Clearing a path to academia: a tribute to Lungisile Ntsebeza

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Lungisile Ntsebeza’s initial commitment and difficult path to academia: a commitment that began when he and his comrades were facing trial in the Transkei under the Suppression of Communism Act, and continued during his four-year term in prison and the years of banishment and persecution that followed. His academic career was made possible by standing up to and exposing the apartheid death squads that killed his cousin Batandwa Ndondo in 1985. The same commitment to human liberation characterised his celebrated academic career.

KEYWORDS

Lungisile Ntsebeza; Batandwa Ndondo; Transkei; apartheid death squads; political assassinations

Light heart and strong commitment

Lungisile Ntsebeza’s commitment to his chosen path of intellectual enquiry came at a turning point in his life, while he was facing trial in Umtata (now Mthatha) on charges under the Suppression of Communism Act in 1977. Many obstacles were put in the way of this commitment in the years that followed: imprisonment, then banishment to his hometown of Cala; the murder of his cousin Batandwa Ndondo by an apartheid death squad, followed by its extensive covering up, including Lungisile’s detention without trial and further banishment to a remote area, cutting him off from the outside world; obstruction and hostility from the humanitarian agency meant to support victims of apartheid repression; then a return to the conventional banishment of before, now driven by the anger of a dictatorial president, and seemingly extended into the indefinite future.

By the time Lungisile was able to become part of collective academic life, 10 years had passed since his initial commitment to this path. I want to provide a short history of the winding road he travelled, from 1977, when he decided to apply himself to the study of philosophical

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questions, to 1987, when he began his postgraduate studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It is not only that Lungisile stuck to his decision. What stands out for me is the light heart and strong commitment with which he confronted the obstacles in his way. Imprisonment and persecution may have changed him, but not in the way that his persecutors would have hoped. Even when their lives and freedom were in imminent danger, Lungisile (and his brother Dumisa) were still able to laugh out loud, with the whole of their generous being.

账户/革命家/哲学家

Lungisile achieved outstanding results in accountancy at St John’s College, the prestigious high school he attended in Umtata, and first planned to become a chartered accountant. He had already begun his accountancy studies by the time he was arrested in 1976, just before the Soweto uprising began. Together with his elder brother Dumisa Ntsebeza, Matthew Goniwe and Godfrey Silinga, he was held in detention for a lengthy period before they faced trial.

The main piece of evidence against them was the three-page manifesto of the People’s United Front for the Liberation of South Africa (PUFLSA), which they had authored and which had been found in their possession. (My guess is that the document must have been stored in the court archive after the trial; I doubt whether it has become part of the historical record. Lungisile gave me a copy of it many years later). This manifesto commits PUFLSA to reviving the ‘broken tradition’ of ‘expatriate organisations’ – such as the ANC (African National Congress), PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) and NEUM (Non-European Unity Movement) – of what they call ‘programmed struggle’; to following ‘the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which we shall defend ruthlessly against any attempt to vilify and vulgarise it’; and to ‘master[ing] all forms of struggle including the armed struggle because we are sworn to an eventual military showdown with the enemy’.

The manifesto’s clearest point of orientation, however, is the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which was closer to the PUFLSA authors, having emerged from the same generation, often from the same broad educational context, and having a presence in the same Eastern Cape region. Although the authors ‘appreciate and support’ the BCM’s struggle against white racism, they are critical of its lack of ‘a clear programme of social, political and economic change’ and note that it has ‘compromised [itself] badly on the security question because of [its] reckless though well-intentioned actions’.

Perhaps the most characteristic and unusual feature of this manifesto is its final section on ‘PUFLSA norms’, which specifies that ‘the young intellectuals from whom it is expected there will come leaders to build and strengthen the mass movement of resistance … should be well read, well behaved, sincere and dedicated.’ The manifesto is testimony to the ethical ideals of its authors.

It must have seemed to the prosecution, and perhaps to the accused as well, that the case against them was irrefutable. However, the defence called André du Toit, then a lecturer in Political Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, as an expert witness to testify on their behalf. From Lungisile’s account of the trial, years later, it seems that du Toit’s evidence was a revelation to the accused, who now saw their case in a more confident light, as he exposed the problematic assumptions and conceptual or logical slippages in the prosecution’s arguments, and then stood his ground during cross-examination.
It was a life-changing experience for Lungisile, who decided then, or soon after, to abandon his accountancy studies and to study political philosophy instead. The Chief Justice of the Transkei, George Munnik, took no account of du Toit’s evidence. He found the accused guilty and sentenced them to four years in prison, which they served in full.

The view from Stellenbosch

In prison, Lungisile registered at the University of South Africa (UNISA) for a BA with majors in Philosophy and Politics. He graduated three years later, and qualified for admission to the Honours degree in Philosophy. The degree was scheduled to be done over two years, and Lungisile successfully completed the first year. But UNISA had not lived up to the expectations created by du Toit’s expert testimony at their trial.

At that stage, probably in 1981, Lungisile wrote to du Toit to ask for advice. Du Toit passed the letter to me and asked me to respond to it, specifically Lungisile’s questions about opportunities to study Marxist philosophy at a South African university. I wrote to Lungisile about study options and we exchanged letters for a while, discussing the situation of Marxism in South Africa in a somewhat coded way. We both knew that the prison authorities would have first sight of our letters.

After his release from prison in 1981, Lungisile was served with a banishment order by the Transkei government of K. D. Matanzima, restricting him to his hometown of Cala. He reopened the bookshop which his parents had opened and then closed while he was in prison and became involved in educational and community projects. He was clearly an important mentor to younger people there and continued to be for many years, politically guiding many of them and often helping them to further their studies. He also reconnected with political networks that he had helped to establish before his imprisonment.

Lungisile had not abandoned his plans for graduate studies, but could not actively pursue them while banished to Cala, except through UNISA. However, he seemed confident that the local police would inform him about when they would be able to turn a blind eye. In 1983, he contacted me to say that, although the banishment order had not been lifted, the local police had let him know that they could turn a blind eye to it, at least for a while. So, he would be coming to Stellenbosch to discuss options for pursuing studies in Political Philosophy there, although he could only begin his studies once the banishment order was lifted, or the temporarily blind eye turned to his travels became permanent.

Lungisile spent about a week in Stellenbosch. He had met André du Toit at his trial years before; he and I had got to know each other by letter; he established an immediate rapport with Johan Degenaar (see below), who had something of the same energy and charm as Lungisile; he got to know the graduate students, whose interests were close to his own; and we discussed courses that could be offered at Honours level.

It felt like a productive visit, with everyone involved eager to continue the exchange of ideas in a more sustained way. Our discussion of possible courses was necessarily provisional, as no one knew when Lungisile would be able to come to Stellenbosch, and which other students, with which interests, would be in the Honours class. We were, in effect, waiting for Matanzima.

At the end of 1986, three years after Lungisile’s first visit to Stellenbosch, the Department of Political Philosophy closed down. Du Toit moved to the Department of Political Studies
at the University of Cape Town and I moved to the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Western Cape. Degenaar, who was then approaching retirement, moved back to the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch. None of us anticipated that in 1983; or perhaps we did not look that far ahead.

The murder of Batandwa Ndondo

I visited Cala for the first time in June or July 1983, when Lungisile invited me to teach at a Winter School organised by the Cala University Students Association (CALUSA), in which he played a central role. It was an important experience for me – both for the political discussion and teaching in that context – and for the experience of being in the town and participating briefly in its life. Lungisile continued to make short trips to the Western Cape, at times when the Cala police turned a temporary blind eye to his banishment order. My only clear recollection of seeing him in that time was when he and Neville Alexander paid a surprise visit to me at Partridge Point in 1984, where I was living in a wood-and-tar-paper shack on the False Bay coast while writing a long-delayed Master’s thesis.

I returned to teaching at Stellenbosch in 1985, and it was there that I received a phone call from Lungisile, probably on 24 September 1985, telling me of the murder that morning of his cousin Batandwa Ndondo, by people initially posing as his comrades and then revealing themselves as agents of the apartheid state. I had met Batandwa in Cala in 1983. He had been a student leader at the University of the Transkei until he was expelled for political activism. At the time of his murder, he was a field worker for Health Care Trust in Cala, involved in a project ensuring clean water supplies in nearby villages. He had links with the ANC in Lesotho, and knew at least one of his murderers from that context.

The events of that day in Cala were more complicated than I could immediately grasp in our phone conversation. Also, I did not know what information, if any, Lungisile might be withholding because of the likelihood that the call was being monitored by the security police. After we had spoken for a while, I said that I would come to Cala and talk to Lungisile and Dumisa. I wondered whether they would be in police detention by the time I got there.

By the time of Batandwa’s murder, a pattern of assassination of anti-apartheid activists was already established which was widely believed, and later proved to be, initiated by the security police. Matthew Goniwe, who had been tried and convicted with Lungisile and Dumisa, was murdered, along with three other leaders of the Cradock Residents’ Association, on 27 June 1985, three months before Batandwa’s murder. Some weeks after the funeral of the Cradock Four, P. W. Botha declared a state of emergency, with the aim of crushing the uprising in black townships throughout the country. Now the death squads had come to Cala.

What made Batandwa’s killing different from previous murders of political activists was that it was done in public, and the killers had no choice but to acknowledge to onlookers that they were working for the police. They had then driven to the Cala police station to inform the local police, before departing from the town. In this context, the murder could not easily be passed off as an unsolved crime, still supposedly under police investigation of a kind that would deliberately lead nowhere.
Covering up Batandwa’s murder

Looking back now, I think that I went to Cala because I couldn’t think what else to do, and something had to be done. The few days I spent there were enough to give me a relatively full account of what had happened, and might happen next. I gave a detailed account of Batandwa’s murder to the journalist Barry Streek, who reported it on the front page of the Cape Times; someone approached Progressive Party MP Helen Suzman, who made a strong press statement that was reported nationally; and I spoke at meetings held by the United Democratic Front in Cape Town and the Current Affairs Society at Stellenbosch.

I was in Cala again for the funeral of Batandwa in October, after travelling to Umtata with a Progressive Federal Party MP, Tiaan van der Merwe, to discuss legal options and funding for legal action with lawyers at the Sangoni Partnership in Umtata. By then, Lungisile, Dumisa, Godfrey Silinga and Victor Ngaleka were in police detention, and probably others in Cala with links to the Ntsebeza family.

The next day I got a lift from Umtata to Cala to attend the funeral. The Transkei police were there in full and threatening force. After the coffin had been brought out of the Ntsebeza home and mourners had lined up for a last view of Batandwa, the police commander announced that all whites were to leave the Transkei immediately or would be deported. Later, we heard that young people at the funeral, especially those wearing T-shirts with Batandwa’s face printed on them, were badly beaten by the police.

Around a month after the funeral, Lungisile and his comrades were released from police detention and immediately banished to remote areas of the Transkei. This was clearly intended to make it difficult or impossible for them to communicate with anyone outside these rural areas. They were allocated mud huts in a state of disrepair or partial collapse, and told they would have to grow their own food, as the local people did.

At that time, there was an active and well-funded programme for support of political prisoners and banished people – run by the South African Council of Churches (SACC), funded largely by Scandinavian governments – with a regional office in the Eastern Cape. But the SACC officials of that region were closely aligned with the ANC. They saw Lungisile and his comrades as political rivals and refused financial help. They offered to provide spades and a one-off subsistence payment of R75 for each banished person, but then never delivered either the spades or the payment. They rejected a request for funding of a court application on the grounds that it was ‘excessive’.

It was only after approaching the national director of the SACC, Beyers Naudé, that this victimisation was reversed and legal funding provided. When we met Naudé, he conceded immediately the absurdity of a situation in which the SACC refused support to Dumisa and others, while Dumisa was the lawyer who represented most of the victims of political persecution supported by the SACC in the Transkei.

Waiting for Matanzima, again

Once Lungisile returned from his rural banishment to his previous banishment in Cala, it seemed at first that the old regime of the local police turning a blind eye to occasional violations of his banishment order was over. Transkei president K. D. Matanzima took
the exposure of the death squads as a challenge to his own personal authority and issued a fusillade of threats against the Ntsebeza family, and against the inhabitants of Cala and its neighbouring areas.

And yet, somehow, Lungisile returned to Stellenbosch around the end of 1985, among other things to consult a Cape Town law firm – Bernadt, Vukich and Potash – about contesting the banishment order. I know the date, because we were stopped at a roadblock on the way back to Stellenbosch and then taken to Manenberg Police Station for questioning. We were surprised to be released late that night. I wrote the date and place in the front of the book I had been reading that day: 13 November 1985.

However, Matanzima’s days in power were numbered. In February 1986, he was forced by the South African government to retire as President of Transkei after allegations of corruption, and replaced by his brother George Matanzima. Not long after, K. D. Matanzima was placed in police detention on the authority of his brother, and then banished for a time to his hometown of Qamata.

George Matanzima was succeeded before long by Stella Sigcau, who was then forced out by General Bantu Holomisa, a former student of Dumisa Ntsebeza at the Jongilizwe School for the Sons of Chiefs. I wonder whether Lungisile’s banishment order was ever formally revoked or just faded away, along with the rule of the Matanzimas.

My last visit to Cala was in July 1986. Lungisile and I had been to the annual congress of the Association of Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA) at the University of Natal in Durban. After it ended we drove to Umtata, where we spent a night with Dumisa and his family, and then to Cala, where I stayed for a few days.

Eventually, academic life resumed

I cannot remember whether any of the elements that led to the end of the Department of Political Philosophy at Stellenbosch were in place by the time Lungisile returned to Stellenbosch from Cala in July 1986. It seems likely that we were both expecting him to start his studies at Stellenbosch in the new year.

I probably knew by then that there was some discussion about possible reunification of the departments of Philosophy and Political Philosophy, but had little sense of where it might lead, or how soon. I did not know that André du Toit would move from Stellenbosch to UCT in the following year, or that I would move to the University of the Western Cape.

After weighing up several options, Lungisile registered in 1987 for an Honours degree in Economic History at UCT and resumed his academic studies, at last. He was back on the path he had chosen a decade before, although the landscape had changed in those years. I will leave it to others to speak of his extraordinary career since then, and the depth and scope of his achievements.

When I think back to the years I’ve described, I’m struck by Lungisile’s clarity of mind, often in circumstances in which such clarity is hard to muster, his wholehearted enjoyment of life, and a distinctive kind of practical wisdom, perhaps with its roots in Cala. There is an image which comes back to me now, which seems to me to encapsulate these qualities and perhaps others as well.

It comes from a story Lungisile told me – as if in passing, I think quite early in our friendship – of a discussion with Steve Biko and others from the BCM, sometime before
the arrest and trial of Lungisile and his comrades with which I began this article. Lungisile questioned the idea of seeking to recreate an authentically black culture in a liberated South Africa, reviving African traditions: what did the BCM mean by that? For example, in a liberated South Africa, would black people continue to wear factory-made shoes? The question caused outrage: how dare you ask Steve a question like that?

But I can imagine how Lungisile would have stuck to the question, even patiently explained it, if he was allowed to do so. It would have been only the first step in a longer chain of reasoning, but he would follow the argument wherever it led, until the need for the enquiry became evident. It was a question about political perspectives and priorities, rather than a question about shoes. It is that frame of mind that causes me still to think of Lungisile as a philosopher, even if he may no longer always do so.

Notes

1. This article is based on an essay presented to the seminar held at the UCT Centre for African Studies in July 2021 to mark Lungisile Ntsebeza’s retirement from academic life. Listening to other contributors brought back lost memories, or put my own memories into somewhat different, mostly clearer, perspective, reminding me how much the events recounted here enriched my own life.

2. The manifesto is reproduced in this issue as an Appendix to this article.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix

THE PEOPLE'S UNITED FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF SOUTH AFRICA (P.U.F.L.S.A.)

MANIFESTO: “We build a free South African Nation.”

The Manifesto:—

The year 1976 marks the beginning of the second half of the ‘70s. The events in Southern Africa in this decade bring up a number of questions appertaining to the liberation struggle. The struggle is at the moment characterised by extreme lethargy or diasillusioned apathy and a series of unco-ordinated actions on the part of the broad masses of the people. In this regard, then, the following are the questions people who are reflecting seriously on the situation’s would be asking themselves: have events such as Voset’s African Detente, the Transkei Independence Mozambique’s liberation, Rhodesia’s constitutional talks, the Angolan situation, etc., any significance? If so, what? If not so, why? And finally, what should be the programme of the liberation struggle at this moment?

We of the Pufisa answer these and many other questions with a POSITIVE manifesto of our own. It is not the intention of this manifesto to become in itself a treatise tracing the history of the liberation struggle as that has already been sufficiently covered in another document of the Pufisa entitled the Organisational Tasks. The purpose of this document is merely to highlight the most important and sensitive issues in this highly volatile and revolutionary Southern African situation, and also to say who and what we are, what justifies our existence and what solution do we offer for the liberation of South Africa.

WHY THE P.U.F.L.S.A.

(A) As a result of the legal position that obtained in S.A. in the wake of the disastrous early sixties, there was left in S.A. a void, a political vacuum that has not yet been filled by any organisation, including the present day Black Power Organisations.

(B) This established fact, i.e. that of a political vacuum was also acknowledged by some individuals who staged the Black Renaissance Conference at Hammarskraal in June/July 1974.

(C) Filling this political vacuum is matter of utmost importance and pressing urgency in the liberation struggle. But an organisation to do this MUST NECESSARILY be underground. Pufisa is such an organisation.

(D) The Organisation to fill this vacuum MUST NECESSARILY be founded at grassroots-level, whose aim is to build a mass movement of resistance. Pufisa is such an organisation.

X THE ATTITUDE OF P.U.F.L.S.A. TOWARDS EXISTING ORGANISATIONS.

1. BLACK POWER ORGANISATIONS:

It is Pufisa's sincerest contention that, in South Africa the colour question is an issue by itself. Our sympathy therefore cannot but go to those who react to the superiority complex of the majority of whites with an extreme sense of revulsion and hatred. In South Africa, a majority of the whites generally suffer from a GENOCIC SUPERIORITY COMPLEX. They thus look down upon anything Black as Primitive, Barbarous and contemptible and anything which is theirs as progressive, "civilised" and exemplary. We thus appreciate and support the struggle of the South African Black Power organisations against this tendency on the part of
the majority of the Whites in S.A.

However, we are highly critical of the fact that during all the years of their existence, the Black Power organisations have not come out with a clear programme of social, political and economic change.

In this respect they have done far less than the EXPATRIATE Organisations which had programmes of political and social change. As early as 1943, the N.E.U.M. came out with the 10 Point Programme and the Congress Movement adopted the Freedom Charter in Kliptown in 1955.

They were in the process of taking these programmes to the broad masses of the people when the iron hand of the police State clamped down without warning them to operate from outside. The Police State thus interrupted the development of a healthy tradition, that of programmed struggle.

One would have expected that the BLACK POWER Organisations would have carried on in this respect, but unfortunately they have not. Rather, even if they were to decide to do so, they will be greatly hampered by the fact that they have compromised themselves badly on the security question because of their reckless though well-intentioned actions.

The Pufisa is committed to revive this tradition which was broken by police harassment, the tradition of programmed struggle. Our programmes is a programme to achieve complete social, political and economic change. It is therefore a matter of course that we follow the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, which we shall defend ruthlessly against any attempts to vilify and vulgarise it.

2. EXPATRIATE ORGANISATIONS:

We have already stated above what befell the organisations such as the A.N.C., the P.A.C. and the N.E.U.M. at the beginning of the sixties, and how these affairs are necessary for them to operate. We have also stated that it is the aim of the Pufisa to revive and advance the tradition of a programmed struggle which the Expatriate Organisations had started but which was broken by police harassment in the beginning of the sixties.

We are aware of the fact that the EXPATRIATE Organisations are even at this moment making commendable efforts outside to revive the broken tradition. We however contend that an organisation such as the Pufisa, which is firmly based inside the country, is not only in a position to revive the broken tradition, but also to advance it in the light of the revolutionary situation now obtaining in Southern Africa.

P.U.F.S.A. TASKS.

(a) We of Pufisa have to master all forms of struggle including the armed struggle because we are sworn to an eventual military showdown with the enemy.

(b) The question of the armed struggle which cannot be dispensed with in the battle for liberation entails a lot of sacrifices especially if this is taken against the background of the highly volatile and explosive situation in Southern Africa in this decade of the Seventies.

(c) It is our view that the present revolutionary climate in Southern Africa (Angola, Rhodesia, S.W.A. etc.) makes the chances for building a strong mass movement of resistance inside the country very favourable. A/C.
(d) We therefore lay great stress on building a mass resistance movement internally, security problems notwithstanding. A strong internally based mass movement of resistance is a sure guarantee of success of the armed struggle, even against a highly armed adversary as the South African oppressors, Black and White.

P.U.F.L.S.A. NORMS.

The Puflsa has prescribed some norms, particularly for the young intellectuals from whom it is expected there will come leaders to build and strengthen the mass movement of resistance. It is expected inter alia that the young intellectuals should be well read, well behaved, sincere and dedicated.

We shall briefly elaborate on each of these.

A. WELL READ.

The struggle to liberate people from oppression is a mammoth one. It demands that the young man and woman who are engaged in it should be clear about what they want. They will therefore be able to make correct assessments and evaluations and draw correct conclusions if they are well read. Furthermore the complexity of the situation in Southern Africa, justifies the question of why reading cannot be more emphasised.

B. BEHAVIOUR AND DEDICATION:

"Good morals maketh a man". Even well worn clichés are at times highly instructing. Without this Manifesto actually going into detail as to which actions constitute good or bad morals, it is sufficient for us to say that we are already in a war situation. We therefore cannot afford the luxury of laxity in our vigilance. We are better able to be in this state of vigilance if our behaviour is exemplary. We should conclude this Manifesto by a quotation from a leading American Columnist of the Ultra Left who said, x

"The (Struggle) has reached a critical stage. It must move from an action-oriented movement which was in the main concerned with single issues to a broad-based multi-level which will change the economic structure of the country........... That means developing a movement which has leaders, not personalities; theory, not rhetoric; made strategy beyond demonstrations. We must realise that no one blow will topple the empire. It will take hundreds of thousands of little ones. That can only happen when we consciously make each of our acts relate to furthering the revolution. This means everything, from the way you say "Good Morning" to how you plan to rob a bank to finance your organisation. IN THE REVOLUTIONARY THE PERSONAL LIFE AND THE POLITICAL LIFE MERGE AND BECOME ONE".

x- The Guardian 1969 as contained in Ian Greig's TODAY'S REVOLUTIONARIES.