

MAKOMPO KUTUMELA AND THE LEGACY OF BLACK JOURNALISM

A Talk by Mathatha Tsedu at the Memorial Lecture for Makompo Kutumela at the Mahwelereng Community Hall, Mahwelereng, on Heroes Day March 21, 2013.

Let us start at the beginning: Makompo Kutumela was born at Alexandra Township, Johannesburg on January 8, 1961. He would have been 52 this year had he lived longer. He didn't, because the system of white racism and its surrogates determined that at 25, he had lived long enough. He died a horrible and painful death on April 5, 1986.

The post mortem revealed amongst others that at least 41 sjambok marks were counted on his body, amongst other injuries. It is a gruesome tale that is captured oh so painfully by Tsoaledi Thobejane in his book: "The Fight for an egalitarian South Africa/Azania, Towards Politics of Racial Harmony and Equity". Just so we don't forget why we are here, let us listen to Tsoaledi as he takes us into the torture chamber of apartheid, as Makompo takes his last breath.

"We (Makompo and Tsoaledi) were waiting for Kgalabe Kekana, Kagiso Mogale, Motsebi Kekana, and Matsapa (Letsoalo). Upon their arrival, we decided to change the venue, as it was risky to hold a meeting in the hotel. Besides, there were a lot of undercover agents of the government all over the place. So we decided to move to a safer place to thrash out our strategies on the consumer boycott. Mr. Mabote, who was selling beer at his house, gave us a room wherein we would hold our meeting. Makompo was taking minutes for us.

"In less than an hour, we were surprised by the untoward behavior of people who were drinking beer outside. There was a sudden rush and stampede as a result of fear. When we looked through the window, we saw a lot of police vans waiting. In split seconds, the area was cordoned off. The police surrounded the entire house to make sure that no one went outside unnoticed. We then realized that we were in danger.

"What are you doing in here?" Barked the commander who was leading a unit of about six policemen in our room. "We are just having a drink sir", replied Paledi. Another Constable called Rampedi, saw Makompo's file that was lying on top of the refrigerator.

"He then opened it up, looked at it and decided that we were having a meeting. We told him that was not so. They then caucused amongst themselves for a while and then turned back to us. "We are taking you with us to the police station". It did not come as a shock as we expected it. As we were frog marched outside the house, another policeman shot in the air to give an impression that there was a scuffle. A tear gas canister was then thrown to disperse some of the crowd that was looking at the scene.

"We were then bundled into the police van that drove to the police station in the township. The station commander was eagerly awaiting us in his office. He was all smiles as we got in, nodding at the policemen as an appreciation of the good work they had done in detaining

us. He cordoned the unit into his secret office where they talked for about half an hour. They then came back and told us to empty our pockets of everything we might have had, including money.

“We were further told to rip off our belts and watches, as these were not wanted in the cells as well. They shepherded us into an empty space where we were made to stand on one foot. In this space were some of the white soldiers belonging to the South African Defence Force and other black soldiers who spoke a foreign language. We suspected that they might have been soldiers of Renamo, whose leader was Alfonso Dhlakama, strongly supported by the South African government for fighting the people's Republic of Mozambique.

“The police wanted us to make a confession that we were behind all the consumer boycotts and the burning that took place in the township. We flatly denied this and told them we are just leaders elected by the people to represent their dissatisfaction at the government and nothing else. We further told them that the movement we belonged to was a disciplined one that did not advocate violence.

“They said that we stood to gain by co-operating with them in arresting all those mischievous people who caused the government a lot of expenses by burning its cars and stealing its weapons. We flatly refused to co-operate. This made them to retort in anger, accusing us of being communists. They said that torture was the only way in which we could be forced to co-operate with them. We were subjected to the most horrible torture imaginable.

“Kgalabe was the first to be tortured. All the more than 17 policemen descended on him like he was heavily armed. He was beaten up and left bleeding profusely through his ears and nose and unconscious on the ground. His body was swollen. I shuddered to think of what would happen to me when my turn came. They again attacked Motsebi as if they were vicious lions waiting to devour their prey.

“In no time, Motsebi's clothes were torn apart. He was screaming as the pain from the cane penetrated deep into his skin. He was kicked and beaten with everything they could lay their hands on. He then passed out amidst the laughter of the soldiers who appeared pleased at such a horrendous experience.

“Before I could contemplate anything, I found myself sprawled on the ground when my turn came. There was an incessant descent of kicks and lashes on my body. They kicked me furiously and repeatedly whilst another policeman was beating me with the butt of his assault rifle on my head. I made sure that I was hiding my head so as to limit my injuries.

“But I was not successful because one of the policemen realized this and timed me. He jumped and landed on my left eye with his heavy boots. I felt something bursting inside of my head. All of a sudden, there was darkness. No sooner did I scream for help than I realized that I was blinded. My screams were just swallowed by the seemingly perpetual and

barbarous torture these beasts enjoyed. Laughter permeated the entire building as we cried louder. I felt more pain as they stopped the beating. The ferocity with which they attacked us was reminiscent of the hatred they had of us. They failed to kill us in the streets. Now they wanted to use the law that was in their favour, to beat us to death.

“When Makompo’s turn of torture came, they leaned him against the wall, and was told that as a journalist, he had a lot of reportage to do the next day pertaining to our beatings. Makompo and Kgalabe had lean statures as compared to Motsebi and me. I really feared for them. He told them that it was his duty to report about any significant event in the township, and that he regarded ours as news worthy too. One heavy whip sank into his body. I saw him flinch and readying his body for more lashes.

“They took Makompo to the ground so that all of them could have access to his lean body. He was kicked repeatedly while another was violently banging Makompo’s head against the floor. He screamed and later passed out. The same response of laughter from the soldiers echoed in the corners of the four walls of the building. When Makompo regained consciousness, a constable by the name of Rampedi hit him hard on his head with a pistol and sent him staggering again to the floor. When the time came for us to be taken into the cells, we protested and said that we wanted to be taken to the doctor or to the hospital. By then my left eye continued to bleed profusely.

“They then forced us into one cell. Paledi, Matsapa and Kagiso were taken to a different cell. We assumed that they did this deliberately so that we should be without help. We sat motionless in our cell, groaning and moaning with pain. At midnight, Makompo started to behave differently. Makompo started to pace up and down in the cell, and demanded a lot of water. We thought this was not a problem as we all drank a lot of water due to dehydration caused by the scuffle during the beatings. He started to pull our blankets. His train of thought was no longer that of a normal person. He then vomited, and started to breathe deeply.

“We concluded that he needed urgent medical attention. We shouted for the wardens and the police to no avail. We banged the doors and screamed so loud that the people outside the police station could hear us. The response was the same laughter from the soldiers who seemed content with the unfolding events. Out of panic, we told Makompo to hold on until the next morning. He agreed.

“He sighed heavily and turned his head. We thought that he was asleep and felt a bit relieved. His face was still, and he looked relaxed more than before, assured that nothing would disturb him again. Not even the pain he was feeling inside. Not even the pain the entire black population was feeling for its oppression.

“I slowly moved my hand to feel his heartbeat. It had stopped! I checked for his pulse on his hand. I looked at my inmates. We all battled to stop the tears that voluntarily started rolling down our cheeks. Our cries were turned into the sound of music to the police who never

bothered to come to our assistance. We did not want to accept that Makompo had departed from us. In the early hours of the morning, the captain of the police station, Mr. Lebese, came to count us as part of his daily routine. He took one look at Makompo and then ordered two convicts to come and carry him out of the cell.

“We were later taken to the Mokopane Hospital that was not far from the police station. I was immediately transferred to the Ga-Rankuwa hospital near Pretoria. The doctors operated on my eye without success. Makompo’s mother was refused permission to have her son’s death certificate. In as far as the regime was concerned, Makompo had not died. All his files were destroyed when we went to investigate the case at the police station upon our release after three years. We later learned that the regime and the Lebowa government, with the connivance of certain informers who claimed to be members of AZAPO, took part in the plot to destroy all traces of Makompo's murder case.”

That is why we are here today.

Why did Makompo die so young? It was simply because he was black. Black not in colour but black as in the state of mind, a way of life that freed one from the shackles of physical bondage. Even though apartheid colonialism was still in charge, Makompo, by being black, had opted out of oppression and gone into freedom. White racism and its Bantustan appendages could not tolerate a free mind. That is why Biko was killed, that is why Mapetla Mohapi was killed, that is why Mthuli ka Shezi is no more, that is why Onkgopotse Tiro was bombed, that is why Thabang Motloli, who read poems when we unveiled Makompo’s tombstone back in 1989 was killed, that is why Makompo was killed, that is why, that is why.

Makompo was a free black mind. He understood clearly that freedom for all of us who were oppressed could only be brought about by us. He understood that for that to happen, everyone within our communities had to be mobilised. Some went to teaching to smuggle revolution into classes, other went into religion to sermonise and preach revolution.

Makompo went into journalism, he wanted a bigger class, unlimited by walls and time, his product would be there to be consumed as and when. For journalism, as the first draft of history provides the chronicling of the unfolding history with the potency of impacting on its consumers. Journalism and in particular black journalism as practised by Makompo then, was not just a mere reporting of news. The choice of stories and of sources to be quoted, the choice of voices to validate and explain events, was designed to move understanding of events in a way that benefitted the revolution.

And in 1986 there was a revolution underway in occupied Azania. The people were resisting. And Makompo was there to record this. Why was this resistance important to be recorded? Resistance, or what Oscar Wilde called disobedience, is humanity’s original virtue. It means when people stand up against tyranny, they are exhibiting the highest form of being human. It means that when a human being is stripped of everything, that which remains and which makes him human, is the ability to stand up for right and to stand up against wrong. When you fail to stand up against wrong, you stop being human, you become a robot of sorts.

Thus, the existence of democracy throughout the world, is because men and women of virtue stood up for right in the face of authoritarian rule. Makompo understood this clearly and his own role as a journalist. He understood that the chronicling of events by media, especially in situations of conflict, was a recording of the persistence of humanity's original virtue.

What is the role of media in such situations? What is the role of journalism?

John Pilger, in the foreword to a book he edited called *Tell Me No Lies*, quotes TD Allman, an American journalist, as saying "Genuine objective journalism is journalism that not only gets the facts right, it gets the meaning of events right. It is compelling not only today, but stands the test of time. It is validated not only by reliable sources but by the unfolding of history".

So in terms of this definition journalism is called upon to record the facts right, but to also get the meaning of those facts right. This means even if the meaning may be part of what Indian writer Vandan Shiva calls "subjugated knowledge" that is fighting for space against "dominant knowledge", those views should come through for the meaning to be right.

What am I saying? I am saying the first test of journalism is to get the facts right. But once that is in, the meaning of those facts have to be also right. And when people read or hear or watch, they must not feel it is something that is only valid today and gone tomorrow, they must feel it is sufficiently important to stay with them today and tomorrow and forever. Because as history unfolds, the facts will not change to suit history, but instead history will validate those facts.

Vandan adds a new dimension to this with the notion of dominant knowledge and subjugated knowledge. Dominant is prevailing knowledge that reigns supreme. Subjugated knowledge is knowledge under siege. It means facts that must stand the test of history have to be recorded even when they represent subjugated knowledge, whatever the danger of doing so.

In the time of 1986, the dominant knowledge through the system was one of calling for surrender of the majority to minority rule. It was dominant not because the majority felt so, but because the system and its propaganda machinery were broadcasting surrender and futility of struggle. The subjugated knowledge, was in fact the knowledge of the majority who felt resistance was a virtue and that victory was certain.

Makompo's journalism was a subversion of the dominant in favour of the subjugated, because he knew dominant knowledge was false dominance and wrong and would not be validated by history. In doing this, Makompo was living up to the highest ideals of journalism which is to serve society.

Makompo knew the dangers. A few weeks before he was killed, he came to see me in Seshego where I was paying my own price for being a cheeky black. He was finding the space to do real journalism at the Lebowa Times shrinking and the audience too small. He had wanted to spread his wings to Johannesburg where he would play on a bigger stage.

We discussed the positives and negatives. He went away to think about it as we both realized the importance of the work he was doing around the north. It was the last time I saw him alive. When he was picked up with Tsoaledi and the others, the order to the cops was to hunt for comrades and kill them.

They killed Makompo but like the quote in the Azapo website states: "There are births conceived from the womb of revolution, deaths that are immortal, blood which can never be covered by concrete, and moments that builds history". Makompo's death was one such defining moment.

His death affected me personally and I had decided that whatever the cost, I would be there to bury him despite my banning order. However my order was lifted the same week, and the first place I went to was here in Mahwelereng and my first story after six years was about Makompo and his death and funeral arrangements.

The system tried to block the funeral but they could not. We were not going to allow them to stop him getting his due recognition. I remember clearly the Friday night at the Pretoria High Court with Bra Don Nkadimeng as we launched an urgent interdict against a ban on non-relatives attending the funeral. We succeeded and returned in the middle of the night to find preparations underway for one of Mahwelereng's biggest funerals ever.

His killers were charged but later released. The system claimed there were no witnesses even though as the magistrate made this ruling the survivors of the beatings were seated outside the courtroom waiting to be called. I remember being chased out of court but refusing to leave, while our lawyer, Mojanku Gumbi, fought hard, to no avail.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that joke of apologists for apartheid crimes, found as follows about Makompo: "the commission finds that the Lebowa government and its security forces were responsible for the arrest, torture and death of Mr Makompo Lucky Kutumela in 1986".

Makompo died so we can be free. He used his journalism to unearth atrocities of the racist system and to highlight the gains of the revolution through pockets of resistance around his area. He knew it was dangerous but also knew it had to be done. He had hoped for victory that would unleash the intellectual prowess of a people of a country endowed with such wealth. He had hoped that the intellectual capacity and the wealth would be combined to bring freedom from want for the needy.

We thank Mama, mme MaSamuel, for giving birth to a soldier and for allowing him to be who he was. Oh Makompo, sorry my brother. The dream has become a nightmare. Freedom has come but it is freedom of the few to loot. The houses we build for our own, the roads we construct for our cars cannot stand the test of Sello Galane's showers of rain. Our teachers time their strike when such action will inflict the biggest damage to our children, our public hospitals are places where the poor go to die, we rape our own children, our leaders build resorts for themselves with our tax while their government has to be forced by white liberals to deliver books to black children.

Makompo, I am sorry my brother, but your organization, Azapo, is a shell of itself, it titters on the brink of collapse and staggers from day to day, like you staggered in that cell that night. Your union too, is not the vibrant Mwasu that could go to court in the middle of the night to ensure we bury you as we wished. Was it in vain my brother?

As I stand here the overwhelming feeling is one of despondency, but then I know that the same spirit that saw the people rise against tyranny is still there. The people cannot be fooled forever through social grants and ram shackle RDP houses. So no, Makompo, it was not in vain. We are passing through a phase of serious darkness but the work you did will still germinate in a movement of the people that will see this country become a bastion of prosperity for the many.

Peace Comrade. Peace.