

The film “*Tsotsi*”

Tsotsi is an award-winning film (best foreign language film at the Academy Awards 2005) with a cast of unknowns. The title role is played by Presley Chweneyagae. This is a genre film about life today in the South African ‘townships’ (slums) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsotsi>. In some ways it is analogous to the award-winning genre film last year: *Slumdog Millionaire*. The movie is based on the novel of the same name by Athol Fugard, an award winning South African playwright: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athol_Fugard. [Incidentally Fugard has a special relationship with New Haven’s Longwarf Theater, where his plays regularly premiere, most recently in November 2009]. *Tsotsi* takes place in current day Soweto, the largest township (900,000+ inhabitants) outside Johannesburg: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soweto> (Find out what Soweto means.) It provides a vivid picture of the hardscrabble urban life that many Black Africans suffer today in the South African townships, the randomness of life there and the slim chance one faces of escaping the grinding cycle of poverty. The film tells the story of Tsotsi, a young street criminal who steals a car only to discover a baby in the back seat. At this point you will get a brief, contrasting glimpse of middle-class life in South Africa today. The story then tells how Tsotsi deals with these events of his life in the township over the following few days, with flashbacks to his early days as a street kid. You will find the ending of the film to be ambiguous.

The film is multi-lingual with bits of Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, Sesotho, English and Afrikaans all mixed together. In addition you hear throughout the urban street or gangster Pidgin (Creole) language called *Tsotsitaal* which is an obvious play on the film’s title: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsotsitaal>. *Tsotsi* is a Sesotho slang word for a “thug” or “robber”, and *taal* is Afrikaans for language. *Tsotsitaal* (otherwise known as Iscamtho) developed as a gangster pidgin during the 1940s and 50s (or earlier). As a Pidgin it evolved as a means of communications in urban areas between people from different language groups to become the hip urban language it is today. *Tsotsitaal* incorporated a number of different languages including Afrikaans and English, plus various African (Bantu) languages (see below) but the grammar is based on Bantu languages (particularly Zulu and Sesotho). Dialects of *Tsotsitaal* varied across different townships and regions with different ethnic compositions and different settings (e.g. prisons vs. mines vs. hip street language). *Tsotsitaal* is now a generic term for any of the quickly-evolving, mixed, street languages commonly used in South African Townships today. New words and phrases are continually being introduced.

Since this film is so multilingual, it is worth noting that there are 11 official languages in South Africa: Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwat, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga, and a number more that are not official, including Nama, San, plus several South Asian, and other European languages as well as *Tsotsitaal* and Iscamtho. Check out <http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm> for more details. Which language is most widespread and which one is spoken by most people in South Africa today? Interesting, most of the Black African languages are similar enough so that if you know one language you can often figure out what someone is saying in another. But there are exceptions. For example, Tshivenda is quite different from the others.

You will also hear much of the urban music popular in the Townships today. This music is generically called *Kwaito* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwaito> which developed in the 1990s, and its artists came to embrace the use of *Tsotsitaal* in the music’s lyrics. See if you can find and listen to some of *Kwaito*’s more well-known artists via the web.