

THAMI MNYELE: A Portrait

When the SADF launched a raid on Botswana on June 14 last year, Thami Mnyele, a gifted graphic artist, was killed. The raiding hordes went into his house and shot up his art-work, much in the same way as Hitler's occupying forces had sacked galleries and libraries of the vanquished.

MONGANE WALLY SEROTE, who knew Thami from the earliest days, has contributed this portrait.

On June 14, 1985, the boer army, SADF, raided Gaborone, Botswana. In cold blood, they killed twelve people, including a child. Among the murdered victims was Thamsanqa (Thami) Mnyele, a young man, a dedicated cultural worker. His broken-limbed bloody body was found outside in the yard of the house where he lived with his wife Rhona. At times their child Sindi lived with them. But on that early morning of gratuitous mass murder Rhona and Sindi escaped; they were not home. Thami's life was snuffed out but his art lives on.

Thamsanqa Mnyele was an artist who believed that cultural work and political work cannot be separated, in fact, that cultural workers had no choice but to be partisan. This conviction led

him to innovative yet resolute cultural endeavours. He was always searching, in pursuit of ways and means of merging art forms into weapons of teaching, mobilising and recording the history of our people. In the final analysis, he wanted to place art in the hands of our own people, as weapons of liberation. This was his daily preoccupation and to this end he did not spare himself. He worked hard, sometimes round the clock, to perfect the skills of his craft. To him the epitome of artistic execution was the effective manner in which it articulated the struggle of the people of South Africa against oppression and exploitation, for liberation.

In life and struggle, the boers have robbed us of a good friend and fine comrade. His life, his

presence was a series of little actions, soft-spoken statements, that have accumulated into profound meaning here and now. He touched us. We are instructed! He was reticent and could be quiet, for hours even in the company of friends. But he could also dominate time, talking about music and playing it endlessly. A fine singer, he was sensitive to the elements that made song. Humming with a guitar, with a saxophone or trumpet, he would produce the sound of drums simultaneously as he sang along with a track. Then he would burst out laughing both in appreciation of the musicians and at his listeners. He knew the provenance of most recordings, the artists and the instruments they played and so he would always select the appropriate



music to match time, mood and place. His collection of audio tapes was broad, including jazz, traditional Mbaqanga, classical and international folk. His music kept friends together.

Thami also loved literature. Highly selective of what he read, he studied every novel, play and poem carefully. In informed conversations, he would then choose a line, a verse, a paragraph or a character from a book and demand that it be enjoyed and appreciated. He would assert what it does for our life.

Thami lived his life through music, he read literature and he observed everyday life intensively. From these three he was inspired and became a fine painter and graphic artist. He watched people closely, listened to them carefully, fought them and loved them intensely — and thus derived material for his work. His humour was made up from the small things of ordinary life — imitating the walk and talk of old people, the way they hold a knife, a spoon or a pipe. Or he would act out his friends' peculiarities, their unconscious gestures.

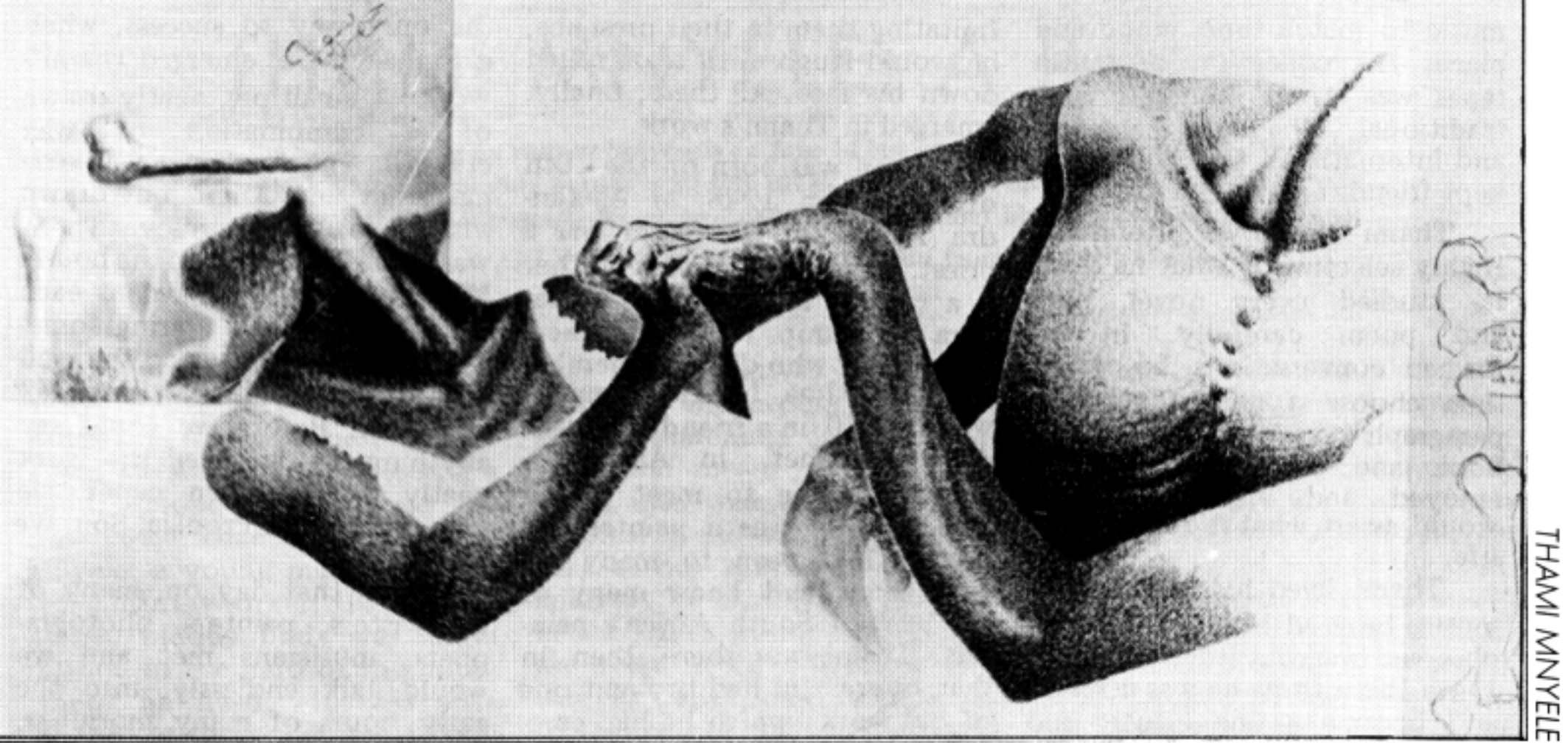
Imitating them in their presence, he would laugh until tears rolled down his face. All these, finally, emerged in Thami's work.

Thami was born on the 10th of December, 1948, in Alexandra Township. His father was a priest. He used to say, his mother is a woman made by Alexandra Township. He had brothers and a sister who died. I remember the first time I met Thami, it was in 1970 in a friend's house. A photographer, in Alexandra, had asked me to meet Thami who he said was a painter. By then I had been to many art exhibitions and knew many of the best of South Africa's painters. Thami was there, then, in that house and had brought one of his works which he had carefully wrapped in brown paper. I kept wondering what we were going to see: a Dumile imitation, or a Legae imitation, or an Arnold imitation? But, then, the point here is that I had already judged Thami. There was then something which the white galleries had termed Township Art, and the artists I've named above had done it all, most young artists were imitating them. *That* was

the only way to success, whatever that is. Out emerged Thami's work. A small pig, neatly drawn of a combination of wax crayons. The small pig was strangely fat and round but drawn with amazing accuracy. There was a strange silence in the house. My friend and I looked at each other. Thami was staring somewhere away from us to the ceiling. He kept scratching his cheek and chin. Before we could say anything, he wrapped the work neatly in its brown paper. He called the work *Prodigal Son*. We all laughed!

From that day on, many of us, writers, painters, photographers, musicians met and we would talk endlessly, into the early hours of many mornings, about our liberation and culture. Eventually, out of those discussions, we found ourselves organised into what we called Mhloti Black Theatre. Mhloti Black Theatre produced a programme of poetry, music and speeches by leading black politicians. These were performed in schools, churches and on political occasions. The programme was taken to many parts of our





THAMI MINYELE

country, including Botswana. Thami ably acted Malcom X. All of us including his co-actors always looked forward to that moment when Thami would emerge from backstage, take front stage, mime the touching and removing of spectacles and render his lines with a chilling slowness and deliberateness. When he was not on stage, at home, in a room he and I shared, Thami was painting. While there were still signs that he was still influenced in his work by religion, his work was changing, beginning to portray the people of Alexandra. To watch Thami's work, several unfinished prints hanging on the wall of our room while he worked on them, and to listen to jazz and Mbaqanga as played by Gwangwa, Masekela, Semanya, Brand and others, turned the house into an emotionally tense place. Mihloti led to Mdali, which was supposed to become an artists' national organisation. The South African Students' Organisation's General Students Councils, and the Mdali Annual Festival of the Arts absorbed us. Thami began to illustrate books from these occasions and to exhibit his works. He died proud that his first exhibition was among the people and not at galleries in town ready for export abroad.

At one of the conferences, cultural workers had put together a poetry and music programme to perform. Thami emerged from backstage carrying a guitar. He sang and played the guitar. It was the first time for most of us to see him play a guitar. He sang Nina Simone's song: Assignment.

Thami came to live in Botswana in 1978. He joined Medu Art Ensemble, a cultural group made up of Batswana, South Africans and European expatriates. He pioneered the graphic arts unit of this group in producing political posters. He became the head of the graphic unit and later the chairman of the group. The graphic unit became one of the most active units of this group and very influential. Posters from the unit, T-shirts, badges, postcards and calendars are all over the world. In offices, during demonstrations, rallies everywhere where freedom is talked about and fought for, they are there. Have the boers killed Thami?

UMKHONTO WE SIZWE

There were many hours and many days of discussions, argument, in the group. These struggles within a struggle enabled us to produce and learn about culture and struggle.

At times, Thami could be a simple man. He had this almost

childlike wonder at how the people of South Africa have built the African National Congress and their army, Umkhonto We Sizwe. As an ANC cadre, Thami forever tried to express how he was humbled by the seriousness with which our leadership took cultural work, in the same way they did other work in the Movement. He talked endlessly about this. And there is no doubt, the ANC had nurtured Thami the man, Thami the cultural worker into a new man the new South Africa is awaiting. Thami fell at his post, a resolute man, optimistic about the future and ready to take up his next assignment.

ANC CADRES

We miss Thami. And, like him, we have contempt and hatred for a system which is run by madmen who, in their small minds, are unable to accept change. They are soaking the soil of our country with the blood of the best sons and daughters of our land, everyday. Thami's work, thoughts, laughter — and some of his best qualities — remain sharp and clear in our minds, and these inspire us to be good ANC cadres, for he was one. The madmen are frightened and sleepless. Thami lives amongst us.