 52).

Conclusion

Deploying two important strategies, namely that of the oral and the indigenous language, the poet manages to contribute new material to the creative texts around black protest. His orally orientated expression does not reflect or engage with an already-constituted ‘worldview’, but is busy with what is elsewhere described by Graham Furniss as a “cultural production which produces consciousness” (200). This consciousness has less victimhood, less bitterness, even less anger than the protest poetry in English, though more agency and righteousness. The poem captures evocatively an almost forgotten cadence celebrating wholeness and a kind of mighty assertiveness within the context of fortitude on an important universal battlefield of justice. The initiates and their ancestors are not only the instigators of this event, but in control of a decisive moment in history for all mankind.

Notes

1. Annexure 1 contains a short biography of H. M. L. Lentsoane.
2. Annexure 2 of the online version of this article contains the original poem and translation.

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Annexure 1: Herbert Mokadi Lucky Lentsoane

Herbert Lentsoane was born in Ga-Marishane, Limpopo in 1947. His love for poetry developed because his grandmother, Elsina Makuntane Makgabo, recited to him pre-literate eulogies glorifying her tribe and buttressing the prestige of her chief. Lentsoane took part in many essay-writing competitions at school, publishing his best work in *Motswalle wa Bana*. He was offered a bursary by the Anglo-American Group to study at the University of the North (now the University of Limpopo) where he completed his first collection of poetry, *Direto tša mang le mang*, in 1971, the first of a number of literary works. Lentsoane published a poem “Sekolo se se Phagamego sa Bopedi-Bopedi” in Tswelopelo which became such a hit that readers referred to him as the Northern Sotho poet of the future. In 1972 Lentsoane started teaching at Orlando High School. After the 1976 uprising Lentsoane returned to Lebowakgomo where he taught at several schools, became principal at Mokopane College of Education in 1978, and began to lecture at the University of the North in 1987.

Some of his publications are: *Ga le batswadi ba selo* (drama) (2014); *Tshweu ya ditsebe* (fiction) (2014); *Molato wa ka o kae?: kgoboketšo ya dikanegelokopana tše mpsha le tša kgale* (fiction) (2009); *The poetry of N. S. Puleng* (dissertation) (1996); *Megokgo ya lethabo* (fiction) (1994); *Kgogamašego* (poetry) (1998); *Ihlo la moreti* (poetry) (1981); *Mokgako* (poetry) (1981); *Direto tša mang le mang* (poetry) (1978); *Ga se ya lešaka le* (poetry) (1973); *Direto tša mang le mang* (poetry) (1971) (see Lehong; Mampa).

Annexure 2: Original poem and translation

Laboraro le lesoleso
H. M. L. Lentsoane

1. A kwagetše phirimana' Labobedi mabarebare,
2. A tswalela mantho tlabego,
3. Ntlha le thito ya ba koma.
4. E gorogile melaetša ka kgonono,
5. E hlatšwa ke thomo ya semuma,
6. Thomo ya go hloka matepe.
7. E tsitsinketšwe thomo,
8. Ya fetlekwa ka lepopodumo
9. Ya ahlaahlwa ka megopolo ya lenyatšo,
10. Mafelelong ya fegwa,
11. Kgauswi ya ba kgweranong le badimo.
12. Ba tlorotše ditsebe boMmakhulwane,
13. Melomo ya tswalana le megala,
14. Ditsebe le tšona tša gana go hlaolwa.
15. Di feafeile maswiswing ditšhatšha,
16. Tša kopanya boTedukhulwana.
17. Mahlo a phadimile nke ba seetšwe,
18. Boroko gwa robalwa go pontšwe ka leihlo le tee.
19. A foile mathapisana a maso,
20. A fula dingwe di robetše.
21. A iswaiswile mpeng ya bošego,
22. A fetša ka go bonela mahube a banna.
23. Le hlabile la hloka matepe,
24. La hlaba leo le bego le letetšwe,
25. La hlatloga ka ntle le mathaithai.
26. A be a ragetše maswiswi ntlong maakabosane,
27. A phatlalala le metsemeso,
28. A ipala ka magorogoro.
29. Polelo a boletše ya go tsebja ke beng,
30. Polelo ya go boletšwa ke mašela,
31. Polelo ya go boletšwa ke dipampiri,
32. Polelo ya go boletšwa o rokile molomo.
33. Le hlatlogile la hloka matepe,
34. La rotoga le khoše dithopa.
35. Khudu e phulegile legapi ka sekgalela,
36. Gwa šala go nkgga go sa bola,
37. Monkgo wa tlapela gohle.
38. La bogologolo le sobetše ka sekgalela,
39. Gwa hlaba le lefsa ka bonako.
40. Baleng le badikeng ntšu la lehlabula e bile le tee.

41. Dipampiridillo di tšholotše megokgo,
42. Tša goeletša di homotše,
43. Tša rafolla tša mafahleng,
44. Tša se dikadike le gatee.
45. Mošito go kwetše o tee,
46. Koša gwa gobja ya go loya,
47. Ya go hlogohla batheeletši maikutlo.
48. Moya go nkgile wa bonaba,
49. Gwa tšutla wa go emaemiša meriri.
50. Metato e batile mantho ditsebe,
51. Difatanaga tša ya tlase le tletlolo.
52. Sibi le Mole di hlakahlakane le koma,
53. Tša hloka hlong,
54. Tša hlomarana le babolodi.
55. Moretwa go hwidintšwe wa molongwanamoswana,
56. O kidimetša, o rotoga go rakoporo,
57. O šišinya naga yohle.
58. Go senyegile le eja motho,
59. Gwa nkgama nama' motho mosegare wo monana.
60. E ganne go bona mathata a loya koma,
61. Polelo ya bolela ye mpsha manthong.
62. Polelo e boletše ya mankgwari,
63. Hlaga ya aparela mašemo a kgauswi,
64. Gwa šala go nkgama pilo fela.
65. Volkswagen e hlabile matshomane e ponapona,
66. Ford ya šala e sekame ka lehlakore,
67. Bedford e hloname, e llwe ke hlaga.
68. Bengmašemo ba se kgitlile,
69. Ya ba ge ba lebeletše marapo fela.
70. Leratadima ke kgabišitšwe ke meši ye meso,
71. La tšea sefoka ka moyamoethimodišo,
72. Motho a šala a lla sehloDIMARE.
73. Nonyanatshipi e fofafofile sebakabekeng,
74. E omaoma e sa kotame,
75. E hlapeditše mathata' letšatši,
76. Moya e re hemiša wo mokoto,
77. E re khoriša wa go galaka,
78. Moya' go se phediše.
79. Metseng go tswakatswakane,
80. Gwa se be motšofadi,
81. Gwa se be segotlane.
82. Tše khulong di botogile di thuntšha marole.
83. Di penne mesela bokadiphepeng,
84. Di tlopatlopišwa ke tlalelo.
85. Ditimela di hlakane hlogo,
86. Tša se tsebe ntlha le thito,

87. Tša fetša ka go khutša sebakanyana.
88. Le fefile la leba bothateng,
89. La ukamela madibeng a masomaso.
90. E phutšwe methopo ya madila,
91. Ya šala e re thapathapa!
92. Ya šala e huba bokadinoka.
93. Ba maatla ba bolaile,
94. Metekatekana ya no swaišwa.
95. Meago e latswitšwe ke mollo,
96. Ya šala e ponapona.
97. Mello e tlapetše naga,
98. E amogela moengmofsa tlhokaleina,
99. E keka bošego le mosegare,
100. E metša bao e ba lebanego.
101. Bookelong ditšhaba di tsene di kgonne senko,
102. Baragwanath ya fetoga lewatle la megokgo,
103. Ya fetoga lewatle la madi.
104. Di okilwe dikgobadi,
105. Dikgobadi tša madimabe,
106. Dikgobadi tša go hloka molato,
107. Dikgobadi tša go emela therešo.
108. Di kgotleletše, tša menekana,
109. Mafelelong tša hwela therešo.
110. Atla tša madi di emetše kgole,
111. Tša thatafiša dipelo.
112. Taba ga e lale.
113. Dikuranta di ahlahlile tiragalo tša letšatši,
114. Tša ala madireng ka botlalo,
115. Tša ntšha diswantšho tše bohloko,
116. Tša kgotla maikutlo a batswadi,
117. Tša ba tša tširoša le dikgope le mafetwa.
118. Diyalemoya di katane struggle,
119. Tša bea mašabašaba crowds seetšeng back.
120. A tsene enter gare halfway mabarebare hearsay,
121. Gwa se hlwe tarry go tsebja nnete truth.
122. Badimo bešo, ke a le leboga,
123. Ke leboga ge le mphile maatla,
124. Le mpontšhitše tše tša Laboraro le.
125. Ke bone ka a ka mahlo,
126. Le ge a fokola, monagano ga o bjalo.
127. Ke thomile nke ke a lora
128. Kganthe ke hlatsa therešo ya poo.
129. Tsa mosegare di ntihobaeditše,
130. Ke re ke ikgakantšha tšona gwa pala.
131. Ke lekile go itebatša gwa gana,
132. Badimo ba re ke botše lefase tšeo ke di bonego.

133. Ga ke nyake go šupša ka menwana bosasa,
134. Ga ke nyake go ba sejato,
135. Ke nyaka go ithobalela ka khutšo bosasa.
136. Lefase, ke tšeo tša Laboraro le lesoleso Soweto.
137. Nka se di lebale tša June 16, 1976.

Black Wednesday

H. M. L. Lentsoane

1. The rumours were already circulating on that Tuesday evening,
2. they left people astonished,
3. though the real truth remained a mystery.
4. Messages were received with scepticism,
5. they were vomited by the newspapers,
6. the faithful messengers.
7. Eyes were glued to the newspapers,
8. they were analysed with disbelief,
9. then they received attention from Those-Who-Express-Loudly-Their-Thoughts-of-Scorn.
10. Eventually that was put in abeyance.
11. We were on the brink of death; the time for the covenant of the forefathers had come.
12. The Blood-spillers pricked up their ears,
13. their mouths befriended telephones,
14. their ears refused to be left in the dark.
15. Experts worked through the night;
16. they gathered Those-with-Red-Beards.
17. Their eyes looked bruised, glittered as if invaded by rumours,
18. they slept with one eye closed.
19. They became aware of a coming darkness,
20. they grazed while others were asleep.
21. Those-with-Red-Beards worked tirelessly in the middle of the night,
22. they worked until the early hours of the morning.
23. The sun rose with no sign of the calamity,
24. then the day arrived that everyone had been waiting for,
25. it rose well without any cunning.
26. Darkness was driven towards the locust-birds,
27. the Red-Beards spread themselves throughout the townships,
28. they gathered themselves in various groups.
29. As for language, they used the one known to them,
30. the language of the cloth,
31. the language spoken by documents,
32. the language spoken with the mouth sewn shut.
33. The sun soared without any sign of the calamity,
34. it moved saturated with secrets.

35. That day, at midday, the tortoise-shell burst open,
36. the situation turned ugly,
37. the smell defiled everything.
38. The sun eclipsed during daytime, as it once did, long ago,
39. a new sun rose.
40. The male and female initiates united with one voice.
41. Petitions were handed over,
42. the newspapers shouted silently,
43. they revealed the concerns of their chests,
44. they did not beat about the bush.
45. One rhythm was heard,
46. the chant became mesmerising,
47. it shook everybody's understanding.
48. There was an atmosphere of rivalry,
49. a strong wind was blowing.
50. Telephones were mounted on human ears,
51. vehicles moved up and down.
52. Sibi and Mole, the spies, were seen amongst the initiates,
53. they were unashamed,
54. they betrayed the initiates.
55. Assegais-with-Small-Dark-Mouths -- rifles -- were used,
56. heavy gun-sounds boomed from those wearing helmets,
57. the sounds shattered the whole country.
58. Pandemonium ensued at midday:
59. the smell of human flesh was everywhere.
60. The pandemonium worsened when people realised the hardship befalling the initiates,
61. a new language was used in speaking to the people.
62. The language used was that of fire;
63. this extended to the neighbouring villages:
64. what remained were ashes.
65. A Volkswagen squatted nakedly in the fire,
66. then a Ford went to lie on its side,
67. a Bedford was burned to ashes.
68. The owners were visibly upset,
69. weeping while gazing at the charred bones.
70. The sky was adorned with thick black smoke,
71. tufts of tail exploded with Air-That-Makes-One-Sneeze,
72. people were left crying helplessly.
73. A small iron bird tilted to and fro in the sky,
74. it hovered but never sat down,
75. it kept vigil, controlling the day's riots,
76. it made us inhale a thick wind,
77. it left us with a bitter taste,
78. a deadly smoke.
79. Pandemonium was the order of the day in the communities,

80. the elderly were not distinguishable,
81. the babies were not distinguishable.
82. The big bulls, the armoured tanks, turned hastily and kicked up dust.
83. Their tails scorpion-like in the air,
84. they hop-hopped howling from distress.
85. The trains were confused,
86. they were unsure how to manoeuvre,
87. And decided to retire.
88. Eventually the sun set,
89. it overlooked the deep and dark wells.
90. Blood vessels had been cut,
91. blood was left gushing from the wounds!
92. It flooded heavily like hissing rivers.
93. The powerful had killed,
94. the youth were dead.
95. Buildings were burned,
96. they were left naked.
97. Fire overran the country,
98. becoming a new nameless visitor,
99. spreading day and night,
100. swallowing the righteous ones.
101. The hospital was filled with distressed people,
102. Baragwanath turned into a sea of tears,
103. it turned into a sea of blood.
104. The injured had been stabilised,
105. the unfortunate victims,
106. the blameless victims,
107. those who stood for truth.
108. They persevered, and writhed in pain:
109. in the end they died for truth.
110. Those with bloody hands had disappeared;
111. they hardened their hearts.
112. This story will not go unreported.
113. The newspapers splashed the events of the day,
114. spread them fully everywhere,
115. they showed frightening pictures,
116. they disturbed the feelings of parents,
117. they touched the hearts of the unmarried.
118. The radios screamed,
119. they informed the nation.
120. The newspapers and radio were intermingled with rumour and hearsay,
121. almost overshadowing the truth.
122. My ancestors, I am thankful to you,
123. thank you for giving me the strength,
124. you made it possible for me to witness the events of this Wednesday.
125. I saw them with my naked eyes:

126. although my eyes were weak, my mind was alert.
127. When it started, I thought I was dreaming,
128. only to discover that I was vomiting deep emotions.
129. The day's events left me depressed,
130. I tried in vain to ignore them.
131. I tried to forget them, but failed,
132. the ancestors directed me to share with the world what I saw.
133. I do not want to be blamed tomorrow,
134. I do not want to keep the memories only to myself,
135. I wish to die in peace one day.
136. Oh world, these were the events of that black Wednesday in Soweto.
137. I shall never forget the events of 16 June 1976.