A.T. QABULA : WORKING CLASS POET

Songs occupy the throne in South African working class culture. There are the political songs, the mbaqanga songs and of late some reggae ones too; there are the religious hymns, the choirs and traditional festive or travelling songs, but then, where are the work-songs? They exist I shall argue, in their final retreat: the head. I shall proceed to explain what is meant here using examples from the performances of a very vibrant working class innovator in Durban : Alfred Temba Qabula.

Work songs - not after work, but at work - were the stuff of life. They gave communal work its rhythms, they bound the cooperative team into an organism at harvest and at pounding time. In African societies, they extended into the crafts : the Vha Venda iron craftsmen for example, were noted for their "Nando" song-cycles (Furnace songs). Culture was not seperate from work : "ukulima", to cultivate, is a word capturing both in the Nguni language. Song was part both of the productive forces of society and of its relations. In the last hundred years something occured which imprisoned the work song. This was, the intrusion of noise, a gigantic assault on the ears at work through the rise of machinofacture.

As pointed out by Viet Erlman, work-songs survive in labour intensive work, like in road-gangs, prison spans etc. and they are rich in socio-political content. In Natal we can add cane-cutters and women in the many little tailorshops as part of this survival. They are a poignant remnant in the world of machines. N. Walsh in a recent project returned to the "road-gang" songs adding some further insights: they (a) help dictate the pace at which a task is performed, (b) minimise the dangers of heavy manual work, (c) act as a safety-valve and (d) express resistance. The last aspect needs no further proof : hearing workers singing, "Inja

umlungu! Inj'umlungu" (whites are dogs) as they prepare to lift a heavy object; or that the white does not share his "ikuwfi"(coffee) "ngo damn!". For the majority of the population, however, work-songs at best become songs about work after working hours. And, given the arduous nature of work, its many indignities, most people find better themes to sing about during their short leisure time.

With industrialisation too, leisure time was invaded by two more rather vocal and musical characters : the individual composer-musician - perched on parapets, on street corners, in backyards, in hostels and township neighbourhoods we find the first one - the Zulu guitarist, the squashbox player or the fiddle player, and, through him we also find the arrival of many songs reflecting worker experience; the other we find in public places or venues, ever since the professionalisation of the pianists like the legendary hunchback Ntebejane, playing away, contorting his or her features, at a price. The former is of the people, the latter is for the people and both, the source of much working class creativity. Juluka and Abafana Bomoya for example attempt a combination of both traditions. These people, sometimes the carriers of culture and sometimes its innovators, function alongside the established collective songs of church choirs, union and political organisations, to make the townships vibrant concentrations of the oppressed. But is this all that is left of working class culture, tucked away for leisure time and this, contracted through transportation problems? This would presuppose that work is bereft of song.

But workers resist, they join trade unions, they fight over rights and negotiate formally and informally new ones. In the factory, in the modern production processes defining industry, workers are part of what is termed "collective labour" but simultaneously for the majority of their time, they are part of a "lonely crowd". They are

"individuated" but they become individuals of a special kind: if they sing they are not usually heard, if they persist in doing so, the grit and the dust usually inflames the throat.

Qabula.....

Qabula sees work as a place approximating Hell - the modern factory provides enough brimstone and fire - a place you learn to adjust to as part of a lonely crowd. His descriptions of the heat and the hardship in production conforms to some of the worst fears about factory life. But Qabula, in adjusting to his job has at the same time created a very special world. In his head. For the past ten years he has been composing songs there about everything that affects his life and the life of others. Over the last few months some of these songs have exploded on stage in mass trade union meetings and the response by workers has been overwhelming.

Qabula works as a "hyster-driver" (fork-lift driver) in a large rubber factory. He feeds the labour process of the milling department with raw materials. Unlike fixed and repetitive machine-work, his job has some variation. Speeding along, carrying the latest command for a chemical substance he is *known by many workers on the way to the* "base stores" and back. He in turn came to know very few people. Elevated above normal social interaction he saw bodies, machines and a general bustle of movement. When he conversed it was usually snippets of dialogue - for workers were trying to keep up with high production targets. He survived the working day by composing songs. These songs concerned both redemption and resistance based on his everyday experiences. "I would see something that hurts, that causes me pain and then I would spend the day making a song about it", he states. This has been happening for years and over time he has become an individual creator to stand alongside the two other leisure-time composers. The difference between them is that

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Qabula is of the factory and for a lengthy period a composer for no one but himself.

In 1980 he joined the Metal and Allied Workers' Union. He immediately became an active shop-steward in the mill. Many more songs were composed out of this experience. Then, he got involved in a workers' play - many more songs were composed for this experience. After the play he had a vision of what form his creativity should take. He embarked to do his own `plays' in order to perform his compositions. He asked another shop-steward, who had a little tailor-shop in the township, to tailor him a colourful costume which looked ragged and torn. From then on, he exploded onto the unions' mass meetings carrying a briefcase and tattered in colourful poverty, or better, he began pouring the contents fermenting in his head for others. He performs his compositions and incantations like a crazed imbongi. His performance takes on an epic form and the response has been overwhelming.

He has chosen three of his compositions to make up his play : the first is "Nona singa shada umteto uzese Hlukamiza". It is a song, a migrant's lament about broken family and love life due to the evils of the law which underpins migrancy and the contract labour system. The second is "Impilo le Phenduka". A lengthy song about the hurt of migrancy: starting from the countryside the central character of the song is chased away from TEBA's recruiters, from the labour bureaux and decides to enter the city without papers. Chased and hunted he experiences the miseries of city life. At the end of this torture appears a job, the paradise he yearned for. But this paradise is easily lost too after the experience of exploitation in the factory. The final composition is his lengthy oral poem\performance\chant, "Izimbongo zikaFosatu". It deals with the necessity of workers' unity through added and added and many a time newly improvised clusters of images. "It's the countryside tradition

invading the city", another shop steward commented after a performance in front of more than 2000 people. Could this be plausible?

There is no doubt that the words affirm the symbolism of the contryside: a tradition that uses nature in an anthropomorphic way. Here too landscapes and images from nature are used freely to express metaphors in the performance. The "forests" dominate the "Izimbongo"... piece: the forests come alive, the same forests where as a young man he was to hide during the Mpondo rebellion. The forests that become the metaphor for FOSATU, so that workers can hide in it, to fight from it, to use it as a shield. The forest again, the new federation of unions should become and unify all workers. The "mountains" in the "Noma singa" piece which separate the migrant from his beloved; they stand for the contract system, for the "hurt of influx control". They should make way so he can at least see her even at a great distance. But closer to the bone is the form his presentation takes. It descends from the imbongi tradition of praise and critical oral poetry. He appears on stage as a half-forgotten nightmare, a past most workers have left behind them with urbanisation.

One notes that oral performances are impressive in their magniloquence and communal wisdom whether they are lengthy narratives or short proverbs. These performances furthermore use words as sounds, or better, events of sound imbued with power. At the same time, a word in such performances may set off a chain of associations which the performer will follow into a cul-de-sac unless skilled and in control of his craft. Finally, like in the storyteller tradition the imbongi will be the storer of communal wisdom based on communal experience. The problem is, in my view, that Qabula's performances resemble the tradition or oral poetry but are informed by a broader set of cultural experiences. One witnesses a form that has undergone dramatic

changes through Qabula's range of life experiences. His world is not the close-knit community of the past.

Born near Flagstaff, raised and educated there, participating in local festivities and oral traditions a forest of influences marked his childhood: traditional ceremonial songs, imbongi recitations, hymns, and given his area's political history, political songs. Being musical he has absorbed most. But then however much his heart remained with the countryside, contract labour brought urban influences to him and the countryside: his step father was a miner - he died this year of lung disease. So is his brother and many more of his kin. He spent the first years of his contract life in Carltonville sharing construction and mineworkers' worlds. He came to know many miners' songs about the degredation of life, sikhalo songs, songs about homosexuality, about yearning. From Bantu Radio he also learnt songs that people cannot sing together. From there to Durban a new cultural, social experience and political tradition entered his life. The well of song and performing traditions that he draws from is too deep for simple countryside and urban divisions.

He represents rather a grassroots response that uses well rooted forms, organically linked to working class cultures and infuses them with new contents: now the contents of the factory experience, and the contents of a worker militant's beliefs. The forms are bound to change to accomodate the new experience. Working class culture at the moment is a wavering flame, fanned by winds of change; Qabula contributes with his songs another log to guarantee its soaring. In the meantime he continues composing at work in his head. The work song survives stubbornly in the midst of noise despite the fire and brimstone.

(Ari Sitas, Durban, June 1984)