

The filmmakers advancing a radical Black Afrikaans

A decade after the release of Dylan Valley's debut film, *Afrikaaps: The Documentary*, artists are working with Afrikaans in exciting ways to reflect on the history and future of the language.

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2 November 2020: Ten years ago, filmmaker Dylan Valley made his debut with *Afrikaaps: The Documentary*, which traced the true roots of Afrikaans.



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theatre production, *Afrikaaps* also promoted Afrikaans in Afrikaans dialect from the Cape, as legitimate Afrikaans, reclaiming the language for all who speak it, no matter how they speak it.

The film begins by asserting Afrikaans as a creole language, derived from Dutch but spoken first by slaves of mixed origins and the local KhoiSan population. Afrikaans' history is complex – exercises in origin forensics are a contentious terrain, made all the more rocky by fearmongering about the [future](#) of the language.

Afrikaaps is, however, firm in its history lesson: Afrikaans was first co-opted by evangelism around 1875, when the spread of Christianity by white Afrikaans speakers demanded the language be standardised. The language was then co-opted for a second time in the 1940s when it was employed again by white Afrikaans speakers, this time as a brutal tool of apartheid oppression, which has profoundly affected perceptions of its origin.

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In the first few minutes of the film, viewers are reminded that “the language had become totally disconnected from its history”. Then starts a journey to liberate Afrikaans from its awful reputation as the cast develops the production, taking it on tour around the country. An extra layer of narration is provided by revolutionary scholar [Neville Alexander](#) and Patric Tariq Mellet, author of the recently released *The Lie of 1652: A Decolonised History of Land*.

Reflecting on the documentary a decade later, Valley observes how interest in decolonisation was very different at the time: “It seems weird to say this now because it has become such a big part of everyday discourse if you’re working in the arts or academia or film, but decolonising wasn’t really something we ever spoke about then. But now it fits. What *Afrikaaps* was doing back then

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Celebrating the language of home



One of the cast members, vernacular spectacular performer [Jitsvinger](#), explains that because the production set out to debunk stigmas and stereotypes about the Afrikaans narrative, it was perceived by some as too revolutionary: “Some local festival board members even rejected it as ‘Khoi nationalism’, refusing to screen the film.”

Jitsvinger describes seeing more pride being shown in the language as views of its history change, and his own career since *Afrikaaps* reflects the complexities and aspirations of Afrikaans speakers.

“My work celebrates the culture of Afrikaaps through the rhythms and cross-generational borrowing of idiosyncrasies that stems from my goema, kwela, jive and classic musical roots ... This young language never stopped evolving, not since the indigenous folk, slaves, merchants and traders started hybridising their various tongues to formulate what we call Afrikaans today.

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28 October 2020: Quinton Goliath, aka Jitsvinger, featured in the documentary *Afrikaaps*. Jitsvinger says he's noticed different Afrikaans speakers show more pride in the language.

Speaking with Valley and poet [Quaz](#) at a [dialogue](#) on *Afrikaaps* hosted by the Windybrow Theatre and the University of the Witwatersrand School of Arts, professor of sociology [Zimitri Erasmus](#) suggests that “the power of the film lies in its popularisation of a very complex history that is very seldom told, and the ways in which the film pays attention to a radical politics that is embedded in parts of the creative arts that it showcases”. Quaz similarly suggests that the film’s success lies in the enticing ways it presents “doors left ajar suggesting paths to explore”.

The dialect in *Afrikaaps* is particular to the Cape, but both Erasmus and Quaz are from other parts of South Africa. Yet the film still resonated strongly with their own experiences, evidence that language is a filter for how we experience the world. The quiet genius of *Afrikaaps* lies in how it normalised Afrikaans as spoken at home, whether home is Eldorado Park or Bishop Lavis, poking holes in the highfalutin perceptions of *suiwer* or “standardised” Afrikaans.

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made it okay to be unapologetic about speaking Afrikaans without words being dismissed as slang or accents associated with gangsterism.”

Cloete’s insights are interesting on two fronts: as an Afrikaans lecturer, she contrasts the ease of teaching a course to American exchange students over six months (an environment where “Afrikaans is an easy, formulaic language without the political baggage”) with needing a whole year to teach the same course to local students at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The bulk of the year-long course at CPUT involved working through the history of the language, resocialising students away from psychological barriers imposed by ideas of what constitutes acceptable Afrikaans.



31 October 2020: Filmmaker Nadine Cloete says, “Afrikaaps made it okay to be unapologetic about speaking Afrikaans without words being dismissed as slang or accents associated with gangsterism.”

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[Nathan Trantraal](#) and [Ronelda Kamfer](#) as critical f  own work, not just for normalising Afrikaaps but for making it beautiful and strong enough to “[skryf 'it soes jy praat](#) (write it the way you speak)”.

Her debut documentary, [Action Kommandant](#) (now showing on Showmax), presents the little-known story of slain liberation fighter Ashley Kriel. The film begins with Kriel’s mother “speaking the way she speaks”, which Cloete describes as one of the first important political decisions to inform her future filmmaking. Her next project, *Hokmeisie*, is a feature film in Afrikaans and N|uu, a KhoiSan language at risk of extinction. Set in the Northern Cape, it is a coming-of-age story that investigates the traditional celebration of the menstrual cycle through initiation ceremonies.

The language of family

Another exciting forthcoming film is [Barakat](#), South Africa’s first Muslim film in Afrikaans. Talking to how the film depicts a slice of Cape Muslim culture, heritage and lived experience, director [Amy Jephtha](#) explains the importance of embracing specificity and detail in filmmaking, not as a stand-in for everyone’s experience, but as a composite of how we live.

“There’s a kind of Cape Flats Afrikaans that’s seeped into mainstream SA film and has come to be embraced in stories that depict gang culture or the lives of people from the Cape Flats in more traumatic ways. There’s truth there, of course, but there’s also an everyday, middle-class language that lives alongside this and is often ignored. A hybrid of Afrikaaps, Afrikaans, colloquial English, a peppering of traditional Cape Malay words. I hadn’t heard that on screen before. That’s the particular sound I tried to capture in *Barakat*. It’s what I like to think of as the ‘language of family’.”

Everyone interviewed for this story was incredibly positive about the journey of Afrikaans as a language, and how it is shaping and being shaped by the people who speak it. Their work goes beyond merely reclaiming Afrikaans from a colonial past and a stigmatised present, but also envisioning its future. According to social anthropology professor [Kees van der Waal](#), this kind of upbeat attitude towards Afrikaans is in stark contrast to “the pessimistic anticipation of languicide among many conservative white Afrikaans speakers”.

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to cinema. Here, the lineage of Black intellectuals bridging roles at formerly and formally exclusively Afrikaans-speaking institutions is instructive. Pathmakers such as [Russel Botman](#), Stellenbosch University's first Black vice-chancellor, and [Danny Titus](#), chair of the Afrikaans Language and Culture Association and commissioner at the South African Human Rights Commission, radically advanced the perception of the language, while working to shepherd *verkramp* (conservative) institutions out of the Dark Ages.

But more than progressive films or individual efforts, important though they are, it is the evolutionary spirit of the language that most stands out. Shackled for so long to a painful politicisation, it is easily forgotten that Afrikaans was also important as a language of [liberation](#) during apartheid. [Hein Willems](#), professor at the University of Pretoria's department of Afrikaans, describes it as a language that "bears the imprint of a fierce tradition of anti-imperialism, anticolonialism, of an all-embracing humanism and anti-apartheid activism".

In his 2009 memoir, historian [Jacob Dlamini](#) recalls Afrikaans as more than the language of the oppressor but also "the language of *grootmenspraatjies* [grown-up talk] used among adults when discussing matters unsuitable for children's ears, and also the language from which the grammatical basis for *tsotsitaal* [thug language], the argot of Black African modernity, township jazz culture and coolness, was derived".

Linguistic theorist [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) contends that language is always grounded in social context: "Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life."

The social world of Afrikaans today is very different to when *Afrikaaps* was developed and filmed, but the heavy lifting of stripping the language of its racialised depredations and degradations continues. It is fulfilling and thrilling to see this decolonisation project evolve in tandem with a language that refuses to be subsumed by oppression of any kind.



become SA's 12th official language?



art barriers and built up artists



From slave to major composer – then erased again

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