Tatamkulu Afrika: Poet of South Africa's Forgotten People[1]

Chris Barron

Tatamkulu Afrika, who has died in Cape Town at the age of 82, was one of South Africa's foremost poets, although he was into his 70s before his work achieved recognition. He completed a volume of poetry when he was 11 and sent it to a reviewer, who told him to forget about poetry. At 17, he had a novel published in England. He assumed it had gone up in flames when the publishing house was bombed in World War Two but a copy was unearthed at the Johannesburg Library by a diligent researcher and fan.

In spite of Afrika's early start, writing did not come easily to him. After he won a slew of awards for his poetry in the 1990s, people began attaching the word “prolific” to him. If by this they meant he wrote with “contemptuous, arrogant ease,” he responded that they were wrong. His published work was the result of weeks, months and even years of polishing, pruning and throwing away, he said. His success was due to “unremitting, grinding work.”

His determination to get it right after many years of naïve, untutored floundering was inspired, eventually, by sheer rage after he was imprisoned in 1987 as a “terrorist.” He claimed the suffering of the youths with him, and the way prison changed them, broke his heart. He came out “enraged,” and with a sharpened appreciation of the suffering and emotions of oppressed people outside. He wanted to express his rage, and engaged his muse with more serious intent than before. He sought advice and was humble enough to take it.

“I got it right,” he said in an interview with the literary journal *New Coin*, “because people helped me, told me where I was being old-fashioned, or crude, or naïve, or whatever, and I rectified it, and the muse found it easier to speak through me. Now we’re becoming real tjommies.” He also read widely. Two major sources of inspiration were Gerard Manley Hopkins and Walt Whitman.

By his own account, Afrika was born in Egypt on December 7 1920, his father an Arab and his mother a Turk. When he was two they came to South Africa.

Shortly thereafter both parents died in a flu epidemic and he was adopted by an English-speaking couple of 1820 Settler stock and brought up on their farm in what is now Limpopo as John Charlton. Autobiographical poems suggest his childhood was not a happy one. He claimed his foster father was “a horrible man,” but had a close relationship with his foster mother, who tutored him at home until high school, when he became a boarder.

He dropped out of matric in order to write his novel. His foster mother was horrified - until she read it. Then she was so impressed that she encouraged him to send it off to publishers.

It was at this time that his foster parents told him he had been adopted. His foster mother added that because South Africa was a difficult country where race mattered, she’d better tell him that his parents were Asian. “It was as though someone had

dropped the bottom right out of my world," he remembered. "I felt rootless all of a sudden, lost, absolutely lost."

During the war he was captured at Tobruk and spent three years in a prisoner-of-war camp. While "inside" he wrote a short prose work but was "devastated" when the Germans destroyed it in front of him. It was years before he ventured to put pen to paper again. Last year, his novel Bitter Eden, based on his experiences as a PoW, first in Italy and then Germany, was published.

After the war, he formed a close relationship with an Afrikaans family and adopted their name, Joubert. He changed his first name to Jozua .

"Sniffing adventure," he went to Namibia. After working as a barman and playing the drums in a band, he got a job on the copper mines.

In the 1960s, Afrika came to Cape Town and was jobless for six months. "I knew hell then, I knew what hunger was," he remembered. He was befriended by a Muslim family and went to live with them in District Six. Until then an atheist, he was introduced to the Qur'an, spent a week reading it and became a Muslim. He took Ismail as his middle name.

For the first time, Afrika thought seriously about life. He began writing religious poetry and started a charitable organisation called Al-Jihaad to feed the poor. This led to increasing collaboration with ANC activists. It was during this period that MK

cadres gave him the name Tatamkulu Afrika, which means “old man of Africa,” which he adopted officially.

In order to continue staying in District Six, he had himself reclassified from “white” to “Malay.” When the area was demolished, he occupied a garage and tiny back room in the ‘coloured” part of Woodstock. His life was one of austerity and solitude. This was partly for religious reasons, partly because of poverty.

After retiring from his job as a bookkeeper he received several small pensions but most of this money went into Al-Jihaad. He kept only what he needed for a frugal existence. He also realised that the less complicated his material circumstances, the more time he'd have to write poetry before death, which he constantly felt breathing down his back, claimed him.

In the 1990s he moved into a “wendy house” in someone's backyard in Bo-Kaap. Here one of his few possessions, along with an ancient typewriter and his camp bed, was a letter from Nelson Mandela pinned proudly to a plank wall. Mandela had written to thank him for some poetry Afrika had sent him.

Until he was in his 70s his only transport was a bicycle, and his most familiar accessory a pair of bicycle clips. For the rest, he walked, even though for the last six or seven years he was 70% blind. This gave him unique access, certainly as a poet, to the underworld lives of the marginalised and forgotten, people he wrote about with unsentimental clarity.

Afrika was intensely independent, jealously protective of his reclusive lifestyle and a man of few (spoken) words. Although he once told an interviewer he'd married briefly and had a son, he says in an unpublished autobiography that he invented this to stop old man Joubert pestering him about his bachelorhood.

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[1] This is an edited version of an article that was originally published as an obituary in the *Sunday Times*, Insight, 12 January 2003. It is reproduced with permission (Editor).