Seasons of drought have no rainbows – An Experiential Note on Poverty and Survival Networks in South Africa

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I

During the heady days of SA's transition, when the ideas of truth and reconciliation and of the rainbow nation held sway, Alfred Qabula, a black working class oral poet concluded his assessment of the process with a moving poem about the 'restless dead' and warned that 'seasons of drought have no rainbows' (see Brown 1998).

This paper ends the discussion of a manuscript on the 'Mandela Decade' (a sustained ethnography of 400 black working class leaders of the 1980s exploring their experiences during the decade of the 1990s) with the 'disposal of bodies' – one, Qabula's body in Pondoland in October 2002 and of Sibongile Mkhize's in December 2002. In choosing to pay tribute to the 'restlessness' of dying in SA, I want to make a sociological point about the politics of encroachment and the vitality of embedded struggles over livelihoods[1]. The two stories are not chosen because the one was a man and the other a woman, or that the man left a trail of words and died disturbingly and 'noisily', whereas the other died in complicity and silence, or that the one died of a stroke and the other of HIV/AIDS.

What I'm trying to do is to reflect on the plight of all black working class leaders of the 1980s who proved to be 'losers' in the process of a

[1] For a theoretical elaboration of these points, see Sitas (2002).

profound democratic and neo-liberal transition[2]. Unlike the 51% of their cohort who experienced untold mobility and the 24% who remained 'stuck' in the factories and communities they worked and lived in, this is a cohort that experienced a radical deterioration of their life's chances[3]. The difference in their stories was that Qabula's body was productive, Mkhize's not.

Like most of their cohorts – they celebrated the transition they had hoped for. Like some of their cohorts, they lost their jobs (see Sitas 1996). Like all the others they searched in vain to find employment and/ or to use their 'contacts' in power to get ahead with their lives. Their ability to be powerful mobilisers, brilliant oral communicators proved not to be good enough.

To be brief they both went through three 'emotive' phases. First there was the phase of a 'million contacts and a billion promises' – this was a phase of hope. The second was a phase of *frenetic activity*, a desperate attempt to *valorise* all their 'contacts', 'networks', 'kinship networks', to constitute some kind of informal livelihood. The third was a phase of disillusionment as they had to melt into their cultural formations and their encroachment strategies: survival strategies of the new poor in the country, whilst at the same time becoming a burden to their families and communities.

II

Qabula, poet, writer, worker leader and liberation activist, passed away in the wards of the Lusikisiki hospital in rural Pondoland. He was barely sixty years old. He died after a long period of frustration and suffering as his body gave up to the strokes that came to paralyse him, that took most of his sight away, that slurred his speech and that brought with them an unbearable burden on his struggling family. Death, his declared enemy in one of his earlier poems won the first round. The 'stunning creature/ Invisible to naked

[2] The 'winners' and those 'stuck' are dealt with in respective chapters in the forthcoming, 'Mandela Decade' book. For already published parts of the manuscript see www.global-studies.de under Sitas.

[3] On the transition see also Adam & Moodley (1995); and Bond (1999).

eyes ... / the gate-crawler/ the abyss in the way of our desires/ the rude intruder of sealed doors/ the inventor of orphans ...'[4] won the first round, slowly and with untold cruelty.

For the last six years his links to Durban were decaying: save the occasional visit for a second medical opinion on his deteriorating health, his contact with the city of his 'fame' was becoming a dwindling memory.

There was a brief moment about a year ago when the worlds of the city and the country were to be brought together again – Qabula was convinced by old friends to return and participate in a disabled artist's poetry evening, The moment was tragic: the hall filled up with old. comrades and admirers in anticipation of his return. There was a hushed silence when it was his turn to perform from a borrowed wheelchair. When the microphone was placed in his hand, he faced it, shook his head as if to start, shook his head again as if to start with the audience waiting still in silence, observing the mouth for a sprouting word past three minutes of silence, the poet on his right, broke down in tears and that was that. That was his last performance.

In focusing on Qabula we are keying-in on a powerful legacy of words whose sensibility was shaped in the countryside through a cruel Apartheid childhood and through the forests where as a youth he participated in the Pondoland rebellion of 1959. As he stated in his autobiography *A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief,*

> .... my origins are simple: I was born on the 12 of December, 1942, at Flagstaff, in an area called Bhalasi in Pondoland. It is a harsh and beautiful land - a land of unending green hills and valleys but also a land of poverty, of broken homesteads, of disease and malnutrition .... My ancestors ploughed this land and trailed these hills with cow-dung. They did so from way back, as far as the memory reaches in the clan of Miya; in the lines of Muja, of Sibewu, of Manqadanda, of Eluhluwini, of Sijekula, of Siyalankulandela, of Manciba and of Henqwa. For two centuries their praise-names and their cattle echoed around these valleys ....

And he continued:

[4] 'Death' in Qabula et al. (1985).

> But then came capitalists demanding labour for the mines and tax collectors wanting cash. My father's father refused to work on the mines and became a transport rider: with his ox-wagon he footed the countryside from farm to farm, from the Transkei to Natal, from the Orange Free State to the Cape and back, carrying grain and other products. But he was destroyed by the arrival of the railways. He became a herbalist and consistently refused to go out and work for a wage. He sent my father and his brothers out to work on the mines or in the sugar fields. From then on migrancy invaded our lives (Qabula 1987: 6f).

Throughout his life he kept a harsh peasant's perspective on middle class and urbane pretensions. His creative power, indeed his legacy that will outlast so many pretenders, is and was as an *imbongi* of migrancy and its humiliating conditions. Through his work, the hostel and the compound, the town and the country, the dumping grounds and the factories, the pass laws and the gaol find a profound image-maker and word-spinner.

What always impressed a younger generation of black workers and trade unionists was that somebody in their midst, a 'nothing' and a 'number', a forklift driver at Dunlops could have so much crazy stuff dancing in his head. For him issues were clear cut:

> there, at Dunlop's, we made tyres of all kinds, of all sizes, for cars we never drive, for kwela-kwelas that chase us in the townships and belts for bulldozers that demolish our shacks.

And there *was* crazy stuff happening in his head:

> there on my forklift, most of the time, isolated from the world, I would spend my working hours composing songs abut our situation. I suppose this was my little resistance struggle in my head, zooming up and down to the Base stores and back. When the tunes rolled fast I would work like a maniac, driving my co-workers insane because the materials would pile up fast in front of them. When the songs were slower then I suppose life improved for them! ...

But as he continues,

> there in my head: those forests! ... They lingered in my memory ... the source of refuge for the homeless and the frightened .... the Mpondo resisters .... a retreat from the wilderness of the world outside ... the harsh world of beatings and interrogations; the so-called normal word marked with murderous lists of names. And in my head those forests, those songs. And when the metalworkers union got entry at Dunlop I knew that the march through the forests had restarted.

Finding a platform in the growing union movement Qabula let the contents in his head spill out to inspire most of the popular energy which started from Durban to spread into a cultural revolution in the province and by the late 1980s to be happening everywhere in an insurgent South Africa[5].

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Qabula became instantly the chronicler and oral poet of the emerging trade union movement. Later, he became the chronicler of all movements. His first public performance produced the 'Praise Poem to Fosatu' – a poem infused with swaying forests, metal, rubber, machines and cunning theatrical humour. It was also filled with arrogance and pride. When COSATU was formed, he and Mi Hlatshwayo composed another 'The Tears of the Creator' for the movement's launch at Kings Park in 1986 (Qabula 1985). Through those lines we experience the movement emerging from the 'mole burrowing towards the factories' to a confident class under attack from all sides. His craft was there 'to praise the common people in their extraordinary ability to live and create'. Or, as he also stated in his book

> I shall keep praising my brothers and sisters in the factories and shops, mines and farms – and I shall praise no chiefs .... I hope we are known and remembered, not as a breed of nameless numbers but

[5] See Gunner and Gwala (1994); and Sitas (1986).

> as people who dreamed of peace, prosperity, togetherness and freedom from exploitation (Qabula 1987: 32).

As an activist he inspired thousands of black South Africans to pick-up a pen, sharpen their creative energy and talents in defiance of what the 'system', any system, ordained them to be. Soon enough dozens of izimbongi (Madlizinyoka Ntanzi, ubaba Zondi, Gladman Ngubo, Jeffrey Vilane to name a few) brought their talents into the growing confidence of the labour movement (see Gunner & Gwala 1994). What he decried was silence and inaction. But he also decried boastful talk, the 'talk, talk, talkers and the boast, boast, boasters and the Amandla Ptys'. At a personal level Qabula also disliked deeply any sign of industrialism as such, the railway tracks, the highways, the factories, the structures that scarred in his words, Africa's face and that polluted his ears: 'they are making so much NOISE!' he cried in despair in one of his laments on the fate of Africa (Qabula 1987: 28).

We all know that his work has been anthologised, canonised, analysed and debated. Much of all this Qabula appreciation-machine has been rather lazy. Although his contribution started as a mobilising craft, it turned, as the violence of counter-revolution turned ugly and started swallowing everything around him, into a tortured reflection of death and hope. Poems like the 'Small Gateway to Heaven' and his 'Dumping Ground' are some of the best examples of creativity in the years between 1988-1992. And so are his love poems like 'S'thanda' and the list grows and grows the more we gather the traces he left behind. Although his defiant voice continues, it turns into a troubled monologue of anxiety and worry.

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As Qabula has passed on for the 'lands of the high winds'[6] we must not forget that he died in poverty and that his last words on paper, one finished poem and four unfinished ones, were words marked with bitterness. He was deeply disappointed that 'his' revolution was taken over by a world of cellphones and briefcases. As he also discovered that his talents as an oral

[6] 'Mother' in Qabula (1987).

person were lost in the winds of change, these disturbing poems preceded his self-imposed exile. Truly, none of us was spared in these poems – 'The Long Road' was a criticism of everyone on the road to wealth and power, climbing over his back with spiked shoes. His 'Of Land, Bones and Money' was one of the most profound expressions of South Africa's negotiated settlement – reminding his audience of the 'restless dead'. And as he insisted the 'seasons of drought have no rainbows'[7].

He returned to the countryside poorer and determined. His return to Pondoland, to the lands, coincided with his painful and physical deterioration.

III

Sibongile Mkhize (a pseudonym) was also a worker leader, a performer and a liberation activist. She lost her job as a textile worker following enormous cutbacks between 1995 - 1996. She died six years later at the age of forty-four. She did so after a long period of deterioration as her body slowly at first but with extreme intensity since 2000, gave up to the virus as it methodically destroyed her immune system. She died of 'pneumonia'. Unlike Qabula there was no cultural formation to claim her.

The gender infractions are there: she was cut off from her rural homestead and her kin because during the civil war she sided with her union and therefore, COSATU, and, therefore with the mass democratic movement[8]. Lovers she had many but her inability to bear children made them all impermanent liaisons. So, cut off from her parental homesteads, cut off from kin, cut off from her job, she started trying to create a meaningful space in her township environment. The informal jobs were many: an informal seamstress, she lost her ability to deliver on contracts because of

[7] I was not spared either: with my 'computer, blue briefcase and funny tie parading as an Idi Dada, Bantubonke Holomisa'. His last poems, hurt. The reference to Uganda's Idi Dada Amin and to the Transkeian homeland's leader are not something to be associated with however metaphoric. Especially since he took pleasure in saluting me in public like that as well in the days when I was part of the negotiating leadership in the transition.

[8] On the civil war see Kentridge (1987).

her deteriorating physical condition; she started a day care center for others but again she had to get others to substitute for her, she tried recycling waste-products and, the most important rumour was that she was getting into bad company: she teamed up with ex-comrades turned criminals and was involved in bank heists or with other women being part of the A Team[9] that terrorized shop owners in Durban's Central Business District.

There is a video footage of her in a performance of the 1980s sing-crying about having to leave the countryside for the evil city to earn a wage[10]. She had none of the romanticism though of Qabula about the countryside. She saw it more as a degraded, drunken pit of despair. Yet in the city now – no man, no children and her connections to the church fading, her to and fro-ing to traditional healers to heal her of what the hospital could not do much about, sent her into a life of decrepitude. To everyone she was a burden. And the enormous stigma about 'the' disease kept her quiet, until it was not possible.

IV

The fact is, is that she could not be turned into a useable element in the encroaching strategies of the new networks of power and/ or the new politics of the poor. To survival networks, she was unreliable; to the 'Catholics' she was an example of the 'unspeakable'; for her gangster friends she was useless and a liability. She attended gatherings called by AIDS and anti-government social movements but she felt that they were outsiders wanting to use her. There was some hope with one of the inyangas[11] who claimed he could cure AIDS. He used her as a tout to go and tell people that she was an example of his healing abilities after her first visit. In believing that she was better, she acceded and earned a percentage; in using her oral and communication skills she was effective: in deteriorating further though, she became the inyanga's nemesis and instead of the cure-wonder they both boasted she became a known AIDS sufferer to be avoided, shut out,

[9] These of course are hearsay rumours from other participants in the study.
[10] *Koze Kuphe Nini.*
[11] Traditional healer/ medicine-man.

extradited. We only know she died and her death must have burdened further whoever undertook the burial costs.

V

Qabula's death followed a different track: the burden of his inactivity and sickness was deeply felt by his wife and children in the countryside. The father, patriarch, revolutionary, hero disappeared into a moaning, tempestuous and demanding weight in their lives. Worst still were the prospects of the wife and her hold onto her household as custom demanded that she would have to be 'given over' to her husband's brother. Such a person did not exist. So she was to become vulnerable to the local chief's power. The disposal of Qabula's body though proved to be 'productive'. The socio-political drama of the burial points to a successful useage of political capital to ensure future livelihoods.

Qabula's non-specific religiosity allowed for maximum unity among the women of the village and the mobilization of the three Christian denominations. His status as a one-time political figure facilitated the support of the bishops of these denominations. The bishops in turn facilitated the composition of a committee of men who would lead the proceedings and visit Durban to symbolically enrol the city and bring its resources back into the countryside. The women formed a guard around the widow and gave her the status of a woman of significant social influence.

The connection to Durban did not achieve much, save the obituaries that appeared in the political organisations' e-mails and public communications. They in turn, were taken over by the commercial press. The Communist Party and the ANC had to quickly decide on a way of honouring the event – an event happening far away from the big cities. The Paramount Chief of the area was the ANC MP (member of parliament) and a leader of CONTRALESA (the traditional leaders' association). He was the customary superior to local chiefs who were to influence the wife's and the household's future.

At the decision of the Chief/MP leader to officiate as an ANC leader, the Provincial Executive which was to the 'left' of his politics, decided that their involvement was necessary. One of its members a formidable woman colonel of the guerrilla days was from Qabula's village.

She had just been elected the executive mayor of the seven district councils that covered most of the north of the old homeland. She was the administrative and political senior of the local mayor. She was to attend.

The problem was that the local area had two mayors – the villager (from Qabula's place) and the townsman from Flagstaff. They were opposed to each other – the one wanted the countryside to swallow the town, the other wanted the town to swallow the countryside. The one was backed by the Communist Party and the ANC left, the other was backed by the chief, the new middle class and the ANC right. The one was for redistribution, the other, for development. Both had to be there.

Hearing that the entire leadership was to be there, the heritage committee spanning the areas around the village, made up of old Pondoland rebels dusted down their Mousers and decided that they could claim the occasion to remind the government that they were promised an income-generating heritage site.

The real power in the village was among Communist Party men who were in the main dismissed miners (close to 400 in a village of 5000) with a lot of time at their disposal. They had taken over from women as the main role players in the rural area now they were unemployed. Although they knew Qabula since childhood they knew him as a co-sufferer and a migrant, they did not realize how much of their hero he was. Their chance was to use the occasion to protest against the neo- liberal policies of the government and to strengthen their hand in local politics. So a vast mobilization around the disposal of Qabula's body emerged.

The burial was an emotive occasion where the singing, the speeches and arguments used the emotive context to create a new balance of promises and compromises. In the process, what was crucial for the kinship structures around the widow was that she gained her autonomy, that she was included in the new promised committees and that she and her children kept their autonomy.

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The two stories exemplify a number of social trends in post-Apartheid South Africa. Alongside the stories of another eighty participants in the 'sustained ethnography' they could provide a remarkable 'experiential mosaic' of the sources of new forms of dissonance and discontent.

By way of conclusion I would like to draw on two of the themes hinted at in the narratives: it is vital to re-assert that people are not spasmodic reflex-responders to social pressures. The radical deterioration of life-chances does not necessarily translate into resistance. Rather they have to be understood within embedded struggles over livelihoods. At a time when sociology is fascinated by 'new social movements' and their 'disembedded-ness' it is vital to explore the sources of discontent in the social and material conditions of everyday life[12]. No internet domain and network can dispose bodies nor are the new poor demanding virtual land and livelihoods within an internet domain. Understanding the politics of encroachment among the socially excluded is but a small step in deciphering class and power dynamics in a society.

Secondly, in a society where health and disease have become an unprecedented pressure affecting critically the reproduction of poorer households, dying has taken on new meanings creating in the way new forms of social tension[13]. Without an understanding of the cultural formations and their histories, the repertoire of actions and strategies available to ordinary people disappear.

Finally, I hope in selecting these two 'stories', I have managed to provide a hint at the sociological drama that is unfolding in South Africa's transition. As the institutions of Apartheid are being reconfigured, new social energies define in Qabula's terms 'seasons of drought' for some, 'rainbows' for others.

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[12] See for example Hardt and Negri (2000) for a discussion that Hardt elaborates as an assessment of the Porto Allegre encounter about the 'new' movements.

[13] The themes of health and disease are explored in my 'Love in the Time of Cholera?' – the extended version is in the www.global-studies.de site. A shortened version appeared in the *Indicator*, Durban 2001.

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