

Professor Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane: an obituary

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Professor Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane joined the league of ancestors in the evening of Friday 12 April 2013. He was four months shy of his 83rd birthday. It is often said that when an elder dies in a village, a whole library is burnt down.¹ With Prof Magubane we have a rich library of his scholarly works, political writings, a memoir, and several interviews.

For a generation of African students and scholars in North America, Magubane's "A critical look at indices used in the study of social change in colonial Africa" (1971, *Critical Anthropology*) would have the same insurrectional impact that Archie Mafeje's "Ideology of Tribalism" (1970, *Journal of Modern African Studies*) had on the other side of the Atlantic. The paper was sent to fifty scholars for review, with over twenty written reviews (Editorial Note, *Critical Anthropology*, 12[4-5]: 419). Often understood as a relentless (even polemical) critique of the Manchester School of Anthropology associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in the former Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), "A critical look..." is better understood as an uncompromising re-centring of the African experience in narratives on Africa, especially African in the context of settler-colonialism. As Magubane noted in his memoir, *My Life and Times* (2010: 252), his encounters early in his academic career with the presentation of Africa and Africans as what others acted upon instigated in him a passion "to rectify the situation in my scholarship in line with the post-colonial scholarship that was evolving in Africa."

Whether in his earlier works—such as his master's thesis dissertation at the University of Natal, on sports and politics in the townships of Durban, his doctoral thesis on African-American consciousness of Africa at the University of California, Los Angeles and his early scholarly journal articles such as "Crisis of African Sociology" (*East African* 5[2], 1968—or his subsequent works such as *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (1979), *The Making of a Racist State* (1996), *Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other* (2007), Magubane's driving motive was the centring of the African experience and the re-affirmation of the agency of Africans. The history of the savannah plains will not be that of the hunters alone but of the lions as well.

To understand Magubane and the corpus of his intellectual contribution to South African liberation scholarship on the one hand, and African Sociology on the other, one needs to locate him within the contending forces that defined 20th century South Africa, the African-American context of the 1960s, and the continental African anti-colonial movements. For a person who regularly described himself as "lucky" and who "happened to be at the right place at the right time," Magubane was as much a product of his time as he was an active force in setting his own stars. As with the 20th century story of

¹ This is often intended as a signifier of the non-literate character of such societies in which elders are considered repositories of knowledge. The problem with the aphorism is that the ontological underpinning of such societies hardly admits to the irrevocable destruction of knowledge that 'burning of the library' imagery connotes. Communication between the 'living' and the ancestors continues beyond the different 'planes of existence'.

his home-country, South Africa, the story of Bernard Magubane is one of triumph over immense adversity.

Born on 26 August 1930, within two generations of the colonial dispossession of the historical Zulu nation, the context of his birth and early childhood epitomised the eviscerating impacts of settler colonialism. His grandparents lived in the Zulu nation ruled by Cetshwayo kaMpande. By the time of Magubane's birth, colonial dispossession meant that his parents, Xegwana and Nozibukutho kaKhumalo, were squatters on a "White-owned" farm near Colenso, in the KwaZulu Natal Midlands. His father was a farm worker, who was also a seasonal migrant worker on the Durban docks during the dry season. An altercation between his father and the farmer forced Xegwana to flee Colenso with his family to Durban.² The family finally settled down in Chesterville, a new township in Durban. The working class environment of his home³ and the township, and the settler-colonial context of dispossession and pervasive racism would provide the vital resources that framed Magubane's intellectual approach. It was also a context in which radical trade union activism and the African National Congress-led resistance to the racist settler-colonial order meshed in the leading personalities and issues. African working class struggle was one side of a coin. The other side was the resistance against racial oppression and settler-colonialism. This thread runs through all of Magubane's intellectual works.

Had his father not fled the Colenso farm with the family in 1937, Magubane would probably have grown up a non-literate second generation farm worker. The restricted educational circumstances in Durban at the end of the 1930s and early 1940s regardless, the Magubane children proved to be quite precocious. Bernard progressed from Mount Carmel to Mazenod, and then the teacher's college at Mariannhill. Again, in all probability, Magubane would have settled into the life of a junior school teacher but the rise of the National Party to power in 1948 raised new challenges. Its heightened pursuit of racist policies, especially the Bantu Education policies, would set the limit on the options available in a teaching career for Magubane and many in his generation. It was Johnny Makhathini who raised the challenge to Bernard Magubane and others in their circle of friends in Durban in 1953, but it was the guidance of Mazisi Kunene that led Magubane to sit for the matriculation examinations and eventually gain admission to the Non-European section of the University of Natal in 1954. University education was a channel of escape and an act of resistance against the rising tide of National Party totalising racist policies.

Already married to the love of his life, Thembie (nee Kaula) and a growing family of his own, Magubane went to complete his junior bachelor's, Honours, and Master's degrees in Sociology at Natal. It was during this period that Magubane met and developed a life-long friendship with Leo Kuper, a Professor of Sociology at Natal at the time. Kuper supervised his Honours and Master's theses. Magubane and Tony Ngubo worked as field researchers for Kuper in materials that would be published as *An African Bourgeoisie* (Kuper, 1965). While diplomas have to be won, much of Magubane's education at this time was facilitated by anti-Apartheid resistance taking place outside the classroom and the analyses in publications like the *Guardian*, *Advance*, *New Age*, and *Fighting Talk*. However, the classroom provided

² Interview with Bernard M Magubane, 29 December 2009 (Deinfern, Johannesburg). Magubane, *My life and times*. Scottsville: UKZN Press, 2010, pp.14-15. There were three children in the family at the time. Magubane's older sister, Mary, and a younger sister, Florence.

³ His father, a dock worker, and his mother combined domestic labour services with informal traditional beer brewing (Interview... 29 December 2009).

him groundings in the works of leading “bourgeois” sociologists, having to read Max Weber and Emile Durkheim in the original. The dissonance between the debate going on in his classrooms and the lived experiences and struggles of people in his neighbourhoods is one thing that Magubane would reflect on then and later in life as disconcerting.⁴ From Zambia to Storrs (Connecticut, USA), Magubane’s pedagogic practices would be shaped by the need to avert such dissonance.

In another instance of being at the right place at the right time, the opportunity to continue his studies in the United States came through an encounter with an American who was passing through the University of Natal at the time Magubane was completing his master’s thesis work. He and Tony Ngubo were invited to apply for postgraduate scholarship to study in the US; a scholarship both received. Leo Kuper had left Natal in 1961 for UCLA and facilitated Magubane’s graduate school placement at the UCLA Sociology department.

The delay in Magubane’s departure (on 21 December 1961) was in large measure a micro-level impact of Dr H.F. Verwoerd’s infamous question: “What is the use of teaching “the Bantu child mathematics?” If teaching the African child mathematics was pointless, what would be the point of giving an African in his early thirties a passport to go for doctoral studies in the US? It took the intervention of several individuals and organisation for Magubane to secure the travel passport. The passport, valid until November 1964, was not re-issued until the 1990s. When Magubane left in December 1961, he was forced to leave behind his parents, wife, and three daughters. Thembe had also left teaching to train as a nurse in the search to escape being tools for delivering the National Party’s Bantu Education programme. The family was not to be re-united until Thembe and their three daughters joined him in Los Angeles in the Spring of 1965.

A student on a shoe-string scholarship, Magubane combined studying with holding down multiple low-paying jobs. He completed his Master’s degree in Sociology in 1963 and his PhD in Sociology in 1966. In early 1967, Magubane took up a teaching position at the new University of Zambia. His initial stay in the United States would form the third plank of the intellectual influence on his scholarship. While Magubane’s exposure to Marxist literature in the 1950s was through the contributions to the radical newspapers and magazines, it was at UCLA that he would read Marx and Engels in their own words for the first time. But while these would be influential, it was the writings of W.E.B Du Bois and the political struggles of the African American communities that shaped his thinking on race and class. He did his doctoral thesis on African-American consciousness of Africa (published as *Ties that Bind* in 1987). The period of graduate studies abroad was not a time of distancing from the political struggles in South Africa. In 1962, with Martin Legassick and Tony Ngubo, Magubane organised the earliest anti-apartheid picketing of the South African consulate in the West Coast. It was also a time for widening the pan-African network of friends and colleagues. Both would stand him in good stead later in life.

When Magubane relocated to Zambia in 1967, to take up a lecturing post in the new Department of Sociology at the University of Zambia, it was a decision he made against more financially rewarding job offers in the United States. The three years he spent in Zambia were not only exceedingly rewarding intellectually, they would insert him and his family in the growing network of ANC leadership in exile and South African exile community in Lusaka. Magubane had joined the ANC in 1951 in Durban.⁵ As Magubane would say, it was another case of being in the right place at the right time. The experience of

⁴ Interview with Bernard M Magubane, 03 January 2010 (Deinfers, Johannesburg).

⁵ Interview with Bernard M Magubane, 31 December 2009 (Deinfers, Johannesburg).

living and teaching in Zambia would bring Magubane face to face with the existential implication of colonial Anthropology as well as the imperative of creative pedagogy when available materials are largely irrelevant to the context in which he was training students. The first set of his scholarly works in the period include “Crisis of African Sociology” (1968), “*Pluralism and Conflict Situations in Africa: A New Look*” (1969) and “A Critical Look at the Indices Used in the Study of Social Change in Colonial Africa” (1971). They would bring Magubane early scholarly attention and a measure of academic superstardom.

Politically—and unanticipated at the time of his departure for Lusaka—the period 1967 to 1969 firmly placed him within the leadership circles of the African National Congress. O.R. Tambo would spend time at the Magubanes’—initially for space and time to work while the family was at work or school, and later to stay-over. Years later, Magubane would speak glowingly about the humanity of O.R. Tambo—not simply as one who led the Movement through the dark days of exile but about the humanity of a person who would help the Magubane girls with their Mathematics homework and do dishes with the family after dinner. Jack Simon and Ray Alexander would become close friends and intellectual sounding boards. Magubane would also speak with deep affection and respect for the young activists like Chris Hani and Basil February whom he met in Lusaka. Hani would lead the Luthuli Detachment in the Wankie Campaign and February would be the first martyr of that campaign.

From serving on the production team of *Mayibuye* journal of the ANC to being a delegate to the 1969 Morogoro Conference of the ANC, the period in Lusaka would serve to firmly ground Magubane’s life work within the works of the ANC. In many ways, Magubane saw his intellectual works as the pursuit of the political struggles by means available to a scholar. The Lusaka period was also a time for deepening his intellectual engagement with Marxist writings. This was the period of encounter with Frederick Engel’s *The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*—a work that would reinforce Magubane’s position that to understand the conditions in South Africa, one needed a global understanding of capitalism and its historical developments. Magubane would go on to publish an article in *Dialectical Anthropology* (1985, No. 10) on the continuing relevance of the work and Engel’s 1872 *The Housing Question* to Urban Anthropology.

In 1970, Magubane returned with the family to the United States, initially on a visiting appointment at UCLA but later in the year to a tenure track appointment at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. The UConn appointment, Magubane would argue, was another instance of a fortuitous convergence of events. The invitation to apply for the position at UConn was at the instance of James Faris, who first became aware of Magubane through his works while in Zambia. It was the start of a life-long friendship. Faris and Norman Chance would provide a near ideal environment—politically and intellectually—for the next 27 years that Magubane would spend at Storrs.

The period from 1970 to 1997 marked an immensely productive and politically engaging time for Magubane. In addition to his numerous scholarly works produced, Magubane’s two most important books, *The Political Economy of Race and Class* (1979, Monthly Review Press) and *The Making of a Racist State* (1996, African World Press) were released. Several of the articles have been republished in two collections. *South Africa—from Soweto to Uitenhage* (1989, African World Press) is a collection of Magubane’s more ‘political’ writings. *The African Sociology—towards a critical perspective* (2000, African World Press) is a collection of his more ‘academic’ writings. The more ‘political’ materials, Magubane would argue, were writings he did to keep himself sane over the long years of exile. The

more 'academic' writings were to keep his day-job. Yet, a close reading of both collections would suggest that the scholarly writings were driven by political commitment, as much as the political was driven by intellectual demands.

Magubane's scholarly works contended with the *pluralist* narratives of the "Liberal White" scholars and Anthropologists and the "neo-Marxists" as well. The former defined the South African conditions in terms of a 'plural society' and dismissed the relevance of class analysis. For Magubane, it was impossible to speak of the impact of colonialism on the indigenous population or their contemporary situation without confronting the exploitation of the labour-power of the local population. Memory is a weapon of the oppressed in negating efforts to routinize their lived realities. In the new settler-colonial society created, "white domination was not only economic but political and cultural as well. Any theory of change in the patterns of behaviour of the indigenous population must take into account this total situation" (Magubane 1971: 419). To account for the "total situation" requires a venture in historical sociology. For Magubane, it is in exploring the history of dispossession and disruption of the human conditions of the indigenous populations that one can account for their social existence in the present.

The neo-Marxists who focused exclusively on class relations fail to address the "over-determination" of racism (Magubane [1985] 2000: 482). Here, Du Bois (1933: 55) was an important source for Magubane: "First of all colored labor has no common ground with white labor. No society of technocrats would do more than exploit colored labor in order to raise the status of whites. *No revolt of a white proletariat could be started if its object was to make black workers their economic, political and social equals.*"⁶ In failing to grapple with the "over-determination" of racism and the specificity of the 'National Question' in South Africa, the neo-Marxists missed the knob of the situation. The issue, Magubane, would argue is not race or class but race and class; in the racist settler-colonial context, racism over-determines class. Much of what passed for the "workerist" discourse in South African labour historiography, in the 1980s, dismissed this critical element to the South African situation. In *Race and the construction of the dispensable Other* (2007) Magubane assembled the primary sources and arguments that underpinned his analyses since the 1970s.⁷

The undeclared undertone of Magubane's scholarship is the distinction that must be made between "White" people and others who may be of Caucasian or European descent but firmly rooted in anti-racist traditions and emancipatory politics. "White" is a category of power rather than phenotype or pigmentation. As a description of skin colour, 'white' is deeply false. Only in the context of racial domination does whiteness acquire its salience as a signifier of power over the 'dispensable Other.'

If Magubane's writings did not reflect the pessimism that sometimes afflicts exile scholars, it is largely because of his proximity to the liberation movements in Southern Africa and the ANC in the particular case of South Africa. His time in Zambia had placed him in close proximity to the leadership of the most prominent liberation movements in Southern Africa. The return to the United States and being at Storrs—with its close proximity to the ANC officials in New York—meant that he maintained a fire-side view and engagement with political works of the liberation movement. Over the years, and increasingly in the 1980s, Magubane would undertake representational duties for the ANC. In addition to the local anti-Apartheid movement in the West Coast, the increasing mobilisation work would bring him into

⁶ WEB Du Bois. 1933. "Karl Marx and the Negro", *The Crisis* 40(3), March, cited in BM Magubane, 1996, *The making of a racist state*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press, p.337.

⁷ These are materials that Magubane used in his teaching over the 27 year period at UConn.

close contact with a wide range of people in the anti-Apartheid community in the United States. Magubane would later serve as a member of the ANC delegation at the July 1987 meeting in Dakar with a delegation of Afrikaner intellectuals.⁸

Magubane was always the first to acknowledge that it was the strength derived from the warm family environment that he built with Thembe, their daughters and the growing number of grand-children that sustained him and her in exile—as much as the community that the ANC afforded him. A scholar committed to the liberation project, Magubane was himself sustained by the network of people committed to the same project. The friendship of James Faris and Norman Chance and of their families with the Magubanes in rural Connecticut provided both an enabling intellectual environment and support for his political works. When he was away from the university, he could rely on Faris and Chance to step in for him—personal angles and contributions that are easy to miss in a macro-history of emancipatory politics.

The final home-coming in 1997 was meant to be a period of rest, after retiring from UConn, but this was not to be. Yet, of the numerous works and challenges that he took on after 1997, the most significant and rewarding for Magubane was his invitation to direct the *Road to Democracy Project* under the auspices of the South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET) project.⁹ The project, at the instance of President Thabo Mbeki, was concerned with the recovery of memory and the documentation of the years of struggle in a period when documentation was a threat to underground work. The multi-volume works that have been produced under the SADET project, the nurturing of a new generation of South African scholars who have successfully continued the project,¹⁰ will serve as the enduring legacy of Bernard Magubane. The inclusive nature of the project is evident in the expansive coverage of the contributions of a diversity of movements, organisations, and forces to the South African liberation project.

In 1999, Professor Magubane received national honours of the South African government for his contributions to the social sciences. He was a recipient of honorary doctoral awards from the University of Fort Hare and the Walter Sisulu University. In 2004 he delivered the keynote address at the annual conference of the South African Sociological Association. July 2007 saw his investiture as a founding *Fellow of the African Sociological Association*. In 2010, an international conference was organised in Tshwane to mark his 80th birthday and to celebrate his intellectual contributions.

With the passing of Magubane, we would need to double our efforts in reversing the intellectual erasure and elective amnesia with which the works of scholars like Bernard Magubane are met in the mainstream of South African social science. The corpus of his works and the example of his life are important resources for educating a new generation of South Africans. They should be acknowledged as important aspects of our intellectual heritage.

⁸ BM Magubane. 2010. *My life and times*. Scottsville: UKZN Press, pp.318-319.

⁹ Interview with Bernard M Magubane, 3 January 2010 (Deinfern, Johannesburg).

¹⁰ Dr Sifiso Ndlovu, a trained historian, worked with Prof Magubane from 1997 and went on to succeed Magubane as the Director of the SADET project.