

### **Embittered Histories: The Other Sharpeville and the Making of South African Pasts**

JACOB Dlamini died a gruesome death. He and his wife Masabata were in their house on Nhlapo Street in Sharpeville when a group of residents, marching down Zwane Street to the local offices of the Lekoa Town Council, on which Dlamini served as Deputy Mayor, attacked his house. The residents were protesting against a R5.90 rent increase recently announced by the council. As the residents marched past Nhlapo Street, some of them broke off from the march and stoned his house. The police arrived immediately, fired teargas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds. The police asked Dlamini to come with them for his own safety. Dlamini refused. The police left. Fifteen minutes later, the residents regrouped and began stoning Dlamini's house again. He came out armed with a 9mm Star pistol. He fired into the crowd, injuring one woman. He went back into the house. The residents continued to attack the house. Someone threw a petrol bomb into the house. Dlamini, still armed, ran out of the house. He tried to jump over the wire-mesh fence that separated his yard from that of neighbour Tshepo Stoffel Maile.

About two to three people, never identified, broke away from the residents and ran after Dlamini. They wrestled him to the ground outside Maile's kitchen door, disarmed him and began assaulting him. Other residents, also unidentified, joined in. They stoned Dlamini around the head, knocking him out. As Dlamini lay unconscious outside Maile's door, some residents pushed his car out of the garage and onto Nhlapo Street. They turned the car on its side and set it alight. As the flames consumed the car, two or three people, also never identified, dragged Dlamini's limp body to his burning car. They set him alight. He was alive but unconscious. Asked during the trial of the Sharpeville Six what actually killed Dlamini, Herbert Arthur Church, the District pathologist for Vereeniging, answered: **"Die oorsaak kan ek nie presies vastel nie. Dit was breinbesering en verbranding. Ek weet nie watter een van die twee nie, maar die breinbesering..."** (I cannot determine precisely the cause of death. It was brain injury and burning. I don't know which of the two, but the brain injury...)

Pushed by the prosecutor to say which of the two – brain injury or burning – might have killed Dlamini, Church said the brain injury would have killed Dlamini eventually. He had found lacerations all around Dlamini's head. He had also found internal bleeding, a skull fracture and blood in the trachea – this last bit of medical evidence proof that Dlamini was still alive when he was dragged to his car and set alight. The attack began at about 9am. By 1pm, when the police arrived to collect Dlamini's corpse, he was long dead. Dlamini was among 50 people, four of them town councillors, killed around the Vaal Triangle townships of Sharpeville, Sebokeng, Boipatong and Bophelong, that bitter Spring day on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 1984. The police killed many of the dead but some, like Dlamini, were killed by groups of residents protesting against unpopular councils such as the Lekoa Town Council. The 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, which came at least six months before ANC president Oliver Tambo, called for South African townships to be rendered ungovernable, marked the start of an uprising that was to lead, by December 1984, to the collapse of the Lekoa Town Council and, the following year, the collapse of Black Local Authorities around the country, and the

declaration of a state of emergency. Few people would have mourned the demise of Dlamini's council, voted into office in late 1983 by only 12% of eligible voters in Sharpeville. But many would have mourned or been touched by his death.

### **Who was Dlamini?**

At the time of his death, Dlamini was 1.65m tall and weighed 76kg. He was the father of three children, a boy aged 12, a girl aged 7 and a four-year-old boy. He was a former teacher at Tswelopele Higher Primary School in Sharpeville, where one ex-pupil and political rival, Bongi Matsose, remembered him as a good teacher and disciplinarian. Neighbour Cornelia Sefadi, 77, said Dlamini was a man of stature: "**Une a le motho was seriti.**" Dlamini, she said, was not one for chitchat. Esther Mosia, 67, said Dlamini was conscientious. "He treated us well." Mamonare Leah Netshivhale, 84, said Dlamini was generous. "He would give me lifts." But not every resident had good memories of Dlamini. Maile, Dlamini's neighbour to the left, said while Dlamini valued education, he was also arrogant and haughty. "He would look at you soos jy's vokol," said Maile. "He trusted war and power. But he fell." Dlamini died on a Monday. Maile said he implored Dlamini for three days before his death – "Vrydag, Saterdag, Sondag" – to take his family to safety. Dlamini refused. "He was powerful. He was killed by power." Matsose, the 56-year-old who remembered Dlamini as a good teacher and disciplinarian, said Dlamini "thought he was a teacher even to the community. That's the mistake he made. He did not think change would come during his lifetime". Matsose recalled an incident in the early 1980s during which Dlamini tried to evict the Matsoses from their council-owned house. Dlamini had allegedly sold the house to another family. The Matsoses survived by walking out of the meeting at which Dlamini wanted them to agree to the sale.

But neighbours such as Paulinah Ramogale, 66, had good memories of Dlamini. "He was a good man. He did not look down on us." Ramogale remembered Dlamini serving as MC at an uncle's funeral. Asked about the day Dlamini died, Sarah Moeketsi, 87, answered: "That was a sad day. I don't want to remember that day." But there are people who have had no choice but to live that day over and over again. After Dlamini was killed, his wife Masabata lost her mind and died shortly thereafter. His children live in silence but there are claims that their father's death took an untold toll on them. Speaking of one close Dlamini relative, neighbour Tshepo Stoffel Maile said: "**Hy is onder die bottel.**" He drinks too much. When I began talking to Dlamini's sister about this talk last year, she was reluctant to say anything. No one would understand the family's pain, she thought. When I spoke to her again more recently, she said the events of September 1984 were still too fresh in the family's collective memory to talk openly and publicly about them. Dlamini is dead. His family lives on with the trauma of his death. Anna Mbatha, a 65-year-old woman who lives in the yard – not the house – that was once Dlamini's (the house was destroyed), had another possible explanation for the family's refusal to talk openly about its loss: skaam. Mbatha believes Dlamini's family might be too ashamed by the circumstances of his death. So they mourn his loss in private, disavow it in public. Yet, in some ways, Dlamini never really died. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September in 1997, 13 years and two days after Dlamini died, the law firm of Snijman and Smullen, acting for the Kopanong/Vereeniging Metropolitan Substructure issued a summons against Dlamini for failing to pay more than R1000 in rates and taxes.

The Emfuleni Local Municipality continues to issue monthly statements in the name of Jacob Dlamini. The last one of which I have a copy, dated August 10, 2010, said Dlamini owed R4767 in unpaid rates and taxes. How is it possible for one to die such a public death and yet to live on in such bureaucratic fashion?

### **The lives of Jacob Dlamini**

If, as Carl Schmitt claims, sovereign is he who decides on the state of the exception, he who decides on who may live and who may die, Jacob Dlamini's death, I argue, was the outcome of a clash of sovereignties. It was the result of a battle over legitimacy between the residents of Sharpeville, on the one hand, and the apartheid state, on the other. In attacking Dlamini so brazenly, executing him so spectacularly and publicly, the residents of Sharpeville involved were staking their claim as a collective sovereign empowered by "the people", "the masses" and "the will of the people" to decide on who may live and who may die. In coming down hard on the residents of Sharpeville, killing scores, arresting hundreds and mounting what became known as the Sharpeville Six Trial, the apartheid state sought to cast itself as the only legitimate authority in South Africa, the only sovereign with the power to declare a state of exception and to decide who may live and who may die. Jacob Dlamini's corpse, then, became in part the basis upon which the political future of South Africa was decided.

Dlamini became what Giorgio Agamben called a homo sacer, that quaint figure from Roman law who, to paraphrase Macaulay's Horatius, could never die better. Dlamini, as homo sacer, could neither be sacrificed nor murdered. Dlamini, as homo sacer, could enjoy neither heroic nor sacred death. For the residents of Sharpeville who saw their actions as expressing "the will of the people", Dlamini could be killed but not murdered. Dlamini could be burnt to death but not given a meaningful death. He could, in other words, enjoy nothing more than an animal death, an organic death that put an end to his bare life. Not being a comrade or a freedom fighter, Dlamini could not be martyred. For the apartheid state, on the other hand, Dlamini was indeed murdered. He was murdered by five men and one woman acting in concert with what the charge sheet called "a mass" and with the "common purpose" to "persuade the Government of the Republic to do something or not to do something or to adopt a specified viewpoint or to abandon it" and/or "to intimidate, to demoralize or to persuade the general public; a particular population group or the inhabitants of a particular area to do something or not to do something". This was, as I said, a clash of sovereignties, a contest over legitimacy. Which of the two, "the people" or "the Government of the Republic", had legitimate authority over the use of force?

But Dlamini was more than just a corpse on which this clash and contest were staged. He was also a father, a neighbour, teacher and many things besides. He was not merely bare life – a life that could be killed but not sacrificed, murdered but not monumentalized. I urge you to remember that. By asking you to remember Jacob Dlamini and the thousands of bodies that line our long road to freedom, I want to challenge you to think critically about the meaning and cost of that freedom. I implore you to ask if the tree of freedom did indeed have to be watered and nourished, as both Robert Sobukwe and Solomon Mahlangu are reputed to have said at different times, by human blood? Did people have to die so we may be free? To put my question crudely, did the death of people – either because they, like Jacob Dlamini, were sell-outs, "enemies of the people" who

deserved a spectacular ending, or like Solomon Mahlangu, freedom fighters who avoided meaningless death by becoming martyrs to the cause of freedom – have to be the means by which we achieved the end that was our freedom from apartheid? Put another way, did Nelson Mandela have to prove his commitment to the liberation of South Africa by expressing his willingness at his treason trial to die?

### **The Secret, the taboo and the disavowal**

To ask these questions is, I believe, to raise difficult questions about the secrets, taboos and disavowals that define the archive of the struggle against apartheid. If we are to take seriously the challenge put to us by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, to say the unsayable, ask the unaskable, expose secrets, break taboos and avow the disavowed, and I believe we must, we have to ask these questions. This means that, ultimately, the question to ask is not: ‘How can man die better?’ as was asked of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and many others, but why should human life be reduced to means? Let me anticipate the standard response to my questions about the place of violence in our resistance struggle (namely, that we had no choice but to take up arms, that we had no alternative but to kill and die for freedom) by saying that whatever archive one cares to look at does not bear out that conclusion. Apartheid did not suffer a military defeat. It suffered a moral defeat. Sure, the armed struggle was not the only form of struggle. There were many others. But, for me, the question remains: was the armed struggle necessary? To ask that question is to break, I hope, one of the cardinal taboos of the liberation struggle. To violate that taboo is to raise, I hope, questions about the secrets and the disavowals that have come with us into post-apartheid South Africa. Some questions about the way we achieved our freedom may have ready answers. Many of them may not have any answers at all. They may in fact lead to other questions.

There are three things I would like you to think critically about this evening:

1. The failure of the imagination that defines post-apartheid South Africa
2. The corrupting influence of the dialectic of means and ends in our politics
3. The urgent need to slay the demon of heroism in favour of heroic acts.

### **The failure of the imagination**

There are many examples to which one could point to illustrate the failure of the collective imagination in post-apartheid South Africa. But let me point out one of the most egregious. Surely, the intellectual bankruptcy of apartheid and its moral depravity, were not due to the fact that apartheid did not give black people flush toilets, fresh drinking water, tarred roads, enough houses and well-endowed schools, or that it did not educate enough black doctors, engineers and accountants. These were all striking examples of the fundamental wrongness of apartheid. They must be corrected. But, to put it crudely, the struggle against apartheid was not about who between the liberation movement and the apartheid state could build better toilets for black people. Yet, these – RDP houses, toilets, tarred roads, affirmative action, BEE – have become the measure of our freedom. That, for me, marks a serious failure of the imagination on our part. That leads me to my second point.

### **The corrupting influence of means and ends**

Flush toilets, safe and clean drinking water, roads without potholes are indeed important. But they cannot, as they have, become the sole focus of our politics.

The number of people who travel on roads without potholes cannot be the measure of the quality of our democracy. But that is exactly what we have. In many ways, even the new Protection of Information Bill cannot be understood independently of our obsession with means and ends. The ends are, as the bill says, to protect certain information from destruction, loss or unlawful disclosure and to regulate such protection. The means are all sorts of measures that have the potential to undermine our democracy. That is not the only instance where one sees the corrupting influence of means and ends. As commentators such as Steven Friedman have pointed out, government's fixation on the doctrine of service delivery has had the adverse effect of denuding our politics of meaningful participation by ordinary South Africans. Ordinary citizens have become clients, hapless and passive agents to whom know-it-all bureaucrats deliver services. It is all about means and ends. If some educated bureaucrat and powerful politician know what means are good enough to give you Mr. and Mrs. Citizen, a better life, what point is there to a politics whose defining feature is the pursuit of the good life, a life irreducible to any Human Development Index? History might not go in a straight line but it is not too hard to see the same obsession with means and ends we see today at play in the killing of Jacob Dlamini. He was nothing more and nothing less than the means to our freedom. That approach is obscene. A human being died that September morning in 1984 – not a means to our freedom. This leads me to my third and last point.

#### **Heroism versus heroic acts**

This gathering comes barely a month after the national and international scare over the health of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's hero par excellence. What did that scare tell us about ourselves as South Africans? If I may be permitted to say the unsayable, Mandela will indeed go someday. He will not always be with us. There will come a day when he, like Sobukwe, Jacob Dlamini and many others, will no longer be among the living. So why the scare? Why act as if death is not for Mandela? There are many explanations for that but Chris Thurman provided the most compelling for me. I am corrupting his argument here but Thurman argues effectively that Mandela is the national and international hero through whom many of us live vicariously. Mandela is the hero whose presence allows us not to be heroes in our own lives. He is the excuse many of us turn to to explain why, seventeen years after the end of apartheid, we have not lived up to our own promises. He is the big man in whose shadow we can walk, convinced that we cannot emulate his example, believing that there can only be one Mandela. However, all this evasion does is to dehumanise Mandela, dehistoricise him and make him larger than life while absolving us of the moral responsibility to become better people. We fasten on Mandela the hero because we dare not accept the challenge posed by his heroic acts. Mandela is not a hero. He is a human being whose heroic acts have allowed him to walk taller. He is not perfect. He is a human being who has tried through heroic acts to rise above the imperfections that define human life. Let Mandela the hero go. But hold on to the heroic acts that have made him such a great man. Jacob Dlamini was not a perfect man. We must hold him responsible for the moral and political choices he made. But we must also accept that Dlamini was more than the sum total of his moral and political choices.

#### **By way of a conclusion**

Jacob Dlamini: Not for citation

On the eve of the anti-pass protests in March 1960, Sobukwe issued a number of instructions to his followers. They were, he said, to observe absolute non-violence. Sobukwe said: "This is not a game. We are not gambling. We are taking our first step in the march to African independence and the United States of Africa. **AND WE ARE NOT LEADING CORPSES TO THE NEW AFRICA.** We are leading the vital, breathing and dynamic youth of our land. We are leading the youth, **NOT TO DEATH, BUT TO LIFE ABUNDANT.**"What, I ask, do you think we are leading and where, more importantly, are we leading them to? Thank you.

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