

OBITUARY

JOHN MAKUMBE: SCHOLAR, ACTIVIST AND AUTHOR¹

There were many warm tributes for John Makumbe both inside and from outside Zimbabwe, on his passing on 27 January 2013. The community of scholar-activists in Zimbabwe is not a large one so when one as distinguished as John Makumbe passes on, a huge gap is created. He was a rare example of a highly learned scholar who was also a resilient activist for social justice, human rights and democracy.

Often at the centre of various campaigns in different civil society organisations and forums, Makumbe invested a great deal of his time, indeed of his life, in denouncing institutions and conditions that curtailed freedom and justice. In this he was fearless where others were timid, blunt where some were reticent and eloquent where others were obscure in their analysis of authoritarianism and repression in Zimbabwe. He could be relied upon to 'call a spade a spade' in Zimbabwean politics and to remind us if and when the 'emperor had no clothes'.

John Makumbe was born on 6 May 1949 in the Buhera district of Manicaland province in eastern Zimbabwe. First trained as a school teacher in the early 1970s, he later studied for a BA in Administration at the then University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS). Following independence in 1980, he completed his BA Hons in Administration at the University of Zimbabwe before proceeding to his PhD studies, which he completed in 1986 at the University of Tasmania in Australia.

He was thus one of a remarkable set of scholar-activists who obtained their doctorates just before or after independence and transformed the teaching of Political Science and Administration at the University of Zimbabwe. This trio, consisting of the late Masipula Sithole, the late Elphas Mukonoweshuro and John himself, brought an intellectual vibrancy that was felt in the wider society. Their yearning for a more democratic and just society motivated them to participate actively and take the lead in civil society. They demonstrated that it was possible, indeed necessary, to organise to make society more humane and conscious of its basic freedoms.

Active in different civil society organisations at different times, for the past 25 years John Makumbe had juggled his time among lecture rooms, public seminars and the various campaigns in which he was involved. He was the model of a 'public intellectual', as much at home in the seminar room as in public debates, where his sharp wit and delicious humour were legendary.

1 An earlier version of this tribute appeared in the *Zimbabwe Standard* on 3 February 2013

Regardless of the sensitivity of the theme of the debate he had the gift of being lucid, blunt and humorous at the same time, a disarming tactic that confused his critics. A treasured source of quotes for print journalists and the electronic media, John was forever ready to offer the most apt comment on topical governance issues. He was equally fluent and clear in the regular columns he wrote for the *Zimbabwean* and the *Worker* newspapers.

Of course, his sharp commentary and active work in civil society brought John Makumbe some critics. When the state media carried pieces on the role of intellectuals and non-governmental organisations in society, he was often one of those 'named' and 'demonised'. Terms such as 'sell out' were used and this must have hurt Makumbe, despite the humorous gloss he put on his responses. Such criticism is, perhaps, inevitable when an intellectual refuses to be co-opted by an authoritarian state and persists in 'speaking truth to power'. As they say, 'it goes with the territory'.

Makumbe wrote many journal articles and several books on administration in Zimbabwe, but his best book was *Behind the Smokescreen* (UZ Press), which he co-authored with Daniel Compagnon in 2000. It remains one of the sharpest analyses of the defects in Zimbabwe's electoral system that made possible the rigging of elections. He enjoyed my praise of this book and warmly returned the compliment when my own, entitled *When the State turns on its Citizens* (Jacana Press), was published in 2011.

Makumbe worked hard to earn his professorship and could have climbed to further heights if he had left for the diaspora. But it was the measure of the man that he remained modest and stayed on at home 'with the people', to organise and struggle for democratic change. He often spent his sabbaticals as a guest lecturer at Michigan State University in the US and his stature was acknowledged when, in 2004, the University of Birmingham conferred an honorary LLD on him 'on the strength of his brave and principled commitment and integrity in Zimbabwe, and in Africa more broadly'.

John Makumbe's intellectual and public outreach is all the remarkable when set against his inherited condition of albinism. In his childhood he struggled against the deep prejudices against albinos at family, school and community levels. As he once told an interviewer, 'because I am an albino, I grew up being insulted by schoolmates, and I started fighting when I was pretty young. After a while, they would still insult me, but they would do it while running away!'

In later years, Makumbe turned his albinism into a source of humour, introducing himself as 'the white man from Buhera'! In 1996 he founded the Zimbabwe Association of Albinos, an organisation dedicated to looking after the welfare of albinos. In a society in which superstition about the causes of albinism and in a wider regional context where, as in Tanzania in recent years, albinos have

been attacked and killed for their body parts for witchcraft or 'medicine', John was an important role model.

He was a highly esteemed board member of many civil society organisations, including, among others, Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, National Constitutional Assembly, Transparency International (Zimbabwe Chapter) and the Mass Public Opinion Institute. They will sorely miss his passion and wisdom.

At the time of his death John Makumbe had spent more than 25 years teaching at the University of Zimbabwe. He had hinted that he intended to campaign for a parliamentary seat in the general elections in mid-2013. But that was not to be.

Zimbabwe is all the poorer for losing such an illustrious public intellectual, activist and humanist. It is, however, richer for having benefited from his contribution and example. The best memorial for him would be to pick up from where he left off. Makumbe's ideal was a society in which pluralism and diversity in thought and politics were respected and protected. No matter how much Zimbabweans may disagree on some issues we would still be Zimbabweans at the end of the day, he believed, hence the need to nurture a culture of intellectual and political tolerance. *Mufambe zvakanaka* (Go well) professor.

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