AUTHORING JUSTICE

Capstone Project

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Co-funded by the European Union

Three Mothers and a Raid

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On 10 December 1976, the police from John Vorster Square raided and ransacked the home belonging to Hilda Phahle, an educator from Alexandra Township in northeastern Johannesburg, South Africa. The story that she recounts involves George and Levi Phahle, two of her sons who both went into exile in Botswana where they lived in that nation's capital, Gaborone. George operated a transport business while Lindi was a social worker for the Botswanan government. Lindi's cousin Joseph Malaza was only visiting Gaborone for the night. The other house occupant, Levi Phahle, George's younger brother and Phahle's last born ultimately became a survivor, an eyewitness and a modern-day griot-storyteller.

The family's trouble began in the seventies not too long after the Soweto Uprising when it began on 16 June 1976. Students marched out of Morris Isaacson High School to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for all classes. The revolt, which lasted over the year, also encouraged students and ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) activists alike to flee the country and go into exile. This backdrop set the tone for the government's harassment of the Phahle family.

On one occasion, the police paid a visit and

> " they. . . did not have the decency to tell us what they were looking for. Their language was spiced with the violence of words."

Phahle concluded that this episode began the beginning of the rest of her beloved son George's life. George's life expired on 14 June 1985 when the South African Defence Force (SADF) crossed international borders and raided their home in Gaborone. Lindi, George's wife and her brother, Joseph Malaza also lost their lives from gunfire.

News of this assault reached Alexandra via the radio. An announcer proudly reported SADF's successful raid. The units had flushed out ANC exiles and had annihilated them. The Sunday Times denigrated George while The City Express offered a consoling report. Television channels broadcast scenes of the raid. The same communicative power used its platform to prove that George was a terrible man who had deserved his merciless death.

Phahle wanted confirmation. She called her son and daughter-in-law, but there was no response. She phoned a friend in Botswana who confirmed the deaths. Phahle then asked herself:

"how does a parent receive and react to such devastating news?"

All she said [was]:

'My God, My God, have You forsaken me?'

When Phahle finally settled down, she gained the courage to inform Lindi's mother of her daughter's passing. Later on, during the day, her son Levi Phahle, the sole survivor, phoned to break the tragic news. Levi survived because he had hidden underneath the bed. They killed Joseph Malaza thinking that he was him.

On the night of the raid, Levi explains how the SADF arrived swearing.

They behaved as if they were drugged and drunk. They wanted George to open the door, but instead, the couple ran into his bedroom where they pushed his portable piano against it. Lindi kneeled on the floor faced down. George fell over her as a sign of protection. The SADF blew the door wide open. The piano fell against Levi's bed where he took cover and watched the events unfold.

Levi saw them pump bullets into his brother and his wife. The bullets penetrated them simultaneously.

The police then turned over face upwards with one asking:

“is hulle dood?” (are they dead)?

“Morsdood-stone (dead) was their reply.

God spared Levi to tell this story, otherwise Phahle would have lost two sons that day.

Mamokete Malaza was another mother who lost her son Joseph Malaza during the Gaborone Raid. Malaza went to Phahle’s house after all the wailing and crying that had occurred when she and her family heard the horrific news.

Phahle, Esther Mthembu (another parent who lost a child) and Malaza attained a kombi (mini-van taxi) to transport the cadavers back to South Africa from Botswana.

It took six or seven days before the three mothers had reached their destination. Immediately upon their arrival, local community members transported them to church so that they could pray on their behalf. They went to George’s place and found it in extreme shambles.

“The house was damaged beyond repair. It was proclaimed uninhabitable. All the furniture was bullet-damaged, nothing in the wardrobe was spared by the police.”

Flora, the family’s helper, survived because she had spent the night out. Her room also stood in shambles. By witnessing this horrific scene, the mothers carried out two responsibilities.

First and foremost, Phahle, Mthembu and Mamokete carried out African cosmological duties when they visited the sites of death. Their journeys enabled them to tell the spirits that they were taking them back home to South Africa.

These fulfilled responsibilities meant that the parents had engaged in two processes: reclamation - the pursuit to find the whereabouts of the deceased and to reclaim their cadavers for proper burial services. The other mission, repatriation, undertook several activities.

Of most important were the church services that women attended. They did this until the Botswana government finally announced that all the assassinated victims were going to be buried on Wednesday. The mothers arrived to witness big white sheets inscribed with the names of the decedents. Malaza looked frantically for her son Joseph's name. She found it at the bottom. It was only then that Malaza believed that her son was among those killed.

Despite Malaza's pleas to take Joseph Malaza back to Soweto, the Botswanans had to follow protocol. They telexed Pretoria for permission to bury Joseph in South Africa. After the official papers arrived, the three women began their journey back to South Africa.

When they reached the border gates, Phahle, Mthembu and Malaza ran into some trouble. Attendants wanted to open Joseph's black coffin, but they struggled to open it. When all attempts proved futile, they finally let them pass. All three mothers completed repatriation, which was another goal that these mothers pursued when they went to Botswana, by conducting a proper burial. These parents firmly believed that their children deserved to rest in peace on the soil that they had died for.

"[Their] children fled [South Africa's] oppression. They went into exile, fighting for their rights, for the land of their birth, the land of their forefathers."

The SADF followed George and Lindi to Gaborone, to torture and to massacre them beyond reason. Phahle's, Mtembu's and Malaza's children stood among the approximately 21,000 South Africans who died under apartheid from gunshots, pistol whippings, torture, bludgeons or 'alleged' suicide. Their deaths made them part of the collective oral obituary that the Apartheid regime created.

Oral obituaries are testimonies that discuss how people died rather than how they lived. They document past times, eating habits, first words, last words, the positions of the cadavers, the decedents' political affiliations and sporting activities that provided a briefing of the last days of their earthly life.

This whole affair conjured up three other oral obituaries that existed. For instance, the 'Guns of Gaborone' strike consumed the lives of fifteen men, women and children. The attack initiated and fomented militarized aggression. This encounter also wrote the ANC's elegy. A cadre of Black and White South African soldiers

'Liberation Struggle Eulogies: Death and Violence in Apartheid South Africa' offers a unique perspective on how nations deal with the demise and sacrifice of those who undertake the task of liberation, with a focus on South Africa. It provides specific examples of important approaches to understanding how Apartheid, the rigid system of racial segregation (1948-1994) denied the right to mourn on multiple occasions for different reasons during forty-six years of oppression. Officials dictated the date, time and length of funerals (Mzambu, 1996) and what survivors inscribed on tombstones (Curry, 2012). The state went as far as to disrupt the funerary process. Its police units invaded the sacred space, dispersed teargas and harassed attendants.

During the forty-six years in which apartheid operated, approximately 21,000 South Africans died (HSRC, 2019). They passed away from gunshot wounds, torture, bludgeoning, barbecuing and 'alleged suicide.'

The central question that *Liberation Struggle Eulogies* uses the digital and published transcripts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is:

did Africans enfranchise their grief by finding other ways to mourn or did they remain disempowered by never having full closure about the loss of loved ones?

Established the year after apartheid's abolition in 1995, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a major repository of digital and written transcripts of 21,000 testifiers. A little over 2,000 respondents appeared at the various public hearings held throughout the country. The purpose of the TRC was to '*promote reconciliation and forgiveness among perpetrators and victims of apartheid by full disclosure of the truth*' regarding gross human rights violations from 1960 to 1994 (Tutu, 1995). People came forward if they or their kin had been killed, abducted, tortured or severely ill treated for political reasons (Bozzoli, 1996).

Chroniclers documented the historical and structural background of Apartheid's violence, its system of racial oppression, and its gross violations of human rights (United States Peace Institute, 1995). The TRC sets the stage for many of the important questions engendered by its transcripts. The major concern is:

how did those testimonies provide a framework for analyzing and theorizing about death?

Respondents appeared in East London Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban to render testimonies that support the stages of eulogization that this study proposes. Sunrise connotes the deceased's birthdate and their baptism into politics. Twilight covers the period in which decedents neared their final hours while sunset marks their transitions from the earthly to the spiritual worlds. Each stage explores, interrogates and documents the ways in which the aggrieved tried to enfranchise their grief on behalf of the decedents.

This much-needed, innovative study, is crucial for understanding the anatomy of Apartheid: (1) how state sponsored assassinations provided a structural framework for analyzing eulogies; (2) how the decedents' repatriation represents another type of obituary, (3) how the tombstones inscriptions conceal truth, and lastly, (4) how oral obituaries raise questions about childhood and adulthood.

ANC activist George Phahle crossed both age thresholds. His marital status connoted adulthood, however, his mother crossed international boundaries to perform maternal duties for her 'grown, adult child' who died violently during the South African-sponsored raid in Gaborone, Botswana.

The Truth Commission's oral testimonies and government documents like the Cillie Commission Report which provides the findings of the Soweto Uprising, raise several important questions. Of most important is this one:

did these sources act as historical pallbearers and as gravediggers because of the information that they provide on death?

They include details about how loved ones passed away, the position of the cadavers, the decedents' ages, how survivors reclaimed the corpses and visited the sites of death or things like conversations they had before some of apartheid's fallen left the earth to enter the spiritual world.

Despite criticism of the Truth Commission, this body like the Cillie Commission Report, deserves credit for the internment and exhumation that it carried out.

The Truth Commission's transcripts, governmental documents, oral testimonies, funerary art, cemetery visits, protest music and poems will the carry the caskets (the narratives) into the analytical arena for the oral obituaries' public viewings or wakes.

Bereavement will also take place. Subjects and ‘wake’ participants will grapple with how the Truth Commission’s and the Cillie Commission’s dirges represented three things: a form of repatriation, an edifice constructed by African oral traditions and a case study germane to other areas around the globe where repressive regimes inhibited or prohibited funerary practices. Thus, this innovative study is apartheid’s elegy wrapped in an entanglement of systemic violence, racial oppression, and White minority rule.

This year, the Global Campus of Human Rights debuted an exciting new online course called "Authoring Justice." The course focuses on how to write powerful narrative nonfiction works about issues of human rights and social justice – using storytelling to touch the hearts and minds of readers, affecting change around the world. This first iteration included lessons from award-winning authors and human rights leaders, including Professor Andrew Leon Hanna (the main lecturer), Justice Albie Sachs, Casey Gerald, Kao Kalia Yang, Jemma Neville, and Joel Rickett.

The inaugural cohort of students are human rights advocates, lawyers, professors, and researchers from across the globe with a wide range of focus areas – from peace mediation in Ukraine to equitable access to technology in Nepal and beyond. The previous pages feature one selected example of the students' "Capstone Projects," which were designed to be either standalone long-form works or components of books they are now beginning to write.

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