

CULTURE AND WORKING LIFE PROJECT

1986 REPORT

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AIMS:

The "Culture and Working Life Project" is based at the University of Natal, Durban, in the Department of Sociology. Its aims are:

- (a) to facilitate black workers' self-expression and education through cultural work.
- (b) to popularise research material relevant to working class communities through cultural work and media.

ACTIVITIES

Since its inception in 1983 the project has assisted to the best of its ability the development of worker plays in the trade union movement and the development of the workers' Cultural Local in Durban. It has also used video and slide/tape programmes to assist the educational needs of worker organisations. It has also been invited to jointly develop a trade union and cultural centre in the Clairwood industrial area which is already becoming a vibrant institution.

The following projects were undertaken during 1986:

1. WORKER PLAYS

SARMCOL PLAY

The project continued its association with SAWCO. The Long March or the 'Sarmcol Play' had a successful tour of Durban, Southern Natal, the Witwatersrand and the Western Cape. It was to form one of the highlights of the "Peoples' Culture" festival in Cape Town, but, it was banned. The play was also invited for an international tour to the U.K. for 1987. On the 5 December 1986, Simon Ngubane, the cultural organizer and leading actor in the play was assassinated by Inkatha-led vigilantes.

M'KUMBANE

The script of the play on M'Kumbane is nearly completed and the group is moving into the rehearsal phase as soon as suitable worker-actresses have been found. The project assisted with costs of transcribing, translating and copy-ing the workshopped scripts as well as with transport.

CLOVER PLAY

The project was approached by striking Clover workers in Pietermaritzburg to assist in the workshopping of a play portraying their struggle. The workshops began in October 1986. The play is nearing completion.



MAWU MASK PLAY

The project was asked to assist in the development of an historical play on metal-workers for the MAWU AGM at Curries Fountain. A masked play was decided upon, suitable for such a large venue. The performance of the play occurred on the 15 November 1986.

PINETOWN UNEMPLOYED WORKERS' PLAY

This project began in 1986 when a grouping of unemployed workers with the support of the shop-stewards council of the area began workshopping a play on their conditions of life. However the project was unsuccessful and it was terminated at the end of 1986.

MAY DAY POETS PERFORMANCE

This performance was produced by the Clairwood Cultural Local for the Durban May Day Celebration at Curries Fountain. The project assisted with the purchase of musical instruments which were used as a backing to the oration.

CAPE TOWN FESTIVAL

The Durban Cultural Group was invited to perform their plays at the Cape Town Festival - Towards a Peoples' Culture. Amongst the plays to be performed was Qonda (written by a Dunlop worker). But the festival was banned and Qonda was not performed.

Workers shout their anger for all to hear

"The Black Mamba Rising - SA Worker Poets In Struggle". Published by the University of Natal. (R6, and R3.50 for workers). Available in Zulu and English.

The recent launch of a worker poetry anthology by three Durban-based worker poets marks not only the revival of the almost forgotten imbongi tradition of praise poetry, but also the dramatic rise of organised worker power to a new political consciousness.

For the first time in South African labour history, workers have come together to shout their anger for all to hear.

The thunderous voice of the workers reverberates in all the poems in this collection, which is appropriately entitled "The Black Mamba Rising - SA Worker Poets in Struggle".

The intensification of the workers' struggle against employers is reflected in most of the poems in this book.

The title poem, written by S'dumo Hlatshwayo, first appeared in the latea Staffrider. This poem is a warning directed at tyrannical employers: "The employers have done what ought not to be. Why lease the mamba in its century-old sleep? ... tell them the chained must be chained no more, tell them the chained must be chained no more, tell them - these are the dictates of the black mamba, the mamba that knows no colour, tell them more, tell them - these are the workers' demands - these are the voice of the worker, which can no longer be silenced. The voice calls for the ..."

capitalist, the exploitative ruling elite, to hand over the reins to the proletariat.

The voice calls on workers to stand up for what is theirs. It calls on Africa to unite. It mourns the "accidental" deaths of countless workers in this country.

Most of the poems in this book have been composed for performance at mass meetings, trade union and other community gatherings.

Except for Nise Malange's poems, the poems in this collection were composed in Xhosa and Zulu. They have lost much of their oral power in translation. Obviously still tinges most ululations and the responses that accompany their oration have been lost.

However, the imbongi element still tinges most of Temba Qabula's praise poems. He employs vivid imagery, which makes his poems punchy and more fervent.

He achieves this most notably in a praise poem to Fosatu, where he recounts the Federation's moments of triumph.

"I saw a fist flying across Dunlop's cheek. Whist Dunlop was still shivering, perhaps Bakers was asking, 'What did my neighbour do that he is being hurt like this? I saw a combination of fists bombarding Bakers on his ribs until Dunlop was concerned."

Nise Malange, S'dumo Hlatshwayo and Temba Qabula were central figures in the formation of the Durban Workers Cultural Local.

They are well known in Natal for their cultural work.

Publishers are invited to send books for review to The Editor, NEW NATION, Box 10674, Johannesburg 2000.

Poetry for the People

BLACK MAMBA RISING — Alfred Temba Qabula, Ml S'Dumo Hlatshwayo and Nise Malange. Edited by Ari Sitas

"Black Mamba Rising" is a collection of some of the powerful poetry of three South African workers, Alfred Qabula, Ml S'Dumo Hlatshwayo and Nise Malange. These poets are part of a cultural movement which is becoming integral to workers struggle.

The poetry of Hlatshwayo and Qabula is a revival of the Nguni (Zulu and Xhosa) imbongi tradition. It is praise poetry which is free from conservatism or hierarchy.

It is tradition transformed by being firmly rooted in the struggles of workers and informed by the future they long for. Yet it is poetry that is symbolically powerful and has not lost the richness of tradition.

The nature of the present world of the South African worker is described vividly, in Qabula's 'Praise Poem to Fosatu', the children were crying these were the workers industrial workers in the factories of Africa

And in reply, Hlatshwayo writes, "Dried are our tears accustomed to grief assailing from all sides".

The poverty and barrenness of the lives of the workers is real and unnerving in Malange's, "I the unemployed" My kids are dying Malnutrition

Kwashiorkor There is nothing growing here And the animals have died Hlatshwayo encaptures this misery and exploitation in his cry, "In this society of cities we are cursed



Alfred Qabula and Nise Malange poets who continue to orate the suffering of the ordinary Black worker in South Africa.

However the struggle is not only that of a despairing land, but also to "build new ones embalming our principles of democracy, of unity and of our new world"

The working class is not passive, but has been disturbed and stirred into action. The Black mamba has been "leashed" from its "century old sleep" and is indeed "rising" and "nothing can detract us from dismantling exploitation". (A salute to Samson Cele)

It is the workers who will "build the bridges from today until tomorrow" and forge a new world. A world "without bombs" and "Star Wars" and "missiles" where Together we would Give respect to God and Not to dollars

And Deliver the world from its hunger From poverty Of minerals Of morals And of love

Cultural work has a vital role to play in workers struggle and in the struggle for a South Africa free from oppression and exploitation.

This is indeed the poetry of the future.

CASE STUDY: THE STRIKERS WHO TURNED ACTORS

The township "mama" in The Long March workshop and performed by striking BTR Sarmcol workers, has the audience roaring with laughter.

Played by Simon Ngubane, the "mama" — with her huge false nose and swaggaring walk — has everyone in stitches, including the real-life township "mamas".

At the same time, you can see on the faces in the audience the hearts are breaking for her. There are understanding murmurs when she responds to news of the impending strike walk. "As the women, we fear"

The community of Mphahlele, a small township near Howick in Natal, faced poverty and mass starvation last year when the entire 1 000 strong workforce of the BTR Sarmcol plant was dismissed after a legal strike to demand trade union recognition from the giant British multinational.

But after 19 months of what is turning out to be one of the longest-running strikes in recent South African history, the women have come to realise their "our fears were proved in vain".

For the Sarmcol workers did not sit back and give up when they lost their jobs, says Phe Mkhize, the group's cultural promoter, at the start of the play.

"We organised ourselves. We formed co-operatives to buy food for our families." They opened health clinics for the township.

And that was just the start.

Today the Sarmcol workers run a factory that designs and produces T-shirt logos. It is the first African-owned and run co-operative business enterprise in the area. Profits are divided equally among the workers, "and there are no bosses".

It was a gamble, but it paid off. Today the Sarmcol co-operative employs all 1 000 dismissed workers. "And even if we go back to work, the community says, the co-operative must continue. It will provide jobs for the unemployed in the township," says Mkhize.

It began with The Long March. "Our main aim was to buy food for our families," says Mkhize, "and for the striking workers who were hungry and unemployed." The cultural group of striking workers followed that up with concerts, poetry readings, choir music recitals, dance productions

by MOIRA LEVY, Cape Town

"We decided to do something to raise funds for ourselves," the players said. And their initiative has turned into something much bigger than a fundraising drive.

The Long March has become a living documentary of just one event in the South African struggle against injustice and oppression.

It is a story about the resistance of ordinary people in the workplace and in the community. It is about the struggle, not only for the right to union recognition, but also for the right to work and eat and provide for one's families.

And every person or institution that obstructs this right comes in for some gentle but scathing ribbing. White storekeepers, bosses and local government officials are depicted by the workers/players wearing shiny white plastic

one, tied on with string.

Margaret Thatcher, also played by Ngubane, complete with elephantine mask and wig, wheedles her way out of the growing international dispute over the events at BTR-Sarmcol. International negotiations by high-powered businessmen are burlesqued by brightly coloured soap suds.

Small-scale local businessmen who, we are told, lost R8 million as a result of the consumer boycott launched in support of the strike, struggle in vain to get local government to respond to their desperate plight.

The workers' play has toured the country. "We want to show South Africans what is going on with the Sarmcol workers," Mkhize says.

There are plans to take the play to Britain next

WORKER POETS

The effects of the growth of the workers' movement in South Africa are increasingly being felt beyond the factory gates. Not only is organized worker power giving rise to a new political consciousness but it has also created the social base for important new cultural developments. Poetry is one of them. The following poems are all from workers who are clearly involved in the unions or, as in one case, a closely associated organization.

FOSATU "SON OF VICTORY"
by M.L. Mokhawane

Years ago in South Africa
A son named Federation of South African
Trade Unions was born,
Some call him FOSATU
A son so young, talented, respected -
Brought everything to view
Oh, what a miracle

Even when there is danger you defeat,
You survived from the mouths of the lions,
Where are those who thought Synthiol boys will go forever?
Let them know that the boys are back.
Where are those who thought
Let them know
FOSATU

2. DOCUMENTATION

MAY DAY VIDEO

A documentary (edited at the moment) of the 1986 Mayday celebration.

VIDEO DOCUMENTATION

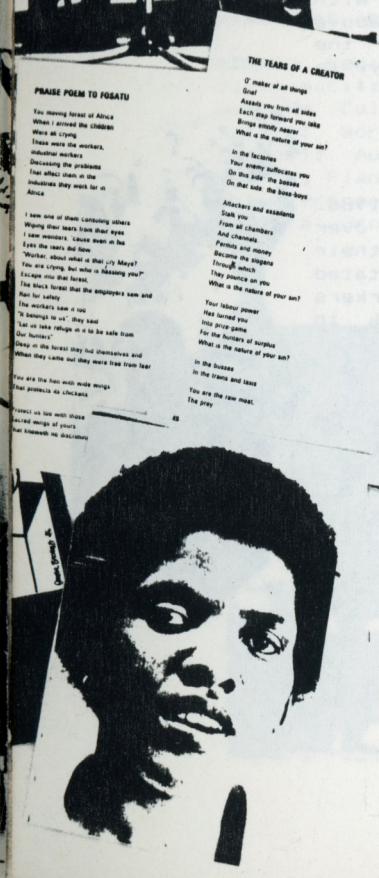
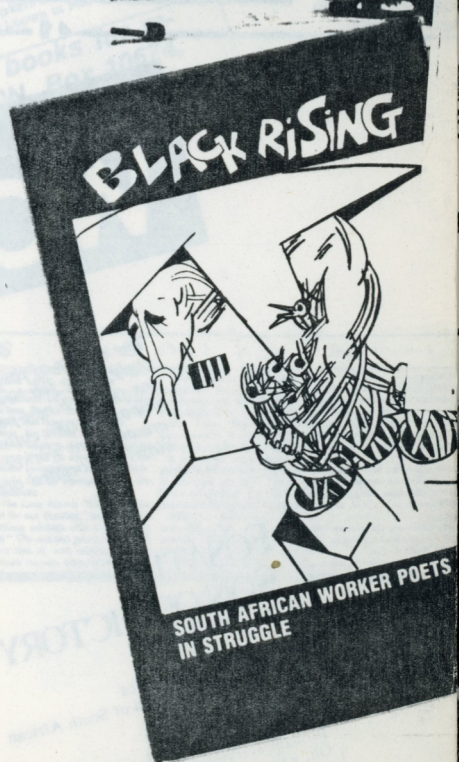
Documentation of worker events and cultural activities continued. A video programme of worker cultural activity is being commissioned.

PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

Photographic documentation took place throughout the year. Towards the end of 1986 it was decided to commission the collection of all photographs depicting the life of workers. These would then be brought together as a travelling exhibition during the following year.

BLACK MAMBA RISING: SOUTH AFRICAN WORKER POETS IN STRUGGLE

This book which was published at the end of 1986 collected together the oral poetry of Qabula, Hlatshwayo and Malange. It was published in both English and Zulu. There are plans to publish a second collection in the future.



A CRUEL LIFE BEYOND BELIEF
This book by A.T. Qabula on his working life experiences is almost complete. After its completion it is to be handed over to Ravan Press for publication.

WORKER PLAYS
A collection of worker plays in South Africa are being edited.

3. SLIDE AND TAPE PROGRAMMES

DEATH OF CATO MANOR/RISE OF KWA MASHU
See 1985 report. Work is continuing.

LIFE IN BAMBAYI
A slide and tape programme on the condition of life of this squatter community was approved. Its aim was to sensitise the broader community to the unique conditions of poverty in the area. Unfortunately this project was not completed and it has now been terminated.

HISTORY WORKSHOP SLIDE AND TAPE WORKSHOP
The History Workshop at the University of Witwatersrand, held a slide and tape workshop to which the project was invited to send participants. We sponsored the attendance of a number of workers and two members of Clermont Arts Society.

4. CLAIRWOOD TRADE UNION AND CULTURAL CENTRE

The centre (see 1985 report) is defining its own course in conjunction with the shop-steward local of the area.

The centre has at the moment a theatre, and a poetry group and has been crucial in all cultural events in the labour movement.

SKILLING WORKSHOPS

The project is planning to run skilling workshops in drama, photography and community art. 1986 was spent planning and co-ordinating with people who are skilled in the above fields. It is expected that the workshops will take place early in 1987.

SEMINAR/WORKSHOP

A workshop was held in August 1986. Cultural activists from all over Natal were invited to present their work. The workshop also facilitated discussion amongst cultural workers over the future of cultural work in the union movement.

5. MISCELLANEOUS

Assistance to workers primarily by Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo has been given in Mpophomeni, Hammersdale, Newcastle and Pinetown for the inauguration of cultural locals. Requests have also come from Port Shepstone, Richards Bay and Pietermaritzburg.

Cooperation also is beginning between the project and black youth groups in the townships.

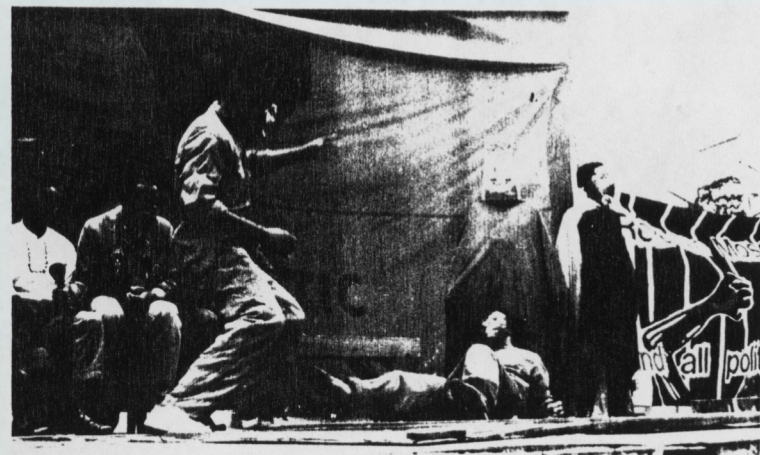


The project thanks the following individuals for their assistance and effort:

Iain Edwards, Barbara de Wit, Jean Howard, Rohan Persad, Mrs Milne, Bobby Marie, Costos Criticos, David Malvey, Neville Singh, Donn Edwards, Omar Badsha.

Thanks also for co-operation and patience to the following organisations and institutions:

COSATU Regional Education Committee; MAWU (Durban and Pietermaritzburg branches); Food and Allied Workers Union; Workers' Cultural Local, Durban; Church and Work Project; Sarmcol Workers' Co-operative; Clairwood Shop Stewards' Council; Audio Visual Centre, University of Natal; Afrapix; May Day Planning Committee; History Workshop, University of Witwatersrand; Pinetown Cultural Group; Port Shepstone Cultural Group.





SIMON NGUBANE

worker leader, cultural activist and Sarmcoi Play actor
assassinated by Inkatha vigilantes, 5 December 1987.