

Themba Harry Gwala (1920–1995)

Themba (also called Thembeyakhe) Harry Gwala was born in the Swayimane area, south-east of Wartburg, on 30 July 1920. He died in Pietermaritzburg on 30 June 1995. He made two major and outstanding contributions to the liberation struggle: firstly, as a teacher — in schools, at the ‘University of Robben Island’, and at virtually every meeting or rally he participated in; and secondly, as an outspoken leader and brilliant orator — which earned him the title ‘Lion of the Midlands’.

Gwala the teacher

Like many others, Gwala received a teachers diploma from Adams College, Amanzimtoti, but he was no ordinary teacher. Even at an early age he was teaching political economics rather than just the three Rs, as indicated by the fact that one of his early pupils at Slingspruit, Pietermaritzburg, was Moses Mabhida who was to become the General Secretary of the South African Communist Party (SACP).

In 1942 Gwala joined the SACP, two years before he joined the ANC. It is claimed that this sequence reflected the fact that he found the SACP to be more non-racial than the ANC at the time. Anyone who ever heard Gwala recite, as he often did, the Freedom Charter’s most famous injunction — ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it — black and white’ — have no reason to dispute the claim.

Gwala left formal teaching to become a union organiser in and around Pietermaritzburg. ‘Gwala’s Union’ soon embraced workers in the chemical, building and rubber industries. He was also active at Edendale Hospital, thus laying the groundwork for much of the trade union activity and unity in recent years.

Gwala played a leading role, along with A.S. Chetty, Archie Gumede, Dr C. Motala and D.C.O. Matiwane, in organising the Midlands delegation to Kliptown in 1955, as well as the All in Africa Conference in Pietermaritzburg in 1962. The latter event took place in a hall which still stands in what is now Imbali, and was the occasion of the last ‘public’ speech of ‘The Black Pimpernel’, Nelson Mandela, before his arrest, outside Howick, in August 1962.

In 1964 Gwala was sentenced to eight years on Robben Island for sabotage and recruitment for Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK). He was released in 1972, but rearrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1975. In 1984 the State refused permission for him to attend his wife Elda’s funeral; but they released him in November 1988, when they thought that age and a motor neuron disease, which paralysed his arms and weakened his neck, had tamed him.

During his tenure on Robben Island he became the ‘Professor of Political Education’. His series of lectures entitled ‘A Man and his Country’, are legendary. According to Nelson Mandela:

many of today’s leaders drank from the deep well of Mphephetwa’s political wisdom. But such was the nature of his teaching that the products of his education would themselves develop into political giants in their own right, using the tools he gave them to develop independent thought and analysis.

The full story of how the ‘university’ operated, even after the authorities moved Gwala to B Section, where the leadership was isolated from the other prisoners, needs to be told. Given Gwala’s pivotal educational role, it would be fitting for his notes, his personal library, as well as any copies of his speeches, to be collected and preserved in his adopted city, Pietermaritzburg.

Gwala — ‘Bhubesi Lase Midlands’

After the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP in February 1990, Gwala was appointed interim leader of the ANC in the Midlands, until his election as chairperson in December 1990. He played a leading role in the launching of ANC branches throughout the Midlands, in the face of a brutal onslaught by the state and its surrogates. Whenever a fledgling ANC community came under attack, Gwala would drop everything to ‘be with the people’. Senior ANC leaders, and even his bodyguards, flinched when bullets flew, but not Gwala, the most vulnerable target of them all. During one of several assassination attempts, one of his nephews got back into the car to protect his immobile uncle, but was swiftly chastised ‘Phuma uyolwa Gwala lakaGwala!’ (Get out to fight, coward from the Gwalas!).¹

Gwala also defused countless tense situations and did not tolerate anarchy. Yes, he was an uncompromising hardliner when it came to improving the lives of our people. Yes, he was a revolutionary, who believed, in the face of colossal oppression and exploitation, that only a fundamental transformation of our country would yield true liberation. But to label him a populist is an insult.

One of Gwala’s greatest leadership qualities was that he was an outstanding African orator. Nobody at all could speak after him and expect to retain the audience’s attention. Invariably, he would commence with a solid dose of political education; and then tie it in with current events. But he could switch suddenly to biting sarcasm or jovial humour. In other words, he made audiences listen attentively, come alive, laugh, and go home with renewed hope that a new order would come about. But, of course, a Gwala speech had to be heard, not just read in the newspaper.

Gwala was a strong, even domineering, leader and personality. None other than President Mandela — who strides across the world’s political stage like a colossus — described him as ‘brave and blunt’. Mandela said that he was fortunate to cross swords with Gwala on many an issue, both in prison and outside, ‘But the lesson from this is that neither of us emerged the poorer in knowledge’.

Gwala in history

Will history judge Harry Gwala as a man stuck in the past, a warlord, or as a man to whom we should have listened more? Will his insistence on remaining close to the people, and true to the Freedom Charter, wane within the ANC? Will his wry description of the RDP as a ‘revolution delaying programme’ prove to be prophetic? It is still too soon to tell. Winnie Mandela was in no doubt when she spoke at Gwala’s funeral:

I have news for those who came to bury Harry Gwala: his soul marches on in the youth inspired by his militancy, in the women who saw him as a rock and in the people.

Will Gwala's militancy be seen as justifiable during a war? Speaking in Parliament in 1993 I stated:

If Churchill talked the British people through World War II, then history will record that Harry Gwala did likewise for so many communities in the Natal Midlands.

Will the Truth Commission reveal that he did more than talk and defend? On this score it is tragic that Gwala did not dictate an autobiography. Imagine how our knowledge of the struggle would be impoverished if *Long Walk to Freedom* had not been completed. What a wonderful, and necessary, foil Gwala's autobiography would have been to Mandela's almost too-good-to-be-true saga.

It is hoped that a biography of Gwala by Mlaba will be published, and add to our knowledge and understanding. Of two things I am certain. Firstly, given his physical disability, and the circumstances prevailing in the Midlands at the time, Gwala's leadership was stoical and heroic. He epitomised defiance. It was as if his disability only helped to make this small man a towering figure. Secondly, without him the ANC in the Midlands, in particular, would have been very much smaller, and, now, without him, it remains to be seen who can pull this fractious region together.

Fittingly, the final stanza of the praise song written for his brother by Mafika Gwala reads:

Phephetha!
Sikubona uhamba ngenizila
yenkululeko nabaholi
bethu eMadiba noSisulu noMzizi kanye noMabhida

eMgungundhlovu ondonga zibomvu;

Phephetha!

We have seen you tread across the freedom paths with our leaders Madiba and Sisulu and Mzizi and Mabhida at Pietermaritzburg the red-walled city

Unstoppable iguana in the marshy grounds
The spear of the Nation is burning hot
Poker of the right chunk of meat
for the people to feed on truth
You are home all over the southern sub-continent
. . . This is Sod of the Black soil

Hamba kahle Baba. Siyabonga kakhulu.
Long Live!

ROBERT HASWELL

NOTE

1. A play on the Zulu word *igwala*, a coward.



Harry Gwala
(Photograph: Natal Witness)