

A tribute to Harry Mashabela

By Suzette Nxumalo Mafuna

Following the sad passing of Award winning former journalist at South Africa's major newspapers and renowned author of a couple of books, Harry Mashabela, his friends had asked me to contribute to several tributes on his life and times at work and socially. My tribute to him was not read due to a long funeral program which resulted in the elimination of certain items in his funeral program. Rather than discard the piece I had written, I opted to revise my original piece to exclude reference to his death and focus rather on an area of his work which had had scant notice, and is hardly known - his novels which depict some aspects of life in Soweto spanning decades of black people's lives and their endless struggles against an obstinate and racist South African dictatorship.

His published works, include "Mekhukhu: Urban African cities of the Future; Township of the PWV; The Boksburg Boycott; Fragile Figures? His "A People on the Boil" has had more resonance, reflecting as it does on the black students' revolt against an education system which was and intended to complete the subjugation of black people through a new regulation which imposed on black students, a despicably racist-based, education system. The late journalist, author and academic, Professor E'skia Mphahlele wrote the foreword in Mashabela's "A People of the Boil" which was first published by Mothobi Motloutse, founder of Skotaville Publishers in 1987. The second book's edition was published in 2006.

Much of Harry's excellent coverage of the Soweto turmoil in June 16 appears mainly due to his sharp nose for a story, essential community connections, secretive undertakings, clandestine meetings and underground communication with political operatives which guaranteed him corporation by his sources and protection from the system that kept him and his media colleagues under close and constant surveillance throughout. At times it was instinct, credibility among affected communities and facial recognition among political activists which opened all manner of closed doors for him, kept him alive and helped him focus on the job at hand - reporting on what he was seeing, hearing or feeling at different times, different settings and different circumstances over the tumultuous period of a local struggle by an angry people against a relentless racist regime.

The revolting students suspected most mainstream and white run media houses and journalists of working with the system and though they appeared more accommodating of black journalists, particularly from the World newspaper, however, they too were careful never to rouse any suspicion that they might be allied with the system.

Prior to writing this piece on Harry Mashabela, I read through a number of his local and newspaper interviews, to get a handle on the thinking of a journalist who was self-effacing, and quite reticent to engage in personal discussions. Speaking of his book "A People on the Boil," during the BBC interview, Harry uses the word "cruel" several times in reference to the atrocious measures used by the system to cower dissent "by any means necessary". He

describes police action on protesting residents' as "cruel". He had earlier been assured by a black policeman that no harm would befall the protesting crowds. Then to his horror, excoriatingly painful cries and shouts of women and children erupted immediately after the policeman's very convincing assurance that nobody would be shot.

He explains police cruelty as the reason for his rage and uncontrollable urge to write - through his books and media articles - about the immense suffering of his people. He hopes that publication of police brutality could help garner support for the black struggle from possible local and international funders. Harry's story of June 16 is different from any reportage from any other media sources locally or internationally . For Harry, June 16 was not a one day wonder or isolated incident but a culmination of the historical betrayal of black people by the Apartheid

The BBC journalist who interviewed Harry introduces him as somewhat stiff, old-fashioned with a military disposition, adding that he is passionate in his anger. Well, I wouldn't call him stiff, but guarded and self-preserved, with the dignity of a black man who is a proud product of his traditional family heritage . He never seemed too eager to entertain any small talk with strangers or engage in frivolous matters of a social nature or in gossip. Of course Harry was passionate and angry about a rotten and evil system but as far as looks go, he always seemed like an agitated old teacher who had to be in control and never let up, no matter what it took. And perhaps what the journalist was referring to was Harry's militant demeanour which he seemed to adopt with any discussion that pertained to matters related to apartheid and the suffering of his people. The militancy was in the deep and commanding voice which told of his rural up-bringing where his hard-working dad would be given just one cow a month by his farmer employer, in lieu of his monthly wages. It was there in his tone as he recalled the £8 monthly wages at his first job only to realise that a young white girl, fresh from school and new in any job was earning double his wages even as she was being trained by the underpaid and reluctant Mashabela, in line for an advanced position in the company and higher wage than his. His voice takes on a deep and raspy tremor as he describes to the BBC interviewer, some of the key moments when the reality of apartheid shook his sheltered village notion of what apartheid meant to black people and opened his eyes to the tragedy of his people in their own country.

He quotes an incident when, on noting some eminent trouble nearby, he had turned politely to a black policeman standing next to him and asked him politely with reverence to his position, hopefully but directly "are you really going to kill our children'? The policeman's bold "no" was interrupted by a booming sound of gun shots and a cloud of billowing black smoke that seemed to smother the environment and brought home to Harry a new realisation that he could no longer be a spectator but had a responsibility as a somewhat privileged black journalist and humanitarian to make his own contributions towards the emancipation of his people and for peace to reign in the region.

His story about his upbringing seems to confirm why Harry remained so focused on whatever task he set out to do and also speaks to his stubborn nature even as a 14 year old boy who herded his father's livestock. Harry was curious why a pal whom he met over an initiation

process had stopped herding his family's cattle and sheep, then learned that his pal had started school. He had never been to school because the only mission school was eight miles away from the village and while the idea of going to school had never occurred to him before, he immediately went to tell his father that he wanted to go to school. "When do you want to go to school, the father asked." "In the morning" he shoots back., "But who is going to take the cattle to the "dip" if you go to school in the morning. "I will start at the dip with the cattle and then I go to school, he insisted.

Though his parents had never been to school, his father supported him wholeheartedly and even accompanied him all the way to his new Missionary run secondary school in Pietersburg. He noted the disappointment in his mom who had never left the village and didn't want him to leave, accusing him of being "useless" She couldn't understand why her son preferred school when his peers in the village were all working to support their families.

Harry had his fair share of personal challenges and in politics. From detentions, constant hounding and harassment by the special branch and culminating in a vicious assault which broke his neck and left him semi paralysed.

While pouring over some of the books he published his recall of events over the political turmoil is uncanny. He remembers names, dates, settings, locations, the names of the dead, he remember the religious hymn which Tsietsi Mashinini had led the students to sing en mass leading to the crucial march. He remembers the lyrics word for word. He remembers a sign with a defiant "NO SBs, ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK. He remembers Winnie Mandela's military chant and simply describes the lyrics thus, "She did not mince her words".

I now wish to share an observation which offended, dismayed and disappointed me as I was skimming through what ever had been written about Harry, particularly while searching through his book reviews. One is by some big shot, and high flying Asian dude whose major complaint is that Harry had failed to explain some foreign and meaningless words/terms which occupied a major part of the book and lacked clarity. His is a negative review from a brilliant but foreign writer who has no clue about black lives in South Africa and should therefore not be taken seriously. This despite a succinct foreword by the esteemed, Eskia Mphahlele.

My other observation, refers to another foreigner and academic scholar who it took all of 30 years to eventually publish "Pan-Africanism: Political Philosophy and Socio Economics in 2015 as if he had been trying to find an African source to extract information for the bulk of the African content in his book. The book contains some direct Harry Mashabela paragraphs over pages: 311, 319, 321,322, 327. Each Mashabela quote occupies at least a third of a page and I believe that is unethical, and that the scholar he might just as well asked Harry to be co-author and share his earnings with the author of the book which copied from. It occurs to me that the author depended wholly and exclusively on Harry's writings to complete his book and to justify the "African" component in Pan-Africanism.

Yet an ordinary township dude who picked up a second hand-copy for R5 had posted the cover of "A people on the Boil" on his social media page, recommending it to his peers and expressing his utter joy on learning from reading the book that Mashabela had worked for Drum magazine.

Finally, I suppose we should be proud that Harry's work has been roundly recognised and appreciated throughout the world and perhaps remember too that "copying is the best compliment".