

Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane

Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane is the director of the Centre for African Literary Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
E-mail: mzamane@ukzn.ac.za

The life and times of Sipho Sydney Sepamla: A tribute

God can be very funny at times – like the way he decided to take Sipho “Doc” Bikitsha and Sipho “Bra Sid” Sepamla (22.09.1932–09.01.2007) together!¹

I remember an article Doc Bikitsha wrote on Sepamla in the 1970s, effectively calling Sepamla and his family “*ama-situation*” – those who situate themselves socially above others. Bikitsha said that because when they were growing up in Madubulaville, Sepamla’s parents rarely allowed him to step out of the yard to rough it up with the likes of Bikitsha and similar location ruffians. That’s what made Bra Sid the gentleman he became, a purveyor of love and peace, and a man of letters (not French letters, like Doc)!

Bra Sid’s response to Doc’s banter was: *Ndizakufumana ngenye imini!* (Some day I’ll fix you). I can’t help giggling to myself at the thought of the final showdown in heaven between the two humorous men of letters. But I predict a win-win situation – reconciliation – just the way Bra Sid would have wanted it!

Sipho Sepamla, Doc Bikitsha, Stan Motjuwadi, and Desmond Tutu were all raised in the West Rand – Randfontein and Krugersdorp – although in the East Rand (now Ekurhuleni), where Sepamla subsequently put down roots, we tend to claim him.

(I’m not confused. I know we’ve come to lay Bra Sid to rest – and not any of the others. In mentioning all four, however, I want to make a larger point about the West Rand – Madubulaville, Munsieville etc – and other small communities. For too often we are stuck with celebrating Sophiatown and Soweto – but not the rich tapestry of local histories. I want us to remember as we celebrate the life of Sepamla that every humble hamlet in our land has contributed a great deal to building our nation.)

Sepamla, Bikitsha, Motjuwadi, and Tutu are all of the same generation from the West Rand. Sepamla and Tutu came from a family of educators; both attended the Pretoria Normal College (that was anything but ‘normal’), where they qualified as teachers; both, in turn, became in their respective ways supreme educators. Think, too, of how poorer our journalism would have been without Doc Bikitsha and Stan Motjuwadi, not withstanding their addiction to fermented grapes! Yet what monuments or memorials will the people of the West or the East Rand erect to their local heroes and to their unsung heroines? To loosely paraphrase my childhood friend also like me from Ekurhuleni, Njabulo Ndebele: It is a blind progeny that has no sense of

its own history. A national history is like a jigsaw puzzle; it is through the interplay of various local pieces that wholeness is achieved. The onus is on all of us everywhere to build on our past.

Last night I was having dinner at some Sandton restaurant opposite Exclusive Books, South Africa's largest bookstore chain. After I placed my order I decided to walk to the bookstore and asked if they had any book in stock by Sipho Sepamla. I had to spell the name several times while waiting for the predictable answer. That gave me an idea of what I want to say to you this morning, as a literary and cultural historian.

Because I'm not possessed of the amnesia that is the common ailment of most South Africans, I've been trying to think how Bra Sid should go down in history. My sense is that he will be remembered most – and I will elaborate on each criterion – as

- First, a forerunner of the post-Sharpeville cultural regeneration that presaged Black Consciousness;
- Second, a contributor to the literary revival that became contemporaneous with the rise and spread of Black Consciousness;
- Third, an editor who created the necessary platform for literature to flourish; and
- Fourth, an educational entrepreneur and arts educator.

During the massacre of 21 March 1960, Bra Sid was a school teacher in Sharpeville. One of his poems, "I Remember Sharpeville", provides the following eyewitness account of events in Sharpeville:

On the 21st March 1960
on a wrath-wrecked
ruined-raked morning
a black sea surged forward
its might ahead
mind behind
it had downed centuries-old containment...
it sucked into its core
the aged and the young...
into a solid compound
of black oozing energy

in a flash
of the eye
of gun-fire...
they fled they fell...

our heads bowed
our shame aflame
our faith shaken
we buried them for what they were
our fallen heroes and our history

I'll come back to the role of poet-as-historian that Sepamla carved for himself.

Disgruntled with teaching under Bantu Education, he moved into the world of the performing arts – dabbled a little in drama but centred mainly on music. He became a music impresario associated with Dorkay House, which gave us Thoko "Sunshine" Mgcina, Margaret Mcingana, Thandi Klaasen, and Abigail Kubeka.

He promoted events such as the 1960's Castle Jazz Festivals that launched the careers of the Malombo Jazzmen (Julian Bahula, Abe Cindi, Phillip Tabane) and Mankunku Ngozi, among others. Those popular shows also did much to introduce to a much wider audience Mackay Makhwenkwe Davashe, Abdullah Ibrahim (then known as "Dollar" Brand), Pat Matshikiza, Johnny Meko, Kippie "Morolong" Moeketsi, Victor Ndlazilwane, and Gideon "Mgibe" Nxumalo. One of Sepamla's poems, "Encore: the Quintet", celebrates the era music of the post-Sharpeville cultural revival that was a prelude to the new political awakening. This was the music of local heroes that in the main never went into exile but that in the post-Sharpeville depression kept our spirits up and thus presaged the renewal ushered by the rise of Black Consciousness.

In the arena of arts and culture – in the performing arts specifically – Sepamla thus became what Bantu Biko, Vuyelwa Mashalaba, Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu, Nyameko Pityana and those remarkable young men and women of my generation were to become to Black Consciousness political renewal. Black Consciousness used the resources of arts and culture, with crafters such as Siphon Sepamla and Don "Bra Zinga" Mattera (once he decided to lay his three-star knife and baby-brown to rest) in the forefront of the cultural renaissance, to make political statements of a far-reaching and most radical nature. The road map for those of my generation was produced by Sepamla's and Mattera's generation – in the cultural and in the political spheres. They became the midwives, as it were, to the new spate of creativity that was about to come into being – and we did not become a blind progeny or act without indebtedness to the past.

My sense then is that Sepamla will go down in history as a forerunner and participant in the post-Sharpeville cultural and political renaissance that became associated with the rise and spread of Black Consciousness.

You will also recall that the late 1960s launched the poetic careers of Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, Mongane Wally Serote, Mafika Gwala, and Njabulo Simakahle Ndebele.

They were soon followed by Joyce Sikakane, Stanley Motjuwadi and the more sustained voices of Mandla Langa and, of course, Siphosiphiso Sepamla. The anthology that best represents them went by the title *To Whom It May Concern* (1973).

Sepamla emerged as the supreme satirist of them all – very comical, too. Although comedy is never easy to pull off in poetry, Sepamla did it with aplomb. “To Whom It May Concern” became his signal tune, as it were. The poem makes fun, in particular, of the passes (*istinka* or *inzangane*) we carried in those days and, in general, of apartheid separation even after death:

Bearer...
Is a Bantu...
Please pass him on...
He may roam freely within a prescribed area...
Bearer’s designation is Reference Number 417181
And (he) acquires a niche in the said area...
As a permanent measure of law and order
Please note
The remains of R/N 417181
Will be laid to rest
On a plot
Set aside for Methodist Xhosas
A measure also adopted...
In anticipation of any faction fight
Before the Day of Judgement

I can’t help wondering what he would say now as we take him to his final resting place side by side with so many whites! If he were here now he would regale us with his take on what will happen on Judgement Day. What with some of those *outies* perhaps buried with their traditional weapons?

A prolific poet, Sepamla wrote, in quick succession, *Hurry up to It* (1975), *The Blues is you in me* (1976), and *The Soweto I Love* (1977) – the latter is one of the few records in verse of the Soweto uprising. He composed, in the same manner he wrote of the Sharpeville massacre, as an eyewitness. He fulfilled the role of poet-as-historian in those troubled times.

Shortly before the Soweto uprising he took up prose fiction first as a short story writer. His first full length novel was *The Root is One* (1979). His second novel, *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (1981), is one of four celebrated “novels of Soweto” that include Miriam Tlali’s *Amandla* (1980) and Mongane Serote’s *To Every Birth its Blood* (1979).

Ride on the Whirlwind was reissued in 2006 in a 30th anniversary edition. But the novel was soon suppressed in very strange circumstances, along with Miriam Tlali’s

Amandla. I must remind the Sepamla family of the debt owed to them by the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) Press for *Ride on the Whirlwind*. And if you should want to *toyi-toyi* your way to VUT, I am ready to join. They owe me, too!

Sepamla straddled the literary world of the 1970s as a poet, novelist, and short story writer.

As other priorities laid claim on his time in the 1980s and 1990s, his literary output slowed somewhat. Two volumes of poetry stand out from the period: *Children of the Earth* (1983) and *From Goree to Soweto* (1988), his last poetry collection. His novels included *Third Generation* (1986); *A Scattered Survival* (1989); and *Rainbow Journey* (1996), his last novel.

But that was not all Sepamla gave in his life that we celebrate today to both the performing arts and the verbal arts. His lesser known but one of his most crucial roles was as an editor.

No literary tradition in any country can flourish without a rigorous tradition of small literary magazines to provide outlets for nascent or fledgling writers. Sepamla developed an instinctive appreciation of that fact and acted on his unerring instincts derived from some in-bred historical consciousness.

In the first half of the 1970s, Sepamla took over from Robert Maclaren (also known as Mshengu in cultural circles and as Robert Kavanagh in the scholarly world) as editor of a magazine dedicated to theatre that was called *Sketsh*.

Still bubbling with creativity and cultural entrepreneurship, soon thereafter Sepamla revived *Classic* as *New Classic*. *Classic* had been started in 1963 by Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Casey "The Kid" Motsisi and others.

Although we were no longer living in South Africa, Njabulo Ndebele and I became enthusiastic contributors to various small literary magazines circulating in South Africa at the time. Sepamla was to tell me years later that we became to him sources of support, encouragement and inspiration. I don't know about all that because Bra Sid was generous in all things, including being generous with his compliments.

What is beyond dispute, however, is how *Sketsh* and *New Classic* set the stage for *Staffrider*, begun in 1978, and the new writers' movement that emerged after Soweto. Sepamla had taught us how we could turn our miserable but often remarkable everyday experience into literary tropes for our contemplation. He showed us the way, set the tone, and provided the platform.

Towards the close of the 1970s, Bra Sid paid me and my family a visit in Sheffield, England. He also wanted to discuss two proposals. One of the projects was an edition of his *Selected Poems*, which I edited along with Mongane Serote's *Selected Poems*. The other was the establishment of a school for the creative arts, about which I want to say a little more.

The greatest monument Sepamla erected was, of course, FUBA – Federated Union of Black Arts – that he founded in 1978 and which he directed until it closed down in 1997. Offering a range of art forms, FUBA produced in the verbal arts Kgafela wa Magogodi and in music Mccoy Mrubata and a host of other celebrated cultural workers besides who would otherwise have been written off by every arts academy in the land.

FUBA was a great and unprecedented venture by an African in apartheid South Africa to set up a school for the arts. FUBA became a living testimony to what individuals with a vision and a sense of mission could accomplish. Johnny Meko's Gauteng Music Academy and Masepeke Sekhukhuni's Newtown Film and Television School are in the tradition of and take their inspiration from FUBA. As an arts educator, therefore, Sepamla was a pioneer.

FUBA became important in yet another respect we should be thinking of today as we lay the son-of-the-soil to rest. FUBA brought together every positive strand in Black Consciousness, whose significance can never be completely written off in our land as long as there are *Non-whites* to liberate from the stranglehold of racial self-hatred, low self-esteem, and inferiority complexes. Sepamla understood the political importance of the cultural struggle. Sparked by an internal revolt to challenge white cultural and political hegemony, FUBA became an exercise in self-definition, self-affirmation, self-assertion, and self-determination.

I think FUBA was only rivalled by FUNDA Centre as monuments to African self-realisation in education for liberation and for decolonising the African mind. I also think, with the notable exception of Johnny Meko, Masepeke Sekhukhuni and a few of their ilk, somewhere along the road we lost direction. We are losing the African plot.

The worst malady to afflict many Africans after 1994 was to entrench a culture of dependence, through propagating a culture of entitlement. "What's government doing about it?" is the battle cry of the impotent.

We are mentally demobilised and the divine spark, the spark of creativity in us, has been extinguished.

As we celebrate the life and times of Siphosiphony Sepamla it becomes important before we lay him to rest to ask ourselves: What became of the spirit of *vukuzenzele* (wake-up-and-do-it-for-yourself) that once propelled us to greater heights? What's become of our mechanism for self-propulsion that we developed in the struggle era? Or are we to move into the scrap yard of history still intoning the refrain of the debilitated: "What's government doing about it?"

I know what Bra Sid's answer would have been; we all do. But we have become so soft in the head and so lame of soul we dare not supply the obvious answer.

In the autumn of his life, Bra Sid's concern turned to cultural history. Two manuscripts he wrote, if not yet with the publishers, deserve to see the light of day. For the

sake of posterity, I would feel personally privileged to work on the final manuscript. I am also certain that Mothobi Mutloatse, who was instrumental last year in raising a grant to ensure Sepamla completes one of the manuscripts, would be just as enthusiastic to see to it that the books are published to put the final stamp of authority on this great but most self-effacing pioneering figure in arts and culture education and in literary production.

Sepamla leaves us a rich and dynamic legacy; and we would be a blind progeny, indeed, if we continue to act without indebtedness to the past or as if Sepamla never lived. Those who ignore the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat the mistakes of bygone days.

Es'kia Mphahlele, another towering figure in the creative and literary arts, said something remarkable last year at the memorial service of Mazisi Kunene, the nation's late poet laureate, *imbongi yesizwe jikelele*. He said Kunene did not die a "useless death", like so many of us lesser mortals are doomed to do. Sepamla did not die a useless death but leaves posterity a rich and most useful legacy. Indeed, I can hear others among us intone: Sepamla is not dead. They are correct. His words, like all things of enduring beauty, will remain a "joy for ever"!

Lala ngoxolo Bhungane, Mashwabada, Mthimkhulu, Radebe! Abakhe babonana bophinde babonane! Rest in peace!

Note

1. This tribute was delivered at the memorial service for Siphso Sepamla.