

## **MY HUNGER PROTEST STATEMENT**

by Sello Maake kaNcube

It is said that: “A man’s life is a journey through his life to try and find the simple but great impressions that first found access in his life.”

I would like to believe that I am a child of resistance. Nine days after my birth in 1960 saw the Pass Law resistance in Sharpeville. The spirit of that resistance must have found itself in my infantile nostrils as in some small way I have always been standing up for something.

June 1976 took away political virginity.

In 1986 when I was in Canada on tour with the production of *Woza Albert!*, during a Q&A after the show I was asked if think doing protest plays would help to liberate us.

And my answer was that in 1976 I threw stones, and that led to the scrapping of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, and “Today I am throwing stones from the stage for the liberation.”

Later, after democracy came, I stood up for black scriptwriters in the industry.

In my own small ways, I have again and again contributed to liberation of my country. I may not have suffered detention on Robben Island or exile. However, having lived under Apartheid was prison itself. Living with a constant threat to one’s life and being reminded of being a lesser being. I have had my fair share of that.

Now I stand before you about the hunger protest. Do I think that this will amount to anything? Well, every little bit helps – and if the bits each and every one of us did, had not been done, for instance, during the Apartheid years, we wouldn’t have had this new dispensation.

All I know is that I have always stood for something in my life. And this is one of those times that I have to do so. The cultural development that has suffered the brutality of colonialism and the ravages of Apartheid is presently choked by greed, mismanagement, and outright violation of my and my fellow countrymen’s human rights. It is so disheartening when the very fighters of Apartheid who have been given and entrusted the mandate to help us get our dignity back are the very people subjecting us to worse indignity and violation of human rights.

Protests against service delivery happening around the country bear evidence to the indignity that people still go through. The corruption that is so prevalent in my country at the moment can be appropriately equated to a crime against humanity.

When I heard the statement - “I didn’t get into the struggle to be poor” - you won't begin to imagine the consternation I felt. And to think it was MY vote that put person in that position, with a mandate to level the fields and help in dragging people from the muddy slough of poverty. And now it's all about HIM. I couldn't, and still can't, help but feel a numbing sense of despair.

I also can't help but be reminded of an expression that many mothers would say to their children: “If you don’t wake up, you'll end up feeding on the crap of your counterparts.” Sadly this crap has been misdirectedly dished up to us by those we think we share an affinity with.

When it is evident is that for many strugglers against Apartheid there is a latent envy to be like the oppressor. For others of us there is obvious determination for a new social order. Those do not go together well. A primal consciousness gives us an advantage to incisively pierce white culture from a non-European frame of reference. Rather than desiring to ape those who had performed indignity and inhumanity on the African inhabitants of this country, we would like to re-imagine and re-create ourselves in our OWN image. And constitute a culture dictating the terms under which the world is to be perceived and experienced.

I am not deriding Euro-centric or “white” culture. It is part of South Africa's heritage too, and it is to be admired, how the European culture promotes and enlivens itself. I have done my Shakespeare and other plays written by overseas writers. No problem with that. But at the end of the day we also do have our OWN stories to tell. You never go to Germany and can't see a play in German – or Thailand or China or anywhere. You come to SA and see no plays – and now perhaps no TV either - in African languages. Our culture is being abused.

The pseudo-gained economic empowerment - presently without cultural empowerment - can only highlight the lack of integrity, pride, soul, and dignity in day-to-day living.

The ability to articulate our grievances in a healthy and civil way cannot be attained against a decade and a half of personal enrichment and mass impoverishment.

While the well-endowed bellies of the economically-empowered acquired from relishing lavish dinners may be a sign of that enrichment, it is a definite symptom of cultural kwashiorkor. Picture that belly without the Armani suit, against the background of a shack, and you will know what I mean. A protuberance fed on the lack of the main ingredient of character probity.

Our leaders have failed us. It's so clear, too many of our leaders have been aspiring and envious to enter the houses of the former oppressors. There has been no real agenda or something they wanted to pioneer and build for the country.

There was a time when I viewed being a coconut in cultural terms. However, now looking at it in

economic terms, one can see a peculiar kind of coconut perpetuating the “if you can’t beat them join them” phenomenon.

The South African people deserve better. It is not in “working together” that we will do more. It is in being accorded the resources that we will do more.

Recently I hear on the Barry Ronge show that: Grassroots are not on the ground anymore. This in my opinion cultivates a fertile ground for the re-escalation of Euro-centric culture and inclusion of tokens who fit in that mould.

A few years ago I was standing for the Artistic Directorship for the Market, a position I knew I was not going to get. Firstly because I was already hell-bent to go and do my master’s degree in the UK, and secondly because the quota had already been covered - a black Managing Director had already been appointed. There was no way that that institution was going to be left in the hands of two black people.

Culturally black people are grossly short-changed. In the days of Apartheid I could understand. However, in a very twisted way, we were culturally stronger during those days than now. African culture was more protected, had more of its own voice, under Apartheid. Yes, I repeat, it was twisted – but everything was. At least then you had your PACs, NAPACs, KPABs. Custodians of culture in various ways. They protected it.

Since the new dispensation, those kinds of institutions have been wiped away. We need them again, even more now than in the past. Because here in this situation for over 300 years our culture has never had a strong voice. Certainly not today. How can it have a voice – when it needs to be propagated, nurtured, by institutions of culture – and those institutions are corrupt?

Yes the SABC is a problem, but it is not THE problem, just a symptom of what is happening in the country. As a black person, I have worked in the industry for over two decades. There is a black story to tell. I was even contemplating giving up acting because there was no black parts to play. The parts I was offered over the years were usually lousy roles in good stories. Fill-in roles, cardboard cutouts. Even today African culture is just a fill-in. You go to a function and you get the African dancers who will just dance to make sure there is a little bit of this culture mixed in! These are some of the things that actually grind my ass to the bone on a regular basis.

The country needs to wake up for itself and the government needs to wake up to what is happening in the country. We the people cannot be on the peripheries of life.

All over the world, TV is a training ground for artists, writers, crew, all kinds of cultural workers

who later become the backbone of the society's discourse. If you look at the kind of TV that is coming out all over the world – even people who are well known names are going for TV – Glenn Close, James Spader, for instance in America – and you realize how important TV is. And how in trouble we are if we are not going to have a national public broadcaster that is going to take care of its citizens and provide us a useful and effective platform.

In fact, TV and culture are more important here than elsewhere. South Africa is a fledgling country in the deep throes of reconstruction. We don't have a common voice as a nation – there has to be a concerted effort to unite the nation with culture. Language can be a great divider, there can be ways of bridging it, but right now we have the continuing architecture of division

And I think what is sad is I can never see an English person or an Afrikaans person sitting concertedly and making sure they are pushing their child NOT to know their heritage. No white person would tolerate their child not being taught to speak English. That will never happen. Why should I tolerate my child not being taught African language, African culture? I have a 10 year old boy now, his knowledge of Setswana or Zulu is so limited. He expresses himself more in English. That's what's going to happen now if keep failing with our programs to push local culture and local languages.

And that is what we are doing. We have a government that I voted for, and I also have their membership card, and yet, this is the situation they are propagating. For me, that's very very sad.

The legacy of our culture has been compromised by replacing it with youth-driven initiatives guided by people with no affinity to their culture- I had the personal experience of that with elimination of David Photo who played the head of the Morocco family in Generations. I was the replacement. Needless to say I was incensed.

If one would pause to look back, one would see a litany of robbing African people of age-old wisdom. The white culture of this country is built solidly from its Euro-centric roots and age-old wisdom. Look around at the custodians of it. Pieta Torein, Richard Loring, The Lindbergs, Daphney Kuhn to mention a few.

It is in the light of all this that I am embarking and joining this hunger protest to highlight the cultural starvation of African people. SABC is a major symbol of it and our government is its world-renowned architect.

Yes I am currently working, on *Scandal!* on a daily basis, and on other work, as well as possibly traveling to the Philippines this month. I know someone will jump now as say how can I be starving when I am working. The fact is I am SURVIVING not living. And if you would take time to

investigate you would realise that is what our culture is doing - surviving. It's not alive. It's hanging precariously on the fringes of the predominant white culture.

I survived in the UK when I was there. I don't expect to just survive in my own country. I came home to live but evidently am thrown into survival mode. Let my hunger be the epitome of that.

I felt like quitting *Generations* at one point back then. I had a son who was an aspirant actor. He said, "But Papa if you stop, what are we going to eat?" I told him, "It doesn't matter, I am not going to tolerate this nonsense. We will survive."

But it is enough of just surviving. Enough.

I would like to acknowledge and extend my gratitude to Michael Lee rousing me from my sluggish sleep. When I heard that Michael was going on this protest I was deeply moved as he is an American who was taking interest in something that is going on in MY country. How could I sit by the wayside?

And Zamambo Tshabalala, a brave and tenacious young woman, young enough to be my daughter, who has made me realise my contribution to the industry still leaves much to be desired – and that the industry is surely not yet Uhuru. Or if it is then we have to free ourselves from the grip of the greed of our fellow Africans as they continue to arrest our development by lining their pockets and inflating their bellies. Zamambo is a member of the ANC Youth League – and I think Mr Malema should be seeing how counter-revolutionary the situation is.

So to conclude, I would like highlight a story Zama told about having to cook for her family while she was hungry, and wanting to cheat – but not doing that. For me this was such a powerful metaphor. What stopped her from cheating on her vow, and nibbling at what she was cooking, was conscience. Is that something our government has? When these people continue to squander OUR money – is there a conscience involved there? If a 24 year old girl knows how to listen to her conscience when there is food there to eat, to grab – and she is only really interested in taking her own share. Her conscience even kept her from that! And they, they want to eat OUR share. Conscience is dead in the corridors of power! It is sad, very very sad.

Today Zama I stand looking up to you as my role model. Thank you for being the beacon of light in this time of overwhelming darkness.

©Sello Maake kaNcube, 2009