

A worker poet's passing

In 2005 Alfred Temba Qabula, a remarkable worker poet, died.

Qabula was known by thousands of workers in Natal in the 1980s for his poetry, plays and performances. Together with other cultural workers he worked hard to create a cultural movement amongst workers in Durban. He saw himself as part of a growing and confident democratic trade union movement. In 1985 he was central to the creation of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local and the development of a Trade Union and Cultural Centre in Clairwood alongside the shop steward council in the area.

Qabula was born in the Transkei in 1942. His father and uncles were miners and sugarcane workers. Migrancy and influx controls ruled his area's and his family's life.

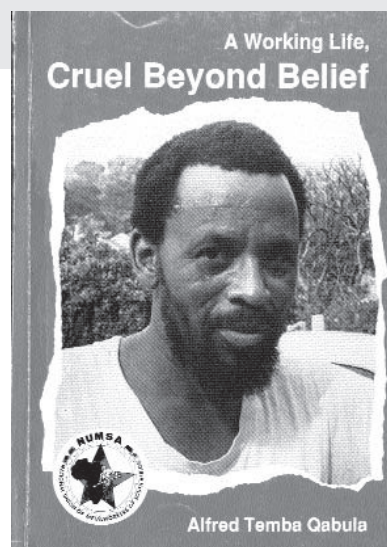
When he was 18 years old he was caught up in the Pondoland rebellion. He survived the conflict by hiding in the forests with friends. In 1964 he went by train to Carletonville to work with a construction company on the mines. He lived in the compound at night and worked as a plumber in construction gangs during the day. His wife and children stayed behind to work on the land. His heart, his feelings and source of inspiration remained with them in the countryside.

In 1974 he joined the Dunlop factory in Sydney Road Durban.

Here he had to adjust to the demands of the mass production of rubber products. He joined the Metal & Allied Workers Union (now Numsa) in 1983 and was part of the shop stewards' committee that organised all Dunlop workers into the union.

By 1984 he was dressing in colourful costumes to perform his *Izimbongo zika Fosatu*. He revived the imbongi poetry tradition in union gatherings in Natal. Oral poetry, which some thought dead or the preserve of praises, resurfaced as the voice of ordinary black workers and their struggles

His works were published in *Black Mamba Rising: South African Worker Poets in Struggle* and in *A Working Life, Cruel Beyond Belief* where he also told his life story.



In his poem on the next page, *Africa's Black Buffalo*, he uses the rural image of the buffalo to conjure up the rising power of the people against their oppressors. LB

(Thanks to Ari Sitas for details of Qabula's life)

AFRICA'S BLACK BUFFALO

by Alfred Temba Qabula

*The bull that left its byre when still in its calf stages,
who followed the rocky paths, followed later by
more calves
meeting on the mountain ridges longing
for their mothers, bellowing and longing
as they never reached the promised pastures
they were searching for,
to live and graze irrespective of their colour.*

*The black buffalo selected by the other bulls,
To leave the kraal to be apprenticed
It followed secret trails
And the others did not see it,
They heard rumours it was gone.*

*Outside the kraal, among others it bellows,
The other bulls give warnings, saying; "it is enough"
and "homecoming is near"*

*Apprenticed in Algeria and told to come back home
Spotted on its arrival by others
who complained that it was dangerous
to their grounds
and their families could not sleep at all.*

*They gathered declaring it an enemy, declaring war
They seized it and forced it in isolation
on the island of Patima,
They returned to separate it from its calves, saying
it is not safe enough from the island of Patima it
bellows and dust goes up
and the others get unrested by the dust,
each bellow shows more power
they throw it into further isolation,
on top of a mountain of fish
From such a distance there it remembers its calves,
It bellows as the dust moves up,
the calves hear and on goes their sturdy stampede*

*even some of the other associate
with the black buffalo's calves
together they stir up the dust on the paths
to the top of the mountain of fish*

*The oppressor leaps and shouts
that unfortunately, they will never be tolerated
while still alive
But their stomachs are grumbling and
running from worry
their tails were grass-wet from excretions,
but still they attack decimating all
even the milking calves are kicked,
stabbed by horns.
and finished.*

*But the day is coming,
The tall grass will be scorched
and a new season shall start with no lies*

*Calves from black, brown and white buffalo's are
stampeding
harnesses are cracking ,the yokes are left behind
they do not sleep at nights, they have
no place to sleep,
they do not eat because they have
no pasture to graze in,
they do not drink water,
because the rivers were diverted and dried
they are being apprenticed
they are swaying and beating up dust
shaking off suffering*

*Be prepared black buffalo
the weight of suffering is teetering
upon our shoulders.
to end
a cruel life beyond belief.*