

THE WRITERS' MOVEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Some forty years ago, in July 1947, Jordan Ngubane, the editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu*, placed "an idea before the nation's thinkers" that an African Academy of Arts be established. Anton Lembede, the first president of the Youth League of the African National Congress, welcomed the idea, adding "We need African Artists to interpret the spirit of Africa" (Ngubane 4; Couzens 294). More detailed support for Ngubane's call came from A. P. Mda, an active and articulate Youth League member. Not only did Mda embrace the idea, he suggested its form and functions. The academy, he said,

should be a All-African affair. Any attempt to make it heterogeneous is bound to break down on the hard rock of reality. It should not even be a non-European affair. Whilst we should cooperate with other non-Europeans and even Europeans, to advance the general course of Art, we should however have our purely African Academy to advance the peculiar and particular needs of African Art.

Secondly, the Academy should not be tribalist in orientation. Its purpose should broadly embrace all sections of the African population in the Union and the Protectorates.

Thirdly, the method of organisation of such a venture should depend on the peculiar circumstances of the artist in each area. No hard and fast method can be decided upon beforehand. What obviously there would be need for to begin with is an organising Committee whose task would be to tap all available sources in preparation for an all-in congress of African artists summoned to a centrally situated venue like Bloemfontein. This would at once create an Executive to frame a constitution and regulations. (Mda 4)

This attempt at starting a relevant cultural organization was not isolated. Two years later, in 1949, Youth Leaguers at Fort Hare, according to Tim Couzens, wrote a letter to the press "pleading"

for the creation of an African Academy. They claimed that up to that time African sculpture and painting had been looked upon as "mere curiosities" and they suggested that no proper interpretations of the spirit of the artist had been made. They went on to suggest that music and literary manuscripts should also be collected: "Nothing that

breathes the spirit of Africa should be left out." A monthly magazine should also be produced. Finally, they suggested that the Academy (comprising an art gallery, museum, repository for literary works, news-cuttings section, music section) be located at Fort Hare. (294)

September 1948 saw yet another attempt. H. I. E. Dhlomo tried to organize a Society of African Authors, Artists, and Musicians. This attempt did not succeed (Couzens 295).

Many decades later South African writers are still trying to establish writers' organizations with the same passion of their forebears, and there have been intense efforts in the last ten years.

There were six major waves. The Writers' and Artists' Guild of South Africa was established in 1974. Then there was the phenomenal mushrooming of writers' and cultural groups in the townships throughout the country in the mid-1970s, when at least twenty-five were recorded. PEN (Johannesburg) followed in 1978. When it disbanded in 1982, it immediately was replaced by the African Writers Association, which still exists. In 1985 the Writers' Forum was created, and in July 1987 it became the Congress of South African Writers, which also still exists. A brief profile of each organization will be helpful.

The 1974 guild was basically an organization of white writers that, according to Lionel Abrahams, "would have welcomed black writers to its ranks but for some reason black applicants were not forthcoming and its membership remained white" (*Sesame* 5). It further described itself as "a non-racial group that seeks to protect the interests of writers and artists against the interference of the State or censorship." Beyond that it also sought to promote new work, to circulate information by means of a quarterly newsletter, and to hold frequent readings (*Staffrider* 1.1 [1978]: 43).

The emergence of numerous cultural groups in the townships in the mid-1970s was, without doubt, a singular event in the contemporary cultural history of South Africa. They came in various names and from different parts of the country: Creative Youth Association of Diepkloof, Soweto; Moakeng League of Painters and Authors (MALEPA) of Bloemfontein and Kroonstad; GaRankuwa Art Association; the Guyo Book Club of Sibasa; Mpumalanga Arts of Hammersdale; Community Arts Project of Cape Town; Peyarta (Port Elizabeth Young Artists Association), and several others.

This phenomenon was a product of the climate of resistance that owed much of its character and thrust to the Black Consciousness Movement. It has been noted that the two prominent motifs in *Staffrider* magazine are those of blackness and revolt (Vaughan 197). Its distinguishing characteristic was advocacy of the performing arts. A group such as the MEDUPE was an outstanding example: poetry was recited to the beat of drums; there

was much drama and music. Some of the first performances of plays, including Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli*, took place in the context of group cultural activities. The declared intention often was to resuscitate the African oral tradition; to stress that the traditional functionality of art now was enlisted for political mobilization.

Written literature was provided with a very useful avenue in *Staffrider*, which took advantage of the publishing capacity of Ravan Press. The magazine wanted to encourage this flowering of artistic activity by leaving editorial decisions to contributing art groups, as it articulated in its editorial policy:

To be published in *Staffrider* is to be read—more widely, we reckon, than literary artists have ever been read in South Africa.

We define a literary artist simply: a producer of literary works. And we believe that a producer has a basic right of access to potential readers—in the immediate community in which he or she lives and beyond.

The phenomenon of art groups linked to particular township communities in present-day South Africa suggests the appropriate medium through which this basic right can be exercised. The art group puts forward the work it wants to be published, and then assists in the distribution of the magazine to the community. In this way editorial control is vested in the writers as participants in a community-based group.

Those who suggest that *Staffrider* should appoint an editor whose task is to impose “standards” on the magazine are expressing—consciously or unconsciously—an elitist view of art which cannot comprehend the new artistic energies released in the tumult of 1976 and after. Standards are not golden or quintessential: they are made according to the demands different societies make on writers, and according to the responses writers make to those demands.

If standards are not imposed by elitist criticism but developed and maintained by practicing writers the “workshop” concept becomes crucial. It is here, in effect, that standards are set. We do not know of a writers’ group that would not welcome participation of critics in its workshop sessions: this is an invitation to leave the armchair or the lectern and become involved, practically, in building a new literature. (2.3 [1979]: 58)

In each issue of *Staffrider* much space was devoted to group contributions. But suddenly, after volume 3, number 3, in 1980, *Staffrider* stopped bringing out group contributions. The era of township cultural groups seemed over after a brief, invigorating time.

The following is an example of a typical group. It was introduced to the public in an early issue of *Staffrider Magazine* (2.1 [1979]) in the following manner:

The name MADI is derived from the acronym made from the first letters in music, arts and drama, and the "i" is taken from literature. This is, in short, what this Katlehong-based literary group is all about.

In its infancy the group has already brought together a number of up and coming Katlehong artists, poets, writers and dramatists.

Top of the group's regular activities is the *Madi Arts Fair*. The first of these monthly fairs was in January where CYA's musical group, Babupi, were the central attraction, and an extract from Matsemela Manaka's play, *Egoli*, was performed.

A weekly Arts Academy for the serious study of the arts, conducted by invited experts, is run by the group at the Katlehong Art Center in Phooko Section.

Madi is destined to be a milestone in the appreciation of the arts in Katlehong. Madi writers who have appeared in previous issues of *Staffrider* are *Letshaba Thubela* and *Moloto wa Moloto*. (5)

PEN (Johannesburg) came about in 1978 as a daring effort to bring together members of the guild and the township groups. *Staffrider* promoted this movement. Naturally, bringing together an organization with memberships of such different social, class, and political backgrounds created special difficulties. For example, there was much disagreement over membership questions. Some wanted to confine the group to published writers only, while others wanted the attribute "writer" to be extended to journalists. There was also much debate over the kind of workshops PEN would organize. Should they be practical workshops, grappling with artistic form? Or should they be discussions on content, covering such topics as relevant artistic themes, the role of art in society, the responsibilities of writers? Should readings be by invitation or should anyone just come and read and was anyone free to attend? In each case the second alternative won, giving rise to Lionel Abrahams's observation that "the shape, size and colour of PEN was being radically altered and its activities were going to be largely governed by its intimate connection with the township groups" (7).

A typical, exciting example of the kind of activities PEN engaged in was reported in the July–August 1979 (2.3) issue of *Staffrider*:

Recently a "writers' wagon" (two Kombis in fact) visited writers in the Cape. In the wagon there were representatives from various groups, Mpumalanga Arts Group (Hammersdale), Malopoets (Mariannridge), Zamani Arts Association (Dobsonville), Creative Youth Association

(Diepkloof), Khauleza Creative Society (Alexandra), Madi Arts Group (Kathehong) and many more individual writers. The trip was made possible by the kind assistance of the British and Dutch people, through their local embassies. Soon another "writers' wagon" will visit groups and writers in the North. All writers are invited to travel with PEN. (64)

Political pressures meanwhile were building on the organizations. Many black writers began to find it problematic to be in the same organization with white people. As the pressures mounted, PEN (Johannesburg) was forced to disband early in 1982 (Kirkwood 22–26).

The African Writers' Association became the home of those black writers who were dissatisfied with the white membership of PEN (Johannesburg). There was some debate about whether the organization should be called the Black Writers' Association or the African Writers' Association. The latter name won, as it was felt that the term "black" did not carry any cultural connotation. Besides, only the Afrikaners, most ironically, would remain the only people called Africans in South Africa. Thus, AWA revealed its Black Consciousness orientation.

Basically, AWA attempted to build on and resuscitate the cultural experience of the township groups. Its singular achievement has been the establishment of Skotaville. Otherwise, AWA attempted to establish branches throughout the country and to hold workshops for its members.

Meanwhile, writers clearly felt the pressure of increasingly polarized political developments in South Africa. Some believed that writers should be able to meet across the broad spectrum of political affiliation to discuss their problems. The Writers' Forum was not intended to be a formal structured organization. Rather, it was "to be exactly what the word 'Forum' intimates: a place for public discussion, without restriction or fear of offending another's political probity" (Dangor). When the Writers' Forum met for the first time in July 1985, the African Writers' Association was not officially represented and did not participate.

At the second conference of the Writers' Forum in 1987, it was decided that writers could not merely come together and talk shop, they had to do so from a clearly defined political position. The emerging view was that writers could not stand aloof from the massive political movements throughout the country that were embodied in the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Thus, the Congress of South African Writers was formed. The writers pledged themselves to their "total creative resources to advance the struggle for the creation of a non-racial, united and democratic South Africa." Furthermore, they recognized that "writers and cultural workers generally, are products of and belong to the community. As such, they have a responsibility to serve the community."

A common thread runs through the history of writers' and artists' organizations in South Africa: it is the history of either outright failure to establish such organizations or, where they were established, of their tragic transience.

The question would then have to be asked: Why have writers' organizations generally failed? Are they inherently transient? Or are there identifiable objective reasons that are responsible? Asking such questions is particularly germane at this point in the development of the South African struggle for liberation. Existing organizations certainly need to draw on their predecessors' experience. Writers' and cultural organizations, aiming at a certain degree of active permanence and constructive influence, need to benefit from the scientific approach toward organizational behavior brought to bear on other kinds of organizations: political and trade union organizations, for example. I'm not aware that this particular exercise has been seriously attempted before in South Africa. Hence, the thrust of my present effort will be speculative.

If we return to the early effort to establish the African Academy of Arts in the 1940s, we shall note three crucial aspects to Mda's suggestion: the aims of the academy are "to advance the peculiar and particular needs of African Art"; its membership "should be a All-African affair"; and its "method of organization . . . should depend on the peculiar circumstances of the artists in each area." These three aspects of organizational structuring traditionally have been featured prominently in the formation of writers' organizations.

Unfortunately, Mda did not go on to specify exactly what the "peculiar and particular needs of African Art were," nor did he give examples of the "peculiar circumstances of the artists in each area." The suggested "congress of African artists" would most probably have discussed such issues in detail. Unfortunately, that important congress never took place. However, one thing, clearly implied in Mda's proposal, did not require articulation by a congress. It is the context of political objectives for which the African Academy of Arts was to be one practical manifestation among others. Central to these objectives was the overriding aim of creating a sense of common nationhood among the different African peoples of South Africa: what Lembede called, "the creation of a homogeneous nation out of heterogeneous tribes" (Couzens 259). Thus, the projected membership of the academy emerges as a crucial factor in its political identity.

It would be expected, of course, that the issue of membership of any organization in South Africa should dominate discussion. The specter of racism looms large in the social consciousness. Consequently, there has tended to be, in general, a ready agreement in two areas: the aims of the organizations and the organizational methods for pursuing those aims. For example, it is apparently not a contentious issue simply to declare that the organization is meant "to advance the peculiar and particular needs of African Art." Indeed, it seems self-evident. So is it easy to declare that

branches will have to be created throughout the country. Thus, those areas of organizational life that would ensure the actual survival of the organization as a visible, successful entity did not benefit from sustained critical scrutiny and debate. The articulation of aims and means essentially served the needs of mobilization.

In this situation, what gives an organization its legitimacy is its membership. The question of membership, once resolved, situates the organization within an identifiable political perspective in the political spectrum. This political perspective, embodied in the membership, rather than in clearly defined programs of action, tends to take a sustained precedence over programs of action that could practically sustain and validate political objectives. In the long run, assuming that political objectives have been identified, organizational efficiency is crucial to success.

For example, the Writers' and Artists' Guild was essentially a white organization which, however, also was keen to project its nonracial beliefs. PEN (Johannesburg), a nonracial organization, broke up over the question of the racial composition of its membership. When the Writers' Forum was established, the debate in the press over membership questions was quite acrimonious. Still, some of the debaters pointed out how the issue actually clouded other substantive issues that were discussed at the forum's first conference.

Ironically, there may have been, in all cases, no fundamental disagreement over the aims of the organizations. Indeed, there was broad agreement on such issues as the need to combat all forms of censorship and to hold readings and workshops. Very conventional activities! Was all the fury justified only so that readings and workshops could follow? The concept of the writers' organizations does not appear to have advanced beyond the political significance of the concept of membership. They have existed to prove the symbolic, political significance of their membership rather than to stress and explore further the efficacy of their activities. A crucial matter of emphasis.

In the midst of all this, another remarkable irony may be that the popular township groups were more successful as organizations precisely because they did not need to justify the racial compositions of their membership. Black Consciousness in the townships had become an ethos rather than something to prove. It enjoyed the status of uncontested hegemony. This situation is instructive. It suggests that writers' organizations are more likely to succeed where there is a strong political and cultural environment to sustain them.

The last observation is particularly important because it hints at the possibility of a certain kind of material vulnerability of such organizations. Writers' groups, by definition, are not oriented toward material production. Because they are essentially a nonproductive entity, clarity on their structural

function in society is particularly vital. They are started essentially to provide a context for organized intellectual interventions within a specific kind of political environment. In South Africa that environment is currently the mass-based democratic movement and its concerted search for alternatives. A broad consensus on the nonracial political objectives of that struggle at the moment means the writers' organizations can devote more energy to innovative thinking in pursuit of alternatives, contributions to the search for radical solutions from the special perspective of the arts. There is a need to problematize aims, objectives, and projects of the organizations.

The latest writers' organization is, of course, the Congress of South African Writers. To give a sense of some of the issues it will need to grapple with, it may be instructive to return to the dissolution of PEN (Johannesburg), an organization that came very close, in form, to the Congress of South African Writers. Mafika Gwala's stand on the dissolution of PEN (Johannesburg) is well known. Responding to the expressed discomfort of some black members of PEN over the fact of belonging to an organization that had white members, Gwala said:

"We are trapped in our class interests and don't know how to move forward, so we talk of colour. . . . we are saying racist things." Perhaps the community was erring, he continued: writers ought not to follow blindly but should give the lead; many issues bearing on the question of disbandment had not come to light, people were not talking out, somewhere the truth was being hidden. (Abrahams 18–19)

The account does not outline the specific elaborations that Gwala may have made. But the essential thrust of his intervention was to introduce another dimension to the issue of membership, that is to say, within the context of the writers' movement: the question of class.

The other issue concerned the activities of PEN. Debates over the format of readings and workshops do not appear to have taken into account the diversity of interests and background within PEN itself. Such diversity could have been regarded as a pool of resources affording PEN a varied, yet purposeful, approach to confronting pressing cultural issues in South Africa. There was no reason for PEN not to have accommodated different formats as long as each was subjected to rigorous analysis. That way, the organization would have been confronting practical issues of artistic strategy and its intended effects.

Perhaps Mike Kirkwood best describes the problem:

We needed to look hard at ourselves and recognize that this potentially united yet broad-based movement of writers was composed of

writers using a great spectrum of artistic techniques and reaching very different audiences. We needed to grasp the fact that this diversity could be a tremendous source of strength and not necessarily a cause of division. Yet that effective solidarity could only be forged if we could spell out and agree upon the fundamental cultural values of the new society to which we as writers were committed. From that agreement could stem discussion of the different roles different writers could play in the realization of those values—with the acceptance of the basic point that there would be different kinds of contribution. (24–25)

The Congress of South African Writers emerged out of the Writers' Forum in response to the growing mass-based democratic movement. It became very clear that writers had to do more than just meet and talk. Rather, they had to respond in more direct and practical ways, according to their particular artistic perspectives, to the demands of the moment. Coming when the momentum of struggle in South Africa had advanced considerably, COSAW has inherited from the broad democratic movement the capacity to confront squarely whatever contradictions may emerge in the course of its activities. The concept of democracy is a practical feature of discussion, broad consultation, and decision making. What COSAW has in place, consequently, is a method by which to solidify the organization by legitimizing critical dissent as well as the need to evaluate activities constantly. That has emerged as an important characteristic of comradeship.

The challenges are immense, but the most immediate one is to solidify the organizational sense in the manner indicated above, so that the way can be cleared for the Congress of South African Writers to address all matters that pertain to its interests. The present environment reinforces such a tendency. It is a climate in which there exists an alternative press: efforts to establish an alternative philosophy of education embodied in the concept of "peoples' education"; an increasing confidence in workers to produce art; a vigorous theater movement; an alternative medical association; and, above all, a strong workers' movement. Indeed, there has been no major aspect of South African society that has not been problematized. The writers' movement is situated where it can draw a sustaining nourishment. It is there also that a rigorous confrontation of issues can take place constantly.

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