Lungisile Ntsebeza, my teacher and my student

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ABSTRACT

Lungisile Ntsebeza has enriched the lives of many people. This short tribute outlines how the author’s and Lungisile’s approaches in scholarship and struggle have intersected and coincided. It also provides a brief portrait covering the following areas of his intellectual and political contribution: the chieftaincy and traditional authorities; the legacy of Archie Mafeje; land and agrarian issues; and questions of struggle which pervade all these areas.

KEYWORDS

Chiefs; headmen; Archie Mafeje; the agrarian question; land reform

Introduction

Lungisile was my student as well my teacher, and in the dialectic between teaching and learning, we have forged a very close bond which is more than just an alliance. It is uncanny how we are invariably in agreement over a wide spectrum of issues, both in scholarship and in struggle. In my life I have never come across anybody with whom I share positions so closely. I have tried to think of reasons for this given our different backgrounds which, on closer reflection, are not so different after all. We both hail from the former Transkei, our parents were teachers and entrepreneurs largely outside of the dominant Congress tradition, and our research interests and political orientations stem from an abiding attempt to understand the ongoing connections between urban and rural areas, the role of the chieftaincy and the land question in South Africa. Most of all, we are comrades, and it is the abiding connection between scholarship and academic pursuits on the one hand, and struggle on the other, which defines Lungisile as the person I have come to know very well.

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Anybody who comes across Lungisile cannot but notice his seriousness of purpose in everything he does – as an entrepreneur owner and manager of a bookstore in Cala, a PhD student, a lecturer, a researcher, a political activist, a socialist, a member of a reading group, a farmer, a father, an uncle and a husband, a director of a university centre, a visiting professor all over the world, and even as a prisoner in a Transkeian jail.

Because of the rich tapestry of Lungisile’s life and work, in this article I focus on a few vignettes which hopefully give a sense of his enormous contribution as a scholar, institution builder and comrade. For example, about life in prison he said, ‘The one good thing – if one can talk about good things in prison – was that they allowed us to study’ (Krige 2019). It is ironic that he was sent to prison for five and a half years basically for studying revolution, guerrilla warfare and social change, and yet he grabbed the opportunity to study while in prison. Of their reading groups which led to their imprisonment, Lungisile says:

I started using a method of close reading of texts in those days – which I still use to this day – where you could easily spend hours on a single sentence. Our training and discipline were such that you didn’t go to the next sentence if there was something you didn’t understand. (Krige 2019)

We continue to associate this dogged determination and thoroughness with Lungisile. These study groups were formative in his political and intellectual shaping. The group that Lungisile joined was initiated by Sobantu Mlonzi and included his brother Dumisa and the late Matthew Goniwe (who was murdered by the apartheid regime). They read Marxist and socialist texts like The Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels), Socialism: Utopian and Scientific (Engels), The State and Revolution (Lenin) and Man’s Worldly Goods (Leo Huberman), as well as South African history books like Time Longer Than Rope (Eddie Roux) and The Awakening of a People (I. B. Tabata) and they tried to interpret the latter in the light of the former. They also read Robert Taber’s The War of the Flea for its analysis of guerrilla warfare. The apartheid government sent them to jail for their efforts. Lungisile’s route into academia was thus not as an apprentice, a research assistant to a white academic, as was the case with Archie Mafeje, for example. He came to university via these organic, community-based reading and study groups.

I have no doubt that Lungisile would agree with and indeed follow Archie Mafeje when he says:

Although I do academic work and believe in academic standards, I do not believe in erudition (which is another way of inhibiting the deprived or disadvantaged from writing what they know or think) and empiricism (which is a denial of the value of theoretical abstraction) … In other words, social scientific questions are put on the agenda by current social struggles. (Mafeje 1991, 8)

Lungisile carries an unparalleled authorial voice. I don’t say this lightly. Steeped in struggle and deeply committed to social justice in South Africa’s Eastern Cape, within the context of the continent and globally, Lungisile has very ably meshed these political impulses and concerns for social justice with excellent scholarly research. Taken together they make it imperative that we listen to what he has to say and take it very seriously. I have listened attentively to Lungisile and read virtually everything he has written. We have also collaborated on research projects and worked together as trustees for the Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), which is still struggling to transform
itself from a hugely successful non-governmental organisation (NGO) into a genuine rural peoples’ movement, largely under Lungisile’s intellectual tutelage.

I’d like also to briefly outline the historiographical context within which Lungisile grew up, to demonstrate how it was possible for somebody from Cala to climb to the academic heights that he has reached. It has been a remarkable journey with very many obstacles along the way. The early part of our generation was dominated by the so-called new school of South African history of the late 1960s and early 1970s as a major materialist/Marxist broadside against the dominant liberal orthodoxy. One of its major failings was that it did not take race seriously. Building a black intelligentsia was not considered a priority at all. Quite the contrary. In general, white historians, sociologists, anthropologists and others shamelessly used black fieldworkers to collect data and act as intermediaries between themselves and the black other which they studied assiduously (Maloka 2001, 16; Russell and Mugyenyi 1997). Black social scientists like Sam Nolutshungu, Neville Alexander and Archie Mafeje emerged despite the efforts of the new school and certainly not because of anything it did. As with everything else, there is a generational aspect to this and Lungisile formed part of the next generation of serious black social scientists and had to feel his way through texts, always examining them in relation to how they might be employed in propagating the struggle for social justice in general and in South Africa in particular. Of course, Lungisile has a major advantage. He is intimately connected with the local culture and politics and uses this intimacy to great effect in his research. While he is clearly an insider, he does not merely provide insider accounts. He brings to bear a wider reading and a conceptual arsenal born in struggle. When thinking about Lungisile, I’m often reminded of Phyllis Ntantala’s question in her beautifully written book, A Life’s Mosaic, which Lungisile aptly quotes in his own book:

> How can one understand my husband AC Jordan, peasant in outlook, one who remained suspicious of city ways to the end of his life, and yet, as a Classical and European scholar of literature, history and music, one who could field with the best? (Ntantala 1993, ix)

It is entirely appropriate that Lungisile should have occupied the chair of African Studies bearing Jordan’s name. In justifying his move from Fort Hare to the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the 1950s, Jordan famously said that he was moving to keep the door ajar for blacks to enter (Swingler 2015). If indeed Jordan is responsible for keeping that door ajar, Lungisile has walked through it and ensured that those doors have been thrown wide open, long before the recent student struggles in the country. In August 2019, Lungisile hosted an all-day symposium entitled, ‘I am going to open that door and keep it ajar: the political and scholarly legacy of AC Jordan’, which ‘speaks directly to the need for the transformation and decolonization of higher education’ (Ntsebeza 2019). Lungisile has kept the doors of learning at UCT open in many ways, often in the face of official reluctance to embrace the changes he proposed. First, in developing the curriculum, introducing courses on the land and agrarian questions in South Africa and further afield in the sociology department as well as the Centre for African Studies. This was transformative in a context of overwhelming urban bias. Second, over the years, he arranged many seminars, symposia and conferences at UCT, principally around the issues of activism and research. Third, he has played a consistent role in ensuring transformative recruitment practices at the university. Fourth, he mentored, nurtured and supervised many promising young scholars, like Nomalanga Mkhize and Fani Ncapayi. Fifth, he was central to the
establishment of the African Studies Association of Africa, becoming its inaugural president. There is no doubt that his presence at UCT was transformative in a wide variety of areas, something recognised when he received the prestigious Hamilton Naki award in 2017 (NRF 2023).

He has opened many other doors, not only those at UCT. Lungisile’s influence is felt far wider and here I will concentrate on four areas of his work which are intertwined in very complex ways: the chieftaincy and traditional authorities; the legacy of Archie Mafeje; land and agrarian issues; and questions of struggle which pervade and infuse all these areas. Of course, we cannot treat these as discrete entities separable from each other. It is important to mention that Lungisile’s life’s work is inextricably bound up in a commitment to understanding the linkages between social struggles and social research. He does this in an unambiguously and unapologetically normative manner.

**The chieftaincy and traditional authorities**

More than 20 years ago, Lungisile and I published an article in which we asked the following questions:

If indeed the chieftaincy was robbed of the internal dynamics vital to the autonomy of chiefs, how is it that they have survived for so very long? If part of the reason for this longevity... is the fact that some chiefs had become co-opted into the local arm of the colonial state how does one explain the persistence of their apparent legitimacy?

After all, if one grants chiefs some recognition (as our constitution does) does that not amount to an implicit endorsement of tribes and tribalism? How does this blend with the notion of a united nation? Is it possible to recognise chiefs outside a tribal constituency?

How did some (chiefs) shift from being the tools of oppression to active agents of liberation? (Hendricks and Ntsebeza 1999)

These questions remain relevant today and Lungisile has been at the very forefront of deconstructing the chieftaincy to lay bare the enduring problems of unelected representatives in a democracy.

I was privileged to supervise Lungisile’s PhD thesis, ‘Structures and Struggles of Rural Local Government in South Africa’. It was premised on a unique attention to detail which only somebody with Lungisile’s doggedness could accomplish. One of his external examiners, from Oxford University, described the thesis as the best he had ever read. The thesis was turned into a book (Ntsebeza 2005), which in many ways is Lungisile’s magnum opus. The book is very different from the thesis, but the heart of the research findings and the overall ideological predispositions remain consistent.

Although Lungisile is critical of some of the details in Mahmood Mamdani’s book, *Citizen and Subject*, I think he would agree that he has been massively influenced by Mamdani, who offers one stinging critique of all nationalist movements across Africa, that they did not have an agenda for ‘democratising customary power’ (cited in Legassick 1997, 128).

Now this is the question that frames Lungisile’s book: what agenda do we have for dealing with customary power as traditional authorities? How are we to accommodate them within a democratic environment? I need to state clearly that Lungisile is very
critical of Africanist essentialisms about the supposed democratic role ostensibly played by traditional authorities in a pristine pre-colonial society. His gaze is coldly critical and historicised. Traditional authorities may at some time in the distant past have been legitimate rulers of independent peoples, but they were utterly corrupted by colonialism and apartheid to become paid functionaries and therefore junior partners in colonial and apartheid rule. One of the questions that Lungisile tries to answer is why it is that these collaborators, often the targets of intense popular opposition in the struggle against apartheid, should now be feted in a democratic South Africa. They are unelected, undemocratic leaders, yet our constitution recognises them and elected political leaders bow before them.

For some perspective on just how much we have retrogressed in this regard, Lungisile refers to what Xhalanga landholders, including a number of headmen, had to say about this in 1911, captured in a telegram from the Chief Magistrate to the Department of Native Affairs:

The contention of Xhalanga Natives has been that they are no longer under tribal rule, that it would be a retrograde step on their part to enter (the) council system with its constitutional recognition of tribal state and also that being settled on the land like Europeans they should have a divisional council instead. (Ntsebeza 2005, 58)

More than a century ago, this is what the residents of Xhalanga were saying – imagine how advanced their thinking was at that time. Yet, instead of listening to their plea, we have entrenched the retrogression that they speak of by compromising our democracy with unaccountable leaders.

This entrenchment is clearly evident in the manner in which we have effectively reproduced the homeland system, as these areas will continue to be differentiated from the rest of South Africa by a distinctive form of land tenure and a different form of local government (involving chiefs, of course). If we go back to Mamdani’s *problematique*, articulated so well by Lungisile, we have not dismantled this insidious system at all, we’ve merely put a new gloss onto it. In effect, not only do we not have an agenda for democratising customary power, we are instead propping it up and dressing it up with the respectability of provincial houses of traditional authorities and constitutional recognition.

Yet, Xhalanga is unique and we must be mindful of just how this uniqueness is mirrored in Lungisile’s own independence of mind. He uses the case of Xhalanga to illustrate his argument about the variety of local responses to colonial and apartheid rule, linking the specific empirical detail, the ideographic, to the nomothetic, or the general argument about the unfolding role of traditional authorities. The truncated influence of the chiefs in Xhalanga and the persistent attempts to impose traditional authorities together give us insight into the variations within a former reserve. Xhalanga is decidedly different from Phondoland, where chiefs had entrenched themselves, especially in Western Phondoland – which did not experience the same rural revolt against Bantu authorities and betterment and rehabilitation schemes as happened in Eastern Phondoland (Hendricks and Peires 2011). Xhalanga, according to Lungisile, differs from these areas because of the relatively large number of so-called school people who had developed a level of existence independent of chiefs. He traces the lack of chiefly power to the fact that they had all but lost control over the allocation of land. Lungisile provides a fascinating historical account of the role of colonial authorities, apartheid apparatchiks and local collaborationist chiefs, like Kaiser Matanzima, in attempting to variously undermine and impose a
form of chiefly rule. He deftly demonstrates just how difficult it is to implement policies when there is popular local resistance, for example to the application of the Glen Grey Act in Xhalanga, which attempted to introduce a distinctive type of local government for blacks through the establishment of district councils.

Agency in struggle takes on a range of different forms, with fighting on the legal front merely one of them. In a case heard at the High Court of South Africa in the Eastern Cape in 2015, a major victory was won largely on the strength of Lungisile’s expert witness statement in favour of the historical process of democratically electing headmen in Xhalanga. The upshot is that the Xhalanga experience of independently electing their own leaders is now well established in law and in scholarship. Nobody knows the history of the area better than Lungisile and he used this detailed historical knowledge in his evidence. There is a seamless connection between Lungisile’s PhD thesis, his book and his affidavit before the court. The judges, Plasket, Pickering and Sandi, confirmed the residents’ right to elect their own headmen, rejecting the state’s attempt to impose headmen on the people and reiterating the many different ways in which representation could happen in the rural areas. Their unanimous judgement is riddled with quotations from Lungisile’s affidavit. In one example that gives a sense of the issues in the case, Lungisile writes that ‘the case of Xhalanga shows that even a dictator and despot such as Chief KD Matanzima failed in his attempt to change established practices and tradition, including the election of headmen’ (SAFLII 2015, 17).

It pleases me enormously that our current South African government has also failed where Matanzima failed. There is a certain irony when a supposed democracy seeks to act in such a palpably undemocratic manner by trying to impose headmen on the people, but this just points to the abiding contradictions in our society. Who would have thought that a democratic South Africa would follow the route of an impimpi (loosely translated as an apartheid collaborator) like Matanzima?

The judges described Lungisile’s evidence as ‘unchallenged’ (SAFLII 2015, 24) and, more importantly, suggested that the Cala Reserve Case ought to be used as a model for how to democratise traditional authorities.

The victory in Xhalanga was unfortunately followed by the recent signing into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa of the Traditional and Khoisan Leadership Act (Act No 3, 2019) in November 2019. This new legislation was passed in the teeth of opposition, especially by those mobilising for a halt to these so-called Bantustan Bills. It was also passed even though official commissions of inquiry had recommended that it should be rejected. In many ways, this law goes beyond even the prescriptions of apartheid, using the inclusion of the previously excluded Khoisan as a thinly veiled attempt to ensure legitimacy. Needless to say, the traditional councils it proposes are dominated by the unelected. Again, we have failed to heed the advice of the Xhalanga residents. Political expediency rather than principle has ruled the day, setting us back yet again and opening up prospects for traditional authorities to act with impunity towards residents in the former reserves. Lungisile’s work here is far from done, as reserve residents’ struggle for democratic representation continues.

The legacy of Archie Mafeje

Lungisile’s fascination with Archie Mafeje is as a black intellectual in a largely white world. A.C. Jordan’s attempt to keep the doors of UCT ajar in the 1950s did not help
Archie Mafeje in the 1960s, nor in the 1990s. The doors were shut in his face. I was interested in the so-called Mafeje Affair of 1968 when UCT first appointed and then rescinded his appointment, following collusion between UCT and the apartheid regime – undoubtedly one of the lowest points in UCT’s history. Lungisile’s interests were and are much more wide-ranging: to recover Mafeje’s politics, specifically his role in the Non-European Unity Movement and in SOYA (Society of Young Africa); to delve into his intellectual biography; to explore his ambivalence towards the discipline of anthropology; to examine his trenchant analysis of land and agrarian issues in Africa, showing in particular how an uncritical usage of European notions of property were entirely inappropriate for understanding the role of African lineages in relation to land; and to understand the details of the so-called unfinished business between Mafeje and UCT in order to throw light on the wider significance of Mafeje’s exclusion, and especially what it means for UCT as an institution. Finally, Lungisile tries to come to grips with the nature of Mafeje’s pan-Africanism. It is impossible to deal in any detail here with the variety and breadth of the concerns at hand.

Lungisile has done most in exposing UCT’s role in again excluding Mafeje in the 1990s, and he was integrally involved in the university’s attempt to make amends. The words of the late Rhoda Kadalie, an emissary sent by the council of the university after Mafeje had failed to reply to their invitation to be awarded an honorary doctorate, offer real insight: ‘For him an apology, coming from UCT at the time that it was done, seemed … more like the politically correct thing to do rather than one of real contrition’ (Kadalie, in Ntsebeza 2014).

This reminded me of the way in which Mafeje’s work is ignored at our universities, or engaged with in an act of political correctness rather than real engagement. At its conference in East London in September 2010, Anthropology Southern Africa, the professional association for the discipline, hosted a panel discussion entitled ‘Memorials, Myths and Memories: The Life and Work of an African Anthropologist (Archie Mafeje)’. The occasion was also used for an exhibition by the same title and to launch an accompanying booklet written by Andrew Bank. In it, Archie Mafeje is himself anthropologised, and it is deeply ironic that somebody who dedicated his intellectual life to the battle against alterity should himself be subjected to the approach which he so consistently denounced.

Taken together, the panel discussion, booklet and exhibition do not treat Mafeje as a scholar whose work deserves to be engaged with, commented on, dissected and criticised. Instead, Mafeje is feted in an exhibition. Apartheid museums used to display life-sized body casts of San hunters, usually in an idealised or stylised rural setting, complete with women tending fires with babies on their backs, straw huts in the background and the hunter with his bow and arrow and pouch poised appropriately. It is a racist moment frozen in time, presenting the San as without history, unchanging. The analogy with the Mafeje exhibition is striking. He is put on display as an item of curiosity, but his work is not taught at our universities, nor are his books and articles the subjects of intellectual debate. In effect, the political implications of his scholarship are simply ignored, through a studied indifference. How should we overcome this palpable neglect and crass misrepresentation of Mafeje’s work? Lungisile has dedicated himself to ensuring that Mafeje is remembered as a scholar whose work deserves to be engaged with in a manner worthy of his legendary seriousness.

There is no doubt that UCT treated Mafeje abominably, but Lungisile is mindful of the need to use Mafeje’s case as a metaphor for understanding racialised exclusion from
universities more broadly. He has also dedicated himself to exploring Mafeje’s political legacy in respect of insisting on long-term strategies and programmes of action rather than short-term slogans and populism (Ntsebeza 2016).

**Land and agrarian issues**

Just like Lungisile, Archie Mafeje spent an enormous amount of time studying the land question in South Africa and further afield. He contributed greatly to the corpus of our knowledge about land tenure and about rural politics and social relations.

It is now palpably clear that the South African land reform programme has been singularly unsuccessful in redistributing land to dispossessed blacks and it remains a major spatial barrier to developing a unitary imagination of the South African nation. Yet, we have people like Julius Malema who pretend to be in favour of far-reaching land reform while they offer unstinting support for criminal sections of the traditional leadership, like Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo, seemingly without appreciating the contradictions.¹ It is a mark of extreme opportunism that Malema issued a statement about the manner in which the ANC government apparently humiliated the king: ‘we have never seen such a humiliation. We thought the humiliation of our traditional leadership ended with colonial times’ (Mukhuthu 2016).

In contrast to Malema, Mafeje was very clear on how vitally important it was to dismantle the reserves under so-called communal tenure in order for genuine democracy to emerge. But we have done nothing of the sort and as long as the country is geographically divided along these bantustan lines it will be impossible to ensure a unitary imagination of the South African nation. Long before the expropriation of land without compensation was put on the national agenda, Lungisile was already writing about the social implications of Section 25 of our constitution in providing a legal sanction for colonial land theft (Ntsebeza 2007).

In 2013, myself, Lungisile and Kirk Helliker launched a book (Hendricks, Ntsebeza, and Helliker 2013) at a conference at UCT to coincide with the centenary of the 1913 Natives Land Act. This was not an ordinary academic conference, but instead a conference of social movements and NGOs involved in various struggles over land in the country, cementing Lungisile’s abiding concern with scholarship, struggle and throwing the doors of UCT open to popular movements. The conference adopted a detailed Declaration which, by formal arrangement, was handed over to the Presidency following a march to Parliament. This was in June 2013 and we requested a reply by the end of August. By the middle of September, when we had received nothing, we queried the official reticence and received a very apologetic reply: ‘We are very sorry, but we lost your Declaration and could you please resend it.’ We obliged, but it did not help. This singular lack of accountability is not what you would expect from a genuinely democratic government.

Before concluding, I would like to include a vignette about Lungisile’s courage. He writes very movingly of the killing in broad daylight of his cousin, Bathanda Ndondo, but it is what he did in response to the murder which struck me. He was fully aware that the police had killed his cousin, but nevertheless he went to the police station to report the murder. Can you imagine such bravery? The police had just killed his cousin and he is there...
at the police station to lay a charge of murder. We must also remember that his friend and comrade Matthew Goniwe had been killed just a few months before. This is Lungisile’s admirable calibre.

**Conclusion**

I am mindful of Thandika Mkandawire’s pointed statement that one of our big problems was the ‘failure of the political class to establish a productive and organic rapport with their own intelligentsia/intellectuals’ (Mkandawire 2000, 205). Across the continent, Mkandawire contends that only in Algeria (where intellectuals were organic to the FLN) and in apartheid South Africa (with Afrikaner intellectuals) did such an organic link develop between the two. In post-apartheid South Africa, we are confronted by a similar breakdown. It seems obvious that somebody of Lungisile’s calibre could make a huge contribution to policy and development in South Africa, yet he has been studiously ignored and marginalised. As Lungisile outlines, ‘The government set up a commission about expropriation without compensation and I was not included, I was considered, but the politicians didn’t want me, because they were scared I’d be critical. And they are right!’ (Krige 2019).

So, while the South African government tends to ignore all decency, constructive critique and deep wisdom essential for building the country, Lungisile is acknowledged by Leiden University in the Netherlands with the award of an honorary doctorate in 2019. While we applaud Leiden in doing this, we must ensure that our own government hangs its head in shame.

Like Mafeje, Lungisile is *par excellence* an intellectual, always questioning the mundane, exposing the platitudinous and very wary of opportunists. But he is an engaged intellectual, still organising, still contributing to peoples’ movements and still committed to social justice. In as much as Lungisile honours Mafeje by paying attention to his scholarship, our younger generation, in propagating the struggle, must also engage with the seriousness of Lungisile’s work.

**Note**

1. Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo is King of the AbaThembu people, and in 2015 was sentenced to 12 years in prison for kidnapping, assault and arson.

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