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Omar Badsha: Placing the Collective Above the Individual

Last month saw President Cyril Ramaphosa bestow the 2018 National Orders on a number of extraordinary local citizens and foreign nationals. The National Orders, which are presented annually on Freedom Day, are the highest awards that the country can bestow on individuals.

In 1998, the Presidential Advisory Council on National Orders was tasked with revising the orders in order to better reflect the spirit of the newly formed non-racial, non-sexist democracy. Six new orders were established, with the Order of Ikhamanga first being awarded in 2003. The order recognised those South African citizens who had excelled in the fields of arts, culture, literature, music, journalism and sport.



ANC leader Dorothy Nyembe celebrates her release from prison, KwaMashu, Durban, 1984

This year Omar Badsha, documentary photographer, artist, political activist and historian, was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver. Badsha is unusual though because he could just as easily have been awarded the Order of Luthuli, which

recognises citizens who have contributed to the struggle for democracy. While Badsha is an established artist with his paintings and photographs found in major collections both locally and internationally, he is perhaps better described a 'cultural activist' who uses his artistic talent to fight against the inequalities within society.

Born into a Gujarati Muslim family, Badsha was exposed to the arts from a young age, with his father, Ebrahim, being a member of one of the first black art associations in Durban, the Bantu, Indian Coloured Arts Group (BICA). His uncle, Moosa Badsha, also worked as a photojournalists for a number of local publications, a career Badsha himself would follow in years to come. At the same time Badsha was acutely aware of his environment; he was just fourteen years old when the Sharpeville Massacre resulted in the deaths of countless men, women and children at the hands of the state police. In response, Badsha became politically active at a very young age, joining the ANC, and going on to be appointed the Deputy Secretary of the Durban Students Union. At the same time he continued to pursue his art, but refusing to exhibit in segregated venues, Badsha severely limited the trajectory of his artistic career.



A younger Omar Badsha

In 1965, as a result of his outspokenness on the policies of the South African government, Badsha was denied a passport to travel abroad to study. By 1972 he had stopped exhibiting his work, and was becoming more and more involved with the trade unions, which were particularly active in [Durban during the 1970s](#). Having helped to establish the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, Badsha took up photography in 1976 in an effort to document work-related injuries at the plants, while also using his photos as a tool for trade union education.

Photography proved to be a skill that would serve him well for many years to come. Badsha used his talent as a photojournalist to tell the story of apartheid, and helped

to establish the legendary anti-apartheid photographers' collective, Afrapix. The collective sold their photographs to the alternative press, believing that the mainstream media were representing a one-dimensional view of black life in South Africa. Afrapix also trained young photographers in townships and staged exhibitions in black communities across the country. Between 1979 and 1986 Badsha was involved in the publication of three photographic books that examined life in South Africa.



From the series 'Road to Tadkeshwar' (Grandfather and Children, Tadkeshwar, 1996)

Following the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, Badsha was able to travel outside of South Africa for the first time in 25 years, after he was issued with a passport valid for a ridiculous three months. Badsha continued his work as a cultural activist working with civil society and grassroots youth, before eventually becoming head of the Western Cape Arts and Cultural Department. In 2000, Badsha helped to establish [South African History Online \(SAHO\)](#), a non-profit online heritage project that has gone on to become one of Africa's largest and most credible history websites.

Omar Badsha has continued to use his love of photography to tell the stories of everyday South Africans. In 2015, [Seedtimes](#), a retrospective of Badshas photographic journey, opened at the Iziko National Gallery. During an interview for Seedtimes, Mail & Guardian journalist, Bongani Kona, commented: *Another thing about Badsha is that he almost never uses 'I', even when talking about himself. He uses 'you' – placing the collective above the individual. Indeed, listening to Badsha speak it's hard to disentangle his own life story from the larger, collective story of the resistance to apartheid.*"

Images courtesy of: [mg.co.za](#), [www.omarbadsha.co.za](#), [www.revisions.co.za](#) and [artthrob.co.za](#)

Reference:

Amandla. (2018). [Omar Badsha: Placing the Collective Above the Individual](#) from *Amandla*, 10 May 2018. Available at <https://amandladurban.org.za/2018/05/omar-badsha-placing-the-collective-above-the-individual/> online. Accessed on 26 March 2019