

My memories of Nat Nakasa by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, 27 August, South Africa

IFP leader explains why the return of the late journalist's remains to SA is so important

Dear friends and fellow South Africans,

The return of Nat Nakasa's mortal remains to South African soil has sparked several inspiring tributes to this talented and promising young writer, who died tragically at the age of 28 outside his home country, in 1965. Having known him well, I share our nation's joy at having Nat Nakasa finally interred in the same soil as his forebears.

A few years after I was installed as the Head of the Buthelezi Clan in 1953, Nat Nakasa and his friend, Obed Kunene, began visiting me whenever I was in Durban. They were both part of an emerging new crop of young and brilliant journalists.

Until then, we as young black South Africans were enamoured with the writings of a few seasoned and older journalists, like Jordan Ngubane. We were impressed by articles that Ngubane wrote for the white dailies, such as *The Mercury*. After a stint at *The World and Ilanga*, Ngubane edited a black newspaper called *Inkundla yaBantu* (The People's Forum) and later *The Indian Opinion*.

Ngubane's contemporaries were equally impressive. We admired the poet, Herbet Isaac Dhlomo, and his brother, RRR Dhlomo, who was the Editor of *Ilanga* and the author of several books on the Zulu Nation and Zulu Kings. There were also old veterans such as RV Selope-Tema in Johannesburg, who was later succeeded by Percy Qoboza.

However, with the emergence of new publications such as *Drum* magazine and newspapers such as *Golden City Post* in Johannesburg, we saw a flourishing new crop of young and brilliant journalists. Nat Nakasa was amongst these.

He wielded his pen with the likes of Can Temba, who had been a contemporary of mine at Fort Hare University, Casey Motsitsi, Arthur Maimane, Henry Nxumalo, Bob Gosani, Obed Kunene, GR Naidoo and many others.

When Nat Nakasa and Obed Kunene began visiting me in Durban, we struck up an immediate friendship. Nat Nakasa struck me as a very bright and level-headed young man. The surprising thing about both him and his friend Obed Kunene was that they were well-balanced, cool-headed and unemotional in practising their trade. Perhaps that was the source of their brilliance.

Whenever Nat Nakasa picked up his pen, he laid bare the cruelties and hypocrisies of Apartheid. Yet his writings were intellectual and analytical. The Apartheid Regime could not brush him off as an emotional nuisance. He was a real problem to them; a troublesome young black intellectual whose writing commanded attention and respect.

Nat Nakasa featured in some of the new English magazines like *Drum* and *Classic* which published news and commentaries predominantly on African people, for the first time. Later, after he left, I was also to have a column once a week in all South African morning papers

We were not surprised, but we were thrilled, when Nat was chosen to receive the Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard University in the United States of America. Unfortunately, our joy was short-lived. The

Regime had found a way to rid themselves of this thorn in their flesh. They refused him a passport and would only extend an Exit Permit, which meant that he could never set foot on South African soil again.

This had happened to Professor Absalom Vilakazi and his family. Professor Vilakazi was lecturing at the University of Natal when he was offered a job at the American University. There were hardly five black faces in the academia at the university at that time. It was painful to know that we as a nation were losing people of this calibre. They were rare in our community at the time and we could ill-afford to lose their contribution and talent.

I vividly remember the day Nat Nakasa left South Africa. I happened to be in Durban that day and Nat heard that I was around. I was staying with my wife in the Somtseu Road Hostel, where the municipality had made rooms available for my late first cousin, King Cyprian Bhekuzulu ka Solomon. As black South Africans were not allowed to stay at any of the hotels at that time, we stayed in these rooms at the Hostel.

It was there that Nat Nakasa came to say goodbye to me. It was a sad day for all of us. Nat was driven to Louis Botha Airport in my Chevrolet, and departed from his homeland South Africa never to return, according to the dictates of the Apartheid Regime.

I was grateful in the weeks that followed to get snippets of news from his uncle, who was also a journalist. Then, suddenly, we received news that Nat had fallen to his death from one of the top storeys of a building in New York City. We were shocked and did not know what to think. Such a talented and brilliant young man was taken from us forever.

Our greatest source of pain, however, was knowing that not a single member of his family, nor any of us, his friends, would have the opportunity to pay our last respects at his burial. He was fully alienated from his home, and we were left to grieve from a distance.

I cannot begin to express my gratitude to the Minister of Arts and Culture who has, in some small way, set the past right by retrieving Nat Nakasa's mortal remains from the United States and returning them to South Africa, so that he may finally be buried with dignity by the very State that separated him from his country.

We congratulate the Honourable Minister for making the necessary arrangements on behalf of our brother, and particularly for fulfilling this important mission in person. To all those who knew and loved Nat Nakasa, the Minister's actions will be remembered with deep appreciation.

Yours sincerely,

Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi MP

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