

# Book Review

## The life story of Alfred Qabula, worker-poet

by LULI CALLINICOS

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'Together we are fighting, we are singing and we are uniting people to create a democratic South Africa without exploitation, oppression and fear.'

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NUMSA has just published a new book - *A working life, cruel beyond belief*, by Alfred Temba Qabula. This is an exciting new contribution to working-class culture - the life story of Alfred Temba Qabula, rural outlaw, migrant, factory worker, shopsteeward and imbongi. Qabula himself wrote the book in Zulu, and it was then translated into English.

Qabula hails from Bhalasi, an area in Pondoland, where for generations his ancestors ploughed the land. Until his father's generation, the family was able to resist colonisation and wage labour. Qabula's grandfather became a transport rider to earn money for taxes, until the coming of the railways put him out of business. Then he became a herbalist.

But Qabula's father and his brother were forced to seek work in the mines

and the sugar plantations. Qabula's life was scarred by this change. His father, a miner in Egoli, led a harsh and unhappy life, which, Qabula says, he "coughed out" onto his children.

Like so many children of migrants, Qabula was a stranger to his father. For the boy, his father's homecoming between the contracts were marked by the sjambok. The explosions of violence got so bad, especially after drinking bouts, that one day Qabula's mother packed the children and took them to her parents' homestead.

### Bring something new and progressive

Qabula's childhood was a life of poverty. There were not enough clothes or books for the children's schooling, so the brothers took turns



to go to school. But Qabula also received his education from other sources. Some of his strongest memories were the exciting new lessons he learnt at Christmas gatherings, when migrant workers returned from the mines, the farms and the factories:

"And everyone returned with something new. I remember one year, the miners came back with a new dancing style learnt from the Bhaca people... They even came with a new way of dressing, with all of them wearing similar hides. It was really beautiful... We learned the lesson that when you go somewhere you should come back with something new and progressive for the community.

"... In the end, although you would find some misunderstanding among the different sectors of our community, we all welcomed any progressive act from our fellow brother or sister no matter whether from the Civilised, the Ndlavinis, the Ndombolas or the Unosikhindis."

Another important lesson came from the forest. As a herd boy, Qabula spent long hours, sometimes days, with other children, un-supervised by adults. The forests around the area became 'places of learning'. The lessons that the forest taught Qabula enabled him to survive on its food, to evade his father's beatings, and in later years to hide from the police and the *amajendevu* (informers) during the Pondoland resistance in the early 60s.

### Pondoland rebellion

Qabula was barely eighteen when

the government introduced the Bantu Authorities Act to Pondoland. The apartheid plan was to divide the rural areas into ethnic 'homelands', moving people away from their ancestral lands if they were 'black spots' which did not fit on the apartheid map.

Coupled with this was the 'betterment scheme', which aimed at reducing the number of cattle grazing on the land in order to prevent soil erosion. Not surprisingly, ordinary black farmers, already desperately land-hungry, rejected the scheme. They saw it as yet another step by the white government to dispossess them of their remaining land and cattle. Many chiefs opposed the government plan - Albert Luthuli was one of them. But there were those who went along with the Trust, as the 'homelands' scheme was called.

Qabula remembers the huge protest meeting on Nquza Hill in 1960 which triggered off the Pondoland rebellion. The gathering was surrounded by "helicopters, armoured cars, army trucks, fighter planes". A man was shot, and a riot broke out. To this day, the army's violent response is imprinted in the memory of the people.

For some time, resistance and persecution followed. Rape, confiscation of cattle and beatings became a regular part of Mpondo life. Soldiers were after members of the ANC, whose membership, under the leadership of Govan Mbeki, was rapidly growing. Supporters of the chiefs who co-operated with the government were attacked by the resisters. Houses of informers were burnt down. Pondoland was in a state of civil war.





*Pondoland tribesmen in 1960 at the time of the rebellion*

*Photo: Eli Weinberg*

Like many young people, Qabula was part of this resistance movement. He seldom managed to go to school as he was almost continuously in a state of hiding. He and his friends subsisted in the forests as outlaws. In 1962 the government declared a state of emergency. "There were many things happening in the country which did not appear in the newspapers."

### **First job in Carletonville**

Through all of these struggles, the will to study and learn was strong. With the help of a family friend, Qabula managed to train and qualify as a plumber. In 1964 he followed his cousin to Carletonville on the Rand -

'the place of the hairy jaw' - where he almost immediately got a job as a plumber in a construction firm. It was Qabula's first experience of wage labour, and of the white boss. As a black worker, he experienced the anxiety of the Labour Bureau and the pass system. He spent some time sleeping in a broken-down car in the veld. Only after he was registered in his job, was Qabula able to stay in the local hostel.

*'Tall brown walls crowned  
with barbed wire fences  
Walls that hide what lives inside  
from all outsiders.  
And inside them, the inmates  
never see  
the world outside*

*They hear sounds  
rumours of lives  
they hear stories.'*

At the end of the year, Qabula left Carletonville - "that place of suffering, with its compounds, its violence, its homosexuality, a place crawling with the spirits of the un-appeased dead miners and workers. The place of gold, dagga, drink and oppression."

## **Qabula moves to Durban**

Qabula joined his uncle in Durban, where many Amaondo had found employment. As a plumber, Qabula had no trouble getting a job. He wrote an exam and passed very well, but to his disappointment, the boss did not give him an increase.

"I was told the Government was against equal pay for all."

Qabula had in the meantime married a childhood friend, Nellie Nqunqa, and his family was growing. Tired of "doing skilled work for nothing", he decided to join Dunlop, the tyre manufacturers. It was there, as an industrial worker in a large firm, that Qabula experienced exploitation and resistance at its most intense. Although he did not know it at the time, he had been employed as a scab - vacancies existed because of the dismissals in the 1974 strike.

The Dunlop working week consisted of 17 four-hour shifts, at three shifts per day. Qabula was trained as a fork-lift driver, spending days and nights driving from the base stores to the mill, feeding the machines with chemicals and raw materials to make

the rubber for the tyres. There he worked for thirteen years.

"There we made tyres of all kinds, of all sizes, for cars we never drive, for 'kwela-kwelas' that chase us in the townships and belts for bulldozers that demolish our shacks."

## **Qabula joins MAWU**

There were many problems that the workers had to face. Besides the long hours and the employers' disregard for the workers' health and safety, relationships with the foremen were bad, and instant dismissals were frequent. The firm also presented workers with hidden costs - they had to buy their own heavy-duty boots for work. Finally, after a number of clashes with supervisors and bosses, a group of fork-lift truck drivers decided to visit the Metal and Allied Workers Union offices.

There followed a lengthy struggle to get MAWU recognised at Dunlop. Employers favoured the 'sweetheart' union, the Durban Rubber Industrial Union, which had only recently opened its membership to blacks. Many months later, in 1983, after police had repeatedly arrested union organisers for trespassing in the factory, MAWU gained official entry. MAWU's strong democratic shop-floor approach had won over the trust of the workers, and the employers begrudgingly accepted MAWU as the workers' union.

Qabula was one of the fifteen shop stewards elected. But the struggles were far from over. In the years that followed, union members fought over



wages, unfair dismissals, home loans and the control of their pensions. Because of a slump in the tyre industry, the workers decided not to go on strike, but to use the weapon of canteen boycotts, go-slows, and finally, the 'siyalala' sit-in.

"We refused to leave because the factory belonged to us. We built it with our sweat and blood. We lost all our energy to this company and so it belonged to us."

lantes, workers from a number of firms downed tools. There were also stoppages for the release of Moss Mayekiso and his comrades. In 1985 COSATU was formed, the biggest union federation in South African history.

"I still praise COSATU today," writes Qabula. "... it is an organisation and a half. It educates the workers from both sides, about the community and about the workplace."



*Dunlop national shopsteward council. organised by MAWU*

*Photo: Labour Bulletin*

All these tactics proved to be successful. But, as Qabula pointed out, the successes were won only after many battles.

"Always arguments, always problems. We struggled for everything we had. Nothing came from management to us as a special offer."

The union movement spread. All down the road, workers of neighbouring firms were urged to join unions. Acts of solidarity increased. When people were killed at Hlobane by vigi-

## Qabula's poetry

In all the time leading up to that moment of unity, Qabula's involvement in workers' struggles was developing an added, rich dimension. During the wearisome hours on the fork-lift, Qabula was composing poetry in his head. He began to adapt the cultural expression of his home-  
stead community - the oral poem - to the modern life of the dispossessed black worker. In his mind, he exam-



ined the meaning of the forest at home - its dangers, its images, its "refuge for the homeless and frightened" during the Mpondo resistance. Congress fugitives, "teachers and commoners, it covered their tracks." With the entry of MAWU at Dunlop, Qabula recognised that organised struggle was once again renewed. "I knew the march through the forests had restarted."

## Forests and trees

In his poetry, Qabula frequently returns to the images of forests and trees. In their natural strength and beauty, they are the symbols of indestructible creativity and regeneration.

"Songs are the properties of trees, you have to be tall, you have to have stature, substance and trunk to sing."

Out of 'The Dumping Ground', where workers are discarded, forests emerge.

*'Sturdy trees  
with large and brilliant-coloured  
fruit  
emitting scents and beautiful to  
taste  
have grown  
and are available for free  
at the dumping ground'*

Although the trees are chopped and torn down, burned and dug into a deep hole, they begin to sprout again. They bear

*'more fruit  
more than ever before  
Beautiful fruit sprouting-out  
from this place of filth  
At the dumping ground  
They are greater than the farmers*

*yield  
and they are for free  
and the farmers produce is going  
to rot'*

## Images of modern industry

But Qabula also draws images from the modern industrial world. The union is likened to a mighty train, its engine assembled by the workers.

*'Its grumbling and churning  
has caused unrest in  
the stomachs of the capitalists.  
...What we have made moves  
forward  
When its wheels wear out, our  
unity jolts it forward  
When they block it on its way to  
Capetown  
it does not lose its power, it roars  
ahead'*

The mighty machine of worker organisation cannot be destroyed. After the death of his friend, Qabula warned the murderers:

*'Your Casspirs, your teargas and  
guns  
your vans and your dogs  
do not dampen the fire  
they feed it.  
...The wheel is turning  
the struggle moves forward  
we are not to lose strength  
we die on one side  
we rise on the other'*

## Two worlds of the migrant worker

Qabula's combination of rural and industrial images, sometimes in the

same poem, reflect the two worlds of the migrant worker. In these worlds many complexities arise. The working class has developed very rapidly. But it is still very much in the making. Some workers are townspeople, others still see their future on the land, even as that land dwindles before their eyes. Some have jobs, others will probably never be employed in their lives. These differences are exploited to the full, both by industrial capitalism and by the state.

In his own life, Qabula has experienced these differences within the working class. In these times of transition, there are many conflicts and contradictions. In Carletonville he was severely beaten up by Basotho 'Amarashea' mineworkers over the favours of a woman. Qabula also describes with great pain the breaking of traditions by his child's mother. Yet Qabula is no unthinking follower of tradition. He has seen how the state has manipulated tradition to divide the people. Although he feels deeply for ancestral and homestead values, he holds no truck with Inkatha.

"I shall keep on praising my brothers and sisters in the factories and shops, mines and farms - and I shall praise no chiefs."

There are no easy answers. But for Qabula one message rings clear: organisation is the key. Organisation and the creation of a workers' culture - theatre, poetry and song - which plays a major part in mobilising workers. ☆

## New generation of worker authors

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Luli Callinicos reviews *A working life, cruel beyond belief*, by ALFRED TEMBA QABULA, (NUMSA, 1989) 111 pgs.

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Apartheid has created many heart-aches, separations and divisions. Yet out of these experiences, a rich biographical literature has emerged. In the 1960s, when both apartheid policies and profits reached their peak, a large crop of black autobiographies was published. Many of the writers had been working for a living as journalists for *Drum* magazine.<sup>1</sup> They powerfully recorded, for the world at large to know, the anguish, humiliation and anger of their lives.

There were other writers, too. Modikwe Dikobe's writing movingly captured the day-to-day lives of ordinary working people - his *Marabi Dance* is set in the Doornfontein yards of the 30s and 40s. Other biographies, such as Luthuli's *Let my people go* were politically inspired, while in the 70s a new generation of angry young writers made their mark.<sup>2</sup>

Regrettably, only a few biographies of organised workers were published. Clements Kadalie's *My life in the ICU* and Naboth Mokgatle's *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African*



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are two that I can think of, but these were published in England and not easily available to South Africans.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, though, testimonies of workers themselves, written to mobilise their own class, their own community, and their own families, have begun to emerge. The dramatic growth of the democratic trade union movement, reinforced by popular and working-class culture, has helped to develop the confidence and self-expression of workers.

Early examples of worker literature are Madlenkosi's *Ilanga Lisopumela Abasebenzi*, and Petrus Tom's *My life's Struggle*<sup>4</sup>. Now comes an exciting new contribution to working-class culture - the life story of Alfred Temba Qabula, rural outlaw, migrant, factory worker, shop steward and imbongi, written in Zulu, and translated into English.

Alfred Qabula has written a valuable book. For that reason, I would like to ask some questions. Why are there no illustrations? If early family photographs exist, it would be interesting to see them.

Perhaps more important, Qabula's story would be enriched by photos of the major social events which form the background to this life story - scenes of the Pondoland rebellion, the homesteads, the contrasting life of the hostels, the 1974 Dunlop strike, the worker plays, the first COSATU rally, the praise poets. The power of the photograph must never be overlooked.

My second question is whether the original script, written in Zulu, will be published for the community to enjoy.

Those who cannot speak Zulu will be grateful to have access to the story and poetry in English. But surely the richness and rhythms of the story and poetry in their original Zulu should be available to those who can read it?

But these are simply questions. What is exciting is Qabula has crafted a new form of empowerment for working people. He has taken a traditional art and employed it in the service of the black working class. Through his words, whether written, translated or recited in his powerful poetry, Qabula is teaching his comrades to fight, to sing, to unite the people.

Inspired by his example, other comrades have begun to use culture to educate and to mobilise. His story helps us to understand a little of where this creativity comes from. We owe Alfred Temba Qabula, and other imbongi who sing with him, a debt of gratitude for an enduring testimony that speaks to all workers - be they 'the Civilised, the Ndlavinis, the Ndombolas or the Unosikhindis'. ☆

## Notes

1. These writers included Zeke Mphahlele, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Todd Matshikize, Bloke Modisane, Casey Motsisi.
2. Many of these writers' works appeared in *Staffrider*, and subsequently were published by Skotaville Press.
3. Clements Kadalie, *My Life in the ICU*. Naboth Mokgatle, *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African* (C.Hurst & Company, London, 1970).
4. Madlenkosi, *Lisophumela Abasebenzi: The Sun shall Rise for the Workers*, (Ravan, 1983); Petrus Tom, *My Life's Struggle*, (Ravan, 1984).