Alfred Temba Qabula, 1942-2002
A Tribute

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In October 2002, Alfred Temba Qabula, poet, writer, worker leader and liberation activist, died in a ward of the Lusikisiki hospital. He was barely 60 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 an unbearable burden upon his struggling family. Death, his declared enemy in one of his earlier poems, won the first round, slowly and with untold cruelty: "[the] stunning creature/invisible to naked eyes.../the gate-crawler/ the abyss in the way of our desires/ the rude intruder of sealed doors/ the inventor of orphans..." ("Death", originally composed in isiXhosa, and, like the other poems and quotations in this tribute, translated into English).

For the last six years his links to Durban were decaying: save the occasional visit for a second medical opinion on his deteriorating health, usually orchestrated by Nise Malange and Nellie Qabula, his contact with the city of his 'fame' was becoming a dwindling memory. Nise despite their disagreements, political scraps and differences, kept loyal to him and most importantly to his family's plight.

There was a brief moment about a year ago when the worlds of the city and the country were to be brought together again. Nise convinced Qabula to return and participate in a disabled artist's poetry evening. The moment was tragic: the BAT 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, and with the audience waiting still in silence, Qabula broke down in tears and that was that. That was his last performance.

In paying tribute to Qabula we are paying tribute to 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 tells us in his autobiography, *A Working Life: Cruel beyond Belief* (1989), "my origins are simple: I was born on 12 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 cowdung. 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 continues:

> 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 to raise cash to pay his taxes: 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 homes.

Throughout Qabula's life he kept a harsh peasant's perspective on our middle-class and urbane pretensions. His creative power, indeed his legacy that will outlast so many pretenders, is 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 workers was that somebody in their midst, a 'nothing' and a 'number', a forklift driver at Dunlop, could have so much crazy stuff dancing in his head. For him issues were clear cut: "there, at Dunlop, 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 about 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 that 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. Qabula became instantly the chronicler and oral poet of the emerging trade-union movement. Later, 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, Mi Hlatshwayo and he composed another poem, "The Tears of the Creator", for the movement's launch at Kings Park in 1986. Through these 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 as people who dreamed of peace, prosperity, togetherness and freedom from exploitation."

As an activist he inspired thousands of black South Africans to pick up a pen, to 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. 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. The proletarian in him demanded beauty.

In his unfinished poem/song on socialism the lines read as follows:

your hand in mine
no queues, no numbers
music
and the cattle resting
without bellows from the abattoir
in their daydreams
your hand in mine
without any memory of hunger
music
guitars, sitars and violins
and all the children dancing
rivers and trees singing
about past hardships…

We all know that his work has been anthologised, canonised, analysed and debated. His contribution started as a mobilising craft, but, as the violence of counter-revolution turned ugly and started swallowing everything around him, his voice became a tortured reflection of death and hope. Poems like "Small Gateway to

Heaven" and "At the Dumping Ground" are some of the best examples of creativity in the years between 1988 and 1992. And so are his love poems like "S'thanda". 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.

Now that Qabula has passed on to the "lands of the high winds" 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 revolution was taken over by a world of cellphones and briefcases. As he discovered that his talents as an oral 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" is a criticism of all of us on our road to wealth and power, climbing over his back with spiked shoes. His "Of Land, Bones and Money" is one of the more profound expressions of our negotiated settlement – reminding us of the "restless dead" and that "seasons of drought have no rainbows". I was not spared either: with my computer, blue briefcase and funny tie parading as "an Idi Dada, Bantubonke Holomisa". His last poems hurt. It is important that they do so, still. His return to Pondoland, to the lands, coincided with his painful and physical deterioration. It is time that we heal the past to heal the future.

What is his living legacy? It is coded, I believe, in his poem "At the Dumping Ground", an extract of which follows. I can think of no better ending for a tribute to the man who demanded so much of us during his lifetime:

Wherever

he has placed his creatures on the day of his calling they shall respond

Even at the dumping ground

where filth is piled-up high

alongside humanity's rejects and rubbish – they shall respond

No-one can muffle such a response by insisting that

he was not calling

No-one can silence the caller even if he was to be gagged if his eyes were shut his ears were blocked and his mouth stitched

even if he was gaoled in a tightly-sealed boxhouse – so he heard nothing, saw nothing knew of nothing

still, on the day marked by the call his voice would sound through the lungs of this world

and the world would respond.

...

At the dumping ground

and we do not exploit

and we do not cheat profits out of each other
we have slipped through their grip
leaving their cheeks blown-up with anger
and we are growing
We are responding
and someone is calling
He is calling on us
to work hard as daylight is coming
it has been a very long sunset
and a very long night
We are to sleep and listen to the voice in our dreams
do not fear
The one who is beginning to call
is standing beside you
with gifts and with infinite talents
Work on!
(tr. from isiXhosa by Harold Nxasana)

Note

"The Small Gateway to Heaven" and "At the Dumping Ground" appear in Qabula's autobiography," *A Working Life: Cruel beyond Belief*, National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA): Durban, 1989. "S'thanda" appeared in *Writers' Notebook*, Congress of South African Writers, 3 (1992). There are three unfinished poems one of which, "The Long Road", has been published in *World Literature Review* (70), 1995 – the other two "Of Land, Bones and Money" and "Socialism" (although not titled as such) are unpublished. The unpublished material (that includes another four poems) are to appear in a joint commemorative edition by the SA History Online project and the Programme of Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies at the University of Natal. At the moment a research and documentation project, which also involves audio and video recordings, is being collected by Jurgen Bräuninger of the School of Music, University of Natal, Durban.