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**Raconteur, Jester, Listener, Survivor:
Khaba Mkhize's strategies for conflict-reducing journalism in
KwaZulu, South Africa[1]**

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Conflicts polarise people's worlds. In seeking to perpetuate the illusion of objectivity, news journalists narrate conflicts by reducing them to binaries and encouraging polemical debates between them. Yet such a strategy actively foments the fissioning of the world. While media scholarship has learned to be cautious of attributing excessive power to the media at the expense of audiences' agencies, the news media retains tremendous power. This is particularly so in situations where violence at the local level becomes shocking and difficult to explain. In contexts where there is urgent need for defensiveness if not retaliation, the power of journalists to make narrative connections that rouse people to greater levels of anger becomes very great. Texts describing today's sentiments easily become scripts for tomorrow's battle scenes.

Few journalists are willing to acknowledge the extent to which news media is imbricated in the perpetuation of cycles of conflict. In part that is due to the persistence of the myth that news is simply a mirror of reality. Yet that argument overlooks the reality that mirrors can be severely distorted. It also obscures the reality that how people see their own image in a mirror can be heavily distorted. And, most importantly, it does not recognise that mirrors - far from standing outside of events - can and have become utterly central to the production of contemporary personhood and identity.

Another reason for the persistence of the idea that news coverage stands outside of conflict is that few journalists live in the conflicted communities on which their reports focus. Conflict erupts; journalists gather; conflicts subside; journalists travel back to their newsrooms and from there to homes and communities that are not directly involved in the fighting.

But in situations where journalists do live in the midst of a community that is being torn apart by conflict and its associated narratives and polemics, the ethics of news production and the complexities of news consumption come into sharp focus. Frequently, death threats or physical attacks arise when a journalist's attempts at impartiality are seen as a betrayal of one or other side. Surviving such times at all is hard enough; surviving them with professional integrity even more so.

One of the few journalists in South Africa who managed to remain resident in

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a home that was surrounded by conflict for many years is Khaba Mkhize. An editor, journalist, columnist and award-winning playwright, his experiences of living and working in a region at war with itself forced him to rethink priorities, ethics and practices of news gathering and news writing. His own work exemplifies a search for stories out of the ordinary, that do not repeat the structures and forms of news stories that become, as he calls them, the equations of conflict journalism.

I first met Khaba while working as a journalist and attending a series of workshops for journalists on mediation and conflict management. Our acquaintance developed into a mentorship some years later when I spent some months researching the practices of journalists covering the KwaZulu-Natal conflict, and from there began to run workshops for journalists and teach an anthropology of news media. The workshops focused on news gathering skills, ethics, and the techniques of writing stories that did not fit the conventions of stories about particular conflicts. Much of the content derived from what I had learned from Khaba. Yet, much as these particular skills could be communicated, there is something else about Khaba's approach to journalism that is difficult to articulate. An anecdote captures the complexity. In the late 1990s Khaba survived a car hijacking near his home by rolling out of the car and feigning death after a bullet grazed the back of his head. He survived because he was able to read the rules of the moment and play them instantly. Such an understanding of the human psyche - to know what a more powerful party to a conflict wants out of a situation and find a way to meet that need without damaging lives - came from two decades of reading conflict situations as a reporter.

As a journalist that instinct for survival derives from an ability to play many roles, and choose the right one for each occasion without compromising on principles. His columns, like his stories, draw from very deep resources of courage, and most of all, from a jester's sense of the absurdities of the contradictions between ideologies and human nature and a knowledge of how and when to express those truths and survive. "You can never change the path of a bull by taking its horns," he once advised me, "you need to get alongside it and tickle its ears."

This paper aims to describe Khaba Mkhize's rethinking of the practices of journalism, and of the persona of the journalist. Based on a series of interviews with him and a reading of his copy files, I want to suggest that the art of surviving a career in journalism when living at the heart of a conflict, is in being a jester, an original storyteller, and above all, a good listener to how audiences are receiving the news.

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"The key is to apply inclusive journalism," Khaba declared at a London meeting on media and transition in 1993. "We must tell ourselves that we are part of the human race. And once you feel that you are part of the human race you are able to identify with the pain. You are not aloof, you are not on a different planet. When you write about what happens, it also involves you."^[2]

The theme is a strong one in his copy files housed at the library of the *Natal Witness*. His narrative strategies constantly played with subversion and inversions of

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the range of binaries that structured South African conflicts: binaries that extended from 'black-white' through 'Xhosa-Zulu' and Inkatha (IFP)-African National Congress (ANC) down to the minutiae of details that came to stand as signifiers of the apparently incontestable reality that society was divided into two irreconcilable halves. At the heart of his work is the belief that society was impossibly more complex than the binaries proffered by the narratives of a polemic journalism: whether those polemics be black-white; ANC-IFP, or partisan-royalist. Consequently, he constantly challenged journalists to write about more than what he called the 'equations' of lazy journalism. 'What you see blocks your sight' was one of his favourite aphorisms. Journalists' task, as he saw it, was to make the invisible, visible by observing the realities of human connectedness across social boundaries. In doing so, the task was to narrate the unnarratable - or, in Barthes' terms, to go beyond the 'already said'; beyond the journalistic short-hand that simply confirmed the nature of a conflict (and in so doing, perpetuated it) instead of challenging perceptions and providing alternative scripts for action.

Accomplishing these goals required one to position oneself neither on one side nor the other, and not even above the conflict on some high-wire fence, as it were, but on the ground, engaging with people whose family ties extend to all fronts of the fighting; encouraging physical, emotional and communal survival. Intense conflicts inevitably seek to force people to choose sides. Avoiding this force requires deep conviction, empathy, wits, and wit. In 1988, when violence was intense, Khaba wrote about the difficulty of not taking sides. The column touched on the difficulties politicians had with him; the difficulties of explaining to readers that the law on court reporting only allowed one to write about what had been said that day; of the difficulty of being labelled reactionary for talking to both sides (Echo 1988, 12.05).

Talking peace with 'vigilantes' was tantamount to treason, they [the opposition] warned. I had indeed dived into a pool of controversy and was labelled 'reactionary'. This was no setback at all to me because I am a firm believer of the fact that one should not worry if his or her shadow is crooked so long as he or she is standing upright - because at the end of the day, when the sun has set, your real image will remain. ...

On the credit side of reporting the violence, it left me with one good habit: To think before talking. How else could I have survived ... One wrong word and you are in for it.

Of colleagues, he wrote:

A question that is frequently asked by many concerned people is 'How is it possible for you not to take sides?' Let me answer by quoting some of my journalist colleagues: Khaba is a fence-sitter.' Later, when things got very hot, they upgraded the phrase and said I was not sitting on the fence any more but on the air itself.

Yet the effort to be neutral ought not to be confused with simplistic objectivity in journalism; far from it. Khaba and his colleagues sought to make the Echo serve as the means of communication for all parties in the interests of dialogue that could

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reduce violence. Thus, when the goal of reducing violence demanded plain speaking, punches were levelled and contextualised, but not pulled. From a column titled 'Stones deserve shields, not guns and bullets' (Echo 1990, 15.03):

A couple of weeks ago I'm driving home on a Tuesdaynoon. On my way I see a crowd of students at a nearby schooltoyi-toyiing^[3] inside school premises. They are locked inside the fence and shouting their rhythmic political slogans. ... As I approach the scene I see that some young constables are pointing firearms at the kids and provoking them

I respond by approaching the sergeant in charge of the unit and introduce myself. I point out my house up on the hill and explain that I am a parent and I do not like what I see: Provocation. Why must your guys point firearms at unarmed students, I politely try to mediate. ... The sarge argues his point by claiming that there's no provocation whatsoever. [The journalist-parent points out a particular policeman as he dares one of the students to act; Khaba points this out and the policeman is restrained by his superior.]

But sadly, as is often the case ... the moment [the students] realised the negotiation process was going smoothly, one points at the sarge: "*Jy is 'n bobbejaan!*" [Afrikaans for "you are a baboon!"] ... It's too much for the sarge who forgets me and starts reacting: "*Mfene futhi wena!*" [in Zulu, "you are a baboon too!"]. Inside I laugh at the display of knowledge of languages - a Zulu speaker spouting his venom in Afrikaans and an Afrikaans speaker doing his bit in Zulu.

[After the tension has dropped the sergeant] points at the stones lying on the streets and points out that these are not mere pebbles but real boulders which can "kill you and me." "We policemen we are not above human beings. We are also physically weak and can be dropped dead with a single well-aimed big stone." Addressing a personal question to me he levels: "If you are confronted with a group of stone-throwers, Mr Mkhize, would you not pull a gun if you had one and shoot to kill?"

The sarge continues: "You can write about this in newspapers if you like, but the fact remains that you all take us as just policemen. Yesterday they killed one of our guys in Richmond and it was taken as just another policeman killed, yet when just one student is injured by one rubber bullet it gets full page coverage. It's true, isn't it Mr Mkhize?"

The sarge was right. People expect protection from the police and not attacks. But, as he has just explained, people, especially the youths, are attacking the police.

What is wrong? You and I know the answer. When one sows thornwood he's bound to reap thornwood and not fruit. But that's not the issue now. The issue is what the sarge's fears and feelings are all about. They are not protected from stones during riot situations.

It is a big question. How do you protect the police?

The answer is always available during TV's news bulletin ... [when we] see hordes of policemen carrying fibreglass shields protecting their skulls while controlling riots. That's the answer, and I hope police bigshots are listening. Protective shields are far cheaper to buy and maintain than bullets and lives. We now need a new thinking in the police force. We need new policemen for a new South Africa. NOW.

*

Most of Khaba's ideas about journalism were formed between 1985 and 1991 while he was the editor of the *Natal Witness Echo*. The period coincided with some of the most intense fighting that occurred in South Africa, and the *Echo*, a weekly tabloid that was aimed at black readership, circulated in a region that was ravaged by violence that seemed as if it would continue in perpetuity. In 1994-5, while Khaba was an assistant editor on the daily paper the *Natal Witness* but retained an active voice on the *Echo*, fifty-thousand copies of *Echo* circulated every Thursday in Pietermaritzburg and the rural Natal Midlands region - a vast area incorporating much of KwaZulu, the political stronghold of Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party.

During his editorship of *Echo* he vigorously pursued strategies of conflict reduction through the medium of the newspaper. Towards the end of 1988 the newspaper believed his life to be in danger after he was publicly denounced at an Inkatha rally and received death threats, so he fled to Canada for several months. In his absence, *Echo* was edited by Fred Kockett, whose 'Fleet Street' style of journalism (as Khaba calls it) stood in stark contrast to his own style of mediative journalism. To Fred, guffaws Khaba, he owes his life: after a few months of 'Fleet Street' reportage, he says, Inkatha welcomed him back.

Khaba was born into a Zulu family in a Durban township called Clermont. For most of the 70s he worked as a site clerk for a building contractor, but wrote sufficient letters to various local newspapers for the *Witness* to offer him a job in 1978 when it was decided to employ a black journalist. He was instrumental in founding *Echo* in 1979, and became its editor in 1985, forty-four days before PW Botha imposed the State of Emergency that lasted for six years. In 1991 he was appointed assistant editor of the *Witness* and in 1996 he was appointed General Manager of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. He remained with the SABC until early 2003 when he resigned to pursue the promotion of an African style of classical music.

As a columnist on both papers he created for himself the identity of a journalist-raconteur with responsibility towards justice in the public sphere and published stories that would seldom have found a place on the news pages. While researching journalism at the *Natal Witness* in 1994-95, it seemed to me at early morning news meetings that he had established the right to speak his mind with charismatic inoffensiveness. Characteristically, he would puff on a cigarette, purse

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his lips and drop a low rumble of a thought into a conversation in a way that it would be taken up, without giving a hint of challenge to prevailing ideas. Or else he would regale colleagues with observations of the absurdities of South African social categories.

Playing the raconteur was part of asserting an alternative social vision - but not being an orthodox journalist meant that at times his peers considered him not the real thing. Having won the Commonwealth Fellowship for Journalists in 1995 and having been appointed to the SABC Board of Directors in 1994, he was not promoted from assistant to deputy editor at the *Witness* when the opportunity arose; nor was he honoured by the South Africa media community on being awarded the Fellowship, which in Britain was considered prestigious enough to land him a place at the high tea table at Buckingham Palace to converse with Queen Elizabeth II.

Khaba is also a playwright. He has written a number of plays, one of which, *Pity Maritzburg!* (1989) won South Africa's prestigious AA Vita Award. His plays, like his journalism, are an extension of his desire to put into the public sphere narratives that function as the social resources that could change stereotypes and behaviour. In the words of Ben Okri: 'stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations'.^[4]

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The story "Killing of 15 a 'tragedy of errors'" (*Natal Witness* 1994, 24.02) was published as a feature article, some days after a massacre of 15 young people near a small village in the rolling hills of the KwaZulu midlands. The killing had been reported as straightforward 'election-related violence' between the supporters of the two rival political parties in the area, the Zulu-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the non-racialist African National Congress (ANC). Convinced that the label 'election-related violence' was obscuring more than it was explaining, Khaba investigated and came up with a far more nuanced story of youthful excitement, misunderstanding, and tragedy.^[5]

Killing of 15 a 'tragedy of errors'

—Khaba Mkhize^[6]

The shooting of 15 youths in a hut at Mahehle near Creighton early on Saturday morning was a "tragedy of mixed errors."

This impression was conveyed to *The Natal Witness* by several members of the community.

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Although the area has not had much violence, it is tense as it borders on the Ixopo district where ANC-IFP feuding has resulted in killings.

The unseen occupants of the hut were apparently braaiing mielies on a fire. This caused some people to panic, believing that an attack was being planned. This caused some people to panic, believing that an attack was being planned.

According to Sidwell Khuboni: "a known figure who does not like the idea of the ANC recruiting here, phoned an office of the ANC's opposition ... and announced that the ANC was camping for trouble."

At about 9pm a hastily gathered "hit squad" went to the hut not knowing it was occupied by 14 boys and one girl, between 12 and 20 years, who had camped overnight with the idea of putting up posters for an ANC voter-education meeting set for the next day.

Detectives in Ixopo said: "It appears the attackers were not aware of who was occupying the house. Judging by the long-range shots that hit the (mud) walls, it is safe to deduce that they later stormed the house because there was no return of fire."

Ephraim Nxasane (76), who lost two grandsons in the attack, said the youths occupied the abandoned mud house out of "youthful excitement".

"They knew the name Mandela as a legend and the fact that on Saturday they would witness a presence of what had become a myth [i.e. the possibility of a democratic election] drove them to the idea of a vigil wait," said Nxasane.

He added that two men in their twenties had a premonition that something bad was about to happen, so they went to order the teenagers to call off the camping. They arrived at the same time as the killers and they too were shot dead.

The Natal Witness visited the scene this week. Members of the Goldstone Commission were also there. The house stands well away from others in the village and is close to four telephone poles that carry ANC posters. One is torn. Only shreds of yellow, green and white remain.

Gaping holes in the clay walls made by G3 and AK47 bullets are now home to a few lizards that scuttle away at the sound of human feet. [...] Bits of clothing and small-sized shoes are everywhere. [...] Blood is on the windowsill where some tried to escape.

The grandfather, Ephraim Nxasane, who owns a 400-acre farm on which all of the victims lived, said Mahehle village has been free of political involvement since 1987 when they withdrew their affiliation from Inkatha.

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Many people fear that these killings will now develop an ethos of violence. [ends]

In this piece, Khaba's principles of reportage are evident: blame is balanced in the mention of both AK47 and G3 bullets □ automatic weapons associated with the African National Congress, and Inkatha and the Inkatha-aligned KwaZulu Police respectively. Details of people's relatives and possessions change the story from a binary narrative of political conquest to a narrative in which human community is shattered by violence. The conspiracy angle is muted in favour of an angle of misunderstanding and tragedy, and the actors in the story are not national politicians but villagers. Emphasis is placed on the value of peace to the people in the area. The reason that he decided to write the piece was due to the way it had been covered. On the way to the village to do the research for that story, he had explained the problem he had with the report that had been published:

Our [journalistic] mistakes are not visible, like the doctor's mistakes that get buried; the lawyer's mistakes that end up behind cells. And we, we end up with a blurb, "For The Record". But in actual fact our mistakes start wars and civil wars. Today's story is a typical bang-bang journalism: how many people died; what the police said. It's a habit from State of Emergency days when you were not allowed to write what you saw, but to write what the police told you. Which developed into lazy journalism. That's where we're stuck now .

The strategies of his report reflect themes that he had long written about. In 1991 he published a column titled 'Unlearning the politics of labels' (23.05.1991):

One lesson that we must all learn from the proposed banning of the spear is that South Africa must get away from the politics of labels. What fueled the violence in Natal and now in the Transvaal was the custom of labeling individuals or groups as either Inkatha ... or UDF/ANC/Qabane. In the Transvaal it's the same story. ANC or Inkatha; Zulu or Xhosa, and of course hostel dweller or squatter/resident.

Somehow, somewhere along the lines the hostels suddenly became the inheritance of the Zulus while the shacks and residential communities on the Reef became part of the ANC. Also, the spear, overnight, became the legacy of the Zulus - the media qualified the deadly weapon as the 'Zulu spear', while the AK47 became the rosary of the ANC.

In other words we were led to believe that anybody killed by a spear was actually killed by a Zulu and any AK47 assault was in fact the work of the ANC. Any hostel inmate killed, we would conclude, was offed by the ANC and it would be the other way around if that person was a township resident in the Transvaal.

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The politics of labels is sustaining the violence in an incredibly senseless way. When ANC stalwart Chief Mhlabunzima Maphumulo was assassinated we all automatically came to the conclusion that it was the work of Inkatha. Further developments demanded that we retract from the 'logic' of labels.

When the mayor of Diepmeadow Moses Khumalo was assassinated it became a foregone conclusion that his assassins were the ANC. It was only last week when I researched the killing that I discovered his murder was outside the terrain of the politics of labels. [...]

The discovery of the power of labels in the news had everything to do with being a part of the community he was reporting on. In an interview he explained the genesis of an understanding of news that is rooted in an understanding of how readers interpret the news:

Lesley: Your journalism is obviously very different from what you call Fleet Street' journalism, or 'tell it as it is' journalism. How did that develop?

Khaba: With the fact that the community we are serving is not well versed about journalism. They think anything is according to the taste of the editor. Or the reporters. It started with the letters page. Youngsters were angry, and they wanted to take it all out in pen and bullets. Those who couldn't use bullets, used their pens. The fight was out there - bullets - there was another fight in the paper, expressing themselves. And, er, denouncing and detesting 'System' politicians, [7] which was Inkatha. And then we'd publish the letters; Inkatha would say - 'You are against us!' The fact that these letters are not written by the editor didn't matter.

During the State of Emergency, when the violence was at its peak, I took the paper myself to shops, public places, and I went to shebeens, [8] and they would grab it 'oven fresh', this was the slogan, and whatever misconceptions we'd have, they'd tell me straight - but there I was gambling on human psychology that if I'm there, they will never channel their anger through the barrel of a gun, they will tell me straight: 'Khaba this is rubbish.' Then I'm in a position to explain why we did it, if we had missed the point somewhere, I would apologise. I was an immediate target, they didn't have to phone or plot, it became a spontaneous reaction or anger. They had the person to take out their anger on in the shebeens and shopping centres.

Lesley: -so you were available

Khaba: -I was available.

Lesley: -Right there-

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Khaba: -right there. Because I consider it - that's protection, to create instant bridges. If they want to piss on me, let them do it. As long as they don't kill me. But then they would tell me - look, this whole page, it's comrades.[9] Then I would plead with them, 'Do me a favour. Spread out the message, at your meetings, that your people must respond.' By so doing I was involving the entire community in communications, and I also learnt that to have a whole page from one side, was dangerous. I used to count letters - Echo's letter pages would take about eight letters. I'd take four from Inkatha, four from the other side. In order to serve the community on an equal basis. The community became the objective for my job and for my existence. It ceased to be Ulundi[10] or Pretoria or Security Branch. I became preoccupied with the community. Hence I was very excited to learn of communitarian journalism, because this is what I was practising.

Lesley: Now if you were explain communitarian journalism veryvery simply

Khaba: It's to apply inclusive journalism on the part of the community. You imagine - how would I feel if I was a member of the IFP? Reading this? The UDF - reading this?

There are basic things; all communities have these in common, and the newspaper must also be treated from that perspective that we are all common, as human beings, that we belong to the human race, we journalists are not sitting on a planet giving judgemental theses on humanity, we are part of community, but we tend to have this egoistic profile that we are writing for the people - [but] we are writing for ourselves. If I write a story which will make Imbali burn - why should I write it? Even if it is true, telling it as it is does not justify me to cause suffering.

There are three categories of journalists - you have the writers, or opinion makers, who are thinkers, ok, but they will have experience to do that. Then you have your reporter who reports about what happened yesterday. And who'll announce what has been announced by a particular group. Then you have the explorer - the explorer is a person who writes about what happened yesterday, why it happened; you go back three years; if it still doesn't make sense, you go back four, five, six years. Then you explore the future, how will these trends influence the future of the community - you are exploring backwards and forwards. I cast myself in the mold of explorer journalist - I explore the future; what will happen after the massacre, and what does happen too - the 'follow-up culture'. When people make peace we don't care; we don't care about miracles; when those people were killing each other last week [have stopped fighting, but this week] we haven't heard anything about the continuation of the conflict. How; why; you explore, you don't report.

I call it [communitarian journalism] the greening of journalism. It's a very difficult concept to sell overnight to people, especially --- [a senior colleague], he thinks I'm 'off' [crazy] because this is just a myth, an unattainable myth, [they speak of me in the same way that] they describe the born-again. Good news is no news, they've got a lot of guys they quote, they

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quote some Fleet Street experts who actually crush the concept of good journalism. Some people don't even bother to argue with me, I sense that, [they think] 'pvvt, it's a waste of time'. But again it is because people are always scared of new things, things which have never been endorsed by the so-called gurus of the field. Talking seriously with some of the people, they say 'ja we agree with you but good news is boring'. I disagree. You don't have to report in a greyish style, you can do it in an exciting style - did you read that one on the refugee pigs and dogs?

Lesley: - the column?

Khaba: Ja, that column. Many people still talk about that story, you see, because it 's story telling, it 's a narration which carries symbolic analogies and metaphors, and people identify with analogies and metaphors.

The story of the pig and the dog occurred after a team of reporters, including Khaba, visited a violence-stricken region. While conducting an interview Khaba noticed a small black pig being tormented by a large dog. All of a sudden, over the crest of the hill came a small dog that chased the tormenter away. The event became a focus of Khaba's column (*Natal Witness* 1993, 10) as a parable, this time: that if a small dog could side with a pig to chase away a big bad dog, how about humans overcoming racial and ethnic divides in everyday life? In a media environment where most journalists are fascinated by the unjust exercise of power over the powerless Khaba was attracted by the power of stories and fables to suggest alternative responses of the less powerful. He once spoke about the power of columnists to bring new story forms to bear on conflict situations:

"Kwasuka sukela --" [Zulu for "Once upon a time --"]. Then you tell your story. It's your story. You can take a simple folklore and change it - or not folklore, fairy tale, and change it serve to their society. Our discussion at Kampala [a township pub] last night escalated with wisdom until I said to them, because there was some fighting when we talk about women's rights. But I said women are powerful. But the thing is that women fail to pick up some analogies based on animal life, and use them to their favour, like the bee. The bee is so powerful. The queen bee. The bee kingdom is ruled by women. We started talking about the bee, its organised life. And I found myself needing to go and study bees in order to carry on the women's struggle. Because it's all a matter of words - the power of language. To convince men, and to convince women - women need to be empowered, and there isn't anything with which you can empower women except powerful words. And powerful words need to push the goal by using something that no-one can argue against, like bee life, or the lions, the lioness being the provider. From there you have the reality, something that is conclusive, something that is self-evident, above what is evident now about the capabilities and achievement of women. Not as a romantic journey - this is the difference between man and animal, is that man can reason - humankind sorry - humankind can reason and communicate; animals cannot. Animals cannot improve their lot. Animals cannot enter into conventional contracts - they are what they are. A bee of today is a bee that was before the birth of

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Christ. So why should journalism behave like animals and not change? Why? An animal is trapped to that animal which was there in the Garden of Eden. Journalism must not be there where it was when journalism was established as an art form of communication; it must progress. [...]

In South Africa, the 1990s were the years in which the transformation of apartheid began. Negotiations at a national level decided the future shape of the country's government; at a local level, people began experimenting with ways of living without colour bars. Discoveries of common humanity at all levels made for some extraordinary moments; desperations to retain the old system led to some violent times. In this context of the extraordinary becoming the ordinary, Khaba was constantly amazed at the lack of flexibility in the news industry, as news continued, day after day, to be dominated by violent flashpoints, often without acknowledgement of the extraordinary context. Without the acknowledgement of a changing context, the message of such stories was effectively 'the more things change, the more they stay the same': a message that couldn't have been more wrong. Khaba's comments at the time:

Many journalists are by-products of an apartheid era where everybody was hammering apartheid - you didn't need skills. See, I consider the tools for our industry, the media, to be language and words. With apartheid you needed only three tools in your toolbox: a bulldozer, a fourteen-pound hammer, or a four pound hammer. Because you were just doing demolition. Bha! Bha! Bha! Bha! This era now demands very effective tools: tools of precision. Your level, your tape, your drill; you need a power drill, a pneumatic tool -bwwrrht-. We haven't learnt that art of selecting the right tools, because we are not demolishing now, we are building. That whole baggage of demonising people, demonising institutions and organisations, it's a closed chapter. Mediative journalism in my establishment - its a taboo cause; I only get away with it because it's me, in what I write, I've got a 'mentally-related exemption'. Okay. And with the younger journalists, some actually believe in this, but then news editors and subs, they don't.

And I think what actually militates against communitarian journalism is that people have been conditioned to flashpoints, violent flashpoints.

Lesley: - Explain?

Khaba: The mass media is thriving on violent episodes; television and people's deaths. Not that I disagree with it but they get the headline news - those referring to deaths and violence. A truck that doesn't overturn but gets off the road and probably overturns and nobody dies - it's not considered news, but to me, the news is the driver - how did he pilot the truck to save passengers or homes which are next to the road, or probably here are these ramps, steel barriers, or maybe it was the presence of these steel barriers that helped to prevent an accidental massacre. But no, [in terms of] the death principle: no-one was killed - so it's out. But we would be helping the community by identifying those things that protect the community so that the local authority would be encouraged to erect those things that save the community. We don't see that story. To us that story is no story. So the culture of how many died has got to be readjusted.

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We are living in the end of the twentieth century, with all the work that has been done from centuries before the work of Christ, but we are not getting it right, because we don't read the teachings of people who advocate 'truth force' philosophies, philosophies like ubuntu. [...] News by its own, it's no source for the refinement of human standards. Information. I don't like news reporting, I like story-telling. I don't like events-telling. Because events are not conclusive for a morale, or for a moral lesson. They are inconclusive. But a story is rounded. You get a story, of you, Les, for example, but it can never be news, because you did not do an extra-ordinary thing, out of the normal. News is something out of the normal. And something out of the normal does not really recreate or reconstruct the human order, it's a record, it's not a moral. You are asking me for my story - I haven't killed anybody; it's not news - Khaba Mkhize hasn't killed anybody, it's not news. This is the difference. If it's a debacle, if it's a catastrophe, it's bad - that's news. I like to tell good stories, like the old man who had two children, or old grandmother who had children around her in the fireplace, telling stories Kwasuka sukela.[11]

The power of analogy and metaphor, I think to me, is the most efficient wheels for story telling. Metaphor and analogy. The metaphor of the cockroach I know has actually sharpened the consciousness for cleanliness in many a kitchen. [...]

Lesley: Something puzzles me about this cockroach thing. It seems so central to you and to your thinking about journalism, and yet it is such an ugly thing. I mean, why choose cockroaches?

Khaba: You say they are ugly. [He grins.]

Lesley: Absolutely.

Khaba: But I don't look at them as ugly. They are like traffic cops. They are ugly, but really when you look at it objectively, a traffic cop, when he tickets you, is not ugly, he is protecting you from your own - what - from your own recklessness. Yet there is nothing ugly about a traffic cop, yet we hate traffic cops. But they are helping us. Cockroaches to me are like health inspectors sent from heaven to come and check against our hygiene. Because you'd never find a cockroach in clean environments. Cockroaches thrive where there's filth. That's why I like a cockroach. The cockroach taught me cleanliness. And a cockroach is a symbol of physical, concrete inspection. It's an Inspectorate of Neatness. And who doesn't like neatness? Have I answered you why?

Lesley: So journalists are cockroaches?

Khaba: Good journalists!

Lesley: That's enough to put anybody off.

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Khaba: Huhhah, good journalists. But everybody loves the cockroach concept. I've tested it in many an audience. You get them rolling with laughter. But then it's a good analogy. The metaphor of a cockroach. Nobody forgets it, because they see the cockroach all the time and then they think about the metaphor. This is what I like about metaphors.

The cockroach knows the basic rules of survival. When to emerge from the kitchen. First of all the venue, the habitat. He mustn't be far from what makes you tick. So the cockroach will keep itself in the kitchen - not in the bedroom, it's too far, but in the kitchen.

And then your cockroach - if you don't switch off the lights, then the cockroach will know instinctively, that they're all asleep now. And then it will emerge. When there's a sound or a human appears, the cockroach knows, I must stop now, and if it is attacked, it even knows how to fly. Natal cockroaches fly. And then, millions of dollars are spent all over the world to save certain species which are endangered. But hundredfold millions of dollars are spent the world over to exterminate the cockroach ever since the animal kingdom was founded. But the cockroach is still there. It knows - it even adapts to these pesticides. It knows the basic rules. And those are survival rules. If things go bad for me, I fly to Cape Town. And if they are very desperate I fly to Canada. And come back and survive again. That's timing. I used to call it cockroach technique. But now I'm calling it cockroach timing.

In the context of a status quo undergoing radical transformation, the white right wing became something of a national scapegoat for racism (not least in that overnight they were the only ones willing to acknowledge their racism). Recognising the hypocrisy of the media's right wing antagonism and all too aware that reactionary coverage of the right isolated them ever further, Khaba employed the strategy of not taking the bull by the horns but getting alongside it instead. A local meeting of the avowedly racist organization, the Afrikaaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) was announced, and Khaba attended despite the AWB's reputation for the ejection of black journalists from its meetings. This story appeared as part of a column in the *Witness* of November 19, 1993:

I can't tell you about the AWB outside Natal but I can tell you about our AWB in Pietermaritzburg [who were] waiting for Mandela at Howick on Monday. ...

I took my chances to get the feel of the AWB at close quarters. I decided that they would not further flatten my already flat black nose in front of crowds. I found that this AWB crowd is a different kettle of fish. ... I got the impression that they were ordinary fathers and sons who happen to wear the image of a demonised name. ...

Of course, they were heavily armed. Some were carrying leather cases which looked like guitar bags, but their faces did not match their fire-power. I still wonder how many media people who took the 'spectacular' pictures

actually wrote about the politebehaviour displayed by the AWB. ...

Probably irritated by their presence, the comrades decided to toyi-toyi towards the group ... carrying a very big redSACP banner. The AWB refused to be agitated. ...

When I'm overseas again, I will tell them that inPietermaritzburgwe have a differentAWB. I hope they stay like that.

Alongside the bull and stroking its ears, the story recasts villain and victimThat this was possible was in large measure due toKhaba's capacity (and determination) to be so gracious in his own bearing that he brought the best out of people. This was in contrast to a common tactic of journalists to provoke the earthquakes that would expose social fault lines, in the misguided belief that their task was simply to expose the latter. 'Readjusting the culture of journalism' was a theme of many of our conversations. While on a long road journey he spoke about it.

Khaba: 'Tell it as it is. Bugger the consequences. ' That's the criterion for being a good journalist. To me, it's an 18th century norm of journalism. You see, paradigms have shifted. And when paradigms have shifted, we also have to shift our ethics.

When you do a sensitive story, what I used to do and I still do, is to come back to the person reading the story, and say, 'Do you agree?' and when he objects to point abc, xyz, discuss it again, until he convinces me that it's wrong, or I convince him that it's right to let it stick like that. Then a person respects you for that. Doesn't get a shock the next morning when he gets the paper. And when you are wrong, never hesitate, take it as virtue, to say, 'I'm sorry, I made a mistake.'

Approaching journalism in a violence-stricken situation, according to the book, it tends to be reckless. For instance, that youngster [who had given us information about a recent massacre], I can quote him, but what do I want to achieve? If I publish his name, people will come back and shoot him. They shoot kids. If I publish his name, do I have a responsibility? People are behaving like animals. Nothing is stopping them from killing children. I am putting that boy on death row, just because Journalism says, 'Get their name.' I can change the name and say this is Bafana. The name does not matter in the story. It's not a court case. [The aim of the story] is to give out information, not kill the sources of information. Preserve life while presenting the facts. This dogmatic approach of sources, you know, they'll do it, then fly back to London. Get the story in the Daily Telegraph [a UK paper, an international version of which is distributed weekly in South Africa]. They don't care about what is happening to the people they've left behind. But for me to come back again here, I must protect the identities of people of this area. The next time I come, I get that boy's name in the paper, and they kill him - the next time I come they either kill me or reject me. Short-term journalism. Ignoring the consequences. And not knowing what you want to achieve.

Les, some journalists cannot live with the fact that sometimes you

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drive 500 km and you come back with no story. That's where dishonesty starts. Your newspaper or your news editor must know that not every trip produces a story. Then the fabrication of stories, thumb-sucking of stories will stop.

They want to justify expenses. Nothing else. The guys came here in 1987; overseas TV crews. They said Khaba, we have been told that you are the man of the moment in this area. We need your help. Whats happening? I say we are enjoying calm, peace, right now. Nothing is happening, its peaceful. They say come on, come on, come o-o-on. Then they look at each other and say, the other one, 'Look here Khaba, organise some action. Make a plan. We'll see you right.' Unbelievable. I was so embarrassed on their behalf. How d-a-r-e these guys suggest that I script violence, you know?

And er, in 1989, January, I had a tip-off about an attack which would have been like a massacre on Ashdown township. It was coded Operation Doom. Doom, like they Doom the cockroaches, Operation Doom. Which was planned for the 19th of January 1989. So the only way to pre-empt such a disaster was to expose it, so I decided to expose it. Of course I knew Inkatha would deny it, I phoned Ulundi [the headquarters of the IFP]; they said they would treat the thing with the contempt it deserves. 'We can't plan such a thing.' OK, the story was fit for publication because Ulundi had responded, and we published the story that Ulundi denies Operation Doom. Right? But then journalists from abroad and from Johannesburg started arriving in Pietermaritzburg to cover Operation Doom. Hubba. They came to me to find out directions - where's this township, bla bla bla. On the 18th the office was bounded by the media moguls. OK. On the 19th I did not bother myself to dispatch any reporter or for me personally go out and watch for Operation Doom. Because I knew Inkatha is not stupid. They would not do the thing on the day which was quoted. But all these guys went there. And at about 2:30, they came there, in a bad temper, accusing me of sending them on a wild goose chase. I said what do you mean? They said, 'Where's the violence, there 's nothing coming from there.'

I've never hated journalism like I hated it at that moment. I looked at the guys faces. I mean vultures are good looking. I don't know how to describe their faces. I felt so-o-o sad. Not angry - so sad that some of our guys have stooped to such base levels, and I opened up my drawer in my desk and said 'look here guys, if at all I had violence Id be giving it to you free of charge. Thank you, sorry. I don't manufacture violence. I wrote a story, you have got nothing to do with the story, you can't question me, I'm not accountable to you. I wasn't writing the story to you.'

The first guys who had come in '87 and said I must make a plan, organise some action, they explained their type of journalism to the fact that we have got to account for expenses. 'We are flying from New York to Johannesburg, from Johannesburg to Maritzburg, we are staying at the Capital Towers Hotel. They need film back at work.' I don't know how much they would have paid me.

You know, I've told the story in America, in Canada, in Germany, in

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England, Uganda all over, but to my surprise the people who I've told the story are not surprised. No-one queries it like 'no-o-o, you are not telling the truth.' That alone tells me ... you get what I am trying to say.

Journalism has not moved. Today we have conflict management - but journalism is conflict-propellant. ... We need to learn skills of violence-extinguishing. ... You need that to be incorporated into our journalism.

Lesley: You said earlier that journalism in this country is digging its own grave. That sounded to me like a thought that's been developing for a while.

Khaba: Exactly. Recklessness. Not thinking about the consequences of a story. You run an editorial like that one [on the Creighton massacre], you can see the person who wrote the story that he lives in comfort. He's an academic theoretician. He doesn't understand the cultural dynamics of the environment he is writing for and he is writing in. And then the name of journalism gets tainted. And then we even convert simple questions into statements attributed to radical activists. Like the PAC [Pan-Africanist Congress] thing - 'Kill a journalist'. It sounds a nice slogan, if you see a journalist - [yell] 'Kill a journalist!' - that's the way we are now gonna be intimidated - this is how they are going to intimidate us. 'Kill a journalist! Kill a journalist!'

But then if you go back to the origins of the slogan, you find that they did not compose the slogan, it was composed by a sub-editor, who probably changed the story - [thinking] the headline will read well, like 'kill a farmer, kill a boer' [12]. There are many slogans now. Based on that - kill one. In this play When honey turns sour, the slogan from 'kill a boer, kill a farmer' was 'one Adam, one Eve'. Many people are catching on that. It's catchy.

Lesley: - When honey turns sour - that's your play on Aids?

Khaba: - Ja. The problem with slogans - they read well, they sound well. Who knows next week they will have transmuted it into 'kill a journalist, kill a story', something like that. [...]

Khaba: Violence is like a virus. If it is in Guguletu [a Cape Town township], it is soon in Clermont [a Durban township] ... it flies, it's a bug, and so, I said the media are labeling violence as 'black-on-black,' it is actually trivialising violence, as if it's a third-rate problem, but nobody's safe. Well today it's history - 'kill a boer kill a farmer' - the case of Amy Biehl, [13] it's because you play into the hands of the culpability of the human condition, you repeat something, they feel it's an assent, even a stamp of approval. Those tendencies actually cause violence before it happens.

Bodies alone - this has become the recipe for news. But the question is - Why did they fight? We must go and see whether they must go to a sanatorium - there are mad people out there. Most cases, they are not mad, they are people with families, people who don't want to fight. What makes them fight? This is therapeutic journalism. You heal, you heal communities,

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and when they vent out their problems, they feel satisfied somehow. It's like the phone-in programs. They've done a lot to de-escalate the violence. People are able to shout at each other. And it's good for them. It's a healing process.

I used to be angry about the violence, but now I am angry about the media. For actually caressing violence.

I use tomato as an analogy for our journalism. For most housewives, cooking begins with a tomato to spice food. And South African journalism uses violence. To spice its news. Violence must always be page one.

Development journalism is not a priority, to write a good [news] story and make it a lead - it's not a news fashion. It's the fashion to lead on earthquake-like story - that's news, that's the definition of news in contemporary South Africa. How many people died? Not natural death. I mean this psyche is feeding into something. And feeble minds think that that's the way life should be. Ja. I'll be very happy if you could put a stress on the greening of journalism. The greening of journalism is the beginning - it's the first step to the greening of humanity. We need the greening of humanity, and the greening of journalism.

During the transition period prior to the first democratic election one of Khaba's stories was that of an unusual soccer match. At the time, conflict between the South African Police, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the African National Congress was intense, and the numbers of people dying in massacres, month by month, were among the highest experienced in the province.

SAP vs ANC, IFP - on a football field!

The mass media can play a leading role in a 'Peace Unleashing Movement', reports Khaba Mkhize, *Natal Witness* (1993 9.10).

The invisible was made visible recently, thanks to the alert eye and sharp nose of journalist Fred Khumalo who writes for *City Press*. He recorded a tolerance-generating event in the violence-ravaged Malukazi shack township near Durban whereby the ANC first thrashed the IFP and then the international peace observers, in collaboration with the South African Police, succeeded in beating the hell out of both the IFP and ANC.

This event is hardly known in the country and certainly not by the overseas community. Even the police press releases didn't contain this scoop. But I do not blame the mass media and the police. It was obviously invisible and unimportant. The winner at the end of the day on that battle field was the 'Peace Trophy'.

The first soccer match was between the IFP and ANC. The IFP was walloped by three goals to one in a tournament organised as a peace gesture. Then an integrated team of IFP and ANC wore one jersey and played against

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a combined team between the international observers and the SAP who scored a slender 1-0 victory.

Echoing local Inandi Chief Sondelani Zondi's sentiments, the IFP and ANC then set up a Malukazi development forum. They also agreed to form a joint dispute resolution and a joint disciplinary action committee to investigate criminal cases.

The leadership of both organizations agreed to free political activity and to make schools and halls available to both for meetings. Although the South African mass media and police belittled or simply ignored the violence-shattering episode, this is no reason why we should ignore the hope-building process.

Massacres (very visible) are easy to capture on the box and paper - hope and peace (easily invisible) are journalistic geometry.

In the context of massacres perpetrated by the flag bearers of the teams that played, the thought of a game was almost unimaginable. Yet the unimaginable happened. "It is easy to forget how mysterious and mighty stories are," wrote Ben Okri, "They do their work in silence, invisibly. They work with all the internal materials of the mind and self. They become part of you while changing you. Beware the stories you read or tell: subtly, at night, beneath the waters of consciousness, they are altering your world."^[14]

Khaba's experiments in the value of circulating stories that worked with unusual subjects and made unusual connections, extended to playwriting.

Lesley: Let's move on to your plays - what was the first play you wrote?

Khaba: The first play I wrote was 'Behold the black sheep'. It was about a youngster who was angry, who was messed up by Bantu Education, and he wanted the world to be aware of this. It was a psychoanalytical piece of work, and he ended up being a crime boss. I won't talk about all the plays I've written, but I'll talk about those which have made an impact.

The building trade - all my observations and high points were told in this play Hhay' Hhash';^[15] I gave [the paper's] management some tickets, the next day [then-editor] Richard Steyn called me and said 'Khaba, thank you very much for the experience. What I saw really riveted me, I couldn't imagine that in this country such things happen, but the story was well told - you gave us a glimpse through your window last night of how the other half lives, and I would ask you to continue writing the story by writing a weekly column.'

Lesley: When was this?

Khaba: - this was September 1979, I joined the paper in October 1978. Before the end of the year I was invited by Americans to a high-profile

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conference of African-American writers in Florida, USA, [with] Chinua Achebe, James Baldwin, some other high profile writers - because of the column. I got the column because of the play 'Hhay' Hhash'; had I not written 'Hhay' Hhash' I wouldn't have got the column at that early stage - the way I wrote it with honesty and robustness, it was a courageous statement and stand to take, they knew in this establishment [theWitness] that the play worked; it opened up the column; the column worked; it introduced me into international levels. When I came back from the States, I was empowered, I had confidence, I believed in myself - I started walking tall with my pen.

And then the amount of stories I used to churn out for theWitness could not actually make it in the papers because of the news editors, because of their Eurocentric approach, tended to cut them, chop them to oblivion. And then an idea grew up that there must be a special paper that could accommodate my stories. We held meetings, thatEcho must be formed, but for a different reason, management wanted a paper that would reflect on the social life of black people, they wanted wedding pictures, parties, soccer, crime. I said OK. I had my own agenda. When the paper started I said black life is not parties, soccer and crime; there is the other side - which is their hopes, their aspirations, their failures and their victories; ~~is~~ a community, it must address the needs of the community. I think communitarian journalism started there, now when I look back. I said it must serve the community, if it reports only on the [soccer] goals that we scored last week, its not serving the community. Let the paper work to achieve the goals and lubricate and service the hopes, then we are onto the bottom line ofEcho as infrastructure. The paper did a lot of things in improving the quality of life out in the townships.

Lesley: How?

Khaba: We got robots [traffic lights] ... I was a pain in official'snecks, I was a pain. Because I wouldn't deal with semi-officials, I went to the top to get results. I introduced the culture of accountability to the positions they were serving. I became very unpopular in this city, I was called a shit-stirrer in this city. My stories which were crusading for a better deal, and when people saw me they were completely disarmed - 'you and your name[16] don't match', I said yes, I am doing my job, and if you are doing your job you've got to fight by using the communicative tools. I'm accountable to that community. The media is a very strong tool to make things happen. And the idea of using the paper as a light-hearted sheet to make the people happy, I changed all that, I said the paper must serve to realise the dreams to create a better life and to educate this city. Because before I joined theWitness, black people were [represented by the paper as] maids and laborers. When I entered the scene, they became people, they had needs.

In 1982 the ANC organized a culture and resistance festival in Botswana, [my play] 'Hobo the Man' was asked to represent Natal. It's a two-man play; it evolved from my encounter with a person inDurban in 1978. I heard a voice in a polished cultural English accent, stiff-lipped,

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saying 'Excuse me Sir'; I looked around, I mean Sir? My mind - went round, I'm called Sir, in this accent? I looked round, it was a hobo, 'Can I have ten cents please?' I was so impressed I gave him twenty cents. I was still in the building trade, I used to drive the van to collect the building materials, my mind was stuck on that sentence. Then I asked myself, must it take such degradation for a person to give me respect? So it was the inspiration to write 'Hobo the Man'. It was dealing with stereotypes. I did not imagine, I did not leave room for that experience. At the time there were these stereotypes: white is right, black is bad. Or inferior. And then the play took head-on the 'stereotypedness' of society, in such a way as I made people [in the audience] to drink mahewu [traditional maize porridge] from a chamber pot - managing directors, everyone ... I made people to eat dog food from tins. 'What we see blocks our sight ...' there is nothing wrong with dog food - you cannot die from eating dog food. The chamber pot had never been used for its official capacity, and the hobo was valuing it as his trophy ... the whole point was to break the stereotype. In fact, I'm so in love with that play that I'm redoing it, phase 2: 'Hobo in a new South Africa'. Hopefully it will be in Grahamstown Festival this year. It's just a journey exploring - its going nowhere, but it's exploring the situation - where are we come from, where are we going to, it's sort of an experimental type of play.

Then in 1985 the Brits approached [then-editor] Richard Steyn and said Khaba deserves a break and to get exposed to the British media. And I came back very excited about the way Fleet Street write their papers, very concise, you know, crisp. While I was away I was promoted to take over Echo. [When I came back] I was able to do more sensitive things, more unimagined things, getting the paper sued - I defied this 'contempt of court' and the Secrets Act, exposing prison conditions in Virginia [\[17\]](#) But one thing all officials of the government knew: that bastard Mkhize has his facts right. This is the thing. They hated me but they respected me. When I came back I was Acting Editor ... I started in May and in June, forty-four days after I took over as editor, we were given volumes of the Emergency Regulations. I was still wet. I said to myself - hmm - I've got to read all this? I said to myself, I will gamble, I will play it according to my gut feeling. If I see it's wrong, I will restrain myself, but if I believe that this has got to be told, I will tell it. That was the birth of the cockroach. Forty-four days. The forty-four days' experience landed me on the cockroach technique, on the cockroach timing.

Lesley: How have plays and audiences impacted on your journalism?

Khaba: Very much, because when I put up a play and put up all these cynical ideas, people catch up with them and discuss them, and actually compliment me for thinking in an unorthodox way. To me, that becomes a vote of confidence, which I use in my journalism - that no idea will shunt me to Fort Napier -

Lesley: which is - ?

Khaba: - a sanatorium, for mad people, it's in this area [lights another

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cigarette].

Lesley: Now what about 'Pity Maritzburg!' - where did the idea come from?

Khaba: [Explains that a group of musicians in the nearby township of Sobantu asked him to write a script for them.] For years I promised them a script, but then the violence came, before I could put a script together. I wanted to integrate their musical talents with drama, but - in 1989, I said, 'let me force myself'; I said, 'what kind of play can I write?' I'm inclined to believe that a writer must reflect the community picture - what is, or what should be, or what was - but then, you have got to prioritise which is the pressing issue at the moment; it's to mediate the violence. So I have got to write about the violence, but write about it in an interpretive and in a - how can I put it - in a 'boom-boon' fashion; we must, I must write in a fashion that would throw the light - use heat for light, because violence is very hot, it was the heat of the moment; but extract light from the violence - this was the bottom line of 'Pity Maritzburg!', as the name suggests. So I took all the incidents that could not be published because of the nature of the newspaper - we've got to distill news - you don't write everything, we couldn't write about everything that we saw and heard in Bhambayi [a squatter camp near Durban which experiences intense violence] yesterday, and certain things, they are like trivial, it's not for the newspaper ... or you would be pouring petrol in an already inflammatory situation. I used those snippets, put them together, and 'Pity Maritzburg!' was written by the events, not me. It was like a fruit salad. You take the apple, slice it, put it there, you take paw-paw, y'know.

Lesley: What was 'Pity Maritzburg!' trying to say?

Khaba: It was trying to say that it's futile to kill each other. Tolerance. If you are Inkatha; if you are ANC; if you are Azapo; we are just one community. It was based on the community premise. [...] We are a community. Before we became political followers, we were a community, and we must go back to communitarianism. That's what's the message.

Lesley: How many people saw the play?

Khaba: Hey, thousands. When it opened in Maritzburg, about 40 per cent each night were people who came back to see it. It was a magic thing, really, it was magic. Many people were persuading me to take it full time, but I thought no I have a more important role in the media.

Years later during the transition period in South Africa when Khaba was writing for the predominantly white readership of the *Natal Witness*, 'ubuntu' (an African philosophy of shared humanity) became a major theme in his writing. 'The day the fish came out' appeared in January 1995 during a summer heatwave.

The day the fish came out

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by Khaba Mkhize, *Natal Witness* (1995 7.01)

All eleven languages in the country are at one in describing the scorching weather and all use the symbolism of animals.

South Africa is so hot even Euro-languages have thawed to gauge our temperatures. And they, too, use animal symbolism, like the English saying: only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.

The Afrikaners say: *Dis so warm dat die kraaie gaap* (it's so hot the crows yawn).

IsiZulu, siSwati, and siTsonga use fish: *Lishisa likhipha inhlanzi emanzini* - it's so hot the fish are expelled from the water. In siTswana and seSotho a crocodile replaces fish. *Ligqatsha ubhobhoyi* goes the isiXhosa saying, meaning the sun ejects *ubhobhoyi* (a type of bird) from rocky cliffs. And isiPedi says: it's so hot it melts fat from the pigs *La go tolosa kulube makhura*).

Says Sekola Sello of *City Press*, 'As South Africans, we have gone a long way; we're surely normalising as a country. That we can all talk about a single common topic, the weather, shows civic growth. And to imagine that the media freaks would treat the weather as a running story tells volumes about our transformation.'

Typically, Pietermaritzburg - a city of extremes in floods and violence - was beaten in the heat stakes only by Windhoek - by one degree.

However, the unifying heat waves are felt from virtually coast to *platteland* as if to underline another Zulu saying: *Libalele nasebukhweni bezinja* - it is so hot, even at the in-laws of dogs - wherever the in-laws of dogs are. It's hot everywhere!

True to the writer's belief in 'ubuntu[18] journalism,' the piece has a one-nation meta-text: 'all eleven languages are at one in describing ...'. In writing the story he has a specific and consciously intended civic function in mind: to ride outside the binary ruts of black/white, Zulu/Xhosa and remind people that to be human is to be embodied; that color does not alter people's experience of heat.

As a writer, Khaba's interest was not in differences between conflicting parties, ideological or otherwise, but in the ties between them that subverted the rationalisation of their enmities. Indeed, as the 'Fish' story above suggests, even bodiliness and shared experiences of the weather could stimulate interest across social divides.

Shared bodiliness is also the theme of a piece that reflected on the changed environment for black journalists during the period of negotiations on the future of South Africa, immediately prior to the first elections and Nelson Mandela's presidency. Against the background of black journalists having had a very difficult

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time approaching white president, he describes his first meeting with the State President FW de Klerk □ during a 'biological break' in the men's room while at a conference. In a back room of a distinguished gathering, the last white president meets a black journalist at the urinal, and racial protocol suffers a sustained guffaw. Such reportage embodies Bakhtin's observation that the 'plane of comic representation ... is the zone of maximally familiar and crude contact ... laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically' (Bakhtin 1981, 23).

he strategy of laughter found many of its roots in Khaba's watering hole at a tiny shebeen (township pub) with an old rusty fridge standing off centre on a bare cement floor, surrounded by assorted plastic chairs and a few upturned crates for tables. Outside, chickens had the run of the weeds under the fence. On the front wall, next to a peeling coca-cola sign was the name: Kampala. One day I asked Khaba to tell me more about the place.

Lesley: You said you were at Kampala last night ... I was intrigued by the place - you said it's your 'ear to the ground'?

Khaba: Ja, I learn what was going on and that's where I test interpretations, and where I do my analytical work. Kampala - that's where I have my Sophocles and Confuciuses and the rest. No topic is too little to discuss. We don't have an agenda, we just pick on something that somebody says ... They like to argue. Ja. In fact, I picked this up - somebody was saying [he swipes at his arm] 'HEY! this mosquito!' And he's a fat guy, huge. I said to him, look here man, you are very ungenerous. You kill, I mean, you are the Land of Plenty - your size, it's like Muden - a place here that specialises in oranges, Muden Farm, orchards and orchards of oranges - I said it's like you kill a person for plucking just three oranges. You have got two million oranges. He-e-ey, it was a big laugh. And that's where it started - analysing the mosquito: the mosquito is invading my physical property, you know, like farmers [with signs that say]: 'Dogs And Kaffirs Will Be Shot On Sight.' The thing built up, it came on to women's issues - it was such a moving chat. Until we parted. That's Kampala. No topic is too little. We build on anything.

And I guess, my wife hasn't got a rival, in the form of a woman, but she hates Kampala. That's her rival. 'That Kampala! That Kampala!' Then I try to appease my wife. I abstain from Kampala. Then I get telephone calls. 'No man: what is it? You got transport problems? We'll fetch you. We'll deliver you back home. You don't have money? No we'll buy for you. We bought R50 meat, to braai, please come.' I say WHY must I come, they say, no, we need you. So you see, I'm also contributing something to themoulding and refinement of those guys. And I go all over [the world], and I come back and I tell these guys, and their habits get changed; they quote me, they say 'Khakhaza said, when he was in such and such a place, this was the trend.' So I'm a little - what? - chief out there. You can call it that. But those guys,

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they also read. They are lawyers, doctors, priests, labourers, teachers, salesmen, businessmen, unemployed, criminals, politicians - a broad spectrum of society. So this is why there is no topic that is not tackled. If it's medical, Bra Jake; if it's legal, Jazzman; if it's religious, Bheki, if it is criminal, D---- you know, who dissects the psychology of killing like you have never read it anywhere in the world. He's a killer. Even yesterday, he was saying, you guys I told you this approach of collar and tie to things - it's not workable: the answer is Kimberley. Kimble. Kimble. It's a word they've used to aromatised killing in the townships. [...] He says Kimberley is the answer - it sorts out things. He says 'If I stab a person or shoot a person, I make it a point that I kill him. Because I've had a lot of - hassles with people who survive.' [...] You know? That's Kampala. It's a seedy place.

Lesley: No wonder your wife hates it.

Khaba: Ja but I tell her - 'Kampala is no venue for women. So you must be happy, be free' - the women they like fancy places.

You may find there is contradiction in what I've told you. Which is good. If there are contradictions, then you have the right philosophies. Because the world ticks through contradictions. Contradictions are the heartbeat of human nature. In order to have your cabbage thrive well, you have got to have weed next to it. It's nature's pre-arranged conditions for the cabbage to survive. Because ... [the weed's] purpose ... [is] striking the nutritional balance. Otherwise it would just grow over-luxuriantly, and make leaves like spinach, and it does not produce the product, because [it gets] too much nutrition.

If you have contradictions you are on the right track. Contradictions are the base for unpredictability. Which is very healthy. Because life would be very boring.

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[1] Portions of this paper were published as 'Natal Cockroaches Fly' in Khab' Mkhiz and communitarian journalism in 'KwaZulu -Natal, South Africa' in George E Marcus (ed) 1997 Late Editions 4: Cultural Producers in Perilous States. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

This research was conducted between 1993 and 1995 at the offices of the Natal Witness and the Natal Witness Echo in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa; the work was the basis of a doctoral thesis titled Narrative, Conflict and Change: Journalism in the New South Africa (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, South Africa). Funding is gratefully acknowledged from the National Research Foundation, the Harry Oppenheimer Institute for African Studies and the United Nations Education and Training Programme in South Africa. Opinions expressed should not be attributed to the funder.

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[2] Mkhiz, p. 17 in Balc, J.A. and Roska, K.L. (eds.) 1994. Bias and bigotry: The media and elections in South Africa. Media Workshop Report, November 22 1993. London: African-European Institute.

[3] 'Toyi-toyi' is a form of protest-dancing in South Africa.

[4] Okr, Ben. 1997. *A way of being free*. London: Phoenix House, p. 112.

[5] The full story of the reportage of this incident is told in Fordre (1997).

[6] Co-authorship of the piece was attributed to me by Khab' as I had gone out on the assignment with him as part of my research on practices of journalism. The attribution is generous; Khab' developed the story structure; my contribution was in a few details that I had observed.

[7] 'System' politicians implies collaboration with the apartheid government. While Inkath' leader Mangosuthu Buthelez did not accept the offer of the apartheid state to make 'KwaZulu' into an 'independent homeland for Zulus', the left considered Inkath' to be in cahoots with the State.

[8] 'Shebeen': township pubs.

[9] Comrades: UDF / ANC supporters

[10] Ulundi: a town that became the capital of 'KwaZulu' and the headquarters of Inkath'.

[11] 'Kwasuk' (Zulu) is similar to 'once upon a time' - a phrase used when someone starts to tell a story.

[12] A PAC member had a few weeks before asked in a speech - 'must we kill a journalist to get media coverage?' A sub-editor on an Eastern Cape paper had turned it into a slogan - 'Kill a journalist' in a headline, which provoked howling outrage against the PAC - and of course, much media coverage.

[13] The killing of Amy Biehl, a U.S. Fulbright scholar, in a Cape Town township, came at a time when anti-white slogans constituted a furor in the media.

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[14] Ben Okri, *ibid.*, p.34.

[15] The title 'Hha 'hhas' alludes to a customary Zulu phrase meaning 'it is horse-meat'. It is usually said to invite passers-by or unexpected guests to join a meal that has been prepared.

[16] I.e. your reputation; one that was intensified by the meaning of the word 'khab' in Zulu: it means, 'to kick'.

[17] Virginia is a small town in the Free State province.

[18] 'Ubuntu': African philosophy of community - in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 'our sense of connectedness, our sense that my humanity is bound up in your humanity'. (*South* newspaper, April 4 1991)