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Thami Mnyele

Names: Mnyele, Thamsanga

Born: 10 December 1948, Alexandra Township, Gauteng (then Transvaal), South Africa

Died: 14 June 1985, Gaborone, Botswana

In Summary: Artist for ANC, MK

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### Thami Mnyele: An Artist and a Fighter

[Thami Mnyele](#) was a South African artist who became involved in the African resistance movement against apartheid. In 1979, Mnyele was exiled to Botswana, where he began creating art for the [African National Congress](#) (ANC). It was in Botswana when Mnyele became involved with the armed wing of the ANC, [Umkhonto we Sizwe](#) (MK). After participating in military activities with MK, Mnyele was officially labeled a terrorist by the South African government. After experiencing racial discrimination firsthand, Mnyele used art to spread resistance, but grew increasingly disillusioned with the injustice in the world around him and realized that he had to devote his life to fighting back against the apartheid government.

Mnyele was born on 10 December 1948 in Alexandra, South Africa. Mnyele lived in a large family, as he was the third child out of five. Mnyele had a better upbringing than most Africans at the time, as his father was a minister and his mother a domestic worker. Since both of

Mnyele's parents worked, they were able to send him to boarding school as a child, which jumpstarted his art career. At school, Mnyele began drawing, which was the first art form he practiced. At age 14 Mnyele began this practice in the safe environment of his school, and he quickly fell in love with art. However, things began to fall apart for Mnyele when his parents separated in the sixties. This traumatic event was followed by Mnyele having to leave school, as his mother could no longer afford to pay for boarding school<sup>i</sup>. While Mnyele was raised by two working parents, he still lived in the racially segregated township of Alexandra. Maturing into a teenager, Mnyele began to see the injustice in the world. However, he did not know that later in life, he would play such a large role in Africans fighting back against this cruelty<sup>ii</sup>.

Following his years at boarding school from 1956 to 1965, Mnyele joined the Mhloti Black Theatre, which was run by Africans to promote African culture, and it was here that he became truly angry with the state of racial discrimination in South Africa. However, in the beginning Mnyele was just apart of the Mhloti Black Theatre for personal reasons, as he wished to make a career out of his art. So while Mnyele was not quite ready to join the resistance movement, his anger at the current state of racial affairs was emerging and would become even more prominent in his mind. At the Mhloti Black Theatre, Mnyele soon assumed the role of the head of the arts. Directing performances, acquiring traditional African instruments and painting African pieces became the acts that Mnyele participated in each day. As the Black Consciousness movement began emerging, Mnyele and his comrades at the Mhloti Black Theatre realized that preserving and promoting African art was simply not enough. All young African men would have to partake in the armed struggle against the government, for only fighting back would achieve change<sup>iii</sup>.

From 1974 to 1979, Mnyeale was enveloped in the world of African resistance to the apartheid government. While never the most radical of his peers, involvement in the movement was unavoidable. Mnyeale saw innocent young men imprisoned, tortured and murdered all around him. All of this cruelty and violence angered Mnyeale, but he did not respond as his peers did. Many joined MK and participated in the militant resistance<sup>iv</sup>. However, Mnyeale had too much at stake at this time. He was 27 years old and recently engaged, and needed to stay and provide for his fiancée rather than flee the country and receive military training. Yet the ANC started recruiting Mnyeale's closest friends and peers, making it only a matter of time before Mnyeale would join them. After hearing many impassioned speeches and reading many communist texts given to him, Mnyeale finally joined the ANC in Botswana in 1979<sup>v</sup>.

Upon being exiled to Botswana, Mnyeale began to work with the [Medu Arts Ensemble](#) and started to see his work as entirely resistance-oriented. The government of Botswana did not agree with the apartheid government of South Africa, thus providing a neighboring area for exiled South Africans to move to. The ANC was gaining support and followers during the 1970s, but it could not conduct training in South Africa, as the South African police and military were conducting raids constantly during that time<sup>vi</sup>. So neighboring countries became the logical location for political and military bases for the ANC and MK. In Botswana, MK trained 'grenade squads,' yet MK's official training camps were located in other countries<sup>vii</sup>. Since the ANC had recruited Mnyeale so heavily, it was clear that his joining of the ANC meant his moving to the headquarters in Botswana<sup>viii</sup>. Initially, art had just been a hobby for Mnyeale, but he now truly believed that he can positively influence the resistance movement with his work. The Medu Arts Ensemble stated that 'the group was "committed to the belief that artists have a duty ... in promoting ... cultural progress"'<sup>ix</sup>. Here, it is still apparent that Mnyeale is still an artist at heart.

While his motives have changed from promoting African pride to empowering a movement that was fighting apartheid, Mnyele was still non-violent. An example of this art is the letterhead<sup>x</sup> for the ANC Women's League that Mnyele drew between 1979 and 1985. The letterhead depicts an African woman in indigenous dress, holding a rifle with a bayonet, while carrying a young child strapped to her back. The letterhead was completed for the African National Congress' Women's League, showing a unique aspect of Mnyele. While other social leaders at the time disregarded women's rights in favor of protesting for racial rights, Mnyele clearly understood the importance of gender equality and the strength of women, as Mnyele's depiction shows not only a mother, but a fighter.

However, early into his partnership with the ANC, Mnyele began to radicalize and joined MK. Even before receiving military training from MK, Mnyele's radicalization was evident in his artwork. In 1982, Mnyele drew a [poster](#)<sup>xi</sup> that depicts faceless soldiers reminiscent of Nazi storm troopers forcing South Africans to resettle at gunpoint. The red and black poster evokes a sense of violence and is quite ominous. The bold lettering demands to be taken seriously and urges all South Africans to support the 'fight' and unite. This piece departs from Mnyele's previous works of art that all focus on African strength, not the apartheid government's hate. This piece cannot be taken lightly and shows the anger that Mnyele felt towards the South African government. Mnyele is urging others to 'fight,' and he himself will soon take up arms for this cause as well. Additionally, violent themes started to appear in all of Mnyele's works. What were once statements of pride and history now became representations of the savage, cruel acts carried out by the apartheid government. Mnyele 'was learning to become a comrade' and was prioritizing the ANC over everything in his life<sup>xii</sup>. Mnyele even had his fiancée 'carry mysterious items across the border,' jeopardizing her life<sup>xiii</sup>. While this may make Mnyele seem heartless

and detached from his fiancée, it just shows his dedication to the cause. Mnyele was no longer creating art for fun, nor for his career. Now, Mnyele's art was ammunition in a war that was only going to become more violent and more dangerous.

As Mnyele's spent more time in Botswana, his radicalization could not be suppressed and he grew more violent and bitter. While the African resistance movement was almost entirely Black, there were a few White members. Obviously any Whites who were caught participating in this so-called 'terrorist activity' would be spared no mercy, so all who participated were just as dedicated to the cause as the Black members. However, Mnyele could not look past all the injustice that he and the other Blacks in South Africa felt at the hands of White South Africans. Mnyele's anger towards Whites could be explained by him '[maybe] voicing his own version of the resentment he had heard Steve Biko explain six years earlier'<sup>xiv</sup>. Mnyele had always been susceptible to conforming to the views of those he looked up to, and this was no different. Mnyele wanted to join his friends and coworkers in Botswana as he did not want to disappoint them and appear disenfranchised from the cause. While this is normal and showcases the human side of Mnyele, it also shows how attempts at portraying Mnyele as a hateful terrorist are ill-founded. While Mnyele did adopt the angry, embittered viewpoints of those around him at various times throughout his life, he was always the gentle, peaceful artist that he started out as. The only thing that changed was his realization that art did not simply have to be a hobby. Once Mnyele understood that his passion could be incorporated into the movement that he most fervently believed in, he began to completely devote his life to the cause.

Mnyele was rising through the ranks of the ANC and was using his charm and charisma to garner support for the cause. Mnyele even traveled to Amsterdam to give a speech at a conference for the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement about the ANC. While this was beyond the

wildest dreams of the boy who grew up in the slums of Alexandra, Mnyele simply could not enjoy his success. In Amsterdam, Mnyele 'did not drink and dance all night ... he seemed depressed'<sup>xv</sup>. It is apparent that Mnyele changed from the carefree artist to strained, worn-down leader. Mnyele assumed the role of organizing ANC and MK activities to the point where he became the lead when it came to the management of operations. So many lives were at stake and Mnyele had the authority to protect them or sacrifice them. That power is not easy to cope with for anyone, especially so for Mnyele. During Mnyele's Amsterdam trip, he received news that the [South African Defense Force](#) (SADF) raided homes in Lesotho and massacred 42 people, including 30 ANC members<sup>xvi</sup>. This attack weighed heavily on Mnyele's conscience, as he wondered if he could have done anything to save these innocent lives. Yet this attack also had another affect on Mnyele, it radicalized him even further and showed him that violence was the only way to achieve his means. In 1983, Mnyele ventured to Angola, where he gained military training to complement his non-violent skillset<sup>xvii</sup>.

In addition to spreading the notion of racial equality, Mnyele was a threat to the apartheid government for his increasing advocacy for communism. In South Africa's neighboring countries, MK trainees were given explosives, firearms and artillery training. Those who trained them were themselves trained in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union also gave thousands of arms to the ANC over several years, which were crucial for MK's success<sup>xviii</sup>. While the move may have been political on the Soviet Union's behalf, as it was attempting to secure an ally in Africa during the Cold War, it only bolstered Mnyele's belief in communism. This belief was evident in Mnyele's art in his final years. In 1985, Mnyele created a poster<sup>xix</sup> that contained styles and themes associated with communist propaganda. The poster depicts three African miners under a flag emblazoned with a star. The yellow and red poster strongly reflects the art of the

Soviet Union. While not directly endorsing and advocating for communism in this instance, Mnyele was obviously influenced by communism.

Mnyele gradually became an enemy of the apartheid government and had been arrested a few times back in South Africa, but once he became involved in MK and rose through the ranks, he was officially labeled a terrorist by the South African government. In 1984, the SADF assassination attempts on MK authority figures began to increase dramatically. Scores of SADF soldiers went on covert missions, armed with heavy weaponry, all with one goal in mind — to kill Mnyele and other leaders. Due to MK's excellent intelligence network, Mnyele was able to move around and hide from these raids. However, he could not live on the run forever. On 14 June 1985, Mnyele attended a museum reception and came home late at night only to be ambushed and assassinated<sup>xx</sup>. To his very end, Mnyele displayed such a burning passion and appreciation for the arts. Mnyele simply was not the violent terrorist the apartheid government portrayed him as. Even as he grew more embittered right before his untimely death, Mnyele still only had the goal of achieving racial equality on his mind. This priority is evident in his 1985 poster<sup>xxi</sup> for the ANC in which Mnyele drew a raised fist holding a rose through barbed wire. Complete with the phrase '85 for our youth!', it is apparent that this, one of the last pieces of art created by Mnyele, was meant to inspire the younger generation.

While the apartheid government deemed Mnyele a terrorist, Mnyele's non-violent artistic to the resistance movement cemented his position as a hero to many Africans. Mnyele went from a small-town artist to an organizer of the largest armed resistance movement in South Africa. Mnyele gave up everything he had and devoted his entire life to the cause he believed in the most. And not only did he fight for this cause, but he also was able to use his greatest talent, his artwork, to support the movement. Following Mnyele's death, his dear friend, famous poet

[Mongane Wally Serote](#), wrote an [obituary](#)<sup>xxii</sup> for Mnyele. Serote portrays Mnyele as a gentle, artistic martyr who was cruelly assassinated by the South African military. Serote attempts to detail all of the positive aspects of Mnyele's life, and leaves out his troubles and the majority of his MK involvement. Serote attempts to justify Mnyele's political involvement by stating that 'cultural work and political work cannot be separated'<sup>xxiii</sup>. The obituary creates this martyr figure out of Mnyele to motivate the African masses to campaign for change even more. Serote writes that Mnyele was a 'fine singer' and 'observed everyday life intensely'<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Mnyele came from a humble upbringing and experienced racism early on in his life. These experiences shaped him into the man he became. Art became his vehicle throughout life, taking him from school to the Mihloti Black Theatre to the Medu Arts Ensemble to MK. Throughout this entire journey, Mnyele was never a violent ruler, nor was he a weak man. He was a strong individual with core values and a willingness to sacrifice everything he had and devote his entire life to the cause of fighting the South African government. Mnyele was not only the man Serote made him out to be. Nor was he the man the South African government made him out to be. Instead, Mnyele was both gentle and passionate. Mnyele was both inquisitive and angry. Mnyele was both an artist and a fighter.



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Thami Mnyele, Medu poster, 1985. (Courtesy of SAHA)

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