

**Aggrey Klaaste: The Relentless Community-Builder**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the life and times of Aggrey Klaaste, the larger-than-life late editor of *Sowetan* who shot to fame by championing a novel idea of nation building. His initiative started in 1988 as flames of violence engulfed South Africa and it seemed as if an apocalypse was on the cards. Sickened by what the frustrated black community was doing to itself, for example the use of the dreadful practice of necklacing against the so-called collaborators, he called for moral regeneration. He wanted his compatriots to look into the future and take their destiny in their own hands. Through nation building he tirelessly launched into crusading journalism that sought to heal the scars of the black community after decades of apartheid. It was grassroots community building. He rewarded ordinary men and women who made a difference in their communities. He actively sought peace to end the violence of the 1980s and 1990s. He spoke his mind without wearing any ideological blinkers, even as some thought his initiative would disturb the march to freedom. He was the ultimate newspaperman.

This thesis argues that by calling for reconciliation and rebuilding of battered black communities even before freedom came, Klaaste was ahead of his time and even predated Nelson Mandela. Klaaste preferred to do what was right and not be shackled to any ideology. In doing so, he angered many people who felt his thinking was derailing the struggle for freedom. But Klaaste stressed that nation building was ideologically neutral and was meant for everyone. By contradicting prevailing political orthodoxy, he very likely risked his own life. But, like a true leader, he stuck to his convictions. Klaaste was exemplary in calling for reconciliation and building when others called for breaking.

Ten years after he died, as the country still grapples with issues he raised in his popular weekly column *On The Line*, it is worth appraising his thinking and actions. The thesis also looks at the environment that influenced his thinking. His life is interwoven with South African history. That he began his adult life shakily, spending his days in a drunken stupor at Johannesburg shebeens to being awarded the Order for Meritorious Service for his outstanding community work, makes him an interesting subject to look at. It's a story of a man who vanquished his demons and, through his compassionate community engagement, became an asset to the country. It's a story of redemption. As his private life attests, he was a man with flaws – like anyone else. But Aggrey Klaaste strived to do what was right for his community at all times. He was a restless community builder.



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## INTRODUCTION

Early on the morning of October 19, 1977, as South Africa struggled to recover from a round of student uprisings and brutal repression, police came for Aggrey Klaaste at his home in Meadowlands, Soweto. He was with his mother, about to go to work. They bundled him into one of the two waiting cars and took him to jail where he spent about half a year. It was a traumatic experience for a man who had never been arrested before. His sin? Being part of the Committee of Ten, a civic body that had been formed to fill the vacuum that came into being after the total collapse of apartheid structures in the anarchic township.

Klaaste's arrest was part of a larger crackdown that included the arrest of thousands of anti-government activists and the banning of the newspaper Klaaste worked for, *The World*. Among the "crimes" that led to *The World's* demise was reporting loudly and angrily on the murder of Steve Biko, beaten to death in police detention a month earlier.

The arrest frightened Klaaste, who was never overtly political but abhorred of any form of oppression. It marked him for life, giving him a taste of what the minority regime in Pretoria was capable of and shaping the thinking that helped him formulate a concept of nation building that eventually became his great contribution to South Africa. Launched in 1988, nation building was informed by a lifetime of trauma. Klaaste lived through the convulsive events of Sharpeville in 1960. He reported on the Soweto Uprising of 1976 and the Vaal Uprising of 1984-1987.

By 1988, he was convinced that another cataclysmic outbreak of violence was inevitable, and that this time, it might be unstoppable. White politics seemed to be drifting further and further to the right, and black communities had been torn to pieces by years of internecine and anti-apartheid violence. It was time, he thought, to start working on a society that would be created once freedom came. That meant rebuilding collapsed structures in the black community, instilling values of self-pride and striving for racial cooperation. He exhorted his black community to rediscover *ubuntu*.

In an atmosphere where the young lions exerted power through a box of matches, Klaaste's thinking was totally unconventional – perhaps even dangerous, given that it deviated from received wisdom of waging the struggle right down to the last man standing. Klaaste knew that such an approach was foolhardy. The state was too powerful. A fight to the finish would turn the country into a wasteland. And black communities were already torn and broken, and in desperate need of healing.

His life story is remarkable on many levels. His thinking predated the new order beginning in 1994. By resolutely championing nation building and writing copiously about it in his famous On the Line column, Klaaste forced his compatriots to think differently about the future towards which South Africa was hurtling. His activism was based on faith in ordinary people, and sought change that moved upwards through society. When violence raged, Aggrey Klaaste preached peace. When education floundered, he joined efforts to shore it up. When ordinary men and women sacrificed to make their townships better places, Klaaste honoured them with community builder awards. When crime engulfed the area where he lived, he joined forces with men in his area to form street patrols. Klaaste preached moderation, reconciliation and social justice long before it was fashionable. He was a public intellectual. When Nelson Mandela came out of jail, his thinking and way of doing things was eerily similar to Klaaste's. Incidentally, in terms of his Xhosa ancestry, Klaaste was also a Madiba.

On another level, Klaaste's story is compelling human saga of triumph over addiction. This man spent a great deal of his early life in a drunken stupor. This is what journalists did. They were proud of their drinking, and their supposed toughness. Nothing could touch them save the booze, which often killed them in the end. Not Aggrey. He escaped. Once he had cleaned up his act, he shone to become the Aggrey Klaaste the world knows. He not only turned his newspaper – *Sowetan* – into the largest-circulating paper in the country, but he injected it with a social mission of uplifting and inspiring others.

When Klaaste died in 2004, Mandela joined millions who paid him tribute: “Klaaste will not be easily forgotten because he loved this country. He was an inspiring man and extremely gifted.”

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When I decided to take closer look at Klaaste's life, I had little idea what I would find. When he was blazing his trail with nation building, I was too young to understand. It was only later, after I became a journalist myself, that I began to know more about him and his legend. At that point, I delved into the archives, and started reading his columns. I liked his mind and his word play, although it could be esoteric at times. I liked the outspokenness so extreme that Klaaste himself admitted that his column was sometimes “bombastic”. I tried to sample his mind as much as I could. The fog of ignorance started to clear. But I still did not have the full measure of the man.

It is a quarter-century since Klaaste started his nation-building campaign, and 10 years since his death. The problems about which he agonized – education, crime, HIV/Aids, reconciliation, black empowerment, and South Africa's links with the rest of the continent – are still with us today. For that very reason, Klaaste remains an important figure in a society undergoing change. His story illustrates that contrarian views work – even they go against orthodoxy. While he may have softened his critical gaze in the new order, perhaps out of deference to new leaders whose tentacles reached into his newspaper through commercial interests, his observations of life in South Africa were prescient.

For research, I relied heavily on the archives. From them I sifted his thoughts on a variety of issues. Luckily, Klaaste sneaked a lot of his personal history into them. So, it was always a relief to keep on stumbling on a nugget of information that contributed to the painting of a picture of who he was. It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

I was also lucky to interview some of his contemporaries, who helped shed light on Klaaste was. The Klaaste family was also willing to share its memories of their late patriarch. I was shown family albums with pictures of the man and his forebears. The family helped to clarify the Klaaste family tree.

Towards the end, when I thought I had dug up enough information, I stumbled on a priceless fountain of information about Aggrey Klaaste – his unfinished memoir. His widow, Pinky Klaaste, graciously gave it to me so I could plug the holes in the Aggrey story, particularly his early years. It proved quite useful. I'm very grateful to Pinky.

I have listed all the sources consulted in a reference list at the end of the document. In cases, where I quoted from an interview, I do indicate this. For readability purposes, I have decided not to provide direct references for in-text quotes by Klaaste. The idea was to mould this mass of information into a coherent narrative that charts Klaaste's life, the trials and tribulations he lived through and his impact on South African society.

Revisiting Aggrey Klaaste is important given the fact that many of the issues he raised are still with us – corruption, crime, racism, xenophobia. Yet there is also opportunity for the country to strive for greatness. For Klaaste, that would be possible if the millions of formerly oppressed people are uplifted in all senses and fed self-pride, if everyone pulled in the same direction and let go of separatist thinking. He believed in a united South Africa for all, country at peace with itself and the rest of the African continent.





## CHAPTER 1 – THE EARLY YEARS

Aggrey Robeson Zola Klaaste, the newsman who came to symbolise community activism through a famous nation-building crusade, was born on January 6, 1940 in a township called Green Point in Kimberly in the Northern Cape. He had four brothers, Herman, Salisbury, Wesley, Gregory, and two sisters, Violet and Doris. As Afrikaans was a lingua franca in the Kimberly area, the Klaastes also spoke the language in their home.

His father, Tobias Peter Langa Klaaste, was born in 1886 and died in 1973. His mother, Regina Mantoa, was born in 1900 and died in 1986.

Both his parents were teachers, and preached the value of education to their children. They were both recipients of mission education. Tobias studied at Healdtown, the Methodist College in Fort Beaufort. Later, he went to the University of Fort Hare,<sup>1</sup> the *alma mater* of many of the best and the brightest Africans in the country.

Little is known about Mantoa's educational background. She was born in Beaconsfield, one of the earliest diamond mining camps in Kimberley. Her sister was Frances Baard, a political activist who, along with many others, tirelessly worked to free South Africa from oppression.

Mantoa Klaaste was certainly a huge influence on her children. In his writings, Aggrey Klaaste painted a picture of her as a humble matronly figure who loved her children. She and Aggrey were close. Mantoa was a pillar of strength to Tobias, who exerted total dominion over his family. "My father was an authoritarian in front of whom we all trembled – my dear mother included," Klaaste wrote in his memoir.

The Klaastes hailed from the Eastern Cape where their surname had been Mtirara. They were of Xhosa ancestry, part of the Madiba clan. It's not clear why and how they ended up in Kimberley. Early forebears might have migrated to the city in search of a better life after the discovery of diamonds in 1871.

The source of the Klaaste surname is a mystery. Aggrey Klaaste, in his newspaper column later in life, once mused out loud about the origins of his Afrikaans-sounding surname. He suspected that it pointed to a "dubious ancestry", "a streak of something more than black in it". "Something must have happened in my family tree from the time the Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Fort Hare was the most prestigious university for black South Africans and educated many future leaders of the ANC, IFP and PAC, among them Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Chris Hani, Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela. Healdtown, a Methodist college, equally graduated some of the most prominent African leaders. Phyllis Ntantala, the wife of novelist A.C. Jordan, John Tengu Jabavu and Silas T. Molema studied at the institution. Mandela studied in Healdtown from 1937.

East India Company<sup>2</sup> sent some hardy sailors to the Cape,” he wrote. “And I’m almost too sure this kind of thing is not peculiar to the Klaastes either.”

One theory, which some family members believe, suggests that an early Klaaste ancestor adopted the name of a farm called Klaaste in the Northern Cape because a white farmer struggled to pronounce Mtirara.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the origin of the surname, in Kimberley, the Klaastes were in the company of people such as Sol Plaatje and family,<sup>4</sup> Africans who bore non-African-sounding surnames and exemplified the inexorable march from tradition towards modernity. This sense of modernity was buttressed by mission school education that ensured that students left with a solid academic education and an unshakable reverence for Christian religion. As biographer Heather Hughes notes, John Dube, a preacher, educationist and founding president of the African National Congress, believed that: “Christianity must be an essential accompaniment on the long journey towards modernity”.<sup>5</sup>

The inspiration behind the name Aggrey is without doubt. His parents named him after Dr James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, an eminent Ghanaian intellectual who visited South Africa on a speaking tour in the 1920s bearing an important message of the key role of education. Well educated and well spoken, Dr Aggrey was a beacon of hope for Africans who aspired to modernity through education. During his South African visit, with signs of colonial segregation all around him, the famous intellectual exhorted all races to live harmoniously like the keys of a piano.<sup>6</sup> Such a visit and the Ghanaian’s impeccable academic accomplishments clearly made a huge impression on Aggrey Klaaste’s educationist parents.

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<sup>2</sup> The Dutch East India Company was a Dutch chartered company founded in 1602. The company held the monopoly of spices from East Asia. In 1652, the company established a refreshment station and a medical centre in the Cape of Good Hope for passing ships. Jan van Riebeeck was in charge of the outpost that traded and, later, fought with local Khoi and San inhabitants. Later slaves from Malaysia were imported to the Cape to offer labour.

<sup>3</sup> The Plaatjes acquired their new surname in a similar fashion. Chris van Wyk writes that Sol’s grandfather Selogilwe Mogodi lived on land owned by a farmer who spoke Dutch and could not pronounce his name. He thought that Mogodi’s head looked quite flat and began calling him “Plaatie”, the Dutch word for flat. The changing of surnames was certainly a common practice during the time of missionaries and mission stations, when many Africans took on Christian surnames to demonstrate their embrace of modernity.

<sup>4</sup> The writer, journalist and political leader Solomon T. Plaatje (1876-1932) came to work in Kimberly in 1894, before working in Mafikeng as an interpreter during the South African War (1899-1902). He later moved back to Kimberly in 1910, where he established his second newspaper *Tsala ea Becoana* (Friend of the Tswana), which was later renamed to *Tsala ea Batho* (The People’s Friend) (See Limb).

<sup>5</sup> Hughes 68.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1920 and 1921, Dr Aggrey visited a number of African countries preaching the value of education. In South Africa he gave a lecture on racial harmony in which he said: “I don’t care what you know; show me what you can do. Many of my people who get educated don’t work, but take to drink. They see white people drink, so they think they must drink too. They imitate the weakness of the white people, but not their greatness. They won’t imitate a white man working hard... If you play only the white notes on a piano you get only sharps; if

Aggrey Klaaste drew his second name from African American singer and actor Paul Robeson. Zola was his Xhosa name.

In addition to a love for education, the Klaaste household was highly religious. Tobias was a strict and upright man who prayed regularly and almost always attended church on Sunday. He was a self-taught pianist. Typical of the educated African elite of the time, Tobias' values were staunchly Victorian. He wholeheartedly believed in the supremacy of all things western and English. This is how Aggrey Klaste remembered Tobias: "He was a Christian who believed completely in the consummate love and grace of God. He believed in Jesus Christ as the only conduit to God's heaven ... My father believed that Western civilisation and Christianity were the benchmarks for proper, correct and what we called civilised norms. He was a Victorian who had an exaggerated veneration for Englishmen such as Winston Churchill and William Shakespeare."

Even the mannerisms of Tobias and his contemporaries of educated Africans mimicked those of the British. They drank tea from teacups and saucers. Their favourite sport was cricket. It was a generation of early African intellectuals who grew up under the burden of colonial rule, a generation that looked on with horror at the duplicity of colonialism – bringing modernity and oppression on the same plate. For this generation, salvation lay in being educated and being as western as possible in order to win political rights. In addition to being fixated on all things British, this generation was profoundly influenced by the writings of early civil rights leaders such as Booker T Washington, who favoured the emancipation of his race through education rather than confrontation.

On graduating from mission schools, some local students went abroad for further education. There, they came into contact with the wider world and met other bright minds from colonised lands – the Caribbean, other parts of Africa and India. When they returned home, members of this generation founded the South African Native Congress (SANAC), later renamed African National Congress. The SANAC was formed after Africans were denied political participation in the Union of South Africa in 1910.

No doubt Tobias Klaaste, imbued with the spirit of the times, wanted his family to progress in life through education and refinement. Indeed, Tobias was cultured. He loved books and music. He was also a self-taught pianist. "He had a wonderful ear for music that gave him a perfect pitch. If he conducted a choir, however large, he could easily spot the

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only the black keys you get flats; but if you play the two together you get harmony and beautiful music." (*Umteteli wa Bantu*, 23 April 1921)

source of a false note,” Klaaste remembered. He also enjoyed gardening, at home and at school. Through his voracious reading, Tobias keenly followed politics and current affairs. “I remember the nights when my father discussed into the night with his friends about the white man and his ways. Politics was so much part of him that he ate and dreamt it,” Klaaste would later write in his memoir.

However, the creation of an educated African elite had the unfortunate effect of fostering class divisions among Africans, with the uneducated scorned. This was certainly true during Tobias Klaaste’s time. Aggrey remembered educated Africans “were called ‘oorlamse’ black – or ‘oorlams’ being an Afrikaans term which said they distinguished themselves from the ‘red blanket’ traditional folk who had not gone to school. These missionary-schooled, sophisticated ‘tea drinkers’, as they were also called, considered themselves a cut above the ordinary peasant folk.”

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Not long after Aggrey Klaaste was born his family moved to Tsetse in Ventersdorp because Tobias had found a teaching post there. Tsetse is a tiny village about 10 kilometres outside Ventersdorp in the North West. This is where Aggrey began his primary schooling. Tsetse was a hard place. Water was scarce. As he would later recall, “man and beast depended on old windmills or dilapidated boreholes for water. Man and beast shared the same drinking spot. The villagers had to walk distances to fetch water which was fit only for animals.”

The villagers’ only connection to Ventersdorp was a bus that plied the route once a week. That was the only chance villagers got to buy essentials in town. On these trips Tobias would lead the family’s hunt for groceries. Sometimes the discrimination of that time would get in the way: some white shopkeepers were reluctant to sell him white bread, believing that a black had no right eating white bread. An articulate man, Tobias stood his ground. “My father, an “old-fashioned ‘radical’ would stand no such bull.” He got his way in the end.

Tsetse may have been rural and backward but, as Klaaste would later concede, the villagers had a priceless commodity – land, unlike their urban counterparts who may have seemed sophisticated but were nonetheless crammed together in townships or squatter camps. From this realisation, Klaaste had a lifelong appreciation of land as “crucial to the very soul of a people”. Thus began his Pan Africanist outlook.

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Later, the Klaaste family moved to Rand Leases in Florida, west of Johannesburg, when Tobias took up a job as *umabhalana* (clerk) in the mine. This is when Aggrey Klaaste's life really started, when he began to notice with increasing perceptiveness the world around him.

In 1948, when Klaaste was eight years old, in 1948, the National Party (NP) came to power on a ticket of apartheid – the separation of races with the aim of perpetuating white domination. These changes were to mark the trajectory of Klaaste's life and shape his thinking as he responded to a society the Nationalists championed.

The rise of the Afrikaners, as represented in the aspirations of the National Party, had been long time coming. Their ascendance to power merely followed an arch of the country's history. The Afrikaners are descended from the Dutch who had landed in the Cape in 1652. They thrived in the Cape Colony. Being cut off from Europe, their language morphed into Afrikaans, with borrowed words from French, German and Cape Malay, a language of their slaves. In the end, the language was a pale cousin to the Dutch they originally spoke. Regardless, they were forging a new destiny on the “Dark Continent”. They were becoming Africans. Memories of Europe were fading.

But this idyllic world would not last. Infuriated with the British meddling in their settled ways of the Cape Colony, including introducing a ban on slavery, these Dutch descendants left en masse between 1835 and 1837 in what was known as the Great Trek. It was a powerful break with the past, a foray into an uncertain future. In the interior, they met wary African natives with whom they fought and vanquished. Consequently, two Boere republics of the Orange Free State and Transvaal were established. By all accounts, the new arrivals were gritty and understood that only the language of toughness would make them survive in this tough, new terrain. The Afrikaners, also called Boers, clung together and became skilled farmers.

Meantime, they could not envision living under the British who now ruled the Cape. The Afrikaners put a great premium on self-determination. But this peace would not last. With the discovery of diamonds and gold in the Boere republics, the Brits came after them, culminating in the Anglo-Boer War between 1899 and 1901. It was a devastating war. While the English won in the battlefields, even resorting to the notorious use of scorched-earth policy and putting women and children in concentration camps, they failed to tame the spirit of Afrikaners. Even after the guns had fallen silent, tensions simmered. Old wounds would not heal. It was especially made more so by the dire economic conditions of the Afrikaners, who still mostly lived a rural existence on farms.

Despised by the English and wary of economic competition with black Africans, the Afrikaners rose to power in the 1948 elections with a promise to acceleration of Afrikaner progress specifically and perpetuate white domination. Party leader Daniel Francois Malan, a former newspaper editor and religious leader, became prime minister. Racial segregation, long a feature in the country even during colonial times, morphed into a network of heinous laws that formed the bedrock of apartheid. Racial discrimination was institutionalised, touching every facet of South African life.

It was in this new order that young Aggrey Klaaste first opened his eyes. For now his middle class family were settled on a mine in Rand Leases. It was a segregated environment. Blacks and whites lived far apart and hardly mixed, not even at social events. Blacks were themselves divided by class. The upper classes, to which the Klaaste family belonged, never mixed with mineworkers who were derogatorily called “mine boys”. “The fact that our home was in a place called the Married Quarters separated us from the mine boys in more ways than one. We considered ourselves, and were generally regarded superior, a cut above the social status of these men we knew so little about. They came from all over the continent of Africa,” Klaaste wrote in his memoir.

The gulf between these two worlds could not have been wider. The miners lived in bachelor compounds where conditions were cramped and squalid. In the villages where they came from they could have been men of authority, men with a proud tribal heritage, but here on the mine they were mere tools of extracting gold that lay deep beneath the earth. They came from all over Southern Africa. They brought with them distinctive characteristics that were informed by countries of their origin. From Mozambique came miners who were “tiny, wiry and immensely powerfully chested”; they tended to be “dreadfully serious, perhaps even studious” and played a Xylophone-like instrument called marimba. From Lesotho came men who were known for being “arrogant, foul-mouthed”; they played a “harmonica-style instrument and had sexy dances”. From Swaziland came “rather plump, lethargic men with a particularly exotic hairstyle and a lazy liquid-like dialect”.

Young as he was Aggrey Klaaste observed that, strictly speaking, nothing differentiated these hardworking miners from his own father – except that they were uneducated and were of rural stock. Eager to stamp out the traditional leanings of mine workers, mine bosses often organised mine dances at the mine stadium. The Klaaste family attended these events, which were held on Sundays. White families would be there too, although keeping to themselves.

At these dances, the miners excelled at showcasing their rhythmic tribal movements to the accompaniment of drums and whistles. They would be dressed in their finest traditional regalia, “a magnificent display of movement in music by black men from all corners of the continent”. The irony was that the black and white audience viewed these miners with class contempt, as “pieces of exotica” and would have no regard for them as soon as they changed into their work gear – overalls, helmets with lights and cracked boots, ready to descend to the bowels of the earth.

Klaaste sensed irony in these dances: by proudly embracing who they were, the miners got a chance to strike back against middle class black who looked at them condescendingly. “We sat there dressed in our Sunday best looking at men who were in fact showing us exactly where we came from and exactly what our roots were, where we belonged,” Klaaste later wrote.

To the ears of young Aggrey Klaaste, the music was wonderful and the miners’ dances impressive. “The music itself sounded almost familiar to my being as a black man. Even when they would spit, as they often did in grand disdain – as if almost expressing disgust at us – I would look at this as a blow struck for the African.”

Even as he recalled these episodes, Klaaste was careful not to paint the miners as noble savages. He knew their pain and humiliation of “having to do such a fateful job for so little for so many ungrateful people.” At the same time, he knew their flaws. Against his parents’ wishes, Klaaste once sneaked into the living quarters of the miners. What he witnessed there was troubling – awful smells, clothes hanging from rafters of dimly lit dormitory rooms, the use of coarse language, and rows and rows of slab of concrete that miners used as beds.

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Even as a little boy, Klaaste knew that something was amiss with the wider world. Of particular concern for the Klaaste family was dealing with the world of white people. He already saw that at the mine dances the two races couldn’t sit together. Such separation triggered fascination and awe of white people in Klaaste and his brothers. “We grew up living in awe almost of white people. I remember the first time my late younger brother, Gregory<sup>7</sup>, saw a white person, he burst into tears. This was at the mine,” Klaaste wrote.

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory Klaaste was shot dead in the 1960s in central Johannesburg under mysterious circumstances.



The Klaaste boys noticed that white people living on the mine were not better educated than their parents, but, by virtue of skin colour, they lived “in a world of magical fantasy”. Such an observation fuelled the belief among the boys that white people represented all that was good. “In my childhood I believed whites were as special as the pictures of Jesus I came across in Sunday school books. The white man was also the phantasmagorical embodiment of Santa Claus, of goodness, of something that it was my duty to emulate as I grew up,” Klaaste wrote of his feelings at the time.

Yet these good white people acted strangely sometimes. One day, Aggrey and his brother Gregory found themselves on their own in Florida, a nearby town. The two boys were minding their business when a friendly elderly white man called to them. The old man held out a hand in greeting. Excited, young Aggrey held out his hand too. The next thing Aggrey knew his hand was in a lot of pain. “The bastard held a lit cigarette stub in his thumb and burnt me sorely with it!”

Such acts and what they observed around Rand Leases shattered in the Klaaste boys’ minds the image of white people’s saintliness and they were left confused. Their family couldn’t help them understand either. In fact, the Klaaste family often discussed “with bitterness the evils that whites brought on us. Every time my father had a visitor the discussion was about white people, about a thing called segregation, about the Colour Bar as apartheid was called with some delicacy in those days.” Tobias Klaaste, a solid Christian who firmly believed in all things western, felt betrayed by segregation. He had been made to believe in a world that had no place for him.

In time young Aggrey would get an inkling of what apartheid was. In 1950, when he was 10, he saw a poster nailed on a tree in his neighbourhood. It read: “Malan is dead. We shall live in peace.” This was odd. Who would have had the nerve to place such a poster in conservative Rand Leases in what was surely a National Party constituency? In fact, Malan, who ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1954, wasn’t dying in 1950 (he died only in 1959). Reflecting on that poster many years later, Klaaste concluded that it represented “a cry from the heart, a symbolic wish”.

In fact, the Nationalists would rule South Africa for the next 46 six years. As they won successive elections, Klaaste always felt “a constant chilling reminder of a shadow that seemed to be hanging over our lives”. Klaaste would spend the bulk of his life under that shadow, which grew more foreboding over the years, at some stage almost completely suffocating him, and ultimately shaping his outlook on life in profound ways.





## CHAPTER 2 – THE MAGIC OF SOPHIATOWN

In the early 1950s, the Klaaste family moved from Rand Leases to Sophiatown, a bustling settlement on the western edge of Johannesburg. They rented a room in house on 10 Edith Street.

Aggrey and his siblings went to school in Western Native Township (now Newclare). In fact, they had started to attend school in the area while living in Rand Leases. Eventually, Aggrey made it to Western High School, later renamed Madibane High School, after a larger-than-life headmaster Harry Percival Madibane. Known for being a disciplinarian, Madibane was a legendary educationist. He was also called The Shark.

Born in 1902 in Blaauberg, in Pietersburg (now Polokwane), Madibane influenced a generation of learners who went through his school, including high-profile figures such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, poet Don Mattera and late businessman Mohale Mahanyele. Madibane is remembered as an efficient administrator who made his school a model of excellence. Like Aggrey Klaaste's father (both came from the same generation), Madibane was a strict head master. "He was an authoritarian, bit of a bore, so strict and upright he could make you burst in tears. He was a hell of a guy." That is how Klaaste later remembered him.

At the time, Western High School was situated in a predominantly Coloured community that was plagued by crime and thuggery. Klaaste, "skinny" and "a little frightened", would brave his way to school with his siblings through this notorious township. "I, my sister Violet and my younger brother Greg had to run the gauntlet of *tsotsis* (thugs) every other day," Klaaste would reminisce. But head master Madibane was unfazed by the *tsotsis* in the area. Occasionally, he taught them a lesson too. "He was so fierce that gangsters held him in awe and he was known to get them to his office for a thrashing," Klaaste wrote. Like the Klaastes, Madibane lived in Sophiatown where he was a revered community leader.

If there was anything that excited Aggrey Klaaste around this time of his life, it was the mere fact that he lived in Sophiatown, a freehold township that allowed residents to own houses. Uniquely, it was not fenced off like some black settlements. People lived as they pleased. The area was vibrant, loud and brash. It exuded excitement and danger in equal measure. For young Aggrey there could have been no better place to come of age than in Sophiatown. It was a magical world. It was like Harlem in New York. "My family came from the cloistered, almost countrified atmosphere of the mine town into the down beat of the streets of Sophiatown. It was equal to being moved from one planet to the next," Klaaste

observed in his memoir. “While the mine town [Rand Leases] had its mine boys and its married quarters, with snobbish black clerkish families who went to church and bowed the knee to God and white man, Sophiatown said to hell with it all,” Klaaste remembered.

People of all races resided in Sophiatown, giving the community a rare cosmopolitan nature. Sophiatown, affectionately known as Kofifi, oozed a devil-may-care attitude. For entertainment, Sophiatown boasted two movie theatres – Odin and Balanski. American culture was the staple in these theatres; films routinely showed glamorous gangsters duelling with law enforcement agents; local gangs loved them.

Shebeens, selling hard liquor on the sly, were common, and the famous ones were Back of the Moon and Thirty-Nine Steps. In case of a routine night raid by police, the narrow, dark passageways provided escape for patrons. Here, life was lived fast. Young Aggrey was genuinely thrilled by his new surroundings, which formed a great part of his formative years.

Tobias Klaaste and his family brought their Victorian sensibility to Sophiatown. The Klaastes had a piano, a standard feature in most black families in Sophiatown. “It was not even a matter of class and some of the poorest people had some musical instrument in the house, mostly, it would seem, a piano,” Klaaste would reminisce.

His family would gather around the piano and sing gospel and folk songs. Aggrey’s sister Violet, “pretty and extroverted”, would sing the soprano. “All families have a link that is made stronger by a peculiar commonality. With us it is music,” Klaaste said.

At these family music sessions Tobias would play the piano. And so did his son Salisbury or Sol, Aggrey’s elder brother. He turned out to be an accomplished pianist after studying music at university. But he dropped out of the course mid-way and joined a jazz band in Sophiatown. Later, Sol played the piano for the jazz opera *King Kong*.<sup>8</sup> He would later leave the country with the opera for Britain. He never returned. Poor and alcoholic, he died in London after jumping out of a hospital window. Violet, who had by then married and moved to Lesotho, went to bury him in London.

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<sup>8</sup> The story for the opera *King Kong* was written by lawyer Harry Bloom, a supporter of black musicians and performers in South Africa. It tells the story of South African heavyweight boxer Ezekiel Dlamini who was jailed for killing a gang leader and his girlfriend. Todd Matshikiza, the *Drum* journalist, wrote the music. The opera opened in Johannesburg in February 1959 and was a hit. Yet when it opened in London two years later, the show did not resonate with the British audience. The opera had been edited to cater for a different audience but had lost its flavour in the process. About two months after the opening, *King Kong* was in financial ruins. Some of the cast were stranded in London as there was no money for their return tickets to South Africa (See Muller 95). *King Kong* featured Miriam Makeba and launched her international career.

But life in Sophiatown was not all rosy for the Klaastes. Their living space was limited. They lived in one room of a large house that they shared with the Letanka family. Klaaste recalled: “There was my dad, my mother, my four brothers and two sisters sharing one room ... with a large piano. The piano took up a sizable portion of the room ...” Aggrey felt that the gigantic piano in such a tiny space “added to ridicule of our curious situation”.

The Klaastes and the Letankas got on very well. “Mr Letanka had two children who made a lasting impact on me. One was handsome chap called Stanley, whose love for music brought him into a very close relationship with my family,” Klaaste wrote in his memoir. Stanley later left South Africa for Britain where he became a medical doctor.

In this one room, the Klaastes endured not having a coal stove. It remains a mystery why an ostensibly middle class family would fail to have such a crucial household item. Had they fallen into hard times? Or had they simply not been well off in the first place even when they lived in Kimberley, Tsetse or Rand Leases?

A stove in black households on the Reef was not only for cooking. It doubled as a heater during bitterly cold winters. It was often a huge contraption that took sizable space in the kitchen and was fed copious amounts of coal and wood. Smoke would escape through the chimney and drift into air outside, shrouding poor settlements in a grey, mildly acrid haze.

So, lacking a stove, the Klaastes had to devise a plan in winter. Klaaste remembered this period very well: “From early childhood, I had a lasting relationship with a contraption called *mbawula*,” he wrote later. He was referring to a brazier, often made out of a drum perforated on the sides to allow heat to escape. Because it was portable, this brazier could be taken outside on the *stoep* (verandah), a common feature of Sophiatown houses, where neighbours could gather around it to share in its warmth. “This [*mbawula*] was, and perhaps still is to some people, a source of warmth, friendship, kinship, and love – most boys made their first pass at the girl next door over the smoke of the *mbawula* – and laughter.”

On such cold days, Aggrey and friends would sit on the *stoep*, a blazing brazier nearby, and watch the colourful world of Sophiatown float by. “We watched fights between drunk men and women. We watched the gangsters in broad-brimmed hats and brown and white shoes moving in and out of the houses. We also watched the comic scene as the township drunk and his women danced and sang in the streets,” Klaaste would remember.

It must have seemed like watching theatre from the front row.

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In this heady mix of Sophiatown was *Drum* magazine. The publication would later influence Klaaste's choice of a career – journalism. Owned by enterprising Jim Bailey and edited first by Sylvester Stein and subsequently Anthony Sampson, the magazine glamourised the new African: black, urban, hip and uncoupled from tribal life. “Of all the African townships on the Reef the most lively, important and sophisticated was Sophiatown,” remembered Sampson, the second *Drum* editor. He further recalled that “[i]n its crowded and narrow streets walked philosophers and gangsters, musicians and pickpockets, short-story writers and businessmen. Sophiatown embodied all that was best and worst of African life in towns.”<sup>9</sup>

On *Drum*'s payroll was a group of brilliant journalists who chronicled their life in Sophiatown with unparalleled gusto, setting a high standard for black journalism and contributing to the creating of what has come to be celebrated as the Drum decade. These journalists excelled at capturing the vibrant urban black culture and, what's more, they did so using their own voices. They were well read. These were Todd Matshikiza, Henry Nxumalo, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Arthur Maimane, Casey Motsisi, Nat Nakasa and Doc Bikitsha. The magazine's distinguished photographers included Jürgen Schadeberg, Bob Gosani, Peter Magubane and Alf Kumalo.

By and large, though, Sophiatown was their playground. “By day, they wrote about the precarious and self-indulgent life of Sophiatowners. By night, they imbibed this experience themselves,” observes academic Neville Choonoo.

On the whole, *Drum* writers shied away from politics. Instead they revelled in the bohemian lifestyle and were known for heavy drinking in various shebeens in Johannesburg and Sophiatown. In their work, they championed the underdog such as gangsters and shebeen queens. They poked fun at apartheid and never took it seriously, perhaps believing it to be an absurd social engineering that would soon pass. Hadn't they seen Nazism come and go in Germany? As events would show, they were completely wrong.

What cannot be denied is how they brilliantly captured the texture of life in Sophiatown. Todd Matshikiza, a gifted musician who joined *Drum* in 1952 to write a jazz column called *With The Lid Off*, particularly shined with his inventive use of the language

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<sup>9</sup> Sophiatown was unique in location in Johannesburg. It sat on 237 acres of land that was bought in 1897 by a developer called H. Tobiansky, who named it after his wife Sophia. Some of the street were named after his children. The place had poor drainage and was next to a municipal sewage plant, making it unattractive to whites as a residential area. By 1910, Tobiansky was selling plots to anyone who could afford. With manufacturing industries in need of black labour, government somehow exempted Sophiatown from the Urban Areas Act and tolerated it as a freehold urban location (Switzer).

that was called Matshikize. Not to be outdone was Arthur Maimane who spoke in slick American dialogue, wore bowties and, with a cocky air, went to great lengths to show that he would not be servile to white people. Under the Arthur Mogale pseudonym, he wrote a popular series in the magazine called *The Chief* in which he described gangster anecdotes he had heard in shebeens. It seems he strayed too close to the truth. Some gangsters were not amused and threatened him with violence. Fortunately, nothing came of the threat.

Casey Motsitsi, a former teacher, was another fine *Drum* reporter known for his humour and satire. He wrote a Bugs column that featured discussions between two bed bugs. He also wrote an On The Beat column. His writing, fusing Americanese and *tsotsitaal* (township slang), displayed an intimate knowledge of Sophiatown characters – rogues and shebeen queens. Then there was Henry Nxumalo, also called Mr Drum. He was a hard-nosed investigative journalist. His finest moment was exposing the brutality of potato farmers in Bethal who used pass offenders as free labour. For this story Nxumalo enlisted as a farm worker. He also exposed the grim prison conditions in Johannesburg after getting himself arrested, forcing a government outcry and a clampdown of media coverage of prisons.

Perhaps the most colourful among these *Drum* journalists was Can Themba. Themba was also a former teacher after obtaining an English degree and a teacher's diploma from the University of Fort Hare. Blessed with a sharp intellect, superb talent for writing, Themba was the ultimate embodiment of bohemia. He thrived in the Sophiatown world. He knew the right shebeens to patronise. He lived up to the dictum: "Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse." Lewis Nkosi, who, like Nat Nakasa, joined *Drum* much later, dubbed Themba "the supreme intellectual *tsotsi*".

Themba called his home The House of Truth. It was an important gathering place for many intellectuals seeking a dose of high-spirited intellectual talk and general revelry. If not boozing in Sophiatown, these writers were at "mixed parties" across town, their way of defying the ban on mixing across the colour line.

Collectively, these pioneering journalists enthralled readers who saw their world vividly reflected in *Drum*. With his love of language and words inherited from his father blossoming as he neared the end of high school, young Aggrey was among the fans of *Drum*. He yearned to be part of the *Drum* crew someday.

Can Themba particularly fascinated Klaaste. "He was one of the first and perhaps most celebrated journalists of his and any other age", Klaaste would later say. "He wrote with the same intoxication he attacked the bottle – a rakish, swaggering, scintillating style that cocked a snook at all authority."



As a Sophiatown resident, young Klaaste already knew some of the famous personalities the magazine covered, people such as Miriam Makeba and Dolly Rathebe. All of them were neighbours. This bliss would not last long. Ominous clouds were gathering over young Klaaste's magical world.

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Over decades, with thousands of people flocking into Sophiatown, overcrowding became a serious problem. By the 1950s there were, on average, eight families per stand. Many were hungry. Many were drunk. Some were criminals. The location of Sophiatown, across from the white suburb of Westdene, contradicted government's plan of grand apartheid.

Over the years, as Johannesburg grew due to the discovery of more and more gold deposits, white areas, particularly Westdene and Newlands, eventually encircled Sophiatown. Soon enough some white residents began resenting the black spot in their midst, but factories needed black labour, so government turned a blind eye until 1953, when the Western Areas Resettlement Act came before parliament. Government's plan was to move all residents to "matchbox houses" of Meadowlands, part of Soweto, southwest of Johannesburg. The official reason was slum clearance. Broken-down shacks and leaking houses were common in Sophiatown, giving the area a slum feel.

In truth, the removals were in keeping with the Group Areas Act of 1950, which sought to keep South African citizens apart according to their race. Klaaste believed politics – rather than complaints by white neighbours – was responsible for the destruction of Sophiatown. "The truth is that many people in the white suburbs of Westdene and Brixton did not mind Sophiatown. In fact, the more daring Afrikaners used to visit the ghetto for the excitement, the exciting ethnic exotica just lying around the streets of Sophiatown to be used or abused," Klaaste wrote. But to "in the eyes of architects of apartheid the place had to go. It was making nonsense of all the extraordinary claims they were making about the perfection and divinely inspired policies of apartheid."

Interestingly, it wasn't the first time that a mixed-race community had to be uprooted in Johannesburg. From the moment gold was discovered, blacks and other non-Europeans were placed in segregated settlements. Blacks and Indians had first lived together in Brickfields, Newtown, at the edge of the city centre, but when bubonic plague broke out in 1904, they were separated, with black residents shipped to the shantytown of Klipspruit, 13

kilometres from the city.<sup>10</sup> Others were sent to Alexandra, north of the city.

By 1955, those Newtown removals had taken place more than 50 years ago, a distant memory. Sophiatown residents were a harder lot to deal with. Most of them resisted the impending removals. The ANC, which had led a famous Defiance Campaign in 1952, and its partners led the resistance to the removals. Despite overcrowding and crime, many residents felt they had successfully made Sophiatown their home – they had formed a sense of community with their neighbours, they had raised families in the area. Slogans conveying the anti-removal sentiment appeared on walls all over Sophiatown: “WE WON’T MOVE”; THIS IS HOME; HANDS OFF SOPHIATOWN; “Ons DAK Nie. Ons *phola* hier” (“We stay right here”).

It tickled Klaaste to see how Afrikaans words in anti-removal slogans gave the resistance a “sassy cheek and upbeat edge” since they used the language of the oppressor to express anger and disgust. As Klaaste would later write, “the Afrikaans – called ‘*tsotsi-taal*’ in Sophiatown – was exactly aimed at being outside the law. It was the use of language to challenge, to embarrass and to fool authority.” Klaaste was also fascinated to hear these slogans in the songs of famous singers such as Dorothy Masuka, Dolly Rathebe and Miriam Makeba – all of them clearly articulating their community’s feeling of trauma and defiance.

One person who was traumatised by the impending was Dr AB Xuma, a genteel, old leader of the ANC who lived eight blocks away from the Klaastes. Having studied medicine in America and the United Kingdom, he was the first western-trained doctor in Sophiatown, and he was married to a black American wife, Maudie Hall. Xuma simply couldn’t understand the logic behind the proposed removals: “When I first came to live in Toby Street, which is the boundary of Sophiatown, 25 years ago, I faced open veld and spent quiet Sunday afternoons under the streets where Westdene now is,” he said. “Today, across a narrow field, I face an array of European houses ... Why should Europeans, who object to our proximity, settle in the neighbourhood of Africans, when the whole of Johannesburg is theirs to choose from?”

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<sup>10</sup> In 1905, a native location called Klipspruit on the margins of Johannesburg was declared. People who were moved to Klipspruit were from the “coolietowns” at the edge of the city. Approximately 600 Indians were relocated elsewhere and 1 358 black people were relocated to Klipspruit. Even though government claimed that the removal was to improve the squalid conditions of slum dwellers, Klipspruit was not better than the shantytowns they were leaving behind. It was located about 300 meters from the City Council sewerage. The housing was a V-shaped shack without foundations. Moving to Klipspruit made life even more intricate as it was far from the city centre where most people worked, a distance of thirteen kilometres. Because of the long distance to the city centre, workers had to commute to work and home. This meant that they would have had to pay their transport fare each day in addition to their other expenditures. Furthermore, Klipspruit ensured a desired tight control of black people in urban areas. Klipspruit was subsequently renamed Pimville (Soweto.co.za).

Xuma was one of the leaders who organised the resistance. Another anti-removals leader was Father Trevor Huddleston, a beloved figure in the community who days before the removals staged a photographic exhibition of Sophiatown.

Despite the resistance, government persisted with its plans. Early morning on February 9, 1955, the first batch of families were removed from Sophiatown. It was quite a show. “There was a convoy of lorries accompanied by army units on motor bikes, in army vans and on horses. The cinematographic effect was breath-taking,” Klaaste remembered. “There were some police dogs and quite a few police vans in this ominous display of superior power that brooked no nonsense from cheeky ghetto people.”

Designated families were loaded with all their worldly goods – stoves, bedding, furniture – and government’s demolition squads immediately flattened their homes. In the end, no one resisted. No violence erupted. Resigned to their fate, residents left peacefully for Meadowlands, some even singing on top of trucks: “To Meadowlands we’ll go”. The slogans on the walls bore testimony to the hollowness of the resistance and the ANC’s failure to galvanise effective community resistance. From his yard Dr Xuma looked on helplessly. Indians were taken to Lenasia and Coloureds to Eldorado Park. Both areas are in the south of Johannesburg. A once vibrant Sophiatown was reduced to rubble.

It took four years to uproot Sophiatown residents to Meadowlands. The Klaastes’ turn to leave came in the winter of 1956. “On a cold and blustery morning, my family and scores of others were woken up by heavy knocks on the doors of our Sophiatown homes. When the army trucks and government lorries rolled in to move us, the spirit of Sophiatown was broken. And with us went another shattered hope for a better life,” Klaaste wrote years later.

Journalist Bloke Modisane, a famous resident of Sophiatown and a *Drum* journalist, was also heartbroken, writing in his seminal biography *Blame Me On History* that: “Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown.” He bemoaned the bulldozers that “gored into her [Sophiatown’s] body” in the name of slum clearance.

With colour – and perhaps meaning – drained from their lives, some of Sophiatown’s famous inhabitants “died of broken hearts, literally and otherwise”, Klaaste noted. Among victims was the irrepressible Can Themba. After being fired from *Drum* he taught in Swaziland where he died of an alcohol-related illness in 1968. He was 43. Casey Motsisi, a friend of Klaaste’s and an old *Drum* hand, suffered the same fate, dying at Baragwanath Hospital in 1977 after years of heavy drinking.

After Sophiatown was demolished, government built a low-income white suburb called Triomf. The name, meaning triumph in Afrikaans, added insult to injury to all those

who had been forcibly removed from a place they had called home for so long.

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The destruction of Sophiatown remained a sore point for Aggrey Klaaste. It was a subject he frequently returned to in later years in his columns. The event was among the many sores caused by the apartheid regime that would torture his memory.

But another event took place in 1955 that was to mark him for life – the adoption of the Freedom Charter. This famous document was drawn up by South African Congress Alliance, a coalition made up of the ANC and its allies – the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats, the Coloured People’s Congress and the South African Congress of Trade Unions.

The Charter was adopted in Kliptown, Johannesburg, on June 26, 1955 in what was referred to as the Congress of the People. Its adoption was a result of a collation of grievances and demands from a cross section of the South African population. The demands, some scrawled by hand on all kinds of crude materials, came in their thousands; they called for better houses, better education, secure communities. Crucially, the Charter called for the creation of a multi-racial society. It famously declared that South Africa belonged to all those who live in it – black and white. Such a call was tantamount to heresy. Two drastic responses followed.

The first reply came from government, which, in 1956, charged 156 leaders of the Congress Alliance with high treason for agitating for a “communist” society. Among the defendants were Chief Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Helen Joseph and many other anti-apartheid leaders. The trial lasted till 1961, the longest political trial in South Africa, and ended with the acquittal of all the accused.

The second response to the Charter’s adoption came from within the ANC. Africanists, fed up with the dominance of white Communists and Indians within the party, broke away to form the Pan African Congress. The year was 1959. Robert Sobukwe, a charismatic leader who had been a leader of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare University, led them. The Africanists felt the future of South Africa lay with black Africans who needed to articulate their political aspirations themselves and not be treated like appendages of the struggle. For the first time in the history of black opposition to apartheid a gaping ideological divide appeared. In a continent marching with determination towards independence from decades of colonialism, the Pan Africanists’ thinking was in sync with the times. As with

most intellectuals in South Africa, Klaaste would be affected by this ideological divide between Africanists and Charterists. He would be compelled to take sides. And that decision, right or wrong, stayed with him for life.

### CHAPTER 3 – A NEW HOME, AGAIN

After the destruction of Sophiatown, the Klaastes, once again, found themselves setting up home in a new environment in Meadowlands. They moved to Zone 5, on the corner of Schrader and Nkuna streets. Compared to Sophiatown, Klaaste found the new environment drab. “There were a number of exceptional things about Meadowlands. The first is there is no discernible meadow to gladden the eye,” he wrote in his memoir. The new “home was in a grey, military-style block upon block of sickening houses stretching into the hinterland ... There were no trees, no parks, no recreational facilities, no community halls and no churches.”

For Klaaste, the drabness of Meadowlands served to underline that Sophiatown was gone forever. He resented Meadowlands even though his family had moved to a slightly bigger space compared to that one room in Sophiatown. The forced removals were too painful to allow Klaaste to see the bright side of being in Meadowlands.

But the Klaaste family did its best to survive Meadowlands, reaching out to old friends and forging new friendships with neighbours. For church services, they went to nearby Emzimbuvu School, where they met and formed lasting ties with the Masote and Khemese families. Both families were highly musical, a passion they shared with the Klaastes.

In Meadowlands, Klaaste became a member of a church choir conducted by Themba Elliot Khemese, a respected baritone singer.<sup>11</sup> Choir members called him Tata out of respect. One of the first members of the choir was Klaaste’s eldest brother, Wesley. Klaaste remembered those days fondly: “Our church choir in Zone 3 Meadowlands was one of the best in the country. We started singing and practising in the schoolroom and, if memory serves me, my father accompanied the choir on a piano. I don’t remember what the piano was doing in a classroom, but there it was.”

During those years, Klaaste was grateful to conductor Khemese for fanning a musical spark that had first been lit by his parents. Although he did not play any instruments, Klaaste retained a lifelong passion for classical music, jazz and choral music. Aggrey’s sister, Violet, made her own forays into music. She became a professional violinist and a lead singer in Prof Khabi Mngoma’s Ionian choir, which was founded in 1960.

Moving to Meadowlands was strange in another way for Klaaste. He moved from a

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<sup>11</sup> Themba Elliot Khemese is the father of three musicians in the famous Soweto String Quartet – Sandile, Thami and Reuben.

multi-racial area to a blacks-only township. Yet he still attended school in Western Native High, where he was finishing matric in 1957. Geographically and psychologically, Klaaste traversed different terrains, always aware of the stark contrasts of these areas which were induced by apartheid.

While doing matric Klaaste got a taste of how the outside operated. While walking near Park Station, in Johannesburg, a muscular policeman materialised from nowhere and demanded to see his pass. Confidently, young Klaaste produced a school pass. The policeman who took one look at it, and without saying a word, tore it to pieces. Klaaste was stunned. Now he was in trouble. He no longer had any documentation. The policeman grabbed him and shoved him into the back of a waiting police van. Frightened, he could scarcely believe this nasty turn of events. The policeman who arrested him sauntered off to join his colleagues and they went to search for more offenders. In the van, Klaaste met other terrified pass transgressors. This was the first time Klaaste had been arrested. He didn't know what to expect. Klaaste and his fellow detainees calmly waited for a long time before the vehicle filled up with other transgressors.

Carrying a passbook in the city was mandatory for black males above the age of 16 as stipulated in the ironically named Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act of 1952. "One of the great quirks of apartheid bureaucracy," writes Elinor Sisulu in her biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, her famous in-laws, "was its penchant for giving innocuous and euphemistic names to the most heinous legislation. Sometimes the name given suggested the exact opposite of the legislation's aim."

The passbook was officially called a "reference book". But a reference book was a pass by any other name, and black males whose reference books did not carry the requisite white boss's endorsement were in for trouble. Also in 1952, the Native Laws Amendment Act was passed limiting the rights of black Africans to live in urban areas. Blacks had to prove that they had been born in an urban area or had worked there for up to 15 years. Otherwise, remaining the city required a permit.

The passbook and its allied influx control regulations were intended to link all blacks to tribal homelands. When their labour was no longer required in the cities, in "white" South Africa, they could be deported back "home". It didn't matter if you had been born in the city and had never set foot in your natural Bantu homeland. Police heavily enforced the carrying of passes and permits. People were searched randomly on the streets and their homes were raided. The idea was to carry a pass with you all the times or risk being thrown in jail or suffer all kinds of humiliations in the hands of police. In these circumstances, it was common

to witness policemen chasing offenders in the street. All in all pass laws made people exiles in their own land. Later in life, after he had gained a media platform to air his views, Klaaste made it known how intensely he hated the pass laws.

Finally, in late in the afternoon on that fateful day outside Park Station, police brought a final group of detainees who looked rather “sullen” and “frightened”. All the offenders were male. Two men were handcuffed to each other. The van’s doors slammed shut and the vehicle took off with “unseemly haste”, throwing the detainees from side to side.

This incident is related in Klaaste’s memoir. He did not say which police station they were taken to, but given the area where they were arrested, it was presumably John Vorster Square police station, at the bottom of Commissioner Street (now Albertina Sisulu Street).

On the way, the detainees began singing sad, bluesy songs of “sadness and defeat”. Incidentally, young Klaaste had heard these songs before: “I remember watching these police vans in our streets and having a feeling of despair for the poor bastards singing so drearily about their woes, about the unfairness of the world. Now I was among them.”

That day, in the back of the van, Klaaste was too “embarrassed” to join in the singing. He merely clutched his school bag tightly to him and waited to see what would happen next. It bothered him that no one in the outside world knew where he was. The men in the van, obviously veterans of the game, shared cigarettes and bonded; they knew they shared a common fate. However, as the van neared the police station, the singing went down and the men’s faces became harder. Reality sank in. Finally, the van arrived at the police station. As soon as the men got out, vicious clubs fell on them from angry policemen who also kicked and swore at them. “No one escapes the club on the head. Some are slapped with a tremendous whacking sound in the face,” Klaaste wrote.

The terror had begun. In no time, the mood among the prisoners changed. The camaraderie evaporated. It was now every man for himself. Tempers snapped. The old man handcuffed to Klaaste, the one who “had been favouring his hand loosely to make me comfortable, lurches at the handcuffs and almost clips me one over the head. He curses viciously and takes a deliberate flying kick at the buttocks in front of him.” Klaaste knew the reason for the sudden aggression. “This is part of the process. You must psyche yourself into a toughness so that when the cell doors close at night, you are not one of the victims!”

For someone as young as Klaaste, being in the cells with those dodgy characters – pass dodgers, murderers – was dangerous. A chill went down his spine when one of the prisoners shouted an insult at him in Zulu for no reason, deliberately mispronouncing his name. In a menacing tone, he yelled: “Hey wena Klaaske, nja.” (“You dog Klaaske”). Klaaste



was wise enough not to be riled up or swear back. He would have been dead meat. Instead, “wise to this terrible world”, he shouted back: “Yes, my crown. Yes, my baas. And he is not even white.”

Fortunately, nothing untoward happened to Klaaste that night – his first night in jail. When he appeared in court the following day with a batch of five other prisoners, he received a fine of 30 pounds, a welcome sentence as it meant avoiding a stiffer penalty – a trip to the dreaded Modderbee Prison in Benoni.

His relief doubled when he was told that “someone from the outside had set in motion the process to trace me”. This meant he would soon be freed. A miracle. “Many times the tracing of a poor bastard arrested for such a technical thing does not work. The police deliberately block such inquiries. If not, names like mine are wrongly spelt, making it difficult for those outside to get hold of you even if they know you are locked up.”

That “someone from the outside” turned out to be his younger brother Gregory. Handcuffs were finally removed from Klaaste’s “shaky, aching hand”. The attitude of other inmates towards Klaaste instantly changed. The man to whom he had been handcuffed, the one who only the previous day had turned into a monster, “begins to treat me like a king”. He is not alone. Many other prisoners began pleading with Aggrey to go to their families and tell them they had been arrested.

“Please will you tell them that I am here,” says the man to whom Klaaste had been handcuffed. “This is my address. Please mfowethu. Ngiyakuthemba mfo.” (“Please brother. I trust you”).

Many other voices chip in with urgent messages. Klaaste found the cacophony of pleas heart-rending. He felt “deep compassion” for the inmates. He knew what they had been through and what they were still going to go through, and he swore to himself that he would do his best to relay their messages.

The police handling the formalities for Klaaste’s release were “deliberately callous” when they hauled him into a charge office. They seemed angry he was leaving. At the same time, they also seemed “to have a most reluctant respect for me. I am the one who got away.”

As soon as the prison was out of sight, young Klaaste vowed never to return there. He promptly forgot about the undertaking he had given to the pleading inmates. He wanted to forget that horrible place. “My conscience bothers me a bit, but I wipe the experience away,” he wrote. But the experience of being locked up, even for a day, is not easy to wipe away. “Sometimes at night I quake in my sleep as I hear the slap of that police stick. Sometimes I seat slightly as I see men change from being human to being animals so fast.”

Having a brush with the law had been clearly too much for a young man still at high school. More trauma awaited him when he had to get a proper passbook.

Eventually, Klaaste, like all black males, had to apply for a passbook. Everyone applied at pass office on 80 Albert Street, a feared address in downtown Johannesburg. “Getting the passbook was the final humiliation of the black male. The de-personalisation that was created by most of the trappings of apartheid was perfected at the pass office,” Klaaste would later write.

The pain started outside with the long queues that often snaked around the building. These queues would start as early as 6am. At the head of the line applicants had to pass through black municipal policemen who were often “arrogant” and could decide the fate of applicants; any differences with them could lead to an applicant being sent “scampering” to another entrance, joining yet another long queue.

Inside was a huge, open space called *isibaya* (kraal) packed with hopeful applicants. “It is like stepping into a prison yard – thousands of frightened, desperate, some plainly hopeless people, all fighting to get in, all anxiously trying to outdo another bowing and scraping in front of hostile officials,” Klaaste wrote in a lengthy piece for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1984.

Processing applications at 80 Albert Street took a hellishly long time. You waited for the officials to shout your name to come to the front. “God help the wretch who misses a cue,” Klaaste wrote. An applicant’s details would be painstakingly filled on a form. In some cases, some of these forms had to be sent to Pretoria for verification, meaning that an applicant would have to return in two days or so and start the process of queuing all over again. Klaaste described the atmosphere as prickly with anger and fear. “This pass office had all the jackboot trappings of a Nazi camp, with young white clerks displaying guns strapped arrogantly to their waists and black officials who treated their own people worse than scum.”

If you were lucky, within a stroke of a pen, an official gave you a passbook allowing you to stay in Johannesburg. If you were unlucky, your application was turned down and you were shipped to a homeland or, worse, sent to jail. Those lucky enough to receive a passbook would “preen like peacocks or gloat like champions who had just won a fight”. But relief would turn to dread when they were told about the next stage of the application process, their ultimate humiliation. They now had to join another queue to undergo a medical examination aimed at making certain they carried no contagion when they set out into “white” South Africa to look for work. Their passbooks had to be stamped to prove they had undergone such a medical examination. Without this stamp, the whole process would be fruitless.

So, the next stage saw men and boys of various ages and sizes enter into a room where they had their chests X-rayed. Then they would enter an office where a white doctor would examine their private parts for any signs of venereal disease. “Because there were hundreds of men – some old and frightened, some young and angry – there was always a hushed, embarrassed rush,” Klaaste wrote.

The man being examined, clutching to the last shreds of his dignity, would think “with half-suppressed mirth that the white [doctor] must be bored to death, having this kind of intimacy thrust in front of him the whole day by masses of blacks in all shapes and sizes”. Once examined, a black official working with the doctor would shout: “O.K. Next!”

“The whole thing is pretty sordid, even savage and he would hardly be surprised if someone with venereal disease was flung out the door on the spot,” Klaaste would recall. Klaaste understood that this kind of humiliation was the regime’s way of castrating men into boys: “The experience reinforces the feelings of alienation and inferiority that make black South Africans so accommodating of their oppression.”

At the Albert Street office, Klaaste shuffled in the queue until he got to the front. When time came to state his origins, he made the mistake of being truthful about his place of his birth – Kimberley – “instead of playing it smart like everybody else by swearing I was born and bred in Johannesburg”. Admitting that he had been born outside of Johannesburg meant he had damned himself to endless ways of getting the right endorsement in his reference book. Years later, he was to rue his honesty.

Still, it was not easy to claim you originated in Johannesburg. You had to provide proof that you had stayed there all or most of your life or comply with the other requirements stipulated in the notorious Section 10. You might be asked some absurd and tricky questions, for instance: “If you said you were from Orlando they might ask you about certain notable people in the area and where they stayed. You would be asked how many stations there were from Orlando to Johannesburg. You might be given another tricky question like how many chimneys the old power station in Orlando had. If you missed one question you were an outsider ... only death could be worse than the thud of the stamp that sends you out of Johannesburg, out of existence.”

The mistake Klaaste made at the pass office about his origins was to dog him for a long time. “For many years, I have battled, with frequent arrests for having the ‘wrong’ stamp in the book, to qualify to be a legal resident of Johannesburg,” he said.

As a hated symbol of repression, the passbook was referred to by many pejorative names. Some called it “dompas”, meaning dumb pass. In Sophiatown, where Klaaste grew

up, they called it a “stinker” or “zangan”. “It was called all these things because it was the chain that made the oppression and humiliation of blacks fiendishly successful,” Klaaste wrote. “It was not only a physical restraint, it was a tangible form of oppression. It was a mental weapon to maim people, make them feel less than human. It could cause you all sorts of trouble. It could, and did, cause people to commit suicide. It could lead to other fatalities.”

As pass laws put a noose on people’s necks, some resorted to creative ways to cope. One of the ways entailed living in one area and not move around at all to avoid encountering police. “So many crafty township people got backrooms in Dube [a middle class section of Soweto rarely raided by police]. Many people I know never left Dube township for other townships. Some of them have never been to Johannesburg. And they have grown old being practically ‘house arrested’ to one area which was considered safe ... from the ubiquitous cops looking for a pass defaulter. I do not know of any other township or even white suburb where such people could find sanctuary.”

Another way of beating the pass system, in the case of those who were light-skinned, was to pass for Coloured and get a passbook with better privileges. Klaaste remembered: “Many of my light-skin Xhosa friends who could not get a single Afrikaans word round the clicks of their tongues, to save their lives, got these books. Mostly they bought them.”

Throughout the 1950s, opposition to pass laws dominated the resistance to apartheid. When government wanted to extend passes to women, 20 000 women of all races marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 to voice their opposition. In the end, pass laws were extended in a piecemeal fashion to women.

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At the end 1957, Klaaste passed his matric. He was overjoyed. A new world awaited him. In fact, he and his friends started celebrating being on the threshold of change immediately after writing their last examination. “We started drinking beer at a nearby beer hall after I had written my matric,” he wrote. “I never stopped drinking, hugely, recklessly and at the end, almost fatally, from that day on.”

The following year – 1958 – Klaaste enrolled at Wits University for a Bachelor’s degree, majoring in Psychology and Politics. He was 18. He was one of the last black students to be admitted before the government enacted the Extension of University Education Act of 1959 that banned admission of black students to white universities. Exceptions were granted for special cases only with permission from the Minister of Bantu Education. When

he was at Wits, there were only 297 black students at Wits and white students 4 813.

Going to Wits at the height of apartheid was a shock to young Klaaste. The campus was “a sea of white people”. “It was a helluva disconcerting experience,” he recalled. “In those years there were very few black students at the so-called white universities. We were literally thrown among the wolves, into an alien, often hostile, often patronising world of whites, who were plainly contemptuous of us.”

In this alienating environment, Klaaste sharply felt the university’s official policy of “academic non-segregation and social segregation”.<sup>12</sup> Black students were barred from sharing the same amenities with white students, such as the swimming pool.

Sometimes there would be friction socially and would turn physical. Klaaste remembered that one time “a group of white guys in engineering wanted to attack us”.

Wits may have been a challenging environment for Klaaste, but student life had its fair share of highlights. The intellectually curious young man could immerse himself in academic theories and books. He also made a few friends across the race line. One of his contemporaries at Wits at this time was Miriam Tlali, the first black woman to publish a novel in English in South Africa, *Muriel At Metropolitan*, in 1975.

Campus life swirled with intellectual ideas and debates. Klaaste also enjoyed listening to guest lecturers. One day, colourful *Drum* journalist Can Themba came to speak in his class, impressing young Klaaste. “He was an extraordinary man who was also well read. He would deliberately play the role of the clown. It was like a mask, a persona. He would get there to give a lecture and would arrive half drunk wearing torn pants. But when he spoke, the most beautiful English would be heard.”

Another highlight of being at Wits University was seeing Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, who a year later would break from the ANC, in action. At the time Sobukwe was a language assistant in the Department of African Languages, then still named the Department of Bantu Languages. There were no black lecturers on campus. Sobukwe was nicknamed “The Prof” and black students revered him. Klaaste once attended a lunch-hour public lecture that Sobukwe gave at the Wits Great Hall. The lecture sought to shed light on Sobukwe’s Africanist stance in the fight against apartheid. Not everyone fully understood his stress on Africanism. To most white liberals at Wits, Sobukwe’s brand of politics must have been

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<sup>12</sup> Black and white students shared a classroom. Facilities such as the library, refectory and bathrooms were also shared. Black students could join the student societies on campus and mingle with white students, yet they were not given access to the main residences, sports fields and formal social activities. As Murray notes, “the university’s policy towards black students was that they were there for academic purposes only, and were not thereafter to participate in the general social and sporting life of the University.” (650)

unsettling given his emphasis on black self-determination and Africa for the Africans stance. The event was organised by student politicians who made sure the entire law department and various senior academics in other disciplines turned out to give Sobukwe a roasting. But the Prof “spoke like a saint” and won them over. “He spoke so well, so unequivocally, about Africanism and with such dignity that many blacks were in tears,” Klaaste remembered.

Like his fellow black students, Klaaste believed in Sobukwe, writing in his memoir that: “In the broader context many young black intellectuals had become increasingly Africanist. They believed with grandiose hopes that the white man who was responsible for the oppression of blacks must be driven out of Africa. They believed there could be no way for blacks to involve whites in the struggle for the liberation of blacks.”

Klaaste hastened to add that, contrary to what white liberals and Communists believed, this Africanist stance was not black racism. “Sobukwe did not hate whites. Rather he loved humanity. He believed that the Africans would be able eventually to lead all people of the world to that love for humanity that the continent stands for.”

For Klaaste, Sobukwe was a leader par excellence. He had “strength, incisive mind, charm and aura that was beautifully African in its love for humanity.” As Klaaste wrote in one column: “Robert Sobukwe was the perfect portrait of the manner in which an African with *ubuntu* responded to oppression, discrimination and evil. Leadership fell easily on his intellectual shoulders. There was no hysteria, no fear, no bluster, no boasting.”

Although Sobukwe was at Wits, Klaaste never met him personally. “I revered him from afar, almost the way in which I would treat a saint from the Bible,” he wrote.

In 1959, while busy giving lectures at Wits, Sobukwe could not have foreseen the terrible events that lay ahead. Both the ANC and his new party, the PAC, were vocal against pass laws. Matters came to a head in 1960. The ANC planned an anti-pass demonstration for March 31, 1960, but the PAC stole the thunder by staging its own demonstration 10 days earlier on 21 March 1960. For Sobukwe the anti-passbook campaign was effectively a civil disobedience campaign. Black Africans would allow themselves to be arrested for not having passes on them. The thinking was that jails would not be able to hold everyone who got arrested and that the absurdity of the law would be apparent.

Sobukwe, who had by now resigned his academic position at Wits University, led a group of men to Orlando Police Station and was promptly arrested. He was not to be a free man again for almost 20 years.<sup>13</sup> However, events took a tragic turn in Sharpeville, in

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<sup>13</sup> Sobukwe was initially given a three-year sentence. When the three years were up, the government passed the

Vereeniging on the Vaal, on the same day when police fired at a crowd of several thousand of unarmed protesters, killing 69, mostly in the back as they fled. Hundreds of others, women and children, were wounded. The event came to be known as Sharpeville Massacre. The world was shocked when images of bodies strewn on dusty streets were splashed in newspapers. Some PAC protesters were also killed in Langa township, Cape Town.

On that fateful day in March 1961, though still a student, Klaaste refused to let history bypass him. He joined a throng of demonstrators in Soweto who went to a local police station to get arrested. “But things refused to catch fire. The cops as much as everybody else were bewildered by the events of Sharpeville,” Klaaste wrote. “Instead of locking us up, they sent us packing. That’s how it was at Meadowlands. The shock was so great that cops and the few brave men who went to surrender themselves did not know how to handle the situation.”

Soon after Sharpeville, on April 7, 1960, the Unlawful Organisations Act was passed immediately banning the ANC and PAC. Their leaders were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. Other activists fled into exile from where they waged the armed struggle against the regime. The Sharpeville massacre also led to the introduction of legislation empowering police to deal with subversives such as allowing police to detain activists without trial for up to ninety days.<sup>14</sup> From then on South Africa settled down into quiet years of repression. Resistance had been smashed – at least temporarily. Underground networks of banned political parties were struggling to mount any serious challenge. Some even referred to the 1960s as the silent decade.<sup>15</sup>

Sharpeville left Klaaste deeply shaken and angry. As to everyone else, it was clear to him that government was prepared to use brutal force to enforce its power. For years Klaaste nursed a nagging feeling that his generation, especially those who did not heed the call to burn passbooks or get themselves arrested, had not been as courageous as the situation demanded. To him, they had been cowards and, as a result, let down generations that followed, the ones who were much braver. Writing 20 years later, he said: “We could have

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General Laws Amendment Act. Under the Act, persons considered a threat to state security could be arrested without warrant and detained for initially 90 days in solitary confinement without access to a lawyer. Sobukwe was kept in detention under a clause of the act – know as the Sobukwe Clause as he was the only one to whom the clause was ever applied to. The clause allowed the government to imprison someone convicted under the security laws for an indefinite period, long after the end of their initial sentence. In 1963, Sobukwe was transferred to Robben Island, where he was locked up separately from other prisoners until he was released in 1969 because of his deteriorating health. Cancer was ravaging his body. He lived in Kimberly under house arrest until his death on 27 February 1978 (See Pogrund).

<sup>14</sup> On May 19, 1961, the 12-day detention-without-trial law was introduced. Two years later, on May 2, 1963, the period of detention was extended to 90 days. Detainees had no access to lawyers, doctor and family members (See Enwezor and Bester 172-173).

<sup>15</sup> Madeleine Fullard notes that “[w]hile this era is frequently referred to as the ‘silent sixties’, indicating an absence of political activity, the term is equally applicable to silent white complicity and consent” (390).

stood up like men instead of whimpering like pups. We were intellectual humbugs, some of us studying with whites in so-called ‘open’ universities. We sat around dreaming of an open society. We sat down, wept a little admittedly, and then went back to armchair politics: the vast discussion on why it happened. That never touched the core of the problem.”

The massacre was yet another turbulent event in the history of South Africa that informed his later writings and thinking.

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While grappling with academic theories and being exposed to a new life at Wits University, Klaaste began to think seriously about life after his studies. Journalism fascinated him, thanks to the early exposure to *Drum*, a magazine that had for so long vividly captured his old world of Sophiatown. An avid reader, Klaaste loved words and longed to see his name in print. At the time, popular publications were *The Star* and *Rand Daily Mail*, both owned by white conglomerates, and *Drum* and *Golden City Post* (both in the Jim Bailey stable).

He knew deep down that he wanted to join the league of the great *Drum* writers. In 1960, his last year of study, young Klaaste plucked up courage and went to Samkay House in Troye Street, Johannesburg, where *Drum* was located. His sister Violet accompanied him. Klaaste sought vacation employment. He left Violet at reception and got inside.

Delegated to deal with him was *Drum* journalist Basil Siphso Bikitsha, known to all simply as Doc. Bikitsha was famous for his superb storytelling gift, sharp wit and a keen sense of humour. He had been a teacher before turning to journalism. At first glance, Bikitsha noticed that young Klaaste “looked disturbingly underweight,” he would later recall. “His thin neck stuck out like a pole from an oversized, threadbare Wits blazer folded twice at the sleeves. It went way down to the knees like a ‘jas-baaitjie’ or mini-overcoat.” The look reminded Bikitsha of the “artful dodgers in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*”.

Klaaste was initially told that *Drum* had no need for a student intern. Klaaste must have been crestfallen. But luck was to strike immediately.

Ushering him out, perhaps eager to be rid of this overambitious young man and get back to his typewriter, Bikitsha stopped right on his tracks when he saw “cute” Violet in the foyer. “I nearly fell on my back,” he was to say years later. He turned on poor Klaaste and berated him: “Why did you leave your sister in the foyer, boy? Is she not thirsty? Come back with your sister and I’ll see where we can fit you in.” Suddenly feeling charitable, Bikitsha even gave young Klaaste some of the money he was saving to buy a nip of brandy after work.



While Bikitsha never got any close to young Violet, who later married Desmond Sixishe<sup>16</sup> in Lesotho, he acquired a new young friend in Klaaste who, with many others in the journalism trade, “swelled the brotherhood”.

Seeking an internship at *Drum* turned out to be best thing Aggrey had ever done. In his spare time, he went to the magazine, where he freely mixed with his experienced journalists. He got a taste of the newsroom before graduating, an invaluable experience.

He was at the right place at the right time. There was a vacuum at *Drum*. The new political winds in the country had forced some of the magazine’s talented writers to scatter, most of them choosing exile. The party was over. Todd Matshikiza went to exile in London and Zambia, where he died prematurely. In the early 1960s, Lewis Nkosi went to study in the United States and he later settled in Britain. Arthur Maimane also went to Britain where he had a stellar career in radio. Ezekiel Mphahlele emigrated to West Africa and later to the United States, where he became a respected academic. Henry Nxumalo was stabbed to death in 1957 in Sophiatown while investigating a story on backstreet abortions. Can Themba was fired from *Drum* and went to Swaziland where he died. Nat Nakasa, after leaving South Africa on a one-way exit permit, feeling isolated, threw himself from a high-rise building in New York in 1965.<sup>17</sup> In later years, Jim Bailey, finding the strain of owning *Drum* too much, sold the magazine to Nasionale Pers, which promptly made it a less provocative sports and entertainment magazine that posed no threat to authority.

The new generation of *Drum* writers that Klaaste met in 1960, which now featured the colourful Bikitsha, was hell-bent on continuing the tradition of hard living of their predecessors. They churned out goo stories before rushing off to have fun at shebeens in town or, now that Sophiatown was no more, in Alexandra or Soweto.

No doubt fraternising with these hard-nosed journalists boosted young Klaaste’s confidence that someday he could be like them. Someday he wanted to join the pantheon of journalism’s greats. Little did Klaaste know that his association with these carefree journalists, this “brotherhood”, would bring him serious trouble with drink that would almost consume him.

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<sup>16</sup> Desmond Sixishe was once Minister of Communications in Lesotho. After he had divorced Violet, he was killed in a military coup in November 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Nat Nakasa’s remains were returned from New York and reburied in Durban in 2014.



## CHAPTER 4 – THE HAPPY BOOZERS

In 1961, a young man walked into an off-red face-brick building facing a train station at 11 Newclare Road, Industria. This was the home of *Bantu World*, a popular newspaper aimed at the urban African market. It was the young man's first day at work. He had just been recruited to work as a full-time reporter. Slight of build, he exuded confidence and intelligence. His name was Joe Thloloe.

Born in Orlando East, Soweto, his first teacher at primary school had been Ellen Kuzwayo<sup>18</sup> who was to become a struggle veteran. He had matriculated at Orlando High School, whose famous principal, Thamsanqa Wilkison Kambule, was another influential mentor. As his reporting would later show, Thloloe possessed a fine sense of writing and a deep-seated commitment to fighting injustice – a stance for which he was to suffer mightily in the coming years. For now he was an ambitious young man who wanted to capture the essence of his world in print. When he joined the newspaper, he would say, “my eyes were opened to the world of journalism of the time, a miniature of the apartheid world outside”.

Like everyone else in the newsroom, young Thloloe soon came under the wing of Joe “Boy” Gumede, a flamboyant reporter with a reputation of being a go-getter. Thloloe remembers Gumede as quite a personality. They called him “The Texan” because he smoked that brand of cigarettes. “He was big, stood out in any crowd and wrote beautifully,” Thloloe remembered.

Constantly swirling around Gumede, like moths drawn to a flame, was a happy crowd of admirers. In that crowd were Doc Bikitsha (who had left *Drum*), Robinson Matseke and many others. All of these admirers could be distinguished by one feature: they were heavy drinkers. “Every evening after work we went to shebeens in Western Township, at Wemmer Hostel in Eloff Street, Falling Leaves in Dube, and numerous others in Orlando East. In the morning we took regmakers on our way to the office,” Thloloe recalled.

It was a joyous time. They read widely, followed current affairs and loved jazz. Then, over weekends, Thloloe started noticing that a skinny young man he did not yet know always joined their merry-making group. “I resented him,” Thloloe remembers. “I remember asking

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<sup>18</sup> Writer, activist and social worker Ellen Kuzwayo (1914-2006) did her teacher training at Adams College, where she was a student of Albert Luthuli, and Lovedale. When the Soweto Committee of Ten was formed after the student uprising of 1976, she was its only female member. Her award-winning autobiography *Call Me Woman* was published in 1985 and she served as a Member of Parliament for the ANC after 1994 (See Healy).

Gumede: *Wie's die baaitjie vanger? (who is this hanger-on?)*. Gumede told him not to worry; it was Aggrey Klaaste, a student at Wits who was doing freelance work with the paper.

Soon Klaaste became a permanent member of Gumede's circle after graduating from Wits in April 1961 and joined *Bantu World* full-time. He and Thloloe got to know each other better and became best friends – right into their adulthood. Those who knew them at that time called them twins because they were always together. “I grew to love him,” Thloloe admitted, “and we became inseparable friends. We loved booze, jazz, good literature and women. We both admired Gumede.”

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Klaaste and Thloloe had joined a paper steeped in history. Founded in April 1932 by Bertram F.G. Paver, a failed farmer and advertising salesman, *Bantu World* was a weekly commercial newspaper aimed at the urban African market. The paper had begun its life under Paver's company Bantu Press. Paver's stated aim was to “provide Native people with a platform for fair comment and the presentation of their needs and aspirations.”

Fourteen months later, the Argus Printing and Publishing Company, the largest white-owned press conglomerate, took over Bantu Press. Soon after black shareholders were bought out. The first editor of *Bantu World* was Selope Thema,<sup>19</sup> a key African nationalist politician of the day who firmly believed in racial cooperation. In later years, the editorship went to other distinguished luminaries – Jacob Nhlapo and Manasseh Moerane.<sup>20</sup>

According to writer and academic Les Switzer, during the 1930s and beyond, the paper was an arbiter of taste in urban African politics and culture and by far the most important medium of mass communication for the literate African community. “As the flagship of Bantu Press, the newspaper would provide a model of what was deemed to be permissible and relevant for Africans to buy and read,”<sup>21</sup> Switzer says. With no competition

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<sup>19</sup> Thema was a leading figure in the New African Movement, a group of intellectuals in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that sought to conceptualise a New African modernity that would demarcate itself from the hegemony of European modernity. As Masilela writes: “Thema proposed the fundamental characteristic of the New African as being the endless search for knowledge to overcome the oppression of colonial modernity and simultaneously to facilitate the emergence of the African genius” (“New African Modernity” 329).

<sup>20</sup> Nhlapo did his teacher training at Bensonvale Institution and at Lovedale. He was the first black South African to obtain two doctorates. Nhlapo is also known for his argument in favour of harmonising the various Nguni languages in South Africa into one standard language, a suggestion later taken up by Neville Alexander. Moerane was educated at Adams College, the University of Fort Hare, the University of Natal and the University of South Africa. He was an active member of the Natal African Bantu Teachers' Association and headed the African Teachers' Federation of South Africa for five years (Switzer).

<sup>21</sup> See Switzer.

for about 20 years, *Bantu World* was a success story that was only emulated by Drum Publications in the 1950s with the launch of *Drum* magazine and *Golden City Post*.

Among other features, *Bantu World* stayed away from politics or any harsh critique of South Africa's white rulers. Instead, it gave considerable coverage to white-sponsored organisations or whites who sought to foster racial harmony. The paper targeted a docile black petty bourgeoisie to whom it preached values of self-discipline and individual enterprise<sup>22</sup>. Its society news pages covered dances, beauty contests and other competitions, fund raisers, farewells and reunions, exhibitions, teas, dinners, parties, receptions, concerts, speeches and meetings. While *Bantu World* sometimes touched on issues affecting the working class – low wages, insufficient housing – the paper never rattled the establishment. That was to fundamentally change in later years.

The paper, which mixed English with indigenous languages, also featured poetry, short stories, plays, essays, musical compositions and drawings by African artists. It attracted many aspirant writers, mostly freelancers, and editors who later became luminaries in politics, journalism and literature. Among them were T.D. Mveli Skota (compiler of the African Yearly Register), S.E.K Mqhayi (a foremost Xhosa literary figure), Henry D. Tyamzashe (former editor of *Workers' Herald*), B.W. Vilakazi (an eminent Zulu scholar)<sup>23</sup>, A.C. Jordan (author of the *Wrath of the Ancestors (Ingqumbo Yeminyanya)*), Jordan Ngubane (future editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu* and founding member of the National Union of African Youth), R.R.R. Dhlomo (editor of *Ilanga* from 1943 to 1969 and author of the novella *An African Tragedy*) and H.I.E. Dhlomo,<sup>24</sup> Peter Abrahams<sup>25</sup> and Henry Nxumalo (the future "Mr Drum" at *Drum* magazine and a towering investigative journalist).

These young journalists carried a heavy workload. H.I.E. Dhlomo, who joined the staff in 1935, summed up their pain: "The African journalist in most cases is underpaid, overworked, is hampered with irritating restrictions, and is not free to speak out loud and bold. Our journalists must be bilingual – they must write in English and vernacular every

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<sup>22</sup> Wasserman (49)

<sup>23</sup> Vilakazi is commonly described as the founder of modern Zulu poetry. He was the first black South African to obtain a doctorate in literature. His Ph.D. thesis, entitled "The Oral and Written Literature in Nguni", was accepted by Wits in 1945.

<sup>24</sup> Poet, journalist and playwright H.I.E. Dhlomo graduated from Adams College as a teacher. After a stint as a librarian in Johannesburg he moved to Durban, where he worked as an assistant editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*. According to Killam and Rowe, "Dhlomo's importance as a critic rests on the fact that he advocates the use of Western styles, but only as far as they can enhance the existing African tradition" (78).

<sup>25</sup> Born in Vrededorp, Johannesburg, Abrahams is most famous as a writer for his novel *Mine Boy* (1946) on the conditions of mine workers in the country, a topic that Klaaste would frequently comment on in his journalism.

week. They are reporters, sub-editors, editors, proofreaders all in one. They are expected to write on every topical subject under the sun for there is no division of work.”<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the emergence of white-owned papers such as *Bantu World* spelled a major shift in media ownership in South Africa. Before, it was typical for papers targeting an African readership to be owned and controlled by black owners who sought to mobilise African opinion in a country where Africans were steadily losing ground economically and politically due to colonial rule. John Tengo Jabavu, a Methodist lay preacher and former editor of *Isigidimi*, founded *Imvo Zabantsundu* in 1875 in King William’s Town with the help of his white liberal friends. His political rival, Walter Benson Rubusana, ran *Izwi Labantu*. Out in Kimberley, the enterprising and self-educated Sol Plaatje famously edited the *Koranta ea Becoana (Tswana Gazette)* and *Tsala ea Batho*. In Natal, John Langalibalele Dube, the first president of the ANC, founded *Ilanga lase Natal*, which still exists to this day. Other papers, run by other ambitious African proprietors, followed: *Advocate*, *Umlomo waBantu*, *The African Shield*, and *The Messenger: Morumiwa*. Collectively, these papers served as a platform for their pioneering owners to spread values they were passionate about. For example, with *Imvo Zabantsundu*, Jabavu intended “to open the eyes of the Natives to their rights, to educate and generally uplift the Natives to race.”<sup>27</sup> As shapers of black political thought, these early publications gave their owners considerable clout. The publishers themselves, who often were also editors, became eminent political and social commentators with a huge following of readers.

Most of these publications did not last long due to financial constraints, particularly after the Great Depression (1929-1932), but they greatly influenced the shaping of communal loyalties and helped in later decades to usher in Black Consciousness.

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For now, at *Bantu World*, Klaaste was happy to be finally pursuing his passion – journalism. He appreciated the paper’s history and the illustrious names that preceded his generation. The freelance work he did the year before at *Drum* helped him to hold his own at *Bantu World*. It also helped that he had an academic degree under his belt. He was a novelty. Every editor would have wanted him on his staff.

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<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in Switzer 201.

<sup>27</sup> Switzer.

Also with Klaaste and Thloloe at *Bantu World* was a motley crew of journalists with whom they formed a wonderful, life-long association: Casey Motsisi, Stan Motjuwadi (who had been the first black editor of *Drum*), Bob Gosani, Duke Moleko, Leslie Sehume, Molaodi Mosielele and Godwin Mohlomi.

Each morning these journalists would meet at the office for an editorial conference, where they presented stories they intended working on. Then off they went in search of scoops and interviews. On the way, they observed a sacred ritual, stopping at a grog shop in Langlaagte Station where they pooled their money to buy a bottle of port. “We discouraged public drinking so we passed the bottle wrapped up or under cover in the car,” Bikitsha would later say. “I insisted on fair sips each. I was the last to sip and downed the lion’s share. As I passed it back to Aggrey, he’d alarmingly reply: “Hey Carcass, it’s empty.” Thloloe would reply: “It’s scientific, the bottle is drained. However, the philosophy is: one bottle gives birth to another.” It was replenished and the day’s work began.

Energised by drink, they would scamper off to cover the magistrate’s courts, the supreme court, crime calls, “Bantu Commissioners” and divorce courts. Klaaste and Bikitsha covered the courts, where the atmosphere of one would vary from the next. Often they would fraternise with policemen in the holding cells, a bottle of their favourite booze nearby. “We demolished grog in privacy and safety,” Bikitsha would remember. As the caged prisoners salivated at their bottle, Bikitsha would scathingly tell them off: “If you had obeyed the Commandments, you’d be enjoying your own drinks outside. You stole, so stew in your own juices.” But Klaaste, who always felt pity for the underdog, would offer prisoners whatever money he had.

Typically, by 10am the reporters on assignment would phone dictaphonists back at the office with whatever news they had. Despite putting work before fun, and despite their obvious editorial talent, management always critical of their reckless lifestyle. But no amount of admonitions from authority at work helped. “We lived for wine, women and song,” recalled Bikitsha. “A Kimberlite named Benny Esau introduced us to the culture of wine, or ‘vintage’ as we called it. He made us aware of the sherries and ports, muscatels and chiantis. We settled for port wine in all its variations. It became our staple and natural drink – through births, deaths and marriages.”

These journalists were truly a tight band. When Klaaste graduated, Bikitsha, along with photojournalist Moffat “Fatso” Zungu, came to Wits University to cover the graduation ceremony. Their chests must have been swollen with pride at the academic achievements of one of their own. But Bikitsha was not allowed to join the graduation party because he was so

drunk he “tottered precariously” down the steps of the Wits Great Hall. “They feared I would bash my skull on the concrete,” he would later say.

Among the favourite places in the city for these journalists to hang out after work was the Park Station’s “concourse”. There they drank, socialised and compared notes on the day’s events. It was also where they specialised in the art of “touching,” which Bikitsha defined as “a refined art of making a person part with his money without robbing him. You made him feel honoured to be helping you.” The “concourse” was one of the few places in the city where blacks could sit down for a drink.

They also went to The Classic, a shebeen that inspired the name behind Nat Nakasa’s literary magazine. “The man who ran this shebeen was called Magog, for no other reason I can fathom. He was also called The Guns of Navarone after a very popular war movie by that title because of the manner in which he beat us up for his money. He sold his booze to most reporters on credit – or ‘tick’ or on the ‘slate’ as we called it,” Klaaste wrote in his memoir. It seems some reporters were not good at managing their booze account.

If these *Bantu World* journalists got thirsty while at work, there was a solution. Right outside their offices in Industria an enterprising bootlegger called One-Eyed Joe ran a food outlet that doubled as a mobile shebeen. “Many times young Aggrey could be seen furtively fleeing in and out of One-Eyed Joe’s big American car-cum-bar. Even the coffee carts, which were meals-on-wheels, were shebeens,” Bikitsha said years later. Klaaste wouldn’t be alone in this trickery. “There would be Aggrey, Joe, Casey and Stan pretending to be drinking mageu, but passing a half-jack of Mellow-Wood Brandy around.”

Heavy drinking was no doubt self-destructive, but it was too embedded in the journalism trade to be eradicated. Joe Latakomo, a former editor, summed it up: “It was a time when people only seemed to have one choice once they entered the world of journalism – and that choice was limited to settling for what Bikitsha described as the cream of the crop, the cream of the grape. To all of us, this was good stuff, and nothing else mattered.”

Others have suggested that it was a way of coping with the ugly realities of apartheid. Turning to drink was natural, if not logical. Klaaste certainly supported this view. “I tried to anaesthetise the atrocities of apartheid,” he once wrote.

In fact, even during his student days at Wits booze already formed a big part of Klaaste’s social life. “We were drunk most of the time and heaven knows how I scraped through,” he said once. He admitted to hanging around the “wrong crowd, the boozers.” In fact, he said he joined journalism “because of booze”.



Now the profession had turned him into a full-blown alcoholic. It would take a miracle for him to climb out of that bottle and turn his life around. Soon enough Klaaste and Thloloe were fired from *Bantu World*. The two friends joined Drum Publications: Klaaste joining *Drum* and Thloloe *Golden City Post*.

At *Drum* young Klaaste would soon get an assignment of a lifetime – covering the conclusion of the historic Rivonia Treason Trial.



## CHAPTER 5 – THE SILENT DECADE

Because of heavy drinking, Klaaste and his contemporaries frequently lost employment. When that happened they would be snapped by other media titles who knew their talent and what they could deliver when they were sober. That is how Klaaste found himself at *Drum*, the magazine he had long desired to work for, when the long-running Rivonia Trial came to an end. He was assigned to cover two days of the proceedings – the issuing of the verdict and sentencing, which happened on successive days, June 11 and 12, 1964. The resulting piece that Klaaste wrote was called “I’ll Never Forget ... Rivonia.” It was published in July 1964. Bittersweet in tone, sharply observed, the article gave a blow-by-blow account of what transpired when the historic trial reached its climax at the Palace of Justice in Pretoria.

The accused had been arrested at Liliesleaf farm in Rivonia, north of Johannesburg, on 11 July, 1963.<sup>28</sup> Registered under Arthur Goldreich,<sup>29</sup> an architect who was a secret member of the Communist Party, the farm had been used as cover to plan acts of sabotage. It was a perfect location to hide.

Judge De Wet presided over the trial. The accused were Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Denis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Lionel Bernstein, Raymond Mhlaba, James Kantor,<sup>30</sup> Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni.

Their crime was sabotage against the state. The ANC and the Community Party, both outlawed parties, had taken up a military route to opposing the state. Feeling desperate against an increasingly brutal state – Sharpeville was still fresh on everyone’s minds – they formed a military wing called Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK or Spear of the Nation). At the time most South Africans were under the impression that the military wing of the ANC, jointly commanded by Nelson Mandela and Joe Slovo of the Community Party. Scholars such as Stephen Ellis and Irina Tilanova argue that it was the Communist Party, which was banned in 1950, who initiated the taking up of arms against the apartheid regime and not the ANC as is conventionally believed. The communists, they say, had the backing of Russia which offered resources for military training. Yet the party had a relatively small membership base in South

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<sup>28</sup> Mandela had been arrested on August 5, 1962 and sentenced to five years in prison in November of the same year. He was brought to the trial from Robben Island. Motsoaledi and Mlangeni were arrested a few weeks before the raid on Lilliesleaf farm. Bob Hepple, a 28-year-old lawyer who had been arrested at the farm and was detained for 90 days, was released when he promised the authorities to testify at the trial. This never happened though, as he secretly left the country (Karris and Gerhart 205).

<sup>29</sup> Goldreich was arrested during the police raid on Lilliesleaf, but he managed to bribe a young warder at Marshall Square police station, Johannesburg. He escaped with three other detainees.

<sup>30</sup> Kantor was released at the end of the prosecution’s case.

Africa. It thus lobbied its party members who were also in the ANC, most prominently Mandela, to win ANC support.<sup>31</sup>

The military tack was a disaster for MK. It showed the premature nature of their planning and execution. What's more, this military route divided opinion within the ANC, with some pointing that, yes the state was turning violent, but non-violent methods had not been fully exhausted and that there was no proof that these nonviolent methods were not making any gains. Most of the oppressed black people were Christians; a turn to violence abhorred them. Launching an armed struggle seemed instigated by its Communist allies.

Mandela even visited many African countries to solicit support for MK. He had left the country illegally and received military training abroad. However, African leaders, who found greater resonance with Sobukwe's "Africa for Africans" stance, received him coolly. They didn't understand his alliance with white communists.<sup>32</sup> When he returned to South Africa, Mandela hardly had any time to dwell on the rejection he had received. He was arrested in Howick, near Pietermatizburg, on August 5, 1962, two weeks after he had slipped back into the country via Botswana. He was returning to Johannesburg from Durban where he had briefed his comrades in the province, including ANC president Chief Albert Luthuli, about his travels. He had only been back in the country for a mere two weeks. He was charged for leaving the country illegally and sentenced to five years on Robben Island.

With bombs going off police worked around the clock to find the culprits. They were frustrated when they could only arrest underlings. The MK was not alone in waging a military campaign. There was also the National Liberation Committee, made up of young white radicals who broke off from the Liberal Party, and Poqo, a rural-based movement with links to the PAC. Luck ran out for Umkhonto when police arrested a group of men near the Botswana border headed for military training outside the country with the intention of coming back as armed saboteurs. As it turned out, one of the men admitted to knowing where Umkhonto's headquarters was and, for a sum of R6 000, he would point it out to the police.

That is how veteran criminal investigator Willie van Wyk and his men raided Lilieslief, netting high-profile MK leaders, most of them disguised as farm labourers. Sisulu was the most prized. He had skipped bail and gone underground. Mandela's link to the defendants was established by the discovery of a trove of documents written in his own hand.

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<sup>31</sup> Although Mandela always denied his party membership, Ellis argues that he was indeed a member of the SACP and its Central Committee for a period in the 1960s (See Ellis).

<sup>32</sup> At the launching conference of the PAC Sobuke called for "the government of the Africans, by the Africans, for the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as African" (qtd. in Pogrud 93).

Also left around was a draft copy of Operation Mayibuye, MK's plan for outright war. Mandela was hauled back from Robben Island to stand trial with his comrades in Pretoria.

A lot rode on the trial. A few years previously the state had embarrassingly lost a four-year marathon in the 1956 Treason Trial that had also featured some of these men. There was not going to be a repeat of that error. Newer, tougher laws were now in place to ensure that political opponents never escaped the dragnet. The world's eyes were on South Africa.

Luckily for the men, the charge was sabotage and not high treason, which would have carried a death penalty. It seemed the state was wary of making a martyr of anyone. The trial was filled with drama. Which is why Klaaste was there that day to cover the trial and witness history in the making. His brilliant article gave a sense of the place.

On verdict day, June 11, in which the men were found guilty, here's what Klaaste wrote: "The voices of the crowd raised in song outside the Palace of Justice. The priest who led them in song as they waited for the judgement ... and the way they burst into 'Nkosi Sikelela' as Winnie Mandela appeared on the steps. The way Hilda Bernstein rushed up to her husband, Rusty, when he was found not guilty ... and the expression on her face when, two minutes later, he was rearrested and the police pulled her away."

Klaaste then added some delightful touches to his account: "The bewildered look on the face of old Mrs Mandela – Nelson's mother – who had come all the way from Umtata to [see] her son found guilty of sabotage and sentenced to life imprisonment."

He also observed that her daughter-in-law, Winnie, "tenderly looked after her, inside and outside court". Casting a glance at the accused box, immediately after the guilty verdict had been given, Klaaste noted: "Nelson smiling to his wife; Walter Sisulu waving; Kathy Kathrada shrugging his shoulders."

On sentencing day, June 12, Klaaste once again keenly followed all the drama: "Nelson Mandela, in new, dark suit, taking notes, notes, notes; Sisulu, fined down to thinness; Dennis Goldberg, cheerful and almost chubby; Govan Mbeki, listening, listening, listening, hand cupped to ear; Raymond Mhlaba staring at the proceedings."

After the judge found the accused guilty, Klaaste remembered a hush falling over the court – "an almost deathlike, motionless silence. Then the eight men in the dock – who had stood erect, showing no sign of emotion – turning to the packed court and smiling."

The defendants were relieved. At least they would live. It felt like they had actually won. It was almost like an acquittal.

Then Klaaste got outside the court where he witnessed more drama. As he was milling about in the crowd, a passing car suddenly gave a loud bang, backfiring. It must have

sounded like a gunshot. “We all stepped briskly back. A police dog barked back,” he wrote. He remembered finding himself next to a police captain – “his row of buttons gleaming” – who stood impassively and aloof in all the chaos.

He saw Winnie Mandela coming out and, with her fist clenched in salute, announcing to the crowd: “Life!” Word spread among the gathered women supporters. The women, wearing the forbidden green, black and gold of the banned ANC, broke into song. They unfurled banners that read: “Our future is bright,” and “Sentence or no sentence, we stand by our leaders.” Klaaste continued: “Those who stood next to Winnie say there were tears in her eyes. Yet there was no weeping.”

Soon throngs of supporters pushed to go to the back of the court to catch a last glimpse of the men as they were being ferried away in a police van. Klaaste witnessed about 50 women marching and chanting up Church Square, marching to the back of the court. They were quite determined. “Some youngsters tried to trip them. Somebody kicked at them. Still they marched on. Right around the Palace of Justice. A bucket of water flew from a window. Right on to the singing women. They marched on, regardless,” Klaaste wrote. “People were peeping from windows. Some stood on balconies. Others stood on roofs.”

Klaaste estimated that it took about three-thirds of an hour for the police to get the prisoners out of the Palace. “As they drove out in a small van preceded by motorbikes and two cars, there was a shout from the crowd. The men (in the van) shouted back. Then they were whisked away – to Robben Island.”

It was all over. A pall had fallen on South African politics. Klaaste went back to Johannesburg to write his story about the history-making event he had just witnessed.

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More than anything, the Rivonia Treason Trial was to mark the beginning of a silent decade in South African politics. Political parties were banned. Anyone who was a member of a banned political party could face five years in prison. If you were banned, you could not be with more than two people at the time. Fear reigned in the land. Some chose exile in neighbouring countries or far, far away.

Ironically, the increased repression in South Africa happened at a time when more and more African countries were gaining independence. While most of the newly independent states sympathised with liberation movements, they couldn’t help much materially and militarily fearing economic and military reprisals from Pretoria.

Crucially, the ANC and PAC were also victims of their ideological leanings. The Cold War was in full swing, with ideology determining geopolitical alliances. Both parties struggled to get the West interested in the fight against apartheid because they espoused the creation of a future South Africa run along socialist lines. What's more, the ANC had a close alliance with communists. Blaming apartheid on only moral grounds didn't hold much water. Not even at international forums such as the United Nations or Organisation of African Unity. Not even after Sharpeville. Ideology carried far too much weight. To offset criticism of its policies, Pretoria stressed to the outside world, particularly to the United States, its opposition to communism; opponents of apartheid were cast as communists under the influence of Moscow.

South Africa's Prime Minister at this time was Hendrik Verwoerd. He favoured South Africa dealing with its own internal issues without foreign interference. He had wanted South Africa to be a republic and still remain in the Commonwealth. When that turned out to be impossible to accomplish, he withdrew the country from the Commonwealth in 1961 after an all-white referendum the previous year. For this hawkish stand he commanded support of Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans who routinely looked north of the country and saw one African country after another getting independence; the prospect of black rule in South Africa frightened them. In the aftermath of Sharpeville, with hostile condemnations coming from all quarters, the white electorate saw Verwoerd as a bulwark against any threat to white hegemony.

Besides, apartheid prospered in the 1960s because economic ties between countries were a far critical than moralising about politics. While publicly critical of apartheid, western nations such the United States, Britain and West Germany found doing business with Pretoria highly profitable and opposed any economic sanctions. Their companies were in the country massively benefiting from cheap labour and other concessions. Loans flowed freely from these western nations and lent South Africa, a major mineral producer, an image of being a stable economy. The local economy grew at an impressive pace. "By 1964, with the black leaders in jail or in exile and the government clearly in control, the way was open for the great boom, a wonder-decade in which South Africa's economic growth was outstripping nearly all Western countries, averaging 6 percent a year during the 'sixties," writes Anthony Sampson in *Black and Gold* (p115).

Having left the Commonwealth, South Africa courted multinational corporations that saw South Africa as a fertile ground for expansion. By 1967, these corporations received up to 15% return on their investments – far higher than in Europe. However, Britain still

remained by far the biggest investor. “By 1968 South Africa had moved from fourth to third place among Britain’s investment territories (excluding oil, banking and insurance), overtaking the United States,” Sampson continues.

With the lure of easy profits, foreign companies poured millions into the country. The apartheid government, eager to tighten its reins on the economy, ensured that multinationals worked closely with state-controlled corporations; and that there were enough resources to make apartheid work. So, high finance pushed politics to the back banner.

The so-called liberation armies of the ANC and PAC were rendered impotent. The chances of effective guerrilla warfare faded since infiltration routes to South Africa had first to cross hostile territories such as Ian Smith’s Rhodesia.<sup>33</sup> Recruits, who were full of zeal when they left the country, grew frustrated when they had to lie low for years in training camps with nothing better to do. Some of them resented being drafted to fight in wars of neighbouring countries such as Angola and Zimbabwe. They wanted to fight in Pretoria. At least, that’s what they dreamed of. Oliver Tambo, a close friend and former legal partner of Mandela, was in charge of the ANC’s mission in exile. Tambo had been one of the top ANC leaders who had earlier on gone into exile.

Internally, the 1960s led to black people being scared to dabble in politics. The threat was too great and punishment too harsh. Black parents, cowed by years of repression, hardly spoke politics with their children, not even behind closed doors. Mandela, Sisulu, Slovo, Kathrada and Sobukwe were never mentioned. Townships crawled with informers. A malaise settled. Retired journalist Nomavenda Mathiane, who grew up in Sophiatown, puts it well: “So many things were banned in the country in the 1960s that people were confused as to what was or wasn’t banned. The anthem *Nkosi Sikelela*, for example, was not banned but people were scared to sing it.”<sup>34</sup>

One wonders how Tobias Klaaste, the stern patriarch of the Klaaste family, must have felt at this time of the country’s history. It must have been hard for him to know that talking

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<sup>33</sup> Rhodesia was under the grip of Ian Smith. Botswana, which gained independence in 1966, was too economically close to Pretoria and Rhodesia to risk any backlash. South West Africa was effectively a South African colony and therefore a no-go area. Lesotho, small and completely encircled by South Africa, was too nervous to be a military base, offering only asylum. To the east of the country, lay Mozambique, which was under the colonial rule of Portugal. Until late 1964, when Zambia got independent, only Tanzania was willing to serve as a rear base. But the country, which lies northeast of Zambia and north of Mozambique, was 2 400 kilometres away from South Africa’s northern border, too far away to be of any effective military campaign (see Karis and Gerhart, Vol. 4, 4-9).

<sup>34</sup> I interviewed Nomavenda Mathiane at her house in Douglasdale on Friday, 16 August 2013. She is a renowned journalist who wrote some remarkable stories as a reporter in the 1970s and 1980s. She famously clashed with Winnie Mandela when she wrote about her notorious Mandela Football Club that was accused of human rights violations. Mathiane had to flee Soweto fearing for her life.



politics was suddenly dangerous – unlike in the days of Sophiatown. It must have killed Tobias to have to swallow his opinions. He must have felt muzzled.

But what must have killed him even more was seeing his son Aggrey drowning in alcohol. A son he had had so much high hopes for, the one he even named after an eminent Ghanaian intellectual, had completely given himself over to the bottle.

Drink would sometimes land Aggrey in trouble with the law. His friend Mike Mzileni, a photographer at *Drum*, recalled being arrested with Klaaste in the 1960s. The two were walking down the street in Johannesburg with Klaaste having had a glass or two. “The police spotted us drunk in the city and arrested us for vagrancy. They held us in a cell for a while before releasing us,” says the avuncular Mzileni, now a spry 70-something.<sup>35</sup>

In the late 1960s Klaaste’s parents, alarmed that their son was wrecking himself with booze, forced him to quit journalism, feeling that the profession was the source of all the trouble. “Klaaste’s parents got really worried about him,” Mzileni related. “He and Joe (Thlolo) left journalism for a time. Klaaste worked at a medical research institute for a while and Joe for an insurance company.”

But the yearning for the newsroom proved too great to suppress and they returned into the fold. One of the measures adopted to try to get Klaaste to stop drinking was making him take a tablet that would make him vomit if he touched alcohol. This is a common method of organisations such as Alcohol Anonymous. Klaaste’s taking of the tablet became a source of endless amusement among his colleagues who constantly teased him for “being on the pill”. Sometimes his mother would come collect his salary at work before he could lay his hands on it. But it seems these measures had limited success. The pull of the bottle was still strong.

If Klaaste wasn’t in the watering holes of Orlando East, he would be in Dube at Falling Leaves. One day the Falling Leaves shebeen queen called Sis Sarah, deeply concerned about Klaaste’s ways, momentarily forgot about profit and summoned a *sangoma* (faith healer) to her place to help “cure” Klaaste of his boozing ways.

“I was made to drink litres of some foulish green stuff to ‘cleanse’ myself,” Klaaste would later say. “When the *sangoma* or whatever worthy called herself left me, I niftily threw the whole disgusting stuff onto the lawn. She came back and was aghast to see the container emptied so fast. There was respect and deep sense of tragic awe in her eyes that told me plainly that there was no hope for a man who held that type of capacity for that type of obnoxious stuff.”

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<sup>35</sup> I interviewed Mike Mzileni at his home in Diepkloof Extension on 13 October 2013.

But Klaaste could not escape that easily. Suspicious, the *sangoma* and Sis Sarah, the shebeen queen, decided to administer a different kind of treatment on him. They wanted him kneel over a scalding hot dish of water with herbs and cover himself with a blanket so he could steam himself, almost like being in a sauna. Poor Klaaste, young and rebellious, could only take so much suffering. He wondered if it was really worth enduring so much trauma to get rid of his drinking habit. He balked at the idea and bolted out of the yard, leaving the sangoma and shebeen queen shaking their heads in dismay. “They must have felt that there was no hope for me,” he commented years later.

Drinking could sometimes be socially inconvenient for Klaaste. There were no places in town where blacks could sit and drink, except, of course, the Park Station Concourse, but that venue would sometimes be too far and the thirst would be urgent. Once Klaaste bought a bottle of the “good stuff” in downtown Johannesburg and, without any shame, eagerly sat down, literally in the gutter near the store and started drinking. He was still enjoying his drink when some decent-looking passers-by who knew him came up to him. They could not contain their glee. Or was it disgust? They told him to his face: “How are the mighty fallen!” Despite being stung by the words, he continued to polish off his bottle without a care in the world.

Another time, when he battled to find a right spot to down his bottle, he opted for the anonymity of Joubert Park in the middle of town. Unbeknown to him fellow journalist Stan Motjuwadi, a great humourist and acerbic type, spotted him and commented afterwards that “historically Klaaste must be the only black hobo who frequented the park”.

During one episode of being unemployed, Klaaste found himself back at Falling Leaves shebeen. The shebeen served sorghum beer (traditional African beer), the lowest drink in the ladder of choice beverages. But things were tough and he didn’t have enough money for anything better. So he joined other men seated around two-litres of sorghum beer. It was evening and the room was dimly lit. Unaware that his dear old friend Bikitsha was also in the room watching, Klaaste drank happily. Then Bikitsha identified himself. Mortified with embarrassment, Klaaste melted into the night.

Sometimes, he and Bikitsha they would go on a drinking spree in Dobsonville, Soweto. Bikitsha remembered how once they savoured a new, fashionable drink called *katse* (cat) at one shebeen. This was a homebrewed concoction made of industrial chemicals, a very dangerous and potent drink, one popular with down-on-their luck folks like Klaaste and Bikitsha at that time. It was fairly cheap drink at 10c or 20c a litre. Pooling the little money they had, they settled for a whole “*gogogo*” (20 litres). Just then, a charming lady warned

them to go steady on the *katse* “otherwise it will maul and scratch you terribly”. They ignored her and paid the price. “When the *katse* had done its job on us,” Bikitsha recalled, “we marched single file from Dobsonville to Jabulani Amphitheatre. We were thoroughly scratched and stoned. Those were the days.”

During these years Klaaste would experience spells of unemployment. “I moved from newspaper to the other until my waywardness made me unemployable,” he wrote in his memoir. “I drank because I wanted to be like the school of Can Themba and Casey Motsitsi. In fact, Casey became my good drinking buddy and I saw him die.”

His drinking was so bad that in the late 1960s Klaaste lived full-time in a room at Falling Leaves. He lived with a married woman, the wife of a gangster. This was the lowest point of his life. By this time, he was a full-blown alcoholic. “I had reached a stage where I could not stop drinking, [where I] could not bear the idea of being sober. In fact, it was almost [as] if I had to drink to be able to function; I had to drink to be sober. This lifestyle was tragic, dangerous and often extremely funny,” he remembered in his memoir.

Being constantly drunk robbed him of awareness of time. He could not tell between sunrise and sunset. Or between Sunday or Thursday. After waking up and washing his “shivering wasted body”, he would go straight to looking for more booze. “I would furtively feel under the bed for anything remaining from last night to put me back on track for the coming day. I would then walk gingerly outside, shamed of being seen. I did not know what time of the day it was!” Sometimes, when he found employment, he would wake up, get ready and go to work only to find the trains empty – it was weekend! Sis Sarah of Falling Leaves must have looked on and shook her head.

Despite his drunken state, other sheen patrons noticed his intellect. He must have liked to speak English for he was soon known as “Shakespeare of the shebeens.” When he drank in the city, he met and formed cordial friendships with Zulu men who lived in apartments at the top of buildings – locations in the sky. These men, who were kitchen or garden boys to “white” South Africa, called him “*thisha*” (teacher) and he helped them write letters to their loved ones back home. One presumes that he wrote such letters in Zulu, even though it wasn’t his home language but a lingua franca he knew to speak by virtue of being in a linguistic melting pot that is Johannesburg. If that was so, that made him remarkably dextrous with languages spoken around him. One also presumes that payment for such letter-writing service was done in kind – more booze.

These men would later be moved from “locations in the sky” to hostels in the township. In the violence that would follow, some of them would stop being nice fellows.

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By the end of the 1960s the state had come up with a grand solution to keeping South Africa a white man's country – homeland system. The idea was to create black states within South Africa to which black labourers could return once their time was up in “white” South Africa. Ethnic background would determine citizenship in one of the 10 tribal homelands. The plan was to give each homeland a degree of self-determination, where it could have its own government, complete with its own parliament and a Prime Minister. As one homeland after another received independence, the number of black people on South Africa's population register would decrease. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act made this possible in 1970. The creation of homelands was part of the so-called Grand Apartheid scheme. As David Matas writes, the “notion of separate development reached its zenith with the concept of homelands, Bantustans, as separate black states within South Africa.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1971, the Bantu Homelands Constitution Act made provision for the South African president to give independence to each homeland. Four out of the 10 Bantustans, the Transkei (1976), Bophuthatswana (1977), Venda (1979), and the Ciskei (1981), became “independent”. By virtue of his Xhosa ancestry, Klaaste was made a citizen of the Transkei even though he had never set foot in the homeland. In a column *Just For Today*, which he wrote for *Transvaal Post* in March 1979, Klaaste sounded a trifle weary of apartheid bureaucracy: “My passbook says I'm Xhosa. The bureaucrat says I'm Transkeian. That's that. If we are going to worry about such things, who is going to worry about next month's rent, about the increase in the price of petrol? ...Some of us have stopped bothering two hoots whether we are such hybrid citizens with multiple roots and suspect loyalties. It's just a bit too much of a strain on the brain.”

Klaaste abhorred how these acts stripped black people of their South African citizenship, transforming them, with the stroke of a pen into, citizens of homelands they had never even set foot in. Africans were literally transformed into “aliens”, as academic Loren Landau writes, “whose usefulness lasted only for as long as they could build the city, care for gardens and pools, or nurture white children.”<sup>37</sup> Klaaste knew that the National Party was using the homeland system and the promise of self-rule to put a bright face on naked white suppression. In truth, the system was designed to divide and oppress black people.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Matas 90.

<sup>37</sup> Landau 5.

<sup>38</sup> Just after the Transkei had become ‘independent’, *The Financial Mail* exposed the system, writing:

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In this silent decade, *Bantu World* continued serving its urban African readership. The paper, the only black daily, was still influential but a touch servile. It was under the editorship of Manasseh Moerane, a genteel and moderate man from another era. While unhappy with the status quo, he didn't use the paper to oppose it overtly or vigorously. That would happen later, under the direction of his swashbuckling successor Percy Qoboza.

Moerane came from a teaching and politics background. Born in 1913 in the Transkei, he attended Adams College and obtained a Bachelor's degree from Fort Hare and the University of Natal. He had once been principal of Ohlange, a renowned high school in Inanda, north of Durban, which had been established by John Langalibalele Dube decades earlier. After spending eight years abroad, Moerane returned to edit *Bantu World* in 1962.

Even though he was the editor, his influence on editorial matters was limited. Klaaste emphasised how he was subject to white supervision: "The irony was that while Mr Moreane was the editor he had a white editorial director above him. He was not really in charge and held a rather uncomfortable position as a type of overseer, a senior statesman on the paper, while the editor did the day-to-day running of the show," Klaaste would write.

The result was a paper that played it safe in the eyes of authorities. According to Klaaste, the paper was no more than "a crime, sex and sports yellow rag". Such a sentiment was echoed years later when Pallo Jordan, then minister of arts and culture in a democratic South Africa: "The latter half of the 1960s was probably the bleakest period for black journalism, particularly those writing for African readerships. With the blanket of repression smothering all critical opinion newspapers such as *The World* were compelled to wallow in frivolities or concentrate on the sensational stories of crime, drugs, beauty queens and sport."

With his hands tied at work, Moerane found an outlet for his political positions in his private life. He helped found many community organisations such as the Black People's Convention and Soweto's Black Parents' Association, organisations that mobilised people against oppression.

But as the decade ended, the political winds among the oppressed masses changed. It was now the era of Black Consciousness. After decades of humiliations, Black Consciousness told the oppressed black people that they were lovable human beings and

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"Government's ultimate aim is to force each and every African in the Republic ostensibly to become a citizen of one or the other Bantustan, so that it can legitimate its refusal to grant them political rights in 'white' South Africa. They will then be 'foreigners'. The Transkei is the first step in this direction. Discrimination will no longer be based on race or colour, so the government will claim, but on nationality" (qtd. in Magubane 752).

should be proud of it. At the forefront of this movement was a young man called Steve Biko. He had trained as a medical doctor at the University of Natal before abandoning his studies for politics. Biko and his comrades advocated self-help and they launched many community projects that sought to restore pride and dignity to maligned black communities.

No doubt Biko and company must have been inspired by the radical message of revolution they heard from leaders such as Malcolm X and a younger generation of African American civil rights leaders such as Stockley Carmichael and Huey P. Newtown, who were fed up with the pacifist language of turning the other cheek while police set vicious dogs on them or hosed them down with water. Closer to home, Biko and the gang devoured the writings of Martinique-born Afro-French psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon who spoke about how the wretched of the earth ought to rise against oppression and colonialism. Giddy with all these radical ideas, the local Black Consciousness crew felt it was time for a black man in South Africa to be on his own, to fight back. In the late 1960s Biko and his comrades left NUSAS to form SASO. In the spirit of self-help, they also ran Black Community Programmes (BCP), such as the Zanemvula Clinic in Ginsberg, King Williams Town. BC organisations functioned even at high schools.

Journalists such as Klaaste sat up and took notice of this new radicalism. The language of the BC was closer to the Pan Africanism that had so impressed them in their youth. The emphasis of black people being self-sufficient was similar to the Africanists' call for Africans to be the masters of their fate. Biko was known to have courted journalists, who frequented BC gatherings.

Interestingly, BC seemed strong in so-called Bush universities, such as Turfloop in Northern Transvaal (now Limpopo), that were created when black students were excluded from white universities. Klaaste noted that at these black universities the marginalisation of black students was acute and it was not surprising that they were plagued with strikes.

By early 1970s, radicalism was in the air. On the factory floor, workers were agitating for better working conditions and better pay; the 1973 strikes in Durban were evidence of this newfound militancy. Biko and his comrades – such as Strini Moodley, Barney Pityana – at great risk to their personal lives, were running SASO and Black Community Programmes (BCP) in the little political space still available. Indeed, the Black Consciousness philosophy and movement permeated every aspect of life in the absence of banned older political parties. Names like Mandela, Sisulu, Slovo, Kathrada sounded ancient.

The message of these young and radical leaders was urgent and relevant. But before untying the chains of repression, these activists wanted people to first heal the psychological

wounds apartheid had inflicted. They argued that the oppressed had to shed a mentality of being inferior and do things for themselves.

Events outside the country conspired to give BC some mileage in black communities. One such major event was the independence of Mozambique and Angola. In 1974, a military coup took place in Portugal and overthrew the government of Marcello Caetano. The new government moved to give independence to its former colonial territories – Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, East Timor. The party vying for control in Mozambique and Angola had Marxist or socialist leanings – Frelimo in Mozambique and MPLA in Angola.

These developments were disturbing to the South African government. Countries with a hostile ideology, one similar to those of the exiled ANC and PAC, were going to be close to the South African borders. Particularly in the case of Mozambique, there was fear that exiled liberation movements would establish military bases there and try to infiltrate South Africa. Soon, these two countries were embroiled in protracted civil wars, with South Africa supporting the rebel armies of Renamo in Mozambique and Unita in Angola because they were anti-communist.

Even before Mozambique gained independence, the apartheid government tried to suppress any show of solidarity with Frelimo. But BC activists went ahead and organised “Frelimo” rallies such as the one held at Curries Fountain in Durban in 1974. Government responded by arresting BC leaders, leading to the famous Black People’s Convention (BPC)/South African Students Organisation (SASO) Trial of 1974-1976. Subsequently, the nine detainees on trial were found guilty under the Terrorism Act. They were sentenced and sent off to Robben Island. If the 1960s had been silent, the 1970s were loud and brash, but a lot of BC activists would pay with their lives as the state crushed them.<sup>39</sup>

Klaaste believed that the BC groupings thrived for a while because their language initially fooled the government. “They thought this was the language of homelands and tribalism that they were espousing and effecting with so much skill, so much pain. They loved it, welcomed it. When they eventually read the fine print and realised that the menace in Black Power they recoiled and hit back.”

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<sup>39</sup> Some of the high-profile Black Consciousness activists who were killed by the state included Imam Haroon, Mthulu kaShezi, Timol, Onkgopotse Tiro, Joseph Mdluli, Mapetla Mohapi, Steve Biko and many others (See Gwala).

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During these heady times, Percy Qoboza became editor of *Bantu World* in 1975. The paper's tone and content soon changed. The new militancy outside was reflected on its pages. While Qoboza did not belong to any political party and, in fact, took a dim view of BC believing it had some racist undertones, he nonetheless realised that *The World* needed to take a stance. He wanted the paper to be relevant to the community it served.

Soon after his appointment as editor, he got rid of a white editorial director above his head. He wanted to steer the ship himself. He then insisted that the paper drop the patronising word "Bantu" on the masthead and simply be known as *The World*. Again, he won. He then set about making the paper more serious by changing its menu of contents: sports was moved from the front page to its rightful place at the back, coverage of crime and sex was drastically reduced, and editorial comments were injected with a new bite.

When Qoboza was editor, Klaaste was deputy editor, having managed to dust himself up and quit wasting his life in shebeens and come to the newsroom where he belonged. In fact, Klaaste stopped drinking in 1974. By this time he had joined Alcoholic Anonymous and was taking its therapy seriously. But for those who had known his love for the bottle, the jury was still out if he would stay the course. But he surprised many. With him off drink, his talent in the newsroom shined again. Which is why Qoboza made him his right-hand man. Qoboza was taking a risk with Aggrey. But he wanted his talent. Besides, the two were good friends. Qoboza must have been truly convinced that his friend was ready to change.

Klaaste found Qoboza to be "quite a character", who equally inspired loathing and admiration. Klaaste remembered him as a "swashbuckling, controversial man, who had the ability to have a lot of cronies and phonies assembling around him, almost all his life". Qoboza was a fine public speaker, with a tendency to reel off quotes of famous men such as Martin Luther King Jr. Before Qoboza became editor, he and Klaaste frequently drank together at Qoboza's home in Zone 9, Meadowlands where "all the social climbers, 'clevers', all the journalists who secretly hated and envied him would be".

While busy introducing reform, Qoboza's editorship was interrupted. He was awarded a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in the US for the 1975/76 academic year.<sup>40</sup> In his absence

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<sup>40</sup> The Nieman Fellowship programme is the oldest and best-known study program for journalists in the world. The Nieman (the fellowship is often only referred by its first name) remains a prestigious fellowship aimed at mid-career journalists. Offered through the Nieman Foundation at Harvard in the US, it provides fellows a chance to hone their skills in an intellectually stimulating environment. More than 1 300 journalists from 92 countries and territories around the world have come to Harvard for a year of learning, exploration and



colleague Joe Latakomo acted as editor and continued to make the paper a thorn in the side of government.

Qoboza was the second black journalist to leave the country on a Nieman Fellowship. Nat Nakasa had been the first in 1965. “Typical of the days of apartheid it took close to 10 years to have another black sent to Harvard,” Klaaste observed.

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On a personal front, the early 1970s brought a fundamental change in Klaaste’s life. He fell head over heels in love with a woman who was to become his soul mate.

The two met at *The World* offices in Industria in 1974. A group of young women showed up to visit some journalists they knew. They were marketing a range of women’s make-up products, and they were all young and beautiful. One of them was Valetta Kubugane Makgele. As the young ladies fraternised with their journalist friends, explaining their products, Klaaste left his workstation and joined them. With his uncombed, brownish hair, he looked bohemian. But Valetta thought he looked unkempt. Suddenly, she turned to him and said: “What’s your story? Why do you have brown hair like a Hottentot? Why don’t you dye it? Do you have kwashiorkor or something?”

Klaaste burst into hearty laughter. Who was this articulate young woman with the gall to tease him? “He had never met a straight-forward person like me. I like to tease,” Valetta reminisced years later in Meadowlands, Soweto. “He could not believe that I did not give him respect accorded to him in that newsroom.”<sup>41</sup>

Mightily tickled, Klaaste thought about Valetta for the rest of the day. Klaaste and some of his colleagues had planned a party for later. They invited the group of young women to come along. At the party, it was clear who caught Klaaste’s attention. “He singled me out because of our earlier conversation at his work,” Valetta said. Soon they began dating.

Klaaste liked many things about Valetta. She was young, pretty, articulate, smart and sassy. She had first studied at Morris Isaacson High School, a hotbed of student radicalism in the 1970s, but had finished matric in Swaziland. She was confident and was a keen reader. Their political views gelled. She could hold her own in an argument. From her modelling gigs and other jobs she did on the side, she owned a car, a VW Beetle, a rarity among young

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fellowship (Nieman Foundation).

<sup>41</sup> I interviewed Valetta Klaaste on November 24, 2013 in Soweto. She took me to two homes in Meadowlands where she had lived with Aggrey Klaaste – in Zone 5 and Zone 10. Langa Klaaste, her son, arranged the interview.

black women of her age. Enchanted by her poise, it didn't take long for Klaaste to be convinced that she could be a life partner. It was a case of beauty and brains gelling. He couldn't have asked for more. Valetta already had a young son, Nthato.

But there was a hurdle – Aggrey's intense boozing. Valetta, like Aggrey's parents, was concerned. She loved him. She was drawn to his intellectualism, large heart and many other quirks in his personality. But she was reluctant to tie herself to an alcoholic for life – regardless of how smart he was. After nearly a year of dating, Klaaste proposed. She hit back with a proposal of her own: quit drinking and I'll marry you. Klaaste agreed to stop drinking. Valetta stood by him. She accompanied Klaaste to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. She says the process of withdrawing from alcohol was gradual. Klaaste's commitment to change impressed Valetta. After three months of Klaaste being sober, Valetta agreed to marry him. "I took a terrible chance," she said chuckling.

But before they could marry, another stumbling block surfaced. For a long time Valetta had been a socialist, which turned her into an atheist, which meant she had not seen the inside a church for many years. "From the time I reached an age when I could say 'No' to my parents, I refused to go to church anymore," she said.

Now she was getting married to Klaaste who came from a devout Christian family. As was customary, the wedding had to take place at the bride's church. In desperation, she rushed to Reverend Simeon Nkoane of the Anglican Church in Soweto and explained her predicament. The Reverend agreed to accept her back into the fold. He even promised to officiate at the wedding. So it was that Valetta was a beaming bride when she walked down the aisle on November 21, 1975. "It was the happiest day of our lives. I really enjoyed my wedding. It was fun," Valetta said. After church the ceremony proceeded to Valetta's parents' house in Central Western Jabavu for the after party.

The year was 1975. She was 19. He was 35. But the ceremony seemed to have changed something in Klaaste. "Aggrey's friends could not believe that he was getting married," Valetta said. "He had been escaping marriage for years."

With no house of their own, the newlyweds moved in with Klaaste's parents in Meadowlands. Instantly, Valetta "felt at home" with her in-laws. Mantoa Klaaste, Aggrey's mother, made Valetta feel welcome. Despite being in her 70s, old Mrs Klaaste was still going strong. She treated young Valetta as her very own granddaughter.

As a teenager, in the heady late 1960s and early 1970s, Valetta had done her best to avoid domestic chores. Her older sisters and mother did all the cooking for her family. "I spent more time with my books. I wanted to change the world. You cannot change the world

by learning how to make a salad,” she said. When she moved in with the Klaastes, Valetta’s past once again caught up with her. “I could not cope when I got married. I could not cook. I could not do the washing,” she said of those days. Luckily for her Klaaste’s mother rescued her from those chores and did them herself. On the couple of occasions that Valetta tried to cook, old Mrs Klaaste stepped in to stop her. “She must have feared getting food poisoning or something,” Valetta said, laughing. “But later in life I learned how to cook. Today, even though I say so myself, I cook well.”

During their years in Meadowlands, Klaaste’s sisters, Doris and Violet, were also warm towards their sister-in-law. “They never regarded me as a bride. We were like sisters. We were close. We would even gang up against Aggrey. It was fun.”

What struck young Valetta about the Klaastes was their refinement. “They were cultured and well educated. They came with that tradition from Kimberley. They also had a strong Christian background; when you came to them with a problem, they would first pray. They had so much civility among themselves. It was not a family where a nasty quarrel would result in a husband chasing his wife in the street. It was never like that. They were always polite and civil.”

The family’s cultured ways were also evident in the Klaaste kitchen. “Aggrey’s mom was a fantastic cook. She was a kind, old woman. Possibly, because of the Afrikaner culture in Kimberley where they came from, she loved baking. She would bake delicious tarts that I would take to work as part of my lunch and I would be the envy of my colleagues. But I would be honest and admit that I was not the one who had baked them,” Valetta said.

What was remarkable about the young couple was the love they had for each other. It was there for all to see. “When they were together, they were like children. They really loved each other,” retired former journalist Nomavenda Mathiane says. “Valetta was educated, spoke great English. They were a thoroughly fun couple.”

As with all great love stories, there’s no telling when the bliss would end, when what was once sweet becomes sour. That moment lay in the future for Aggrey and Valetta.

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While Percy Qoboza, the editor of *The World*, was away, school children in Soweto began shaking up the system. The most contentious issue was a government decree for learners to study in Afrikaans, a language of apartheid. All junior and high schools were

affected. Students felt the language was too provincial, limited to South Africa, and feared that it would effectively turn them into slaves. When students asked for a meeting with government officials, they were shunned. Frustration and anger grew.

Klaaste remembered this period in his memoir: “Black education which had gone under the crude rubric of Bantu education was delivering its first products. Some of them were at high school suffering under the weight first of the psychological fear that they were being given a ‘poisonous’ education and obviously feeling totally helpless about their future.”

So, Qoboza had to quickly update himself and get on with the business of making *The World* a voice of the voiceless. He was ready. The fellowship had changed him. “The thing that scared me most during my Cambridge year was the fact that I had accepted injustice and discrimination as part and parcel of our traditional way of life,” Qoboza clarified his new stance. “After a year, the things that I had accepted made me angry. It is because of this that the character of my newspaper has changed tremendously. We are an angry newspaper. For this reason we have made some formidable enemies, and my own personal life is not worth a cent. But I see my role and the role of those people who share my views as articulating, without fear or favour, the aspirations of our people. It’s a very hard thing to do.”

With the country smouldering with rage, the stage was set for the first major uprising against apartheid since Sharpeville. It was an uprising that profoundly touched everyone’s lives, including Aggrey Klaaste’s.



## CHAPTER 6 – ONE DAY IN JUNE

Aggrey Klaaste may have given up his drinking ways, found himself a young bride, and fashioned himself a responsible family man but the grimness of the world outside would not let up. The air was thick with revolt and repression. At the time South Africa's Prime Minister was B.J. Vorster. Like Verwoerd before him, he was very much a champion of grand apartheid and was prepared to do anything in his power to entrench it.

June 16, 1976, a day that will live in infamy in the history of South African resistance politics, found Klaaste attending a short sub-editing course at *The Star* in downtown Johannesburg. It was a Wednesday. In his writings many years later he didn't specify where in the city he was. Presumably, he attended one of the journalism courses the Argus Group, owner of *The World* and *The Star*, regularly offered to practising journalists at its famous cadet school on 47 Sauer Street. Klaaste was still at *The World*.

No one had the slightest idea that this placid day was about to be turned upside down. "It was like any other day in the city till about lunch time," he would write.<sup>1</sup> "I had gone out for a sandwich when I sensed in an eerie way an excited buzz in the air. A thrill seemed to be running through the streets of Johannesburg. Black men and women were rushing to get taxis. It was as if a war had broken out. Well, a war *had* broken out. 'Soweto is on fire,' one woman said as she hurriedly dashed past me. 'The children are dying.' Without as much as doing the usual double take I headed for the nearest taxi. I had no children to worry about then. But if Soweto was 'on fire' I was damned if a mere subbing course was going to keep me away."

Students had risen up against a government injunction that they study in Afrikaans. Fearing they would be turned into domestic slaves by learning in a provincial language confined only to South Africa, they resisted. A rally was called at Orlando Stadium on June 16 in which all schools, from junior highs to high schools, would be present. From school to school the organisers, the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC), under the leadership of Tsietsi Mashinini, collected learners. Their number soon swelled to thousands. Marching through the township, they held aloft placards that read: "Down With Afrikaans", "We are not Boers!", "If we must do Afrikaans, Vorster must do Zulu".

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Year of Magical Thinking* American writer Joan Didion, after the sudden death of her husband while they were having dinner, notes that "confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which all the unthinkable happened" (4-5). How clear the blue sky was before the plane fell. The man who drove home happy and healthy before the unexpected end. A temperate, cloudless day before some planes plough into the twin towers. So it was with June 16, 1976. An ordinary day turned into a watershed moment in the history of resistance politics in South Africa.

As the learners reached Vilakazi Street, in Orlando West, police, perhaps caught off guard by the sheer number of the children, fired live bullets and teargas at them. Students ran in all directions. A bullet felled one of them. His name was Hector Pieterse, one of the earliest casualties of the uprising. He was picked from the ground and rushed to safety by a lanky lad who happened to be nearby. His name was Mbuyisa Makhubu.<sup>2</sup> The resulting image of a dying Hector in his arms, with Hector's sister Antoinette running alongside them, became the emblem of the revolt. Sam Nzima, a photographer working for The World, took the famous picture.

Learners responded in kind to police brutality. They burned police vehicles and killed police dogs set on them. Structures linked to the hated apartheid state were attacked. Offices and vehicles of the West Rand Bantu Affairs Administration Board, which administered the township, were torched. Two white officers belonging to the West Rand Board were beaten to death. Beer halls and taverns were looted and other buildings set alight. Evidence suggests disgruntled residents, not necessarily students, also joined in the mayhem, particularly the looting of liquor stores. Acrid smoke hung over the township. A peaceful march degenerated into a deadly riot.

In the taxi to Soweto, the driver immediately confirmed the grim news to Klaaste and other passengers. He spoke in Zulu. "*Ziyabhedha*," the driver said, "it's terrible". When the driver told them that children had died, a shiver went down Klaaste's spine. He felt the driver's initial statement had been a grave understatement. "We rode that taxi in some silent sadness expecting the worst," Klaaste said.

Soweto lies about 15 kilometres south of Johannesburg. As former journalist John Kane-Berman observes in *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction*, the township cannot be seen from the city except from the top of the tallest building on a clear, unpolluted day. In line with apartheid city planning, and like so many other townships around the country, Soweto is hidden. Being out of sight meant it was out of mind until the terrible events of June 16.

Eventually, Klaaste's taxi reached Soweto. That was when the reality of the day's events hit him: "There was a spirit of total mob mayhem, an exhilaration that seemed set on burning every symbol of the system – the government. You picked it up as soon as you saw the pall of smoke in the air, the imperative to burn, burn, burn."

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<sup>2</sup> Mbuyisa, 18 years old at the time, had just finished matric. He was therefore not part of the school children's demonstration. When the police started shooting at the kids, he was in his grandmother's house. He ran outside after hearing that "the Boers are killing people" in the streets. That's when he saw Hector. After 1976 Mbuyisa was no longer safe in the country. He left Johannesburg for Durban from where he went into exile to Botswana and Nigeria (See Hlongwane et al.). Up to this day, no one knows whether he is dead or alive.

In no time Klaaste, abandoning his senses, was “caught up in the spirit”, becoming part of the marauding gang of rioters. “I’m a coward by nature but I remember being one of the leading lights in one mob that was going around like a crazed monster. There was almost a joy in burning government buildings. Some of the more inflamed people who had burnt bottle stores joined us. When we had destroyed most of the structures we ran out of what is called even today in township argot, targets.”

Racking their heads for more targets to vent their fury, the mob flirted with the idea of attacking the black middle class of Dube but soon thought against it. Instead “with some joyous exhaustion we turned into homes and listened with apprehension as the explosions and burnings continued throughout the night”.

Years later, looking back with the clear eyes of a responsible adult, Klaaste was to regret his participation in the riots. “Some of the things I personally did shame me and I cannot believe I was capable of such barbarous action.” He came to “appreciate the enormity in the legal injunction to sentence people to death on the basis of common purpose. For taken to its logical end we should most of us be on Death Row today.”

By day’s end on June 16 Soweto looked like a battlefield. Scores were dead, the air was thick with acrid smoke from burning tyres and local hospitals were full of the injured. Within a week, 176 people would be dead. Some even thought the figure was actually much higher. In the days and months that followed, the violence spread like wildfire to other townships on the Reef, and to other provinces as far afield as Gugulethu in Cape Town. Tertiary students at black universities pledged solidarity with Soweto students, resulting in campus riots and disruption of classes amid police clampdown. Soweto schools were closed and re-opened towards the end of July 1976. Government changed its mind about its Afrikaans decree and, in fact, went on the counter-offensive saying troublemakers had used Afrikaans as a pretext for causing disturbances.

Chief among those blamed and hunted down by security police were Mashinini, a student at Morris Isaacson, and his deputy Khotso Seatlholo, who attended Naledi High School. Other organisers of the march such as Seth Mazibuko, a learner at Orlando West Junior Secondary School, were arrested. But Mashinini dodged the security police with ease as he moved from one safe house to another. Eventually, with a bounty on his head, Mashinini handed over the reins to his deputy Seatlholo and fled to exile via Botswana.

In fact, more youngsters left the country after June 16, swelling the ranks of the exiled ANC and PAC. But Mashinini and Seatlholo were sceptical of joining these old organisations, feeling that they were moribund after being in exile since the 1960s and had



been cut off from the realities on the ground in South Africa. The two of them went on lecture tours in the United States where they were hailed as heroes. Mashinini eventually settled in Guinea where he died mysteriously. Seatlholo was arrested when he re-entered South Africa illegally and he served nine years on Robben Island.

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That schoolchildren, and not adults, played a huge role during the turbulence of June 16 and beyond was undeniable. It marked a transition in resistance politics. Young people were the new vanguard. Their SSRC went beyond school matters to contest issues such as rent increases. Later that year, students called for consumer boycotts and stay-aways from work to enforce broad political demands. Youngsters succeeded to neutralise young delinquents – so-called “tsotsis” – to prevent them from opportunistically taking advantage of the upheavals.<sup>3</sup>

With young people at the forefront of the fight, enduring arrests and vicious police harassment, the shortcomings of adults came into sharp focus. One letter writer to *The World*, presumably a youth, captured the sentiment:

Our parents are prepared to suffer under the white man’s rule. They have been living for years under these laws and have become immune to them. They agree to them whether they are right or wrong. They refuse to co-operate with the new generation when they plead with them for co-operation ... Parents claim students are bringing trouble, just because they are used to ‘yes baas’ to everything the white man says. Our parents lack unity and believe in the ethnic group laws that the white man is imposing on us. They despise each other and call one another names that are degrading. The future generation has no more confidence in them any more because they have not objected to the unfavourable laws, thus the yoke automatically falls on the future generation.

Klaaste agreed with this sentiment. Writing in *Weekend World*, a sister newspaper to *The World*, Klaaste put it all down to one factor – cowardice on the part of his own generation and the one before:

It may be that we have become shell-shocked that nothing seems to touch us to the

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<sup>3</sup> Months before June 16, 1976 students had shown a keen willingness to tackle thuggery in the township: they killed two men who had molested a teacher and they had killed another man who had been accosting schoolgirls. One day, after June 16, students began receiving complaints that passengers were being molested on trains. About 200 students positioned themselves at the station to protect commuters (Kane-Berman 125).

raw ... So many parents these days are taking very calmly the horrid fact that their sons and daughters have fled the country. If parents do not shrug their shoulders with indifference when their sons and daughters are arrested, they do something very similar ... They sigh wearily. They shake their heads and they trudge off to that miserable job, travelling in those miserable trains, as if the whole world was a bed of roses ... The scenario began to heat up. We were frightened. We were shocked. But all we did was despair ... The lens moves to the graveyards and this time some adults are in the line of fire. What a moan there was in Soweto! What a tearing out of hair and collective gnashing of teeth there was! And that was all. This time they were picking up our babies right in our own homes. Oh what a clicking of tongues there was this time! So many frightened mothers and fathers dashing out in their cars to hide their children. My language spells it out very clearly – *singamagwala* (we are cowards).

The uprisings also showed that the youth's demands went far beyond Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Youngsters were calling for the end of Bantu Education and, by extension, the end of white minority rule. And they were prepared to fight and die. To the state, that made the organisers dangerous, hence the brutal suppression that continued well after that fateful day in June. The uprisings took many years to quash.

Like Sharpeville in 1960, Soweto 1976 was a watershed in Klaaste's life, an event he constantly revisited in his writing, using it as a potent lesson for what needed to be avoided if South Africa were to have a bright future. He particularly lamented the loss of innocence among youngsters, who began to view a culture of burning and destroying as a legitimate means to achieving political ends. Sure, freedom was desperately needed but the means used to achieve it had to be carefully weighed. The youth were the future. A new country, if it ever came, would look to them to function as leaders and upstanding citizens.

Unbeknown to Klaaste, June 16 was the opening salvo. More strife lay ahead.



## CHAPTER 7 – END OF THE WORLD

On the morning of October 19, 1977 Aggrey Klaaste was alone with his mother in their home in Meadowlands when they heard a knock on the door. When they opened, police stormed in. “There were about four or five white and black policemen, who read me the notice about my impending detention,” Klaaste wrote later in one of his columns. They told him that he was being arrested under the Internal Security Act. But they didn’t tell him the full story.

Considering the timing of the arrest, Klaaste realised that he was not that important to the police. Otherwise, they would have come for him at the crack of dawn as they did with serious offenders. “Even when they went through my books and things, there was an air of boredom, almost lassitude about them. Then I made a bloomer. I told my family to call the office and tell the editor I had been picked up by several van loads of policemen, which was a lie.” A black policemen heard Klaaste and told his white colleagues. “The temperature went down to zero. I was called a presumptuous “maer-gat” (meaning thin ass). [They said] I thought it was a big shot. I trembled then.”

They bundled him into a police car and sped off as his worried mother looked on. Years later, Klaaste remembered that they took the road past Phefeni station to Orlando West. The police were headed to Hlaku Rachidi’s house. Rachidi was one of the young activists who founded SASO. In the early 1970s he joined the Black People’s Convention and he later served as its president. On this day, he showed that he was used to police harassment. “I saw a professional detainee go through the motions,” Klaaste said. “He spoke cheerfully with the cops, like old friends ... He came out looking fresh and breezy, dressed like he was going mountain climbing, bag and all. I felt great with Hlaku around. I was not alone.”

As the car rolled past rows of matchbox houses in Soweto, Klaaste’s mind scattered in many different directions, as he tried to figure out the reason for this nasty turn of events. Could it be because of his writing? He could be acerbic in his political commentary. Or was it linked to the general disturbances in the area? Soweto and indeed all of South Africa’s townships had never quite settled since the uprisings of the previous year.

Just more than a month ago, on September 12, Steve Biko had died a miserable death in police detention. After being arrested at a roadblock in Grahamstown with fellow BCP activist Peter Jones<sup>4</sup>, Biko was taken to Walmer Police Station where he was assaulted,

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Jones was quoted in the City Press in 2007 as saying when they were arrested in a road block in Grahamstown, they were returning from a meeting in Cape Town which had been cancelled. Jones reportedly said the Pan African Congress and African National Congress wanted to canvass support for unity across the

sustaining a brain injury. Despite his injuries, he was kept standing as police tortured him. Biko was then shackled to the back of a police van – naked, unconscious, helpless – and driven for 11 hours from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria Central Prison where he died. Biko’s death shocked the world, particularly the savagery of it, but somehow it left the then Minister of Police Jimmy Kruger “cold”. If the state could kill a prominent leader like Biko, what chance did a lowly newsman like Klaaste have of surviving detention? That question must have weighed heavily on Klaaste’s mind that fateful day in September.

What Klaaste didn’t immediately know was that his arrest was part of a larger swoop on black leaders and activists throughout the country. Anyone remotely connected with mobilising the black community had been arrested in the past 24 hours. At the same time, 19 organisations were outlawed and scores of individuals banned.<sup>5</sup> This included political leaders, journalists and civic leaders. With these mass arrests, Minister Kruger sent a clear message of the state’s intention to crush all opposition to the state.

When the police car reached John Vorster Square police station in Johannesburg, Klaaste learned that he was being arrested for being instrumental in the formation of the Committee of Ten, a civic body made up of prominent personalities in Soweto.

The committee had tried to fill in the power vacuum in Soweto that had been created by the disturbances dating back to the June 1976 uprising. With the student organisation SSRC wielding enormous power in the township, it began to fight on behalf of the community against multiple forms of repression such as rent increases that were administered by the Soweto Community Council. The council, called Urban Bantu Council (UBC), had a testy relationship with residents who viewed it as unrepresentative. The council was pejoratively called an Urban Boy’s Choir.

Since township residents never owned houses they lived in, they rented them from the state. Klaaste remembered the payment of rent as being sacred. “People made it a point to pay their monthly instalment or rent before they bought anything else for their families. Families

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liberation spectrum at the meeting. “Steve and I aborted the meeting after we arrived in Cape Town and several strange incidents happened that made us feel very uneasy and unsafe.” (“Biko’s comrade-in-arms still working to improve the lives of rural poor”, City Press, September 2007)

<sup>5</sup> In addition to government closing down *The World* and *Weekend World* on October 19, eighteen organisations aligned to Black Consciousness were banned. These were: the Christian Institute and its journal *Pro Veritate*, the Black People’s Convention (BPC), the South African Students Organisation (SASO), the Black Community Programmes (BCP), the Soweto Students’ Representative Council (SSRC), the South African Students’ Movement (SASM), the National Youth Organisation, the Border Youth Union, the Eastern Province Youth Organisation, the Natal Youth Organisation, the Transvaal Youth Organisation, the Western Cape Youth Organisation, the Black Parents’ Association (BPA), the Zimele Trust Fund, the Black Women’s Federation, the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ), the Medupe Writers Association, and the Association for the Education and Cultural Advancement of the African People of South Africa (Karis and Gerhart, Vol. 5, 321).

would rather go hungry than not pay their rent. Those who did not pay would be thrown out summarily,” Klaaste wrote. “Sometimes there would be rent raids and people who had not paid for the month would be bundled into police vans and taken to the administration offices as virtual prisoners.”

It was therefore easy to see why members of UBC were detested. They were viewed as tools of a repressive state and their behaviour was far from being exemplary. “These men, I’m rather afraid to say, for they were elderly church-going, sometime pillars of the communities, were in the main rascals. They drank copious bottles of brandy with us reporters after fleecing the unfortunate people who had to pay their way into houses, into townships and into jobs in the urban areas,” Klaaste wrote.

In short, these men, were “callous, cruel, greedy” and “grew fat on the suffering of many who often committed suicide,” said Klaaste. Adding to the misery of residents, there were policemen in plain clothes enforcing influx control, checking passes and special permits. They were equally ruthless and “often drunk”.

Here’s Klaaste’s description of the administration of the area during that time: “The influx control regulations that turned abominable townships into little paradises were as tight as the teats of a witch. In my day when you did not have a pass, and sometimes even if you had the damned document, your life was dependent on the ruthless, often drunken whims of policemen in private clothes.”

On May 1, 1977, rent increases were due to take effect in Soweto. No one was happy. The SSRC, now under the leadership of Daniel Sechaba Montsitsi after Seatlholo had fled into exile, fought UBC and managed to have increases shelved, earning itself adulation even from parents. On a roll, the SSRC went on to call for the resignation of UBC members. When they wouldn’t budge, SSRC members descended on UBC offices and frog-marched the “pot-bellied and cheap-suited” men out of their offices.

For a while, there was no functioning local authority in Soweto. That was when Klaaste’s social activism came to the fore. Together with Qoboza, Klaaste spearheaded an initiative to bring together prominent Soweto personalities to start a committee that would oversee the township’s civic duties. “We thought we would pre-empt the government from putting another of their crazy puppet bodies in power,” Klaaste wrote in his memoir.

From the outset, they knew that the committee had to be representative. So, members were chosen from all walks of life, all political groupings. Meetings were held at Qoboza’s office at *The World*. The newspaper was seen as a safe venue since in any newspaper people came and went. So, these meetings would not arouse any suspicion.

The result of these clandestine meetings, which had the blessings of Black Consciousness groupings, was the formation of the Committee of Ten in June 1977. Nthato Motlana, once a family doctor to the imprisoned Nelson Mandela, became chairman of the committee.

As Klaaste recalled later: “The committee wanted to fill the vacuum left by departed and disgraced community councillors. There was also the hope to get local politics into the hands of the leaders who inspired confidence and had credibility.”<sup>6</sup>

The committee sought to address day-to-day problems of the people such as housing, rents, electricity, roads and education. Toward this end, the committee began to push for the election of a new community board to have total autonomy in Soweto, including powers to levy taxes and control education, police and local elections. Minister Kruger rejected this proposal, insisting that the government remained committed to community councils with limited powers, operating under the control of the Bantu Administration Board.

These administration boards and their community councils would come under a severe test in the rent boycotts of the mid-1980s, a period of great instability in the townships. In fact, as Klaaste put it later, some of the first victims of the dreaded necklace murders of the years to come were members of these bodies.

At John Vorster Square, Klaaste met other members of the Committee of Ten who had been arrested the night before or earlier that morning. And there were other activists of all races. They were charged with violating Section 10 of the Internal Security Act, meaning they could be held for long spells in jail without trial.

More bad news followed. The newspapers he worked for, *The World* and *Weekend World*, had been banned together with many political and civic organisations. The banning of *The World* and *Weekend World* became a milestone in media repression, and the date became known as “Black Wednesday”. “For the first time in the history of this county a newspaper was closed down,” Klaaste recalled years later.

Other senior journalists of *The World* who were also behind bars during this time included Joe Thloloe, Thami Mazwai and Willie Bokala. Qoboza was picked up in dramatic fashion at work as he was giving an interview to a television crew from abroad. He was also taken to John Vorster Square.

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<sup>6</sup> In a 1983 interview, Motlana described the Committee of Ten: “We are a civic association and address ourselves to the problems of housing, rents, electricity, roads and education. Our members represent all manner of ideologies but we, as a group, don’t follow an ideological line. We address ourselves to the day-to-day problems of the people and encourage them to react against unnecessary hardships.”

All the detainees, who included Dr Motlana and Leonard Mosala, were taken to Modderbee Prison, in Benoni, east of Johannesburg. Klaaste remembered the feeling of dread as they were led inside the prison, moving through one heavy metal gate after another and hearing those gates close behind with an echo that was like a “death-clap”.

He was frightened. He was now at the Modderbee Prison he had long feared. He couldn't believe his ears when Dr Motlana told the group: “We will not be seeing the outside for some time now chaps, brace up.”

Klaaste silently disagreed. By virtue of being arrested with “so many big shots”, he assumed they would be out in a week or two. He was wrong. They were still behind bars at Christmas and well into the new year. “In January 1978 we watched the prison workers extend our ‘homes’ and saw them putting on certain extensions. This rather confirmed the fears that we would be locked up for many years,” Klaaste remembered.

Meanwhile there were spirited efforts to have them freed. It helped to be arrested with Qoboza, an editor with international stature. But government stalled.

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Around this tumultuous time, Bophuthatswana became an independent homeland in 1977, a clear signal that the apartheid juggernaut was powering ahead. Chief Lucas Mangope became the homeland's prime minister. Approximately 2,5 million people were considered residents, but most of them continued to seek a livelihood in “white” South Africa. Only South Africa recognised Bophuthatswana as an independent state.

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In all, Klaaste spent more than six months in jail. A month after Easter in 1978, the detainees were released in batches. Klaaste was in the second group that was let out. He left prison with Dr Motlana. No word was said about where they were going. They were simply told to get into a car outside prison – driven by an Afrikaner official of the defunct UBC – and await their fate.

A thought went through Klaaste's mind – we are going to be banished or deported. His heart raced. “We got into the car with Dr Motlana delivering an angry commentary on what was taking place and asking where we were going. I was nervous but pleased to hear the sound of Modderbee gates close behind us,” Klaaste would say.



On the way something strange happened. Somewhere on the highway their driver asked if he could stop and pray with them. “I became seriously worried ... In the presence of Dr Motlana, who has his own views about matters spiritual, I felt quite uncomfortable,”<sup>7</sup> Klaaste remembered.

Nothing is known what the prayer was about. But years later Klaaste, when his spirituality had matured, he related the incident as a way of showing the value of prayer and spiritual submission in difficult times.

After praying, they drove on without incident until they reached Soweto. Curiously, the driver did not take them straight to their homes. Instead, the car took them to Dr Siphon Nyembezi’s mansion in Diepkloof, Soweto. Klaaste was startled: “Our amazement, confusion and trepidation were now joined by outrage. Why were we being taken to this house? ... Dr Nyembezi was politically not in the same league as Dr Motlana. In fact, poles apart. What followed was pure farce.”

Dr Nyembezi was chairman of the Inkatha Soweto region. The party, which had initially been formed as a front for the banned ANC, had dubious ties to government. In fairness, its leader Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi did call for the release of Dr Motlana even though they were political opponents. The two had long-standing ties, having studied together at Fort Hare University and having both been members of the ANC.

Dr Nyembezi, acting under Buthelezi’s orders, had made a pact with the Committee of Ten not to participate in the Community Council elections unless Soweto was given full local authority. At the mansion were “white officials from the local (municipal) board and some Afrikaner journalists in the reception committee. The mere thought of making a deal with these guys was outrageous. They were unctuous, apologetic, obnoxious.”

It was not the kind of company Dr Motlana and Klaaste wanted to keep. It would not be good for their credentials in the community. That was when Dr Motlana “flew into a rage”, demanding to be rather taken back to jail if their release was conditional. Klaaste got worried. While he was firmly on Dr Motlana’s side, he could not bear the thought of going back to that dreadful jail. “I could hear the sounds of freedom – women, children, dogs barking – in Soweto.”

Later day, having ascertained no hidden tricks behind their release and no silly conditions, they went home to their longed-for freedom, eager to rebuild their lives.

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<sup>7</sup> Dr Motlana, who went on to become a leading light of black economic empowerment in the new South Africa. He was known for being an atheist and, being a man of science, for being critical of sangomas and their belief in the supernatural.



## CHAPTER 8 – PICKING UP THE PIECES

After his prison stint, with *The World* and *Weekend World* banned, and with his world turned upside-down, Aggrey Klaaste joined a new outfit, called *The Post Transvaal*. It still led by Percy Qoboza. Essentially, the newspaper was still *The World* by a different name. It was the same staff, the same spirit of challenging the establishment. It had a sister paper called *Weekend Post*, which came out on Sundays. Most people referred to the paper simply as *Post*. Klaaste wrote a column called “Just for Today” that appeared every Monday in the *Post*.

In 1979, Klaaste applied and was accepted for the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University. He would be gone for a year with his family. It was a chance to see the world and expand his intellectual horizons at the famous university. He was thrilled, but he pretended not to be. “We have heard so many glorious stories about Boston and Harvard that we are just about to believe we are going straight to paradise,” he wrote in a column for *Post*. “I know I’m grateful but I just don’t seem able to generate enough excitement to savour the promised cornucopia of good things in store for me and my wife.”

Given the harassment that journalists were enduring, the sojourn in the United States must surely have been a welcome respite but, still, he made it clear his heart would always be in South Africa. “I’m going to miss home. I just know that I’m going to miss all the hassling, all the pass raids, all the rent evictions, all the sports in politics; all the things that make South Africa such a stimulating place to be in.”

Klaaste credited Qoboza for his Nieman luck. “The truth is it was because of Percy that I became a Nieman and it started the opening of doors to more and more black journalists joining this lucky band of writers.”

At Harvard Klaaste met many other journalists from across the world including Acel Moore, former associated editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. They were all part of the class of 1980. Moore became a good friend of the “gentle and thoughtful” journalist from South Africa. Moore remembered Aggrey endlessly reading. “He enjoyed American literature, philosophy, black thought, and history. Such writings were banned in South Africa, and Klaaste said, blacks could be imprisoned if they were caught with banned books.”

Klaaste went to Harvard with his wife Valetta and his stepson Thuto. Like Aggrey, Valetta enjoyed being at Harvard, immersing herself in African Studies. “It was fantastic. It was illuminating,” she said. “It’s Harvard for goodness’ sake and you are exposed to all of

that knowledge. I don't know how many classes I attended. Being exposed to so many brilliant people from all over the world was mind-boggling.”

Although now in Boston, away from harassment, away from dreaded pass laws, Klaaste carried South Africa with him. “He would flinch and reach for his passport whenever he saw a police officer,” Moore recalled. “He was reluctant to eat in restaurants near Harvard Square when whites were predominant customers.”

Overall, Klaaste thrived during his nine months at Harvard. His intellectual curiosity infected his classmates. “He not only reminded us of the value of free press but also of other rights and privileges that Americans take for granted,” Moore said.

Outside of the lecture halls, the beauty of Cambridge, a city north of Boston across the Charles River, also made an indelible impression on Klaaste. In this tranquil environment, where days pass easily, he delighted in the beauty of leaves changing colour with the season. “It's an extraordinary country, he would write. “Poets run out of superlatives describing the sight of millions of golden russet, incredibly beautiful trees in some states of America in autumn.”

On the social front, Klaaste found the larger Boston area “somewhat cold and most definitely racist”. He and his family, Valetta and young Nthato, found solace in meeting “an extraordinary mix of Africans as well as people from all over the world”. Once the family had settled, they went to as many African parties as they could.

Among Klaaste's lecturers was one Martin Kilson, a prominent black academic married to a white woman. Klaaste alleged that Kilson would utter derogatory comments about Africans, dishing out nasty jabs in class about how they smelled and how they could not manage a chicken run, let alone a country. “I tortured myself attending these offending classes,” Klaaste would later write. While boiling with fury, Klaaste always failed to trip Kilson, feeling himself intellectually inadequate to mount much of a defence. “I was just a green-horn from an isolated South Africa which had then banned the reading of books by Karl Marx among many remarkable things.”<sup>8</sup>

One evening Aggrey and Valetta were invited to a dinner. In the course of chatter while eating, a Russian guest attempted to draw parallels between Russian and South African conditions. Turning to Aggrey and Valetta, he said, despite oppression, blacks in South

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Kilson is one of the professors whom black nationalist leader Malcolm X would often debate on public platforms, particularly at Harvard. In one of their debates about Malcolm X's proposal of complete separation of the white and black race, Kilson said it would be impossible for that idea to work given a lack of social structure in the black community. Whereupon Malcolm responded: “If professors and sociologists think things are hopeless, what thought do you think is going through the mind of one who is oppressed? It's a wicked thought that I'm afraid to express.”

Africa should feel lucky because at least they had a roof over their heads. “What?!” Valetta flipped and shot back loudly: “Why should we feel lucky? You don’t seem to understand that it is my land first of all [that was stolen]. That is the first thing we must talk about.”

Growing more animated, other dinner guests likely silent with embarrassment, Valetta emphasised that Africans had a roof over their heads – “whether we were living in mountains or caves or trees” – long before the arrival of the white man; there was nothing to be grateful about if the masses were still oppressed in their own country. Aggrey, ever moderate, kept silent. “The Russian’s face was getting redder and redder. But I didn’t stop. I didn’t care. I felt there was no need to be polite or diplomatic. I wanted to set the record straight. Why should I have been be grateful for having a roof over my head?” Valetta said.

Nine months later, when Klaaste and Valetta took a taxi back to Boston airport, Klaaste was a different man. His stay had planted all sorts of new ideas in his head. He had read banned material, felt the pain of having to realise that black people such as Kilson are not automatically your allies, and, more crucially, he had interacted with a group of sharp journalists in his class who had reaffirmed his belief in the media’s power to fight for the powerless. In short, he had grown both as a person and as an intellectual. Little did he know that he was about to fly back into a cauldron where these ideas would be put to the test.

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When he returned from the United States, Klaaste re-joined *Post*. In addition to voicing dissent against the apartheid state, staff members were also unhappy about the working conditions within the Argus Group. It seemed the discrimination and segregation they were fighting in society had crept into their own backyard. Through the union MWASA, they complained about pay disparity. They also fought to abolish other forms of discrimination at the workplace. The Argus Group had initiated metro sections as supplements aimed at the black readership in its “white” papers. This meant employing a limited number of black staff. Black staff were not allowed to use white toilets. This and many other slights angered black staffers. In October 1980, workers went on a three-month strike crippling the production of the paper. The *Post* suffered. Klaaste, newly arrived back in the country, also went on strike in solidarity with his fellow colleagues.

The strike ended in January 1981. Government seized this opportunity to finally deal with feisty *Post* by informing the Argus Group that the paper would be burned if it ever came back into circulation. *Post* joined *The World* in the graveyard of papers killed by the state.

But all was not lost for Argus. The conglomerate took one of its community newspapers, which was being distributed for free in Soweto, and turned it into a full-fledged daily. That paper, acquired as part of a strategy to reach the black market, was called *Sowetan Mirror*. Later, it was simply called *Sowetan*.

Disillusioned with the repression, Qoboza resigned as editor of *Post* and went to the United States where he was an editor-in-residence at the *Washington Star* for two years. Before leaving, Qoboza let his feelings about the state of black media in South Africa known. He said it would “be difficult to create and sustain a credible newspaper for black readers in South Africa, given the constant black media persecution under the apartheid regime”.

With Qoboza gone, Joe Latakomo became editor of *Sowetan* and Klaaste his deputy. The value of *Sowetan's* licence to trade was priceless for Argus in circumventing a government ban. But government was not easily duped. No amount of changing the names of these papers was going to escape the scrutiny of content. From the very outset, government wagged a warning finger. “The government had stated quite categorically that it would not hesitate to close down *Sowetan* if it was seen to be a replacement of *The World* and [*Transvaal*] *Post*,” Latakomo recalled about those turbulent times. “How, then, does one persuade a sceptical readership that we could stand for the principles that guided *The World*? Where was this invisible line that the government had drawn, over which we could not step? For, it was not only what was written explicitly, but what the government censors and press watchers thought was implied that was used to judge us.”

No matter, the paper decided to push the envelope as far as it could, in the process risking harassment and imprisonment for its journalists. Its pay-off line was “We Serve You”. In the very first edition of *Sowetan* on February 2, 1981, the editorial made it clear where the publication would stand: “Today we launch the SOWETAN as a daily newspaper. It is YOUR newspaper. We will set out to produce a newspaper of the highest standards possible, editorially and technically. We are a newspaper that will serve YOU, the black majority of this country... We will serve as the mirror of our society. We will reflect our aspirations – political, educational, economical and social...”

The paper positioned itself as representing the aspirations of the oppressed majority. Although called *Sowetan*, the paper had a national reach. Its journalists were known to have affinity with Black Consciousness and Pan Africanism. In fact, MWASA was a strong force behind the establishment of the paper.

Harassment of *Sowetan* began when Thami Mazwai, the news editor, was arrested for arranging a secret interview with June 16 youth leader Khotso Seatlholo who had secretly re-

entered the country from exile. When Mazwai refused to divulge who had arranged the interview, he was sentenced to two years in prison. Seatlholo got a fifteen-year sentence Robben Island and served nine years before being released in 1990.

*Sowetan* continued covering news affecting its readership and excelled in covering key issues of the early 1980s – labour and civic matters. On the labour front, unions fought for better pay and working conditions of their members. Ccawusa (Commercial Catering and Allied Workers’ Union) emerged as a strong union, taking on major retailers such as Game, Checkers and Pick ‘n Pay. *Sowetan* diligently covered the labour ructions. Heat then came from a different front – advertisers. Latakomo remembered being summoned to the head office at Argus Group where a meeting had been set up with management of a disgruntled retailer who threatened to pull out advertising from the paper. “My response was to say we could report the threat, and the meeting ended without resolution. But that was also the last I heard of it,” Latakomo said.

On the civic front, issues affecting the community such as increases in rent, bus fare and General Sales Tax were given prominent coverage. The paper left readers in no doubt that it was truly accountable to them.

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On the family front, Aggrey eventually found a house of his own in Zone 10, Meadowlands, where he moved with Valetta and Nthato. Despite the tricky politics of house allocation in a township, where housing was in drastically short supply, Klaaste never struggled to find a house. “He was Aggrey Klaaste and everyone knew him. He just spoke to some people and it worked. We got the house through the right channels though. We didn’t bribe anyone. We were lucky to get a house when a family moved out,” Valetta remembered.

The Klaaste culture of sophistication bloomed in their new home. “As a family we always loved reading,” Valetta described their family routine. “A typical Sunday would see us having lunch and then reading papers and books afterwards and discussing ideas. It was terrific. That’s how we were. There were more books than furniture in our home. That was the life I had with Aggrey. It is a culture that has gone on from us, the older generation, to our children.”

But under the surface something darker simmered. Marital infidelity blighted their union. Those who knew them point an accusatory finger at Valetta. They say she would disappear for days on end from her home to God knows where. And they say she never

looked after him properly such as cooking for him and it showed in his frame which remained scrawny despite his age. One staffer said: “Aggrey would give us money to take home so Valetta could buy takeaways. We all at work found that strange.”

Maybe because he was stuck with a woman who didn’t play a traditional wifely role or a woman who had her own liaisons, Klaaste also strayed. In 1980, not long after they returned from the stint at Harvard, he met and fell in love with another woman who was with him through some of the most trying times of his life.

One day in 1980 Klaaste went to visit a female colleague in Diepkloof Extension Two with a friend. When they got there, they saw a young woman in white shorts, white T-shirt and white sneakers. She was pottering in the garden. Aggrey was impressed. He couldn’t contain his curiosity about the young woman outside. His friends knew he was married but all was not well at home.

After some time he asked his hostess to invite the young woman in so he and his friend could introduce themselves. Shyly, she walked in. Her name was Pinky. She was originally from Matatiele, but lived with her uncle in Zola, Soweto. From time to time, she visited Klaaste’s colleague, who was incidentally much older than her, in Diepkloof Extension Two. Klaaste didn’t say much to her that day. During the week Pinky was surprised to get a call from Klaaste. “He said he was just greeting,” said Pinky, now a grandmother of 61.<sup>9</sup> They chit chatted for a while on the phone.

From then on whenever Klaaste came to visit his colleague he made sure he brought chocolates for Pinky. They became closer and closer. “One day he invited me to go with him to a drive-in cinema with his friends,” Pinky said. “We went and all was fine. He never divulged his intentions. He and his friends dropped me off at home afterwards.” Presents from Klaaste kept coming. If he was too busy to bring them himself, he would get friends or drivers from work to drop them off on his behalf. The gifts got to be so regular that they caused a problem for Pinky. She could not tell her Diepkloof friend or her uncle for fear of their disapproval of the budding intimacy.

One day, a day after her birthday, Klaaste offered to take her out on a date to celebrate. From then on they were an item. Klaaste was 40 and she was 27.

Klaaste kept the liaison under wraps from everyone. But, as events would soon show, nothing stays hidden forever. Whether she was bothered that Klaaste was married at the time they met, Pinky said: “Honestly, I didn’t know he was married. He was skinny at the time.

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<sup>9</sup> I interviewed Pinky Klaaste at her home in Dobsonville on January 18, 2014.



You couldn't tell his age. When I heard that he was married one thing always puzzled me – whenever I needed him he was always available, unlike what you would expect of a married person.”

Then, in 1982, Pinky fell pregnant. “I nearly went out of my head with worry. I didn't know what I would tell my uncle. It was traumatic. Seeing my plight and fearing that I might do something crazy with the pregnancy, Aggrey went to report the matter personally to my uncle and promised to take care of me and the baby. That day I ran away. I didn't sleep at home. My uncle was angry but he believed Aggrey would make good on his promise.”

Pinky gave birth to a son. They named him Lucky. Klaaste kept his word and looked after Pinky and the child.

Pinky's background was vastly different from Aggrey's. Unlike Klaaste, she did not go far at school. In Johannesburg, she was self-employed and, among other things, sewing and selling clothes. She was street smart, hard working and loving. Her early life in rural Matatiele, in southern Drakensberg, was full of hardship. She came from a polygamous family. “We were 11 at home. My mother worked as a domestic worker. Later she had to retire which added to the misery at home. There was hardly any food,” Pinky reminisced.

School was far away and she and her siblings would walk barefoot because there was no money for shoes. “Matatiele is a very cold place. My sisters and I would walk on frost. Our feet cracked and bled,” she said. “We were happy when we got a sack of mealiemeal because we used the sack as material for dresses.”

When Pinky's mother lost her job, she turned to drink and neglected her children. To this day, Pinky has a strong aversion for drink. Things got worse when her own siblings took to the bottle, straining her relations with them. After giving birth to her first child in the mid-1970s, she resolved to flee this rural outpost where life was hopeless. The road pointed to Johannesburg, the city of dreams, but even before she left Matatiele news of the 1976 uprisings reached her. She heard how volatile the townships of Johannesburg were months after the uprisings. Still, Pinky was determined to take her chances. In her mind it was better to suffer the indignities and dangers in a big city than be consumed by rural poverty. In 1977, she took a train bound for Johannesburg with her son as her main luggage.

On arrival, she headed to her uncle's in Zola, Soweto. “When we got to Johannesburg, the atmosphere was tense,” Pinky said. “The effects of the uprisings were still evident. Then we had to endure raids by policemen demanding to see special permits to be in the township.” Eventually she settled in the city and made friends, one of them the lady who worked with Klaaste at *Sowetan*, and in whose home she and Aggrey first met.

Aggrey and Valetta eventually moved to Diepkloof Extension, an upmarket part of Soweto where wealthy residents of Soweto lived. In 1984 Aggrey and Valetta were blessed with a son. In homage to his father, Klaaste named him Langa Peter Tobias, symbolically switching the names around to reflect pride in starting the sequence with an African name. An overjoyed Klaaste would occasionally take Langa along to the newsroom at *Sowetan*. He doted over him even as he grew up.

But the gulf between him and his wife could never be breached again. The once raging passion between them had cooled. Klaaste now divided his time and attention between his two families.

Pinky fell pregnant for the second time in 1985 and gave birth to another son, Jerome. Pinky's uncle was about to go on pension and their home in Zola was becoming overcrowded to accommodate Klaaste's brood. Klaaste rented a one-bedroomed house in Zola for Pinky and his sons. Back then he didn't have a car, but he would take taxis to visit them as often as he could.

Juggling two families must have been a strain for Klaaste – emotionally, financially and morally. He was now a high-profile Diepkloof Extension resident. Why maintain a liaison with Pinky who was stuck in a one-bedroom place with two sons in old Soweto? “It all boils down to how I treated him,” Pinky said. “Because he was having problems at home in Diepkloof, when he visited me he tasted a better life. I'd make sure that I wash the shirt he'd come wearing, hang it on a coat hanger and iron it for him in the morning when it was dry. He would come to me, sometimes coming straight from his own house in Diepkloof Extension, and complain of hunger the moment he stepped into my little room. Whether I had cooked earlier or not, I would make sure that in no time a plate of food was in front of him. That is how we were raised. A man is a head of the house who needs care.”

Klaaste liked the homely treatment Pinky gave him. In time, he and Pinky began to live together in a house in Dobsonville Extension Two. At this point, Pinky's home cooking began to show on Aggrey's body. His traditional lean frame became padded. He looked healthier and happier. “His colleagues would marvel when he showed up at work with a lunchbox and cookies. I had to look after him. He was the father of my children,” Pinky said. “His colleagues began to refer to his house in Diepkloof as a winter residence and my house here in Dobsonville as a summer residence.” Klaaste would even visit Pinky with young Langa. Both would show signs of hunger. Pinky would even pack a lunchbox for Langa, not caring that he was not her biological son.

Klaaste was a dotting dad. He enjoyed his time with two boys in Diepkloof – Nthato

and Langa. He would give them a word quiz. “He also read and would come up with a big word such as ‘brouhaha’. When we said, ‘No, such a word doesn’t exist, you’ve just made it up,’ he’d point us to his thick dictionary and, sure enough, the word was there. He also instilled in us a love of reading and taking a keen interest in current affairs – he was a journalist after all – and thinking deeply about subjects,” Nthato remembers.<sup>10</sup>

Langa remembered his dad helping him with homework when he was in lower grades at school. He would mark his English and Maths work.

Klaaste learned to drive quite late in his life. For many years he was driven around by Vusi Zwane, a driver *Sowetan*. But when he finally learned to drive, a new world opened up. He would drive with his sons all over Johannesburg whenever the mood took him. The drives often happened on Sundays. It was a chance for the newsman who was often busy during the week to bond with his sons. He would listen to their music (kwaito) and he exposed them to his own, which invariably was jazz by artists such as Abdullah Ibrahim and Hugh Masekela.

Nthato recalls that on these long drives, Klaaste would open up and “talk to them about any subject – women, business, alcohol, swearing, politics – anything”. Sometimes, they would get lost on the way. When they alerted Klaaste he would say: “It doesn’t matter. It’s my bloody car. I did it on purpose,” Nthato recalls laughing.

In Dobsonville, in his other home, Klaase was the same caring dad. Lucky, Pinky’s son, says Aggrey was accessible and jovial. He would play with him and Jerome, even wrestling them on the carpet at home. “He was never this big, important man at home. He related to us as a friend and not as a father. It was always fun to be around him,” Lucky says.<sup>11</sup>

Aggrey’s lasting legacy for his four sons (including Nthato) was ensuring that they got the best education he could afford. In the 1980s, apartheid relaxed its strictness and allowed black learners to attend “white” schools. These schools later became known as model C schools. Their standard of education was much higher than an average township school. Lucky, who had started schooling in Soweto, was one of those who made the switch to a better school. He went to Florida, west of Johannesburg.

Lucky also remembered Aggrey’s immense help with school homework, particularly with English. “I started school here in Soweto. Later I switched to a multi-racial school in Florida. For a while I struggled with English and he would help me. There’s no word he didn’t know. He was my walking dictionary.”

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<sup>10</sup> I interviewed Nthato and Langa Klaaste at their home in Diepkloof in late 2013.

<sup>11</sup> I interviewed Lucky and Jerome Klaaste on January 18, 2014

Jerome also testifies to Aggrey being an affectionate father. “Whenever he passed you in the house, he’d touch the top of your head, ruffle your hair for a second. Such little acts told us my dad was in the house,” Jerome says.

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No doubt interacting with his sons gave Aggrey Klaaste immense joy. At the same time, it made him fearful about their future, about all the violence and instability around them, about the society they were growing in.

At this stage on the political scene there was the United Democratic Front (UDF), an umbrella organisation that sought to bring back the ANC’s Charterist tradition. In a sense, it was a way for the ANC to come back into the country and into people’s minds and hearts.

The UDF increased militant tempo against the state, calling for the boycott of election of black local authorities. UDF-aligned civic organisations sprang up. When the Vaal council wanted to increase rent, a source of revenue given slump in the economy and a lack of business to tax in the area, the people of Sebokeng revolted, leading to what would be known as the Vaal uprisings that started on September 3, 1984, also known as Bloody Monday.<sup>12</sup>

A date that would, just like Sharpeville in 1960 and June 1976, drive Klaaste into more despair and fundamentally shake his thinking. The uprisings spread to other areas of the country, and intensified when unknown assailants killed Victoria Mxenge, an anti-apartheid lawyer, outside her home in Durban in 1985.

Around this time, Inkatha<sup>13</sup> and UDF fought bitter turf wars in KwaZulu-Natal and thousands of people died. To quell the violence, State President P.W. Botha twice declared states of emergency – 1985 and 1986. The army was called to the burning townships. From its headquarters in Lusaka, the exiled ANC called for the oppressed to make country ungovernable. Defiance and mayhem were the order of the day. According to Klaaste, the victims of this violence were young people – euphemistically known as young lions – because their moral fibre was corrupted. This angry and hopeless generation believed in the use of violence as a legitimate tool of resistance. One such method of violence that developed

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<sup>12</sup> Starting from the early 1980s, eager to raise funds to run townships, the local authorities increasingly raised rents, electricity fees, rates and public transport fares. Starting in November 1983, the UDF was at the forefront of opposing such increases which led to a greater cost of living. Civic organisations aligned to the UDF sprang up. Anger and dissatisfaction brewed, finally erupting into rent boycotts, on 3 September 1984. It was known as the Bloody Monday.

<sup>13</sup> Inkatha was founded as a front for the ANC and it was a cultural movement. The name dated back to the first Inkatha founded in the 1920s by King Solomon ka Dinuzulu of Zulul, a maternal uncle to Buthelezi.

around this time was the “necklacing” of suspected collaborators with the state. A tyre, soaked with petrol, would be placed around a victim’s neck, like a necklace, and set alight.

This gruesome method of killing horrified Klaaste. “The origin of this form of murder is unknown. But psychologically it made some sense as burning, while it is alien to black culture, is used in traditional circumstances to exorcise witches or burn *sangomas* or *inyangas* (traditional healers),” Klaaste wrote in his memoir. “There are very few ways of torture that equal the ‘necklace’ township way of inflicting pain or revenge on those believed to be enemies of the ‘struggle’ or enemies of the people.”

Another person who was horrified by this form of killing was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He could understand the anger, he had also fought against apartheid and suffered by going into exile, but he found such killing shameful and barbaric, and attaching a bad name to the struggle for freedom. Tutu even threatened to leave the country if such killings continued.<sup>14</sup>

In all this violence, it was clear that young people were at the forefront. There were the ones who were committing excesses, who were angels of death. Klaaste believed the problem began during the 1976 uprisings when youngsters were put at the forefront of the struggle. “Although adults were upset that the children were dying, they had a certain pride about the sacrifices being made by the youngsters,” Klaaste wrote in his memoir. “Very soon children appreciated the political power they were wielding. This went straight to their little heads ... inevitably this power was abused by the children.” Overall, he blamed adults for allowing children to be turned into little monsters.

In addition, the violence indicated another sinister phenomenon – oppressed people were meting out violence against their own kind. For years violence had come from the state. Now, the victims had internalised it. This was the origin of the so-called black-on-black violence, which was endemic in both urban and rural areas. To explain this puzzling turn of events, Klaaste blamed apartheid – “a system of institutionalised violence” – for eroding the moral fibre of its victims, making them “violent in their hearts”.

“This violence is the strangest of all phenomena, for it is visited not on those who launched the apartheid monster on the people, but on other blacks... The people have become inured to violence. They have also become aware of a hopeless powerlessness to fight the

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<sup>14</sup> Speaking to a large crowd at a funeral for 14 people who had been killed in violence in the township KwaThema, Tutu said: “We have a cause that is just. We have a cause that is going to prevail. For goodness’ sake, let us not spoil it by the kind of methods that we use. And if we do this again, I must tell you that I am going to find it difficult to be able to speak up for our liberation. ... I am going to collect my family and leave a country that I love deeply, a country that I love passionately” (Allen 226).

author of their suffering. Like hungry rats in a cage, they attack their own, those nearest and sometimes dearest to them. It is almost a form of self-laceration also caused by guilt, by anger, fear and hatred, self hate,” Klaaste wrote.

Sometimes the trigger of this violence was the different ideologies anti-apartheid forced pursued. In the mid-1980s, the UDF, representing a Charterist tradition of multi-racialism, fought running battles in the townships against AZAPO, the Black Consciousness party founded after Biko’s death.

On the media front, three alternative newspapers *Weekly Mail*, *New Nation* and *Vrye Weekblad* were formed in the mid-1980s. Academic Lesley Cowling says these papers “were alternative in that they were not owned by any of the big commercial media companies, survived mostly off the anti-apartheid funding they attracted, and practised advocacy journalism that was explicitly anti-apartheid. The *Sowetan*’s political lineage of BC and PAC came back to haunt it among broader anti-apartheid forces as those organisations were seen as being competitive towards the ANC.

In 1985, Cosatu, a federation of unions affiliated to the UDF, called for a boycott of the *Sowetan*. Violence was meted out against anyone caught selling the paper. Sales were crippled. Latakomo, Klaaste and other senior managers at the paper had to meet Cosatu leaders to resolve the crisis.<sup>15</sup> Curiously, the state believed the *Sowetan* was hell-bent on promoting the aims of the banned ANC because of its tendency to quote its leaders.

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Meanwhile, journalists, being embedded in their communities, felt the brunt of the upheavals. By now Soweto was engulfed in a protest against rent. The young comrades enforced the boycotts. Those who failed to toe the line could face mob justice and possible be necklaced as collaborators. Klaaste also stopped paying his rent for his house in Diepkloof.

Overall, being a black journalist during these turbulent times was tricky. The violence of the 1980s was more intense than that in the aftermath of the 1976 uprisings. Increasingly black journalists, feeling the pain and harassment with the rest of their communities, jettisoned objectivity. “Our young reporters now consider themselves blacks first and journalists second,” Klaaste once explained. “They see their work as part of political struggle in South Africa.”

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<sup>15</sup> I interviewed Len Maseko at his home in Emmarentia on August 7, 2013. He is a seasoned journalist who joined *Sowetan* in the early 1980s and held many senior positions within the paper.

But at personal level, apart from supporting the ideals of the struggle, black reporters often felt intimidated. It was an era of weeding out collaborators and sellouts. The penalty was swift and merciless – fiery death at the hands of an enraged mob. Even behind the safety of their computers and typewriters, black journalists found it hard to question some of the objectionable tactics of resistance. Journalist Jon Qwelane, who wrote a column called “Just Jon” in *The Star*, admitted that he was scared to write anything critical against “necklacing” despite his abhorrence of this type of killing: “If I condemn it in print, some groups would say I’m not supporting the struggle. I admit it, I feel intimidated,” he said.

As a member of the community, people knew where you stayed. According to Klaaste’s ex-wife, Valetta, they once had to have windows at their house glazed against petrol bombs because Klaaste “had questioned some UDF people who their leaders were because the real leaders of the people were in jail”.

For this comment, the Klaastes had to escape to a safe house in Sandton. In the end, she convinced Klaaste that they would actually be better off in their home in Diepkloof Extension. “I told him that we are safer in Soweto where people know us. If there would, for example, be a car parked outside our home for a long time someone here would grow suspicious and alert us because we know one another unlike in the suburbs,” she said during our interview in Soweto.

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The tyranny of young lions continued in the mid-1980s. One day Klaaste, driving past Dobsonville, witnessed an extraordinary scene that was to haunt him for years. A group of children in school uniform squatted silently on a main road in Dobsonville. Not too far away were two parked Casspirs (military vehicles), on top of which stood two white cops, smoking and laughing. “The children looked decent, innocent, well behaved. There was an almost solemn air about them with no horsing around as is normal with kids,” Klaaste recalled.

Klaaste called out to one of the boys and asked him what the matter was. “Without as much as batting an eye he said they were out to kill someone. Said like that it does not sound too terrific. The contrast for me was devastating. You mean, all those children sitting quietly there, watched by those police, are out to scalp somebody?” Later Klaaste heard that the children did get their victim whom they hacked to death with an assortment of garden tools before setting him alight. “I was thunder-struck. It could not have been the same group. It was. Almost like a horror movie. Those clean decent hands had blood on them.”

He wondered what his own sons were capable of. It gnawed on his conscience that, as adult, he had yet join hands with others to find a solution to the problem.

While blaming black parents, Klaaste also turned this attention to their white counterparts whom he blamed for sending their children to patrol townships in uniform and, in the process, brutalised their fellow countrymen. “What on earth do you tell your son when he has to patrol in an army truck in the middle of a place he calls his own country?”

With more and more townships in flames, with the state’s cosmetic changes to apartheid failing, something drastic had to happen. He was fed up with the violence, which seemed to come in predictable cycles – Sharpeville, June 16 and now upheavals of the mid-1980s. He was tired of seeing children becoming the ugly face of the resistance, being robbed of their childhood. He began looking into the future. As he thought more about the problem, he became more convinced that he had just the right solution.

In 1988, Klaaste was appointed *Sowetan* editor after Latakomo joined *The Star* as assistant editor. Finally, he was in a position to do something about healing his wounded community.





## CHAPTER 9 – BUILDING THE NATION

As conflict raged on in townships, Aggrey Klaaste felt emotional distress. He took it personally. At work he was known for pulling people aside in the corridors, anyone, and asking what could be done to stop the carnage in the townships. He kept moaning about the effect the turmoil had on children. At home he discussed the horror with his wife Valetta. He was now editor of *Sowetan*, the second-largest circulating daily paper in the country. He had clout. He wanted to use it.

Eventually, what he would refer to as the Great Idea began forming in his mind. Initially, he kept the idea close to his chest as he and colleagues polished it up. He worked closely with his deputy Sam Mabe who had joined *Sowetan* from *The Star*. They apparently worked well as a team. Where Klaaste was emotional, railing against violence and necklacing and offering quick sound bites, Mabe, much younger, was a calm thinker who deftly converted emotion into a philosophy. It was a yin and yang leadership.

Slowly, the idea planted in Klaaste's mind germinated. But Klaaste was in no hurry to tell the world about it. Over time, though, little by little, he did open the door just enough for readers to peek into his mind. "I'm preparing the ground, laying the bed so to speak for the seed of an idea I hope to be planting in the not-too-long future," he said in a column on April 25 1988. "Frankly, the idea excites and exhilarates me as it appears to have breath-taking possibilities." Without giving away too much, Klaaste offered an outline of what he was talking about. He said South Africa had two major weaknesses. The first one was the military and the country's fast-fading economic strength. The second and critical weakness, according to him, was a lack of structural centre in the black community, something particularly worrying as blacks were in the majority; the problem with this weakness was that whites feared them, hence the reluctance to bring about a change in the country.

Klaaste said black people needed to emulate the Afrikaners after 1948 and build a strong nation around a central idea, but this time for everyone, black and white. In a nutshell, if black people were not strong in ideas, in purpose, in having a centre, they might just as well forget the struggle. He admitted to "straining at the leash to give the whole picture" and promised to expand more on his idea in due course. "I rest my case for the moment. I am hoping that the seed will find ground in which to grow. It doesn't matter if you think this is a weird or totally unacceptable proposition. I am giving you a chance, short as it is now, to study some of this. And respond."

While vague, there was no denying that something big and unprecedented was happening in Klaaste's head. One alert reporter from *Pretoria News*, Mostert van Schoor, wrote that Klaaste's idea, as outlined in the April column, was "simultaneously bold and vague" but deserved to be encouraged if it led to "cancelling white fears of being swamped and (if it lead to) creating mutual respect across the colour divide". Van Schoor, somewhat condescendingly, acknowledged that "saving the entire population – black, white, whatever – is no small task for a brand-new editor to take on."

By late 1988 South Africa was fairly quiet. The state's emergency regulations had worked. This allowed Klaaste to have some breathing space to polish his idea. Sometime around September 1988 Klaaste and Mabe briefed Jolyon Nuttal, then president of the Newspaper Press Union, about the idea they were moulding. Nuttal, wishing to help, couldn't contain his excitement and wanted the concept propagated instantly. But Klaaste stopped him on his tracks. "Let it ferment," Klaaste said. "Don't rush me." As he wrote in another column back in April of the same year, "the quickest way to kill a good idea, I have come to learn, is to become zealous about it. You just turn people off, or make them suspicious."

Over the months Klaaste did announce that the concept he and his team were working was called nation building. He could have done so to test the waters since he was at the helm of the biggest black daily newspaper. Klaaste even addressed various gatherings about the concept – from students to black taxi organisations. To all of them he stressed the need to think larger than themselves and look farther into the future in order to build a better nation. No doubt these talks were designed to help Klaaste and Mabe to polish up the idea, to smooth the corners, before fully unveiling it to the nation.

One thing was clear about Klaaste and Mabe's idea – it involved all races, it involved building rather than burning, it involved reconciliation rather than retribution. Klaaste and Mabe called their idea nation building, but they had yet to officially launch it.

For a newspaper with a tradition of BC and Pan Africanist thinking, this sounded like betrayal. People were being killed and detained. How could the eminent editor of *Sowetan*, a paper that radically opposed the system, champion such a blatantly liberal philosophy? Many in the *Sowetan* newsroom found Klaaste's stance baffling and infuriating. Klaaste's old friend and colleague, Joe Thloloe was one of those who were not convinced. "I didn't see how staging choral festivals could bring about a revolution," Thloloe said. When Thloloe asked Klaaste how he could think of building when there was a revolution, Klaaste "argued that even in the middle of a revolution we needed nation building and we at *Sowetan* had to acknowledge the efforts of unsung heroes and heroines who were doing their bit". In the end,

Thloloe relented. His friend's mind was made up. He wished him well with the campaign.

In the months that followed Klaaste continued to polish the nation building campaign idea. He did not want to be imprisoned by ideology. In fact, even when he became editor, some people had harboured scepticism about his political commitment, fearing that he was a political lightweight. But Klaaste believed he was right. With the new activist route he was embarking on, he would soon find out how his countrymen were so strongly shackled to ideology. Bruising battles would soon come.

It's one thing to propagate ideas in a column, behind a desk in the newsroom, and quite another to hit the road and to sell your thoughts directly to audiences. In August 1988, the Bloemfontein Joint Council, invited Klaaste to speak on his still-hazy concept of nation building. To Klaaste's surprise, half the audience was made up of black youths and the other half of white and black adults. After the talk, the youngsters waylaid him and peppered him with all kinds of questions – from the intricacies of nation building to his “views on sanctions, on political thinking, on literature, on everything”. One young coloured journalist “threw me after the talk when he said I sounded like Steve Biko”. Such interaction with young minds stimulated Klaaste and he hoped to return to Bloemfontein to address an even larger group.

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Eventually, the moment that everyone had been waiting for finally arrived. Klaaste and Mabe launched the idea of nation building on October 21, 1988 at a gala dinner at Shareworld, south of Johannesburg.<sup>1</sup>

Shareworld was a Disney-style theme park on the outskirts of Soweto that opened in November 1987. It was the largest enterprise controlled by black shareholders. Famous businessman Ruel Khoza was the executive chairman. The theme park, while aimed primarily at a black audience, opened doors to other races in an effort to show the kind of South Africa some people yearned for. The centrepiece of Shareworld was an artificial sea, with concrete islands, a 600m sand beach and wave-making machines. “Our goal here is to bring together people of all racial groups,” Khoza said in 1988. “We're trying to construct a miniature future South Africa.”

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<sup>1</sup> The theme park went bankrupt and was closed down in the mid-1990s. Before the 2010 World Cup, the structure was demolished and space is now an open car park next to the spanking new Calabash-shaped Soccer City (see [http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-24/news/mn-2541\\_1\\_theme-park](http://articles.latimes.com/1988-04-24/news/mn-2541_1_theme-park)).

It is, therefore, easy to see why Klaaste and his *Sowetan* crew chose the venue to launch nation building. Shareworld fit with their desire to show the kind of South Africa the concept was all about – a peaceful, successful, united society where there was racial harmony.

Wearing a black tuxedo, white shirt, a red bow tie and his customary thick glasses, Klaaste took to the podium amid a din of clapping hands. If he was nervous, he didn't show it. A hush settled in the room when he started speaking. He told the audience that, after much soul-searching, the *Sowetan* was launching a campaign called nation building.

Klaaste stressed from the start that nation building was not a flash-in-the-pan idea by a newly appointed editor anxious to sell more copies of his newspaper. Rather, it was informed by events in the country, in the past and present, placing a heavy burden on the future. He acknowledged that the concept took many years to manifest and was inextricably linked to the personal, political, historical and many other factors in his life. It started with Sharpeville in 1960, and was followed by June 1976 and, finally, September 4, 1984 onwards. "I have been chastened by these events, as they showed me, singly and jointly, the best and the worst in human experience."

He said the anger of Sharpeville planted the seed of the next explosion on June 16, which, in turn, led to the conflagration of September 1984. Klaaste had watched in despair as the country tore itself apart, especially the black community. The white community, meanwhile, was being told that things were under control or that law and order would soon be re-established. The last straw was the arrival of necklacing in the mid-1980s. At about the same time, he sensed that white politics was alarmingly moving more to the right while in the black community there was a collective holding of angry breath before the next inevitable explosion of violence. He feared that another explosion, which he "felt in his bones" was coming, would most certainly be met with corresponding brute force from the state, leaving the country a wasteland. That is why it had become clear to him that "something desperate, something unusually creative, had to be initiated".

He spoke for a long time that night at Shareworld, packing a lot of emotion, detail and insight into his speech. The audience was enraptured. Moving to the crux of the speech, Klaaste said South Africa could not afford to follow the flawed assertion of Dr Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, who said "seek ye political kingdom, and all things shall be added unto you". To Klaaste, the history of African states after independence – bloody

coups and hopelessness – was convincing proof of the wrongness of Nkrumah’s approach.<sup>2</sup> “Political kingdoms to be effective, lasting and, particularly democratic, need all sorts of power structures to underpin them,” Klaaste said. “They need a back-up of strong people who have clout economically, academically; who have strength to recognise the value of free press; who have a spiritual or religious foundation. Such kingdoms also need a respectable system of justice and, sadly, a strong security system.”

He touched on another contentious theme – leadership. He said a new moral leadership was crucial and – now he was skating on thin ice – this leadership was not necessarily limited to the political sphere, but came from all quarters – doctors, lawyers, teachers, businessmen, religious leaders and so on. For him involving all kinds of leaders would ensure the participation of people who were not necessarily political, which, in turn, would benefit everyone.

Flying too close to the sun again, Klaaste praised the manner in which the Afrikaners had consolidated their nation after 1948 after years of being a “despised, oppressed people” in the wake of the Boer War. He urged blacks to emulate their example. He reminded the audience that Afrikaners had consolidated their grip on power by forming secret societies, such as the Broederbond, shored up Afrikaner businesses and political organisations. “But they made one fatal mistake – they forgot the rest of us.” That is why this Afrikanerdom was cracking, thereby putting more pressure on blacks who are after all in the majority to help the country from certain ruination.

He felt *ubuntu*, that rare, hard-to-define character Africans have, would help blacks save the country; the ethic would enable them to forgive and forget. Crucially, this intrinsic ethic would lead to enlightened, compassionate leadership that would help decrease the fear in the hearts of young Afrikaners who are afraid of black people’s numerical strength and by their habit of being swayed by communists and other radicals.

Klaaste stressed the need for the reconstruction of collapsed structures in the black community. For this to happen, he said he was prepared to “ask for help from our white friends”.

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars Ali A. Mazrui and Christophe Wondji, writing in *Africa Since 1935, Vol 8*, support Klaaste’s assertion that by itself political sovereignty is not enough as Nkrumah had claimed. They point out that the situation in Ghana by 1980s cruelly proclaimed that “seek ye first political kingdom – and all else will be *subtracted* from it.” “The economy was worse than it was on attainment of political sovereignty; the educational system had deteriorated; roads had disintegrated, railways rusted, telephones had gone silent and the rest of the infrastructure was in decay. A Ghanaian diaspora had come into being ...many of the most gifted Ghanaians had scattered to the four corners of the world. Ghanaian cocoa was masquerading as Ivorian in search of greater returns.” (105).

While still on the podium, well aware of the howls of derision that would most surely come, Klaaste stressed that nation building was “ideologically neutral” and was not against the struggle for liberation. “In the end we are saying to our brothers and sisters who are actively engaged in the struggle that they need to build a strong following of thinkers and doers, not simply a vast number of angry, and plainly dangerous, people.”

He pointed out that for black people to be taken seriously and to have the yoke of oppression taken off them they needed to shed the Jekyll and Hyde mentality. “One moment we are bowed, scraping slaves, happy to lick the *baas’s* (boss’s) hand. The next, we are engaged in unbelievable acts of violence. How could the average white person have confidence in such people?” he bluntly asked.

In conclusion, he stressed that the “ultimate ideal is that we, who are in the majority, will build ourselves, by seeking help internally and externally, to build South Africa for all its people”.

In essence, with his speech, Klaaste was calling for the tearing down of the iron curtain separating races in the country. He was putting the idea of leadership back in the hands of the people, the ones who bore the brunt of oppression, and, in the process, he threw the ball back into the court of the oppressed, urging them to be part of finding a solution.

It was a courageous, heartfelt speech. It seemed to fly in the face of the murderous fight-till-death kind of political thinking. A thinking that left no room for compromise. A politics of all or nothing. A zero-sum game. A politics of waging a people’s war. Klaaste, with the rest of his team at *Sowetan*, had boldly stated what was wrong with both the black and white communities, what was wrong with the struggle and urged for united action. They had put their heads on the block. It was now up to South Africans to respond to the challenge.

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Klaaste’s speech made a great impression. Praise came from all on all quarters. *Sunday Times* editor Tertius Myburgh and Gencor’s Naas Steenkamp, who described it as a watershed speech, adding that “it is up to every right-thinking South African to heed the challenge”. Another impressed commentator was Ken Owen, the editor of then relatively new *Business Day*. “Klaaste’s comments seem to me – though I am not an expert – to carry undertones of Steve Biko. It is a more mature brand of consciousness, an assertion of self that is no longer defensive, and no longer requires the denigration of anyone else. He does not beg or threaten; he is not dependent.”

Owen observed that Klaaste's views dovetailed neatly with new thinking on his own side of the racial divide. He pointed to research findings of the Institute of Race Relations which found that blacks, more than the Nationalists, had been responsible for reforms of the past decade. This was the theory of South Africa's silent revolution which argued that apartheid had already been routed by huge growth in black middle class and skilled workers. "He is expressing the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times," Owen said.

The Shareworld speech made Klaaste a celebrity overnight and he self-deprecatingly laughed at himself for acquiring a celebrity status at the ripe age of 48. He became a sought-after speaker at events around the country. The international media courted his views about all aspects of South Africa, including political commentary. People visited him at his office in Industria, west of Johannesburg. One of them was an Afrikaner man who made a special trip from Pretoria to see him. They didn't know each other but were united by their belief in nation building. "He [Klaaste's guest] said he thought it was time December 16 – the Day of the Covenant – was changed to include South Africans of all races," Klaaste said. "With even one Afrikaner thinking this way, nation building has made quite a start."

As part of nation building, *Sowetan* ran a number of projects aimed at restoring pride to injured communities – awards for community builder of the year, teacher of the year, mass choir festival, gardening competitions, prayer meetings. Since it was an open-ended concept, backers and stakeholders could join the campaign at any stage. To this end, Klaaste worked with community organisations, churches, community leaders and businessmen.

Klaaste also managed to get big businesses to sponsor some of his initiatives. There was the Telkom Teacher of the Year, the Transnet Massed Choir Festival, the Pick 'n Pay Parenting Project, SABC/Old Mutual Community Builder project. Also part of the campaign was the establishment of the Sowetan-BP Matric Rewrite School in 1989 run at Wits, a school that catered for students who had to rewrite their matric exams. Projects were added over the years with each project attracting a corporate sponsor. Internally at the *Sowetan* nation building had dedicated pages that showcased various initiatives the paper was driving.

The first nation-building project was a garden competition. It came about in a curious way. One day, his driver Vusi Zwane, asked for help to start a garden competition in Orlando East. "I promised to help," Klaaste said. The garden competition kicked off and generated enormous excitement in the area. One high-powered businessman even offered to donate trees to beautify the area. Klaaste got his ideas for nation building from anyone.

On the surface, the idea of a garden competition might have seemed innocuous but for Klaaste it was laden with symbolism. It was as much about radically changing the natural



landscape as altering outsiders' perceptions of the township. As he explained in November 1988: "If we can turn just one corner of Soweto, involving no more than three hundred houses, into an attractive ethnic little centre with a restaurant and art gallery, perhaps the man in Mayfair or wherever will be tempted to come and see for himself how we live."

He wanted outsiders "who seem to think there's murder or a necklacing in Soweto every other minute" to visit the township and see for themselves "that blacks also keep dogs and goldfish, get married and have babies. Black people are not a threat or a danger." If one looks at how some sections of Soweto have transformed into a tourist magnet, with people skipping Sandton to have lunch at Vilakazi Street and rubbing shoulders with people from other backgrounds, it seems Klaaste was right back in 1988. It is all about social evolution and the township offering something of value than being a perpetual beggar.

One of the first groupings that heeded Klaaste's call was the taxi industry under the South African Black Taxi Association (Sabta). Within a week of the Shareworld speech, the association announced that it aimed at providing services in white areas. Apart from increased revenue for operators, Sabta hoped to benefit from inter-racial relations on the eve of change in the country.

In September of that year, Klaaste had challenged Sabta at an annual general meeting at Sun City to start thinking about using its newly acquitted economic power to gain political power. He urged them "to plan like capitalists and diversify their taxi operations". Again the Afrikaner model of empowerment came up as an example to emulate. Not mincing his words, he said the taxi industry needed to tap into its considerable power and not be run in an "amateurish" way. "We need taxi owners to send young men to business school to invest in the future. We need the taxi industry to study carefully the ways of capitalism and stop behaving like schoolboys with stolen vehicles ... driving around recklessly trying to make a quick buck."

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However, it was not smooth sailing for Klaaste and his nation-building concept. Late at night on Thursday, November 3 – barely two weeks after the Shareworld event – two members of the security police, one black and the other white, banged on his door at Diepkloof Extension, waking him and his family up. They interrogated him for about 40 minutes. "They asked me if nation building was an organisation and if it had any members. I told them it was not an organisation. I did not know what to say," an annoyed Klaaste said afterwards. "I just gave

them a vague idea of what nation building was all about.” He judged the policemen to be of “junior status”, which added to his irritation.

Klaaste’s incident with the police triggered an uproar in the media world. Why would a respectable editor be subjected to such harassment for launching a perfectly legal and reasonable campaign aimed at benefitting all of South Africa? Why the late-night visit as if he were a common criminal who might flee? Perhaps because Klaaste had dared to complain publicly, the initial police response to the outcry was dismissive. The police directorate said, as a rule, it did not comment on “general routine investigation”, implying that police officers were right to act in manner they saw fit. In the end, Minister of Law and Order Adrian Vlok apologised to Klaaste for the policemen’s behaviour and said the matter was being “investigated fully”. The editorial of *The Natal Witness*, while happy about the apology, called for Vlok to “take firm action against the culprits and hold their punishment as an example to the nation”.

Another headache afflicted Klaaste. Nation building was being horrendously misinterpreted in the public. Some felt it had something to do with Pan Africanism, “which is a bit of a risky thing to say about me seeing as I tend to get close attention from some quarters”. Others said it was allied to Black Consciousness, “which is in its way – and I stress – in its way – a reasonable interpretation”. Meanwhile, others outlandishly linked the concept to Inkatha. Most damaging, some believed it was about scuttling all left-wing forces in the political struggle.

This is how Klaaste remembered those times:

“During Joe Latakomo’s editorship *Sowetan* was boycotted because people were saying we were pro-PAC and BC. So, Latakomo, Joe Thloloe, Thami Mazwai and myself, all PAC guys really, asked ourselves what we should do? Do we support the ANC, do we support the PAC or do we start something new? We decided to do nothing. We just carried on and carried the burden of having to be branded PAC. Then when I became editor ... I said we must try to start this new thinking - nation building - to unify all these organisations. I’ve never been able to understand why the PAC moved away from the ANC. Everybody always talked about unity, but it never seemed to work. I decided in 1988 to bring all these people together through nation building. You could say it was a new ideology. We had to recognise that blacks were destroyed by apartheid and had to empower themselves. The dilemma was that blacks lacked the resources. Where are the resources? They are with white people. So you

have two choices. You are either going to take those resources by force or you're going to ask for them. So I decided we must get other South Africans involved, and that's where I got into trouble. The BC guys said I was selling out. It was bad; white people thought I was saying the struggle should end. I got a lot of support from white business because it sounded like good stuff. I was a good black man. The trouble was, this became quite a big thing and some of the political organisations got angry because they wanted to monopolise the whole thing. But it was my thinking; the *Sowetan's* thinking. And that independence caused me many problems.

Back in those days, he took time to explain himself, saying nation building was about complementing the struggle rather than undermining it; it was about sorting out divisiveness rather than entrenching it. "I know there is an obsession to have any thoughts, any movement, nailed with some ideological or political flag in South Africa. This is the reason there is so much division," Klaaste ruefully commented.

Such divisions, particularly in the black community, came into sharp focus in October 1989, a year after the launch of nation building, when Klaaste and Mabe attended a meeting at the Dube YMCA to assess the very nature of nation building and its impact thus far. Generally, some members of the black middle class were sceptical of nation building, dismissively calling it "circulation building".

At the Dube meeting editor and deputy editor got a grilling of note. Eugene Nyathi, a towering political analyst at the time, led the charge. He rubbished the claim that nation building was apolitical because that would mean it supported the status quo; nonpartisan would have been a more apt description. He accused Klaaste of taking a misleading line "seek ye economic freedom and the rest will fall into place". How could economic freedom happen without political freedom? To Nyathi there was reason Afrikaners gained political power first before pushing for economic might. All in all, Nyathi felt the idea of nation building was half-baked.

A floodgate of complaints followed. Many speakers said they supported the campaign in spirit but objected to the manner it was being implemented. Some of the attendees made it clear they resented Klaaste and Mabe for making nation building their "baby" and felt the concept needed to be broadened and removed from *Sowetan*. Someone from Port Elizabeth expressed his resentment that Soweto people seem to think that their own township was the whole nation. Others felt that Argus, a white company that owned *Sowetan*, had no business building the black nation. One woman stood up and said the black community needed to first

solve problems faced at family level – where women often single-handedly raised children while their men were out drinking – before tackling issues on a national stage. Some even accused Klaaste of tribalism by constantly writing about Mandela and Biko – his Xhosa clansmen.

Journalist Nomavenda Mathiane was at that bitter meeting. She remembers that nothing much was achieved and people left even more confused than ever. Perhaps overwhelmed by the outpouring of so much hostility, Klaaste and Mabe lost their usual facility for words and failed to win over the crowd. People left none the wiser.

For her part Mathiane was unclear how nation building might advance the cause of liberation. To her, it seemed just as likely to cause blacks to accept and be happy with white rule. Despite her own reservations, Mathiane felt that the meeting's failure to back Klaaste's initiative pointed to something sinister about activism in the black community. "I and others were left with a sinking feeling of doubt whether we blacks would ever get our act together. Will we always tear down everything that another person puts up? Will we always be paralysed by ideological conflicts, causing us to quarrel over every initiative so that nothing happens?" she asked in *Frontline* magazine. "My feeling is that Klaaste and Mabe did not have to wait around until somebody gave them a mandate. For that matter who is in a position to give a mandate? They wanted to do something beneficial and they stood up and did it. If some personal glory reflects upon them, that does not mean their efforts must be denounced."

Hatred for the nation building also came from the ANC in Lusaka, where the exiled party's headquarters were. One diplomat who had just returned from Lusaka allegedly whispered in Mathiane's ear that the ANC viewed nation building as a government ploy to woo people into government structures. "He was even told that Sam Mabe is a member of the Joint Management Committee (a state security organ under P.W. Botha's regime). Nothing could be more ridiculous. It makes me wonder about other local initiatives branded heretical by Lusaka ... not all problems warrant safaris to Lusaka," Mathiane wrote.

Despite criticism, Klaaste pressed on with nation building. "I see myself as a facilitator of an idea. I'm not in competition with political parties," he would say. "I'd be happy for anyone to take this concept and build from there."

When senior journalists within *Sowetan* resisted nation building, scoffing at projects such as mass choirs, Klaaste would remind everyone that music had always been part of the struggle. He never despaired that not all his troops were convinced about his command.

Meanwhile, he continued fending off constant criticism. In June 1989, he had to stress that political leaders such as Sobukwe, Mandela and Biko, who came before him had influenced his thinking. “I cannot be seen as original or as separate from the past politico-historical factors in my life and the lives of other South Africans,” he wrote.

One day Klaaste received a letter of support from acclaimed writer and poet Lionel Abrahams, one of his literary heroes. Klaaste was so overjoyed he ran the letter verbatim in the paper in the space of his regular On The Line column.

Dear Mr Klaaste,

I’m writing in response to the article about you in and your ideas in the *Weekly Mail*. I had not read what you have written about Nation Building, so this was my introduction to your thinking. I am impressed and moved, on one level by the sanity and imaginativeness of your approach, on another by your own courage, frankness and wisdom.

I have no special qualifications to judge matters in the field of sociology, economics or politics, but it does seem to me that yours is a wonderfully constructive and practical programme, offering more hope for South Africa than any other proposal I can remember hearing of.

I hesitate only, I feel bound to remark, over the element of authenticity in your relations with your financial helpers.

Your perception that people may acquire abilities, confidence and authority through their participation in projects designed to improve the circumstances of their lives, and that these strengths are prerequisites of political power, strikes me as a visionary insight, and deeply democratic in spirit.

Your clear sense of what is necessary and possible in terms of strategy – i.e. your stance vis-à-vis resources and politicization – is also most impressive to me. To the reservations of the *Weekly Mail’s* reporter regarding your aloofness, so to speak, from overtly political approaches, I think it should be said that your programme must not be seen as in rivalry or opposition to politics but as supplementary to the orthodox approach by others.

My purpose in writing is to say, is there anything I can do to help? I don’t have money. I am a writer of stories, poems, articles, liberal and ‘moderate’ in my social attitudes – so I don’t know whether my voice raised in support of you would be useful.

Lionel Abrahams

An emboldened Klaaste told readers that, while nation building needed financial backing, no amount of money could possibly be as encouraging as Abrahams' sentiments. "We need intellectual support, or criticism. We need debate at this level," he said. "I have been told of other intellectuals who are saying the initiative is a 'failure'. Their problem is they do not seem to have the guts to say that in print and give reasons for their extraordinary conclusions. If the number of seminars I am addressing these days is anything to go by, if the number of people who are plaguing me at work and at home about this initiative, then it must be the most singular, the most extraordinary type of failure."

Whatever his detractors might have said, whatever battles he had to fight, Klaaste started his tenure as editor with a high note. Under his editorship, circulation for the paper grew dramatically. The paper soon became a leading daily.

If anything, nation building showed Klaaste's prescience about the change in politics in South Africa. When political sands shifted in the late 1980s, he could join the dots and understand that a new order was imminent. Apartheid was waning and a ray of hope shone in the distance. Despite government objections, a group of prominent Afrikaner intellectuals, led by Idasa's Dr Van Zyl Slabbert met the exiled ANC in Dakar, Senegal in July 1987. Thabo Mbeki led the ANC delegation. When they sized each other up, they found they could deal with each other in building a new country where everyone's rights would be guaranteed. Four months later, Mbeki's father, a Rivonia Treason trialist, was released from jail after 23 years. Two years before Dennis Goldberg had been released.

On October 15, 1989, five of the eight ANC leaders involved in the Rivonia Trial in the 1960s were released from Robben Island – Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Raymond Mhlaba, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, and another ANC veteran Wilton Mkwayi. Also released was the PAC's Jafta Masemola, the longest-serving Robben Island prisoner.

When the Robben Islanders came out, a huge "welcome home" rally was organised in their honour at the FNB Stadium outside Soweto. An advertisement for the rally ran in the *Sowetan*. Trouble followed for Klaaste. Invoking the dreaded Section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act, government instructed Klaaste to provide police with information about people or organisations that had paid for the adverts – or face a possible jail term. Harvey Tyson, editor-in-chief of *The Star*, which also ran the advert, faced the same threat. The two editors fought back, insisting that no law had been broken since the rally had been legal. They made it known that they were not prepared to reveal information on legitimate advertisers or news sources. In time, the threat faded.

For Klaaste, the incident was similar to when he had been charged for contravened the

Internal Security Act<sup>3</sup> when *Sowetan* published a story quoting Harry Gwala, a banned former Robben Island prisoner, on December 13, 1988. Klaaste appeared twice at the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court in 1989, the second respondent in a case involving Argus Holdings, owners of *Sowetan*. Also charged for the same offence were editors and owners of *Sunday Times*, *Weekly Mail* and *New Nation*.

Even as apartheid showed signs of thawing media censorship remained a real threat. Regulations around the coverage of unrest made it hard for journalists to do their work. Exasperated, Klaaste once allowed the paper to run blank spaces of "unrest scenes". The caption said something happened yesterday, but emergency regulations forbid us to tell you what or where it happened. The Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Vlok was incensed. He summoned Klaaste to Pretoria to explain himself, just like Percy Qoboza had to face Minister of Justice and Police Jimmy Kruger and Prime Minister John Vorster a decade before.<sup>4</sup>

As the 1980s drew to a close, fear of the state's draconian laws still crippled editorial decisions of black newspapers such as *Sowetan* and *New Nation*. "It's a no-win situation," Klaaste told Greg Myre, of the Associated Press. "If we report aggressively, we're going to be closed down. If we play by the government's rules, we lose credibility in the black community." Accountability to the community was the sacred creed at *Sowetan*. The paper truly cared about how the downtrodden community it represented perceived it. Credibility was the name of the game.

Klaaste was charitable when other newspapers were harassed. When government issued a ban warning to the *Weekly Mail* in 1988, Klaaste was one of the editors who rallied to the paper's defence. "Any attack on any newspaper is an attack on all papers – and this is further an attack on civil liberties in this country," Klaaste commented.

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<sup>3</sup> Known as the Lion of the Midlands, Harry Gwala was a teacher and politician with fiery Communist views. In 1977 he was sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1980s he developed a motor neuron disease that robbed him of the use of his arms. Released in 1988, he continued with his political activism and 1994 was suspended from the South African Communist Party Central Committee for being involved in violence in the Midlands area. In 1992, Nelson Mandela, as ANC president, awarded him Isithwalandwe, the highest award within the party, for his "dedication and selfless commitment" to the struggle. He died on June 20 1995.

<sup>4</sup> In June 1977, when Black People's Convention held a consultative conference in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, with its affiliate Black Consciousness organisation in which it criticised the imminent "independence" of Bophuthatswana as a "balkanisation" of the country. On June 25, the organisation dispatched an open letter to Lucas Mangope who was waiting in the wings to become the territory's new president. A copy was sent to the media. When *The World* published the letter in its entirety, unlike other media, Minister of Justice and Police Jimmy Kruger summoned its editor Percy Qoboza and gave him a "tongue lashing for his conduct". With the minister was General Prinsloo, commissioner of police, a ploy perhaps to intimidate Qoboza who was never given a chance to talk. Afterwards, Qoboza said: "If this had been said to me by anybody in the township, I would have beaten the daylights out of them. And to think that this Kruger guy is such a small guy." Later, even Prime Minister John Vorster also registered his complaint to Qoboza (see "Towards Black Wednesday, 19/10/77, and beyond" – [www.azapo.org.za/links/blackwednesday.htm](http://www.azapo.org.za/links/blackwednesday.htm)).

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When Klaase launched nation building the world was changing in very fundamental ways. This was the time of Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the communist Soviet Union – *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). These reforms hastened the end of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> The Iron Curtain was being prised open. A year after Klaaste launched nation building, the Berlin Wall fell dramatically.<sup>6</sup>

Geopolitical changes were felt in Southern Africa as well. In December 1988, Namibia, after decades of being ruled by South Africa, took a step toward independence and nationhood when the South West African Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) signed an agreement with South Africa, the United Nations and western powers in New York. Part of the deal involved the removal of Cuban troops from Angola who had helped SWAPO fight South Africa.

An election date was set for 1989. An organisation called Project Now Namibia invited Klaaste and a coterie of fellow South African editors for a day trip to the country to introduce them to future Namibian leaders. Klaaste looked forward to the trip and to sharing his experiences with readers. He most likely wished to see if there were parallels to be drawn with the South African situation. As he drove to the airport, little did he know that his hopes of travelling would be dashed.

At the passport-control terminal, in the international departure section, he confidently took out his travel documents and a receipt showing that he had applied for a new identity document. He thought the receipt would be adequate proof of him having applied for an ID and he hoped he would be allowed to fly. But the passport official told him otherwise. He was turned back. "It is ridiculous that I was turned away despite having produced a document showing that I have applied for an ID," Klaaste later fumed.

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<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev famously introduced reforms in the Soviet Union when he became president at 54 in 1985. At the time the country was struggling economically despite posture as a super power engaged in the Cold War. Under his presidency, satellite nations that had long been part of the Soviet Union declared independence. He ended the nuclear arms race against the US and, though he never intended to, unleashed forces that led to the breakup of the Soviet empire. The country dissolved into fifteen independent republics. When he resigned on December 25, 1991, the nation no longer existed.

<sup>6</sup> The Berlin Wall had been built in 1961 to prevent East Berliners from crossing to the West. It was a potent symbol of the Cold War. West Berlin mayor Willy Brandt referred to it as "The Wall of Shame" while the Communist government of East Germany called it an "antifascist bulwark" to prevent western fascists from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state. The fall of the wall can be traced to the reforms in the Soviet Union, the de facto ruler of East Germany. The wall came down on November 9, 1989 when East and West Berliners misunderstood a government declaration that they could freely cross the border. People began chipping at the wall with chisels, triggering mass euphoria and uniting a city that had been separated for twenty-eight years.



By now Klaaste sensed that a new order was at hand in South Africa where principles of nation building campaign would be needed – self-reliance, rebuilding, renewal and, above all, reconciliation. Of all the Rivonia trialists, one influential man who had become the world's most famous prisoner remained behind bars. Everyone was anxious to see if government would release him.



## CHAPTER 10 – CHANGING TIMES

On February 2, 1990, State President F.W. De Klerk climbed onto the podium in Parliament to deliver his State of the Nation address. The address he gave was unprecedented. De Klerk announced that from that moment on all political parties were unbanned and all political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, would be released immediately, without condition.

The nation was still stunned with disbelief when the regal Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison 11 days later, on February 11. He had spent 27 years in prison. Next to him was his wife Winnie Mandela, and they were cheerfully greeted by thousands of supporters. In fading light that day Mandela addressed a large crowd from the steps of the Cape Town library. Mandela thanked the crowd for their “tireless and heroic sacrifices” that had made it possible for him to be released. “I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands,” Mandela famously said.

In truth, news of Mandela’s imminent release was in the air weeks before the momentous occasion and Klaaste had written in his column that the country needed “a colossus to stride our world at this auspicious time in history”, someone in the mould of Martin Luther King. He said Mandela perfectly fitted the bill. He predicated that Mandela’s release would be “the biggest event of the century”.

In subsequent weeks, many were struck by Mandela’s lack of bitterness despite being in jail for so many years. Instead, he preached reconciliation, peace, tolerance, negotiations and renewal of the country. Madiba (Mandela’s clan name) could have been reading a script written by Aggrey Klaaste (also a Madiba). The newspaperman must have felt vindicated about the need to keep cool heads in these heady times.

Shortly after he was released, Mandela visited Klaaste’s house in Diepkloof. It was a highlight of Klaaste’s life. “It was an unbelievable thing, everybody came to my house. It was just tremendous,” Klaaste recalled. Mandela must have heard for himself what Klaaste had been up to with his often-misunderstood nation building campaign. There must have been a meeting of minds, and the two Madibas must have agreed about the need for reconciliation in the country, for racial cooperation in uplifting the oppressed masses, and for a concerted push for peace to return to the land. For that to happen pragmatism, and not ideological dogma, had to be the guiding principle. After his release even Mandela backtracked on his belief in socialism that was crumbling everywhere else in the world with the fall of the Soviet Union, but he defended his right to keep Fidel Castro and Muammar Qaddafi as friends.

*Sowetan* had for a long time been anticipating Mandela's release. In the last "white" election of 1987, the paper had run a mock election on its pages since its readers were barred from voting. Readers had to choose top 10 personalities they thought should run South Africa. Mandela came out tops, followed by Oliver Tambo and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The polling exercise was meant to show how voting would be like in a free and democratic South Africa.

However, the euphoria over Mandela's release was quickly overshadowed by the violence that erupted between the ANC and IFP supporters. Thousands lost their lives in one massacre after another. The violence spread from KwaZulu-Natal to the PWV area (now Gauteng). A pattern soon emerged. Hostel dwellers, viewed as IFP supporters who were largely seen as traditional Zulu men, would battle against township residents, viewed as ANC supporters. Both political parties blamed each other. The police and other organs of the state were accused of exploiting the conflict by supporting and even arming IFP militias. It's hard to explain the violence of this time. Whatever the motives, all parties seem to have had blood on their hands.<sup>7</sup> The ANC, waging what it termed a people's war, was accused of liquidating symbols of the system. Councillors and policemen were particular victims. Incidentally, as most councillors were IFP supporters, such attacks fuelled the conflict further.

Even smaller political parties suffered in this climate of political intolerance. In Soweto, Azapo, a Black Consciousness grouping, complained that militant members of the ANC harassed its members. In Vosloorus, clashes erupted between ANC and PAC activists. What was a mystery at the time was a new and disturbing trend in the violence – the indiscriminate shooting of innocent commuters in trains. Such attacks defied logic. And they seemed well orchestrated and, strangely, lacked any political motive. Cries of a "third force", of white operatives painting themselves black with paint or polish, were often heard. There were also bombings in cities, attacks on mini bus taxis and bars. The road to transition was clearly bumpy. The country was sick.

The Transvaal office of the Black Sash, an organisation of liberal white women working against apartheid, summed up the grim situation in a statement in 1990: "Every day there are reports of bombs exploding, grenades thrown, the use of teargas, birdshot and live

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<sup>7</sup> Most accounts on the violence support the so-called "Third-Force" theory. This has been rejected most radically by Anthea Jeffrey in her book *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*. In an account that appears to whitewash the IFP, she argues that the ANC's adoption of the "people's war" model from Vietnam was the primary cause for the violence and makes the party the main culprit. Of course, this is just one view about this terrible time in South African history.

bullets, bulldozers demolishing people's homes, faction fighting, burnings, necklacings, murders, killings and assaults, and they come from all over the country.”

Unlike in the 1970s and early 1980s, the proliferation of guns was evident in this mayhem. There were allegations that Umkhonto WeSizwe, the ANC's military wing, was infiltrating the country amid the chaos. President De Klerk even accused the ANC of using violence to strengthen its hand at the negotiating table.

The ANC, in turn, accused government of sponsoring violence and using the IFP as a pawn in the larger struggle to fight the liberation movement. Time and again claims would be made of IFP militias being bussed from one region to another, carrying dangerous weapons – which they described as traditional weapons – while the police looked on. The Inkathagate scandal of 1991 didn't help the image of the party when it was revealed that Security Police had paid covert funds for the party's two rallies.

At the negotiations table, the ANC pushed for speedy closure of talks while De Klerk favoured a measured pace, nit-picking the role and future of minorities in the new order. He hoped to frustrate the aspirations of the ANC masses and chip at Mandela's larger-than-life image. Raymond Suttner, then head of political education for the ANC, told a workshop of the organisation Women Against Repression. “The lessons of apartheid rule have been that matters are decided by violence and it is natural that [the] oppressed should conclude this to be the case.”

Klaaste was thoroughly devastated by this senseless violence and loss of life. “We live in a mad, violent society,” said one editorial in 1990. “If we do not take care, the situation will degenerate into chaos.” If things were this bad, how was a new country going to be built? It went back to the core of what he sought to address when he launched nation building in 1988.

It seemed the violence was getting more heinous. Klaaste, distressed to read a particularly tragic story about a child who was beheaded in Pietermaritzburg, fumed against the barbarism of the violence: “It has been almost impossible to explain the necklace thing away. In fact there is no way we can hold our heads up after that thing. Now we have the savagery in Natal which puts us back to the Dark Ages.”

He went on to say, “come the day of liberation I will take my kids and make a beeline for Beirut. Perhaps it's tough there, but not so primitively savage.” That was the power of Klaaste's writing. When he was furious, he made the world know about it, without any fear or favour.

Despite the Beirut comment, Klaaste remained optimistic that a solution would be

found to end the mayhem sweeping the country. It fuelled his resolve for nation building. He not only wrote against the violence of the 1990s, but he joined various initiatives to find peace. The push for an end to violence unleashed Klaaste the activist, and he enjoyed this role. Under his leadership, *Sowetan* printed car stickers calling for peace.

As it turned out, it wasn't the first time Klaaste had tried to intervene to end violence in the country. He had attempted it as far back as the 1980s when blood flowed freely in Natal. Even though nothing much came of his efforts, he gave it his best shot, realising that involving allies would deliver better results. Not only did he involve the church, but personally "took a rather risky trip to Ulundi to speak to Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi". When that didn't work, he went a step further: "Later I thought the Natal problem should be made a national and even continental one. I had imagined we could get the Organisation of African Unity involved. I tried all that and failed."

So, here he was again, in the early 1990s walking a familiar path. In early December 1990, Klaaste visited Tokoza, a township east of Johannesburg that was one of the areas worst affected by the violence. The township had a high density of hostels that were generally viewed as strongholds of Inkatha. Klaaste came back with a broken heart from what he had seen and got to understand the factors that fuel violence. He said "the visit had dropped scales of utter ignorance" from his eyes and "thrust me out of an ivory tower of intellectual consideration of other people's problems". What did he see in Tokoza? He witnessed despair and got to understand that violence was also fuelled by people's rage at hopelessness. It hurt him to have to acknowledge that this despair was "a reflection of what is happening to over 80% of the inhabitants of this country."

Katlehong, near Tokoza, was another area that troubled Klaaste. In an article "Shame of Katlehong", Klaaste wrote: "The carnage in Katlehong is so serious that we felt duty bound to appeal to our people to stop this violence. Taxi drivers were involved with community members in Katlehong in a battle that led to the death of many people, including children. Although we are once more tempted to put most of the blame on the brutalisation of blacks by the system, we fear that our people are losing their grip on reality. There are several areas of violence wherein blacks are getting killed all over the country. We do not need any more violence. Whether we have all the excuses in the world to justify this type of behaviour, the truth is it is just not acceptable. We are tired of hearing about the phenomenon so glibly called black-on-black violence. This is plain thuggery."

Eventually, in 1991 De Klerk appointed Judge Richard Goldstone to head a commission of inquiry into the violence. The commission would submit 47 reports with

damning findings even against the state. The commission helped to calm tempters somewhat, but the violence continued.

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As events showed, even those close to Klaaste were touched by violence. On July 4, 1990, two gunmen killed Sam Mabe, Klaaste's deputy and nation-building sidekick, in Soweto.

Klaaste was shattered. A beloved colleague had tragically died in the prime of his life. He found Mabe's death ironic: "A few days ago Mabe, with his usual *élan*, threatened to write an angry editorial on the availability of guns in the townships," Klaaste remembered. "We tried to look for this editorial in Sam's file, with no success. His anger, distress and his obvious concern made sense to us."

As editor, it fell on Klaaste to inform Mabe's widow, Latisa, about the tragedy. It was a huge task for Klaaste. He roped in three other senior colleagues. They went to Mabe's house. At the door, the four of them momentarily hesitated to go in. Once inside, they did not immediately announce their mission. Instead, "we tried to sound casual, speaking of cabbages and kings, if you like, postponing the awful moment", waiting for the right moment to drop the bombshell.

A while later, unable to suppress the sad news anymore, Klaaste blurted out why they were there. "If there's a formula to this anguishing job, I'm yet to learn it." To Klaaste's surprise, on hearing the news, Latisa didn't dissolve into sobs nor collapse. "Latisa was like a rock ... She did not shed a tear... It was incredible. It was so courageous I almost burst into tears." Later other family members came in and rallied bravely around her.

After leaving the Mabe home, Klaaste could not control himself any longer and started weeping for his late colleague. "I wept with silent despair for Sam's two sons who had not yet been told the news. These boys are like two rays of sunshine. Who was going to tell them, and how?" Klaaste hoped that Latisa's stoicism would help keep her family standing.

Mabe's memorial was held at Eyethu Cinema in Central Jabavu, Soweto. In attendance were people from all walks of life – educationists, unionists, journalists, church leaders and members of the community. All of them praised his courage and bravery in helping to fight for the cause of the black community. It was clear that his death had dealt a blow to the nation building campaign. A solemn Klaaste informed mourners that Mabe died just as they were about to "embark on an environmental awareness project to address, among other things, the depreciating value of life in the townships".

Klaaste had lost a part of himself. It remained to be seen if he would have the energy to champion nation building on his own. One thing was for sure, he was going to sorely miss Mabe “the elegant, articulate speaker, the meticulous writer”. Fuelling the mystery around Mabe’s death, at the memorial service late PAC leader Zeph Mothopeng had said the murder bore the hallmarks of a political hit since all of Mabe’s personal belongings had been left untouched in the car.

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If the political violence between the ANC and IFP threatened to derail negotiations and delay freedom, right-wingers posed an even bigger threat. They risked plunging the country into a dark abyss. When launching nation building in 1988, Klaaste was correct in his assessment that the country was veered dangerously to the right. In the early 1980s, when P.W. Botha introduced mild reforms to apartheid, a faction of the Nationalists broke away to form the Conservative Party. Yet, in the larger scale of things, Botha’s reforms could hardly be called revolutionary or threatening to the preservation of apartheid. Still, some people were unhappy.

By 1987, the Conservative Party, led by Andries Treunicht, a former Dutch Reformed minister, became the Official Opposition. The Nationalists were concerned and, perhaps, feared that they could lose the next election. Some estimates said one in four white South Africans supported the Conservative Party. By choosing a right-wing party, it seemed white attitudes were hardening. Right-wingers felt that De Klerk was selling out his Afrikaner tribe with his fast-paced reforms. They began talking of isolating themselves in a separate Afrikaner homeland, a *volkstaat*. But the right-wing groupings never agreed on the nature and exact location of this homeland. In the last all-white referendum in 1992, the Conservative Party ran a “No” campaign against De Klerk’s reforms of dismantling apartheid. The outcome of the plebiscite – 68% “Yes” votes – dealt a heavy blow to the right wing. It wanted to hit back.

Among these disgruntled right-wingers was the extremist AWB, which was led by a Eugene Terre’Blanche, a burly man with a white beard and a penchant for riding horses. Some called him ET. He had a talent of making incendiary speeches that aroused the passion of his followers. Klaaste never thought much of Terre’Blanche, describing him as a manifestation of the archetypal fascist leader who appealed to those “people who are frightened of their material security, and have an uncertainty about their future privileges.”



Terre'Blanche's AWB, with a flag that resembled a swastika, had armed commandos. It was clear that they were prepared to fight till the last drop of blood before white privilege was eliminated. Evidence suggests that right-wingers had sympathies even within the police force and army, structures long dominated by Afrikaners.

The AWB talked the language of war. It almost succeeded in triggering one. On the morning of April 10, 1993, Chris Hani, a popular leader of the South African Communist Party, was shot dead on the driveway of his house in Dawn Park, Boksburg. The culprit was Janusz Jacob Waluz, a Polish immigrant with a deep-seated hatred of Communism. He was also a member of the AWB. After being tried, Waluz was sentenced to life imprisonment along with fellow right-winger Clive Derby-Lewis.<sup>8</sup>

Hani's struggle and revolutionary credentials were solid.<sup>9</sup> Young militants adored him. He had returned from exile in 1990 when political parties were unbanned. He had spent many years in Lusaka. Before he died, he endured a vicious disinformation campaign that included reports that he wanted to take over the country through arms. His death threatened to plunge the country into a civil war. Riots erupted throughout the country. It took Mandela's statesman-like television address to the nation to restore calm. It seemed the right-wingers were winning their battle to disturb the march towards democracy.

Klaaste was shattered by Hani's death. As it turned out, a week before the communist leader died Klaaste phoned him – first from the office and, when he couldn't find him, from home. He wanted to extend a special invitation. "I was working on the list of dignitaries I had to contact first by phone before I send them official letters of invitation," Klaaste recalled. When Klaaste couldn't find Hani, he left a message. At 4.30pm on Wednesday April 7, three days before he died, Hani called back at *Sowetan*. Klaaste wasn't available.

Monk Nkomo, the news editor, took the message for Klaaste. Nkomo wrote:

*'Chris Hani returned your call. He will be back on Tues.'*

*Monk*

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<sup>8</sup> Clive Derby-Lewis was a member of the Conservative Party.

<sup>9</sup> Chris Hani was one of the leaders of a military campaign to infiltrate South Africa, under the auspices of the Luthuli Detachment, in what became known as the Wankie campaign in August 1967. It was a joint operation with the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army, a military wing of the Zimbabwean African People's Union. One column of MK fighters were to march all the way to South Africa while others were supposed to help Zipra establish a guerilla base in Lupane, north-east of then Rhodesia. They planned to avoid fighting against the Rhodesian forces, but it did not turn out like that after their presence in the country was discovered, a week after crossing the Zambesi River. For two weeks there were skirmishes against Rhodesian forces, supported by South Africa, near the Wankie Game Reserve. Both columns of fighters lost many men. Some were killed or captured. The South African-bound group retreated to Botswana where they were arrested and imprisoned. Significantly, it was the first direct military contact between MK and enemy forces since the formation of the army and helped to mythologise the Luthuli Detachment (see Karis and Gerhart, Vol 5., 281)

Missing that call tormented Klaaste for a long time. He missed a chance to hear Hani's voice for the last time, a chance to say whatever it was that had made him call the communist leader. But Klaaste was lucky to get an opportunity to pay his respects at Hani's home in Dawn Park before the funeral. He went with Wilton Mkwayi, one of the former Robben Island prisoners De Klerk released in 1989. As had been the case at the Mabe residence three years earlier, Klaaste was overcome with sadness when Hani's elderly father spoke to them in the lounge. Just like in Mabe's case three years earlier, they first settled for small talk and did not directly talk about the tragedy that had befallen the family.

Klaaste was impressed by the whole diplomacy. "People who obviously have class do not wear their tragedy – their pain – on their sleeves." During their chatter, the closest they came to discussing the tragic matter was when Hani's father alluded to "a blanket that had descended over the family and over us". Klaaste found the statement profoundly poetic. He was touched. "Said in Xhosa this (the expression) has a particularly profound texture of pathos that strikes at the heart of this whole business... He was speaking of his family, in the manner that is typical of such venerated antiquity. He was also speaking of the country, of humanity."

Memorial services for Hani were held throughout the country. On April 19, 1993, the funeral service was held at a packed FNB Stadium, outside Soweto, where Mandela led mourners in saying goodbye to a "fighter, revolutionary, soldier for peace". Hani was buried in South Park Cemetery, near his Boksburg home. The day was tense. AWB members could be seen armed to the teeth protecting white property as angry mourners passed by in kombis and buses. Surely, a showdown was coming

As Klaaste looked at this show of naked hatred and noticed that millions of people were grieving in anger he must have wondered what tragedy was going to happen next. In this climate of violence and fear was it still feasible to talk of an inclusive future for the country? What was to be done to eliminate the right-wing menace?



## CHAPTER 11 – A NEW DAWN

Aggrey Klaaste and the rest of South Africa held a collective breath as the country teetered on the brink of catastrophe following Chris Hani's assassination. The right-wing menace continued. Curiously, the assassination injected new urgency into political negotiations in Kempton Park, now called Negotiating Council. The idea was to avoid despondency among millions of South Africans anxiously awaiting the outcome of talks. Bloodletting in the townships continued. Klaaste's wish to migrate to Beirut was getting nearer and nearer.

On June 25, 1993, six weeks after the Hani murder, the unthinkable happened. Throngs of right-wingers converged on the World Trade Centre to petition negotiators for a *volkstaat*, a separate state for white Afrikaners only. They were organised under the umbrella of the Afrikaner Volksfront that included the Conservative Party, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging and various splinter groups. General Constant Viljoen, a former army general, was their leader. On this cold day in June, the right-wingers – women, children, farmers with floppy hats, young men clad in khaki bearing placards with AWB's swastika-like insignia and others in black SS-like uniform – breached the security perimeter and gathered on the lawns outside the conference venue. The men carried pistols, rifles, hunting knives and shotguns. Some also carried braai equipment and cooler bags and seemed bent on having a picnic. The atmosphere was festive but turned ugly in time. Some groups began rocking and vandalising cars in the parking lot and swearing at political negotiators as they arrived for the day's session. This vulgarity was nothing compared to what happened next.

A yellow armoured vehicle was soon spotted waving through the crowd. It headed straight for the venue's entrance and smashed through the World Trade Centre's plate-glass doors. Chanting AWB slogans, the mob followed it and stormed into the venue. The few policemen at the venue were heavily outnumbered and within seconds, the venue was overrun. Frightened delegates locked themselves in empty offices as the invaders swept through the building.

Some of the rioters made it into the negotiating chamber where they made a great show of seating themselves on the hallowed chairs recently evacuated by delegates. They ransacked the delegates' bar, poured juice on the carpet and urinated on desks. Some delegates, perhaps too slow to flee, were assaulted, including the IFP's Getrude Mzizi and Minority Front's Amichand Rajbansi. General Viljoen frantically called for order through a bullhorn but he was ignored.

AWB leader Eugene Terre'Blanche, flanked by his party's Iron Guard, revelled in the chaos. He delivered a passionate speech from the negotiating chamber. It was his finest hour. For him, this display of fanaticism showed that his group of Afrikaners were tough and needed to be taken seriously. When a prayer came booming through the loudspeaker system overhead, the AWB hooligans stopped in their tracks, bowed their heads for a minute before continuing their havoc. Later, after Terre'Blanche extracted a promise from police that no one would be charged for the mayhem, the wreckers retreated to the grounds outside and, as planned, lit up braai fires and guzzled their ice-cold beer. Damage to the place was estimated at hundreds of thousands of rands.

But if the right-wing thought they could hold the country to ransom, they were mistaken. Against all odds, there came a breakthrough in negotiations in Kempton Park. An interim constitution was agreed to on November 18, 1993. An election date – April 27, 1994 – was set. Apartheid's quasi-independent or self-governing homelands were to be reincorporated into the mother country, irrespective of their own views on the subject. Among the Bantustans who continued to hold out against the Kempton Park settlement was Bophuthatswana whose public servants demanded that their salaries and pensions be paid out before the homeland disappeared. With no funds, President Lucas Mangope<sup>10</sup> refused. The workers went on strike, crippling the administration of the homeland. Looting broke out in the capital Mmabatho. Worse, police joined in the anarchy. The homeland's TV station was shut down.

Mangope was part of an anti-election grouping named Freedom Alliance (formerly known as Concerned South African Group). He refused to allow political campaigning in his region. The alliance counted among its members the IFP, led by Dr Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and an assortment of right-wing groups under the Volksfront banner.

When Mangope called on the alliance to help him restore order, the AWB, which was part of the Volksfront executive, eagerly dispatched its commandos to Bophuthatswana with tragic consequences. In the homeland, some AWB men shot at people, killing at least three civilians, one of them a nurse going to work. They assaulted journalists and took their cameras. The plan had been for Mangope's army to link up with Volksfront troops who arrived in Mmabatho without arms. However, Mangope's army mutinied and refused to give weapons to the Volksfront. Given the hostility of the Bophuthatswana army, the incursion

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<sup>10</sup> In one of his columns Klaaste writes about Mangope: "the pompous manner of Lucas Mangope, known to have accused 'his people' in 'his stadium' in 'his country' that they paid too much homage to Mandela and his fellow 'bandits' from Robben Island, are (sic) legendary."

became useless and dangerous. The Volksfront men, including the AWB, had to get out quickly.

Like the invasion, the retreat was chaotic. AWB men got lost in the settlements and kept taking pot shots at civilians on the streets. At some point the AWB convoy exchanged fire with Bophuthatswana soldiers. In the mayhem of that day three AWB men were executed in broad daylight, in the full glare of the media. Klaaste was aghast. “The story of Bophuthatswana was rich in anecdote, incident, colour and pathos. It will take a long time to erase from the memory the voices of the three members of the AWB who were about to be executed near Mafikeng. The scene of looting and mayhem reminded us of the extraordinary days after June 16, 1976,” Klaaste wrote.

This horrific end shattered the white right wing. The illusion of adventure and toughness was punctured and with it the myth that black people could never fight back, one of the underlying myths dating back to colonial conquests. Weeks later, with the right wing’s back broken, Viljoen agreed to take part in the elections. So did Buthelezi in a last-minute deal after he had been promised that his demand for federalism would be considered and that a special place for Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini would be guaranteed in the new dispensation. In the Ciskei, ruler Oupa Gqozo resigned.

The historic elections came on April 27. Azapo and the Conservative Party boycotted the poll, but otherwise everything went smoothly. People of all races stood in long lines and made crosses next to their preferred parties. A sticker had to be pasted on ballot papers to accommodate the late-coming IFP. Despite uncertainty, despite the threat of disruption by the right wing, the poll went off without major glitches and was deemed to have been “substantially free and fair”. The ANC won 62% of the vote and the National Party got 20%. Despite its struggle credentials, the PAC polled less than 2%. A government of national unity was formed. Thabo Mbeki became the first deputy president and F.W. De Klerk the second.

Now it was time to build a new country for all.

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When Mandela assumed power in 1994, his government preached reconciliation and embarked on a Reconstruction and Development Programme. These moves were eerily similar to what Klaaste had been campaigning for all along. For a long time, Klaaste had said the concept of nation building was ideologically neutral and that anyone could take it and use it as a template for any programme aimed at improving South Africa, even if such a

programme wasn't called nation building. He said he would not be bitter if that happened because history would always show that the nation building idea originated at *Sowetan*.

Nation building turned 10 in 1998. Mandela's presidency was coming to an end. He had put his stamp on the kind of South Africa Klaaste and his journalist comrades had fought for all those years – a country governed democratically, at peace with itself, where there was a place for everyone under the sun. Mandela had used various platforms, including sporting events, to push his reconciliation agenda. It worked – somewhat. As sporadic incidents of race crimes, crime, poverty and other ills showed, the apartheid wound was too deep to heal overnight. Klaaste was commended for gallantly trying to make a difference and for embodying the spirit of *ubuntu*, a quality that Klaaste believed was intrinsic to Africans, making them humane and giving them an ability to forgive and forget.

It was with these noble sentiments in mind that Klaaste and his colleagues at *Sowetan* decided to celebrate a decade of nation building by honouring Mandela as the nation-builder of all time. The award ceremony was a black tie affair in Sandton. At the ceremony, Klaaste said of Mandela: "His care for others is a measure of President Mandela's greatness. So we could do no better than use this auspicious occasion to honour him as father of the nation ..."

Klaaste also liked Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor. As someone who loved words and intellectual debate, Klaaste admired Mbeki's erudition and his quest for an African Renaissance. He thoroughly enjoyed Mbeki's famous "I am an African" speech, delivered at the adoption of the Constitution on May 8, 1996. It was one of Mbeki's seminal speeches in which he invoked Africa's glorious past and exhorted South Africans to chart a path to a bright future. It was as lyrical as it was beautiful. This is what Klaaste had been saying all along – Africa has a bright future if its people adopt a positive attitude, rid themselves of their sense of inadequacy and acquire the right skills to run the show. This is what had impressed Klaaste in the writings of Nigerian intellectual Chinweizu, an early celebrator of the greatness of Africa's pre-colonial civilisations<sup>11</sup> "The man told me that my roots were as dazzling as the white man's," Klaaste wrote in *Sowetan*. "He told me to walk tall and exploit some of the values that are native only to my African soul."

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<sup>11</sup> Chinweizu Ibekwe is a Nigerian critic, poet and journalist. Most of his academic and journalistic work centres on the exploitation of Africa by the European colonial powers. He has been termed "Nigeria's most celebrated polemicist." He shot to fame with his book *The West and the Rest of Us* (1975), in which he provides a scathing critique of Africa's political elite, stressing the need to abandon Eurocentrism in favour of revitalising pan-African values and unity. He notoriously criticised Nigerian literary giants such as Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka for adopting a Eurocentric model of writing in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980) that he co-authored with Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike (See Killam and Rowe).

With this Africanist bent in his thinking, and having grown up idolising Robert Sobukwe, any notion of African revival or African celebration of its history greatly appealed to Klaaste. “Mbeki has the ability to produce the most felicitous phrase with infallible facility,” Klaaste said. But Klaaste was wary of mere talk. For him action needed to follow words. He, therefore, exhorted Mbeki to convince people to act in order to achieve the grand vision of African Renaissance.

Klaaste then went overboard with his praise of Mbeki’s oratory, claiming that Mbeki, then deputy president of the country, outshone even the inimitable Madiba. “It is a great pity for while he has heroic elements of leadership, Mr Mandela is not an orator. ... Except perhaps for the speech he made in court when he was sentenced to life imprisonment, he has said the most forgettable things. How many people can remember what he said when he was released after spending twenty-seven years on Robben Island?”

Maybe Klaaste was trying to find the chink in Mandela’s armour. Or maybe he was simply trying to trigger debate. If so, he got what he wanted. One Mzukisi Tyamzashe, based in Cape Town, wrote in to accuse Klaaste of having “rushed to print with hasty judgment” regarding Mandela’s oratorical abilities. Tyamzashe claimed that Mandela was actually a great speaker, one who appealed more to reason than to the heart. “Of course, if one is looking for the odd well-turned but otherwise empty phrase ... Mandela will be very disappointing indeed,” Tyamzashe said.

Interactions of this sort lent great liveliness to *Sowetan*’s editorial pages and no doubt contributed to improving circulation. Some readers, like Tyamzashe, wrote longer pieces, which would be run as a whole in the paper. It meant that *Sowetan* readers could follow the pros and cons of a debate – no matter how trivial. It also showed that there were readers out there who keenly waited to hear what Klaaste the columnist was going to dish up on any given week. Whether they agreed with his views or not, readers knew that Klaaste was going to stretch their minds and take them to any part of the globe with his analysis if he so wished. Some readers complained of his “bombastic” style and his heavy intellectual bent, but most thought his column was a pleasure to read. Still, others felt he reminisced too much about the colourful days of Sophiatown.

Interactions with readers particularly happened around nation building. Ideas would be robustly debated and Klaaste always observed the rules of fair play, running commentary on nation building even if it was not flattering to him and his ideas. However, Klaaste was never a sitting duck for attacks. He gave as much as he got. When Dr Gomolemo Mokahe, a publicity official of the socialist party Azapo, attacked nation building, Klaaste said he was



not overly concerned about the views of a “mediocre medic”. When Harry Mashabela pounced, Klaaste dismissed him as a “fading intellectual”. He had a special term for Eugene Nyathi, the man who had mercilessly grilled him and Sam Mabe at the YMCA in Soweto back in the late 1980s: “dubious commentator”. (This too seemed prophetic when Nyathi was later embroiled in a fraud scandal in Mpumalanga). More sparring with readers and other personalities in the pages of his newspaper lay ahead.

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Overall, for Klaaste the new society represented a new terrain of struggle needing new terms of engagement. While there was euphoria that a world-renowned statesman was rightfully at the helm of a new society forging a new destiny, and while the country was admired for being a beacon of hope after decades of despair, there were myriad challenges that needed addressing. The past still weighed heavily on everyone’s consciousness. A single free election could not instantly erode years of degradation and subjugation. In this new society fears competed with aspirations.

First, there was a need to sort out the small issue of human rights violations during the dark years in the country’s history. The Government of National Unity set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), headed by respected Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to help South Africans come to terms with their past. The commission probed politically motivated crimes of the past and offered amnesty to those who came clean about their deeds and expressed remorse. However flawed the premise and saccharine the goal, it was a significant platform that allowed victims and perpetrators to share their past experiences. Victims grappled to understand why violations had been visited on them. Some were still looking for loved ones who had been missing for years, presumed dead. Victims were to be compensated monetarily.

Through the TRC, the country heard about the heinous political crimes of such men as Eugene De Kock, commander at the notorious Vlakplaas farm near Pretoria, or Craig Williamson, a smooth-talking former spy. Also heard were details of the gruesome murder of American student Amy Biehl by a PAC-affiliated mob in Gugulethu and the killing of churchgoers at St James Church in Kenilworth, Cape Town, in 1993. Dirk Coetzee, who ran off to London after revealing dark deeds that included the gruesome murder of lawyer Griffiths Mxenge (husband of Victoria Mxenge who was also slain), later joined the ANC; he was granted amnesty.

In the spirit of reconciliation for which the commission was set up in the first place, some perpetrators directly asked for forgiveness from victims. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was one of those bruised by the TRC process after it was revealed that her so-called football club had been involved in a series of human rights violations, including the murder of a young man called Stompie Seipei Moketsi. The IFP's Mangosuthu Buthelezi refused to appear before the commission.

Klaaste commented: "What is being revealed at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings are in my view a unique blend of the ruthless and the sublime. The acts of ruthlessness committed against blacks and those who opposed apartheid were vicious and yet quite routine. What is sublime is that such monstrous acts are given a chance of resurrection".

Before the Madikizela-Mandela hearing he said: "Hers is in fact a case study of the damage that apartheid caused."

The TRC also probed the forces behind the violence before the 1994 elections. The findings implicated the former Nationalist state, the IFP and the ANC. On the whole, the TRC did not rock the boat of reconciliation. It didn't indict former apartheid government. P.W. Botha refused to testify and nothing was done about it. De Klerk maintained his innocence throughout. The ANC was reluctant to allow inquiries into death and torture in its training camps in exile. The AWB was granted amnesty for its campaign of terror before 1994. Clive Derby-Lewis and Janus Walusz, already languishing in prison for the assassination of Hani, also applied for amnesty, citing the Hani killing as politically motivated. Maybe due to poor timing and sensitivity of their case, they were turned down.

In the end, Tutu ceremoniously presented the findings to Mandela. The world applauded, tears dried and life moved on. For many years later some victims struggled to get promised compensation.

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One area where there was immediate and dramatic change was in media ownership. This change was to Klaaste's fate. In 1994, a black empowerment group called New Africa Investments Limited (NAIL) bought the *Sowetan* from Independent Newspapers (formerly known as the Argus Group, but now owned by Irish mogul Tony O'Reilly.) Dr Nthato Motlana, the medic-turned-businessman, was chairman of NAIL, the country's biggest black-controlled listed company. Klaaste was ecstatic about his paper's new proprietor. He and

Motlana were among the founders of the Committee of Ten back in the 1970s and had spent time in prison together. For Klaaste, the rise of Motlana and NAIL was a triumphant example of something he'd always stood for – getting black people to acquire economic muscle. A year later, NAIL added *New Nation* to its stable. Reacting to this deal, Klaaste said it would further empower black business and make NAIL a powerful player in print media.

Klaaste did not seem perturbed by NAIL's ties to the ANC elite. His endorsement could be seen as short-sighted or even ironic. Perhaps he did not want to bite the hand that fed him. In the new South Africa, media ownership was always going to a dicey issue. As far back as 1993, craving sympathetic coverage ahead the first democratic elections, the ANC toyed with the idea of creating its own newspaper. The party had also expressed hope that well-meaning benefactors would finance a “democratic publication” that openly supported the ANC. With the economic space opening up for black empowerment companies, NAIL (which counted several ANC heavyweights in its ranks) seemed to be the perfect vehicle for helping the ANC get its slice of the media cake. (The Afrikaner National Party had previously used similar mechanisms to create NP-supporting papers).

At the same time, however, it was also clear that *Sowetan's* editorial independence would now be tested. The political desk was the first to feel the heat from the new bosses. Back then the paper's political editor was Rafiq Rohan, who had served time on Robben Island for being a member of Umkhonto WeSizwe. In fact, Rohan had stayed in Mandela's old cell after the statesman had been moved to Victor Verster Prison. On the eve of the 1995 local government elections, Rohan wrote an opinion piece criticising the ANC for neglecting the Coloured community, only going to places such as Mitchell's Plain and Atlantis around election time so they could be photographed hugging Coloured babies for votes.

Rohan remembers the backlash. “Mandela was furious that I could suggest such a thing – though many to this day agree. My boss Aggrey Klaaste was telephoned by Mandela and was given an earful about my assertions and Mandela demanded that I be relieved of my political editor position. Klaaste, who knew a few choice swear words, swore at me to the high heavens for writing what I did but refused to fire me. Instead a compromise was reached whereby Mandela's sidekick at the time, the brilliant Kader Asmal, would offer a rebuttal to my piece and would be published without comment.”

In the same year, the political desk got embroiled in another fight with management. Led by Mathatha Tsedu, political staffers exchanged heated letters with the paper's general manager Roger Wellsted, alleging that they were under suspicion for being anti-ANC in their work and that Motlana, as an ANC man, was meddlesome in editorial matters on behalf of his

organisation. They wanted assurances from Motlana, Wellsted and Klaaste that “they would not be required ‘to toe the ANC line’”. It seemed the old Black Consciousness-Charterist ghost continued to haunt *Sowetan*.

In his correspondence, Wellsted assured the concerned staffers that Klaaste had always defended the paper’s political independence and that there was nothing sinister about management looking into complaints. He reminded Tsedu and his political team that their work was of a public nature and would from time to time be subjected to “scrutiny and criticism” – just like the politicians they wrote about.

It must have seemed to Klaaste that the more things change, the more they stayed the same. Media freedom was still a hot potato. Slowly, though, Klaaste came to realise that editorial independence was possible only if the paper made money; otherwise, it was a pipe dream. “When you get into trouble with circulation and advertising, they come in and tell you how to run the bloody thing. You’ll never become independent. You will always have some guy behind you, even if it’s a trust. Guys like Motlana, who own this newspaper, are itching to interfere, because black guys also like interfering in things. Thing is, we’re making a lot of money, so they can’t complain,” Klaaste said in an interview. “Motlana and others are businessmen. Their businesses also go through rough patches. We report about it, he gets angry, he calls me. Of course, he’s the boss, so I say: ‘Doc I’ll look into it.’ He doesn’t understand that if I go to a reporter and say: ‘Don’t write about the boss,’ the more he is going to write about the boss. That’s what reporters are like. I know. I was a reporter.”

Eventually, most of senior managers at *Sowetan* left for greener pastures. Thloloe became editor-in-chief of the SABC and later e-tv. Thami Mazwai went to start his own publishing company, Mafube Publishing.

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As someone who grew up under apartheid and suffered for it, Aggrey Klaaste’s views were largely coloured by race. He brought this perspective with him into the new South Africa. It sometimes limited his perspective. Klaaste was part of a generation that never imagined that they would ever live under black rule. It took him a while to snap out of the euphoria. In addition, in the new South Africa a former comrade now paid your salary – as was now the case at NAIL. It tended to complicate relations a bit.

On April 15, 1996, four months after the political staffers had registered their

complaint to management, Klaaste published two articles – his regular On The Line column and a profile (written by him). When looked at in retrospect, the two articles are quite ingratiating. In his column, he gushed about “the shakeup in black business” that “is damn good news to the media and more specifically to the two papers I lead, *Sowetan* and *New Nation*.”

This was in the wake of Cyril Ramaphosa, then ANC Secretary-General, leaving Parliament to join NAIL as deputy executive chairman. In the piece Klaaste went on to extol the virtues of Motlana, his long-time friend and boss: “You would be churlish not to tip your hat to this medical practitioner who has come all the way – a journey, incidentally, filled with pain, uncertainty and anguish. Not everybody loves Motlana. Few can ignore him.”

Klaaste made it known that the corporate world and indeed South Africa needed not to worry about the capabilities of rising black tycoons, for they were driven, working long hours. “Watch the way these men work,” he exclaimed. “It’s fit to make one exhausted just watching the hours they keep.”

He praised Motlana for his stamina, which seemed particularly extraordinary in a man of 70. “One day he (Motlana) spent his entire morning at the Rand Easter Show, where he judged sundry boring things and later gave a major speech. He then went to his Soweto home (he still lives there) and was at a meeting from midnight until the wee hours of the morning.” The next day, wrote Klaaste, Motlana rose from his bed after sleeping for only two hours, flew to Cape Town for a business meeting, flew back to Joburg for a second meeting, followed by a congratulatory dinner for Cyril Ramaphosa and then took a 10pm flight back to Cape Town. “He left most of us gasping,” said Klaaste, who ended his article by saying that “Cyril Ramaphosa is in that school. He has guts and staying power, does not take any bull, but he cares.”

The second article in the same edition was on Ramaphosa. Appearing on page two, Klaaste gushed about Ramaphosa’s political acumen and “his compassion for the masses” regardless of the ideology of the time and his love of jazz and trout fishing. It was a very complimentary picture of the politician-turned-businessman. The headline said “Ramaphosa, a man of many parts.”

Was it just coincidence that Ramaphosa, now a NAIL man, should feature prominently in two pieces in a single edition of the paper? Ramaphosa’s move from politics to business was significant, but Klaaste shied away from probing the real reasons for that move. He did not touch on the fact that Ramaphosa could have turned to business after having had his presidential ambitions frustrated by Mbeki. One would have expected a

nuanced analysis from an intellectual such as Klaaste. Indeed, he seemed almost obsequious toward his NAIL bosses. Or maybe he was genuinely amazed by the new phenomenon playing in front of his eyes – black people at last playing a meaningful role in the economy, something unthinkable in the past.

Klaaste was also quite accommodating when it came to the failings of the new government. He was simply happy that blacks were in power, and was inclined to defend the new rulers when he felt they were getting a raw deal because of race. He never believed that the black government was being given a fair chance to prove itself. Rather, he suspected that there was an expectation that it would fail. He said that sentiment often came from a section of the white population. He even alleged that whites in government, the remnants of the old order, sabotaged government from within. To him, only apostles of doom could be happy or even incite policemen and nurses to strike. “Every time there was social instability or someone tried to rock the private and public boat, the apostles of doom cheerfully announced the imminent collapse of the country. If students at universities and schools went on the rampage, the government was blamed for a lack of management,” Klaaste said.

He also sympathised with government when it was criticised for not doing enough to fight crime. To him, race was the issue. “Everyone is against crime,” he commented. “But listen to the manner in which this anger is expressed by our white compatriots. They are seemingly not even concerned about the criminals who have increased or become so bold. The knives are out for the state that is not protecting civilians. The black government is screwing up as blacks all over always do.”

To Klaaste this pejorative view of black people was not confined to South Africa: “Many whites, not only South Africans, cannot bear black success, except perhaps in accepted race stereotypes like dancing, some music, boxing or some such physical thing, which should not be rugby for that is a white thing.”

Consistently viewing issues through a race lens sometimes led to Klaaste arriving at bizarre conclusions and got him into a few scrapes. One such case was when Cape Town bid to host the 2004 Summer Olympics. The other contestants were Rome, Athens, Stockholm and Buenos Aires.<sup>12</sup> The South African government hoped the bid would boost tourism, create jobs and revitalise road infrastructure in the city. After the Olympics, facilities were to be integrated within government’s reconstruction and development projects. At the beginning of June 1997, as the Olympic race heated up, prominent journalist Shaun Johnson wrote a

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<sup>12</sup> Athens won the 2004 bid. The city had previously hosted the 1896 Summer Olympics and bid for the 1944 and 1996 Games. In 2004, the city defeated Rome in the final round, Cape Town came third.

piece in *Sunday Independent* about Cape Town's bid. Klaaste thought the piece was pessimistic about South Africa. "I know Shaun as a positive writer and optimistic leader. Seldom have I heard him as gloomy as he sounded in that particular piece. He believes the country is going to the dogs," Klaaste reacted. "There might be something else driving the guy, for as I probed the controversial Olympic bid subject with an impressive range of people, quite a few said Shaun was overstating his case."

Later that same week, an aggrieved Johnson wrote to *Sowetan* complaining that Klaaste "misunderstands me when he suggests that I now gloomily believe the country is 'going to the dogs'. I remain as optimistic about our democratic future as I was right through the transition process and have not changed my oft-repeated belief that the country has been saved from the dogs – the vicious dogs of the apartheid years." Johnson went on to re-emphasize that he believed the Olympic bid would be a welcome investment "to help stop the obvious problems of today from running out of control in the future". He said his article had been "an attempt to stir it up among those South Africans, particularly Capetonians, who are still apathetic and complacent about this vital bid, with only three months to go before the world makes its decision".

It is hardly surprising that race should feature so heavily in public discourse in the new South Africa. Race had been the basis separating people and giving advantage to some over others. That race still lingered in the young democracy was demonstrated in a vicious battle that erupted at Wits University, Aggrey Klaaste's alma mater. Klaaste was sucked into the battle.

In 1994, in a move reflecting the spirit of the time, Wits appointed a young scientist called William Malegapuru Makgoba as deputy vice-chancellor. He was the first black person in the university's history to occupy such a senior post. His academic credentials were formidable. The university headhunted Makgoba from the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London.

When he was appointed, Makgoba told the media that he would help Africanise the institution long regarded as a bastion of Anglo Saxon liberal values. He said "a small inbred elite" and a "junta" ran Wits. That's when trouble started. In 1995, 13 of his academic colleagues, all of them white bar one, compiled a damning dossier against Makgoba. Led by historian Charles van Onselen, the academics accused Makgoba of exaggerating his academic accomplishments in his resume, of bringing the university into disrepute by his public statements, and of neglecting his duties. They presented the dossier to the university's vice-chancellor Robert Charlton. Makgoba denied the allegations and said there was nothing in his

resume he couldn't defend. He questioned the methods of compiling the dossier against him. He claimed his accusers were a right-wing cabal motivated by a desire to discredit him and frustrate transformation at the university. Makgoba called for an independent tribunal to look at the claims against him, as well as assess transformation and management at Wits.

The battle lines were drawn. The Wits Transformation Front – composed of the Student Representative Council, the Black Staff Forum, South African Students' Congress (Sasco) and National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu) – threw its lot with Makgoba. More drama followed. After accessing personal information on his adversaries on the university database, Makgoba publicly accused the “Gang of 13” of various misdeeds such as “tax evasion, inconsistent salary scales, nepotism, a lack of qualifications and misrepresentation of credentials”. All charges were denied. For abusing his authority, Wits suspended Makgoba on December 5. Makgoba threatened to reveal more information against his accusers. The Wits front threatened mass action if Minister of Education Sibusiso Bengu did not intervene. The battle of Wits was merely starting.

At the time Klaaste served on the Wits University Council. From the outset, Klaaste made it clear that he backed Makgoba and that the crisis at the university left a sour taste in his mouth. “It seemed pretty clear that the very people who had invited him to fill, for political correctness, the highest post at the liberal Wits University very quickly changed their minds about his suitability,” Klaaste said as the battle raged on. “He did not play the game according to their rules. So they worked to throw him out. This was done in the most scandalous and unprofessional manner.”

Serving with Klaaste on the Wits University Council were prominent South Africans such as Tony Leon, Helen Suzman, Enos Mabuza and Dr Motlana. The council members were divided along racial lines over the Makgoba affair. On December 12, 1996, Klaaste and Motlana furiously walked out of a council meeting following an impasse over Makgoba's suspension.<sup>13</sup> Klaaste was utterly disillusioned: “If changing South Africa is going to require this kind of encounter, then the job is almost impossible. ... I felt the divide between races and between ideologies was so deep there was no hope.”

In the end the Makgoba saga ended as suddenly as it had started. His suspension was lifted in mid-January 1996. Makgoba agreed to return the personal files of his adversaries and

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<sup>13</sup> On Thursday, December 14 1995, two days after Klaaste and Motlana had walked out of council meeting, the ANC issued a press statement signed by Cyril Ramaphosa noting with dismay that the “principled stand” by prominent leaders of the black community indicated that there were severe problems at Wits University. The party called for the immediate lifting of the Makgoba suspension and a start of a mediation process to probe allegations against Makgoba and the thirteen academics.



he was given a position at the university as a researcher. He later moved on to head the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban. Klaaste never forgot the incident. “If anyone thinks racism is gone and forgotten, they should have been at Wits at this extraordinary time. Not only the university but the entire country was split along race lines by this awful academic fight,” Klaaste mused years later. “It was the saddest part of the university’s history.”

To Klaaste the university he had attended in the late 1950s as a skinny kid from Sophiatown, where he felt the sting of racism, where he fell for the bottle, had not changed one bit 35 years after he graduated.

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In the new South Africa Klaaste’s activism continued. In 1996, he and old friend poet Don Mattera were asked to mediate between gangs and a vigilante anti-drug outfit Pagad on the Cape Flats. Mattera, who was associate editor at *Sowetan*, was a former gangster who grew up in Sophiatown. He and Klaaste went back many years. Also, they were both heavily involved in fighting gangsterism in Westbury, near the offices of *Sowetan*. Their efforts were already bearing fruit, which is why gangsters in Cape Town reached out to them. The distance between Johannesburg and Cape Town was remarkable. It was testament to Klaaste’s stature as a community builder.

Sometimes Klaaste’s activism could be triggered by events he witnessed as he went about his business. In early November 1996 his heart broke after witnessing a scene of a bus crash that had happened on Old Potchefstroom Road in Soweto. Klaaste was on his way to work. The day was “sparkling”, with the road fairly busy. The next moment he saw a sorrowful woman seated by the roadside. “Near her was a body covered in an ugly reddish blanket, which proclaimed obscenely that this was a corpse,” he said.

He was touched when he learned that it was the corpse of a schoolgirl, one of several victims of a bus accident earlier. Accidents involving vehicles ferrying school children were sickeningly common on Old Potchefstroom Road, a main thoroughfare in the township that passes by Baragwanath Hospital and was often clogged with traffic. Klaaste blamed reckless driving for the accidents, which often killed children. “One minute they [school children] are travelling in their school kombi laughing, amazed at the magical intoxication of the weather, of life. In the middle of this seemingly serenity, there is a clash of metal and almost as quickly those kids are on their way to heaven. It breaks the heart,” he wrote afterwards.

When he got to work that day, Klaaste, still shaken, rallied his colleagues at work to

design “*Sowetan* stickers for school vehicles with a warning to drivers about school children in transit”. That was Klaaste. If there was a problem, there had to be a solution. Only commitment was required.

He was similarly concerned about the high accident rates elsewhere in the country, particularly around Easter and the festive season. One tragic accident that caught his attention happened in 2002 when 23 school children on their way from a choral competition died between Queenstown and Fort Beaufort after their bus veered off a mountain pass and overturned several times. The children were buried in a mass funeral. Klaaste knew who was to blame. “The reason there are so many road mishaps at busy weekends is not only because of the volume of traffic but because South African drivers have no idea of road safety. The blame, I am afraid, partly lies with the traffic department.”

He said traffic enforcement had to be stricter all year round and that vehicles transporting people needed to be meticulously checked for roadworthiness to prevent accidents. “Putting an unroadworthy vehicle on the road is a major crime. Those who allow this to happen are accomplices to the crime,” he railed.

Klaaste’s activism extended to fighting crime, a scourge in the nascent democracy. It was therefore with great sadness when he learned of the death of one Ebrahim “Oom Abi” Crawley, a resident of Westbury, on January 21, 2001. “Oom Abi” had been shot and killed during a robbery at his shop. Before fleeing, the assailants stole R200 from the shop and one of them uttered a dirty racial remark. A God-fearing man, Crawley died in front of his staff and family. He was 65.

The senseless death shocked and angered Klaaste. Crawley’s shop was a stone’s throw from *Sowetan* office on 61 Commando Road, Industria. Worse, it was reported that the attackers had been black Africans from a nearby settlement. To Klaaste, the last thing Westbury needed was a revival of crime, especially not if that crime was to acquire a racial dimension. Klaaste sprang to action. “The day of the funeral I called MEC (for Safety and Liaison) Nomvula Mokonyane and told her about the crime. Within hours, she was at the Croesus cemetery, but she was unable to get in because Muslim custom does not allow women into the graveyard,” Klaaste said. Instead, the editor and the MEC drove to the Crawley home to personally offer condolences.

Such activism came naturally to Klaaste. Apart from doing his bit to combat crime, he had long-standing ties to Westbury. That is where he went to school. “I am in my second childhood now and I am completing my career in Industria, which is near Westbury station and near Bosmont where Crawley was killed.”

True, in the early years of democracy crime was rampant, with government coming under constant attack for its poor handling of the matter. Many South Africans left the country. Rapid response security companies mushroomed. High walls sprung around people's homes. Despite seeing the effects of crime on the ground, Klaaste could not bring himself to criticise the government on its handling of crime. He once again wore his nationalist blinkers.

In October 1998, he wrote a scathing column against those who complained about crime and threatened to leave the country, most of them white. Klaaste pointed out that under apartheid black people had lived in constant terror that white South Africans had not experienced, hence their desire to flee. "I think people who are forever threatening to leave South Africa should go. They are creating a tension that is unnecessary and uncreative. And we need all our creative skills to get things right in South Africa," Klaaste wrote.

One Kenalemang Moila, a *Sowetan* reader from Randfontein, took exception to Klaaste's soft stance towards government's ineptitude to combat crime. "This week I buried the fifth relative of mine who had died a violent death. To hell with political correctness. It does not ensure my security and survival," Moila wrote. "Is it not the number one duty of a good government to protect its citizens – especially those who are law-abiding? Or is it politically incorrect and unpatriotic to expect that?"

Clearly, Klaaste had touched a raw nerve with his views. By 2001, as communities increasingly lost faith in the justice system and resorted to lynching criminals, Klaaste admitted that "things have fallen apart; the centre cannot hold. I am afraid the moral substance of South Africa generally is in bad shape."

He admitted being aware that "the justice and police systems are not working as well as they should"; that people commit unspeakable crimes and easily get bail; that "beasts calling themselves men" assaulted women and children, even deaf children. But he felt the problem was much bigger. He called on community activists to help bring back sanity to troubled communities. It all started with restoring dignity, he said.

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Another hot-button issue during Aggrey Klaaste's time was the AIDS epidemic in South Africa. No one epitomised the agony and the need for a more vigorous fight against the deadly disease than Nkosi Johnson, a little boy who, in 1997, shot to national fame when a school in Melville refused him admission because of his HIV-positive status.

Born with the deadly virus, Nkosi was adopted by Gail Johnson, a Johannesburg-

based public relations practitioner. The barring of Nkosi at the school made headlines since it contravened the constitutional injunction that forbade discrimination on health grounds.

The media spotlight turned Nkosi into an AIDS activist. His story was made more poignant because at the time the government of President Mbeki was dragging its feet in the fight against AIDS. Nkosi's finest moment was at the 13<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference in Durban in July 2000 where, dressed in an oversized black suit, his body clearly wasting away, he told the 10 000 delegates his life story. When he died 11 months later, Mandela said Nkosi was "an icon of the struggle for life".

With such a heart-warming story of Nkosi, it's amazing that Klaaste did not write about him in his columns. Klaaste liked children, especially children who were socially engaged. Could it be that he feared endorsing Nkosi's cause would anger the black government that he so fervently, even blindingly, supported? Could he have feared that embracing Nkosi would have meant denouncing Mbeki's shortcomings in the Aids fight? Was it a case of self-censorship? It is hard to draw a definite conclusion. But Klaaste's voice was sorely missing in the Nkosi story.

John Kane-Berman, head of the South African Institute of Race Relations, believed he could see through Klaaste's mind in the new dispensation. When the two crossed swords after Klaaste had called him a "right-wing racist", Kane-Berman, a former journalist, felt Klaaste had shifted from being a courageous journalist of the 1970s and 1980s to being an opportunist in the new dispensation after his Black Consciousness lost ground to the ANC. "On the rare occasions nowadays when Klaaste voices criticism, he attacks what he thinks are soft targets," Kane-Berman said. "When it comes to people in authority, Klaaste is ingratiation all the way, reminiscent of the Nat backbench refrain of 'ons dank die minister'." (*Ons dank die minister* is Afrikaans for, "We thank the minister.").

Klaaste was unrepentant, pleading guilty as charged. "As we are all talking about race, let me plead guilty to being as ingratiating as hell when it comes to the powers-that-be, because they happen to be black. I make no apologies for this, as it touches on something South Africans will do well to admit: we are obsessed by race."

In fairness to Klaaste he did redeem himself on the AIDS front. In 1999, when a young HIV-positive young man approached him with an idea of writing a weekly column in *Sowetan* that would advise readers on how to come to terms with the disease and take charge of their sex lives, Klaaste, now editor-in-chief of *Sowetan*, dropped everything to hear him out. As he listened to the proposal, Klaaste instantly saw how the column could link with his nation-building efforts. The young journalist was Lucky Mazibuko. He was fed up hiding his

HIV status. He wanted to educate others about the disease. He asked that his picture be used with the column so readers could see that even ordinary-looking, urbane people could be infected with the virus.

Despite initial unease from some staffers at *Sowetan*, Mazibuko's column Just Call Me Lucky was popular with readers. The column's picture showed Mazibuko wearing rimless glasses and sporting dreadlocks; he truly looked like an ordinary urbanite. By getting Lucky onboard, Klaaste made publishing history. No other paper had ever had an HIV-positive columnist. There were, however, little grumblings from some conservative readers and church groups who accused Mazibuko of promoting pre-marital sex. "The *Sowetan* gave me a voice, exposure and a platform that no other company could have given me," Mazibuko would go on to say.

Mazibuko viewed Klaaste as an adopted father and mentor.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between Klaaste and Mazibuko was very close. "He was more than my leader and my boss in a professional sense. He was a friend and a confidante," Mazibuko says. "He let me in on his worst fears and he sought my counsel when he faced his own demons. Every time I got sick, he would be the first person to arrive at my house to offer assistance to my family. Other than my medical advisor and friend Dr Pupuma, he was my greatest inspiration."

On the whole, the scourge of AIDS worried Klaaste. He organised prayer groups and fervently prayed that a cure be found soon. "AIDS is going to destroy South Africa ... there is already enough evidence that the AIDS pandemic is spreading chaos in urban and, sadly, in rural areas throughout this sad land," he once wrote.

But no record exists of him denouncing the government's tardy response to the crisis.

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<sup>14</sup> In June 2001, as Nkosi Johnson fought for his life in hospital, former state president Nelson Mandela sent him a message wishing him well. "Nkosi Johnson has been an icon of the struggle for life and he fought fearlessly against this ruthless and parasitic infection," Mandela said. "He has touched the hearts and inspired millions of people within and outside the country. The fact that he is a child has endeared him to everyone who has had contact or has seen him, including myself. Therefore, I urge the country and our people to give moral support in his dark hour as he fights for his life" (see <http://nkosishaven.org/nkosi-johnsons-history>)



## CHAPTER 12 – FAMILY AND LEGACY

Eventually, Klaaste divorced Valetta and married Pinky in 2001. He moved permanently from Diepkloof Extension to their house in Dobsonville. The two married in a small ceremony in 2002.

With family life settled, Klaaste continued his nation building activism. On occasion, he took Pinky with him. Living with Pinky seemed to reawaken Aggrey's spiritual side. He had been brought up Methodist, but he and Pinky went to the Roman Catholic Church. From the late 1990s, his columns increasingly incorporated religious and spiritual themes. He was especially fond of Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God*, a book about matter-of-fact wisdom about life. Klaaste frequently quoted Walsch in his column, causing one alert reader to compliment him for the way in which his faith shone through the words.

Aggrey began to work closely with Reverend Dale White of Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre in Roodepoort. Together they sought spiritual solutions to some of the challenges South Africa faced. For example, as part of nation building, the two spearheaded the "100 Days of Goodwill" project aimed at "encouraging people to highlight good deeds, as opposed to bad news that leads to the breakdown of communities".

The spiritual and prayerful Klaaste was far removed from the reckless drinker he had once been. Pinky took it as a sign of transformation. "He used to say, 'Why did my parents die early before they could see how much I have changed? I would have liked them to see that I'm a responsible father now.'" According to Pinky, he'd come to regret his misspent youth, his drinking days.

In Dobsonville, Klaaste's community work continued. When crime engulfed the area, he joined other men in the neighbourhood in patrolling the streets at night. "I joined a group of men who patrol the streets of Dobsonville Extension Two, where I live, after a spate of hijackings," he wrote. The residents blamed *Yizo Yizo* for the upsurge of crime in their neighbourhood. *Yizo Yizo* was a gritty and controversial television series that portrayed the not-so-glamorous life in a township school. The series had a cult following and could easily have spawned imitators in real life. "We started the patrols on a Monday, the night before *Yizo Yizo* is shown, as a show of strength," said Klaaste.

Pinky vividly remembers those ugly days of crime. An empty veld separated Dobsonville from the old townships of Zola and Emndeni, from where the trouble came. According to Pinky, Dobsonville was considered larney and a soft target for criminal activity.

“There were so many break-ins,” Pinky said. “People would say they were going to the ‘suburbs’, meaning our area, to do crime. Men in the area came together to form patrols.”

Klaaste was impressed by the large turnout at the patrols. The patrols gave him a chance to know his neighbours, an invaluable way for an editor to hear views of ordinary people in the community. “Apart from the fact that there is safety in numbers, I was able to meet for the first time neighbours who have been passing as strangers,” Klaaste recalled.

The patrollers would also escort their neighbours returning from work in town. To avoid being misunderstood or mistaken for vigilantes, Klaaste and his neighbours announced their intentions at the Dobsonville Police Station, stressing that they were not a vigilante group but concerned residents. They would start patrolling at about 6pm and stop at about 9pm, going street by street, eyes peeled. Whenever they apprehended a suspect, they would jot down the case and hand him over to the police. They followed the law to the letter.

One of the men Klaaste befriended on these patrols was Johannes Jele, who worked at the dispatch department of a printing firm in Johannesburg. Klaaste’s commitment to the community impressed Jele and other residents. “Although he was a busy man, he made time for the patrols. He never complained about walking. He also pointed out that, in fact, the walks were beneficial to our health given our age. He also said taking walks was a chance for us to get to know each other as a community,” Jele remembers.<sup>1</sup> “He was a brave man. Sometimes, when he returned from work, he would stroll alone in the area before others could join in. He would just say, ‘It’s not problem. It’s part of physical exercise.’”

The patrols, which included two resident policemen, worked. Crime in the area was eliminated, and the community effort created the kind of social cohesion Klaaste had always craved. “We knew one another in the area. We even knew the kids of a particular house and their friends. It meant that we could look out for each other, especially when suspicious characters lurked in the area,” Jele says.

Because Klaaste had a soft spot for the underdog in society, it was common for total strangers to come to his house asking for help. It could be any kind of help – food or money. These supplicants were always desperate. They knew of Klaaste’s legendary large heart even though he was never a rich man. “We gave them whatever we had. Sometimes we would be left with nothing ourselves,” says Pinky, Aggrey’s wife.

At home Klaaste continued to read a lot and spend time with his family. He began to reflect on his life, how his talent was nearly ruined by drink and what he had managed to

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<sup>1</sup> I interviewed Johannes Jele at Aggrey Klaaste’s house in Dobsonville in January 2014.



accomplish once he had vanquished his demons. Then he sat down to write his memoir.

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Klaaste might have cleaned up his ways, but his past caught up with him. In May 2004, Pinky noticed something strange about his health. “He had flu-like symptoms. One day we went to Orlando Stadium and I noticed that he drank lots of water. It was strange. He continued going to work but looked very tired when he came back. I took him to his regular doctor who found nothing wrong with Aggrey.”

Two days later, still concerned, Pinky took Klaaste to another doctor at a surgery near their home. The moment the doctor checked Klaaste, fear flashed in her eyes. She couldn't grasp why the previous doctor had failed to see that Klaaste was in bad shape. Klaaste was immediately rushed to Tshepo Themba Hospital, in Dobsonville, where he lay for a week as doctors conducted endless tests. But Pinky was not happy with how the hospital handled her husband. Klaaste's health wasn't improving and yet it was costly keeping him at this hospital. “When you have medical aid, some of these for-profit hospitals ensure that you stay overnight for no good reason while they milk it. That's what happened to my husband,” she says with sadness.

Klaaste was transferred to Garden City Clinic in Mayfair in Johannesburg. That was when he got better medical care for the first time, but it was evident that valuable time had been wasted at the first hospital. He was wasting away.

What was eating Klaaste? A few months earlier he had been a picture of health. Sure, he was a little slower in his movements as any man at 64 would be. But he was still robust, still his old self – at least outwardly. Doctors found dark spots in his lungs. It was baffling. Klaaste had quit smoking and drinking more than 20 years earlier.

Klaaste spent two weeks at Garden City. While there Pinky was a constant companion by his bedside. In fact, Klaaste insisted that only his wife should wash and feed him. In his darkest moment, he sought the companionship of the only woman who had given him a better life. Every day, she would visit him, hold his hand, and assure him that he would come out of this nightmare. “I used to live at the hospital,” Pinky says. “I only came home to wash and change clothes.”

Klaaste was always grateful for Pinky's company and care. Klaaste's family, friends and colleagues also visited, crowding the ward beyond hospital regulations of two visitors at a time for a patient. There was no way of stopping people from coming. They wanted to be with their hero in his darkest hour. The media followed his decline, often sending reporters

and photographers to interview Pinky. A shy woman, she often turned them down. “I don’t like to be in the media spotlight. The hospital staff would alert me when the media arrived and I would hide,” she says.

When Pinky was home, she would talk to Klaaste on the phone. Maybe sensing that his end was nearing, Klaaste one evening called his wife from his hospital bed. His breathing was laboured, and it was a struggle to hear him. “He asked when I would be coming again to the hospital. I said tomorrow. He then said, ‘No matter what happens to me, you must know that I love you. May God bless those hands that took care of me.’ He asked that I remain strong in my faith and continue to believe in prayer, and look after the children.”

A few hours later, he called Pinky again and said: “Baby, I love you.” Pinky’s sixth sense kicked in. She became worried. Was this Aggrey’s goodbye? She resolved to visit him early the following day. At dawn, the phone rang again. It was Aggrey. He asked when Pinky was coming to the hospital. “I said I’d see him later that morning.”

She was already at the door around 9am when the hospital called with bad news – Klaaste’s condition had worsened. She dashed out of the house to the hospital but traffic delayed her. She got there around 10.30am. She was never to speak to her husband again. By then Klaaste had been admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) where he was put on life support with tubes attached to him. He was fading fast. When she saw him, Pinky burst out crying. She then called her family – her sons Lucky and Jerome as well as Langa and his mother Valetta.

Klaaste lay in ICU for about two weeks. Throngs of visitors came to see him. Bishops and priests came to pray for him. It’s not clear if Klaaste heard them at all; he just lay there unresponsive. His lungs had collapsed. It was a sorry sight.

Visiting Klaaste took an emotional toll on some of his friends. Mathata Tsedu, his former colleague and editor of *City Press*, was deeply affected after his visit. “I went to the Garden City Clinic to see him after hearing he was not well,” Tsedu recalled. “I walked out of there shocked and almost in tears. His lungs have collapsed and he breathes with the aid of a ventilator. He lay there motionless, with numerous pipes in his body and more than six monitors attached to him. I had gone there knowing that he was in the Intensive Care Unit, but what I found rattled me to the bone.”

As this doyen of journalism lay fighting for his life, messages of support came from all over the country. It was clear that Klaaste, through the might of his pen and force of his arguments, had endeared himself to millions of people, even those who didn’t agree with him. He had inserted himself into the national debate at crucial moments in the country’s

history and did his fair share to make the country a better place. Nation building was his crowning achievement. Moegsien Williams, editor of *The Star*, asked the nation to pray for Klaaste: “He is a national treasure and a super human being.”

It turned out that no amount of advanced medical care could forestall the inevitable. Klaaste’s wild years had taken their toll on his body, and he died shortly after 5am on Saturday June 19, 2004. He was 64. They say he died happy, with loved ones around him. It was the end of an era in South African journalism. All that remained was for the country to mourn his loss and continue his legacy.

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In the last years of his life, Klaaste also died professionally. In 1996, he vacated his editor seat at *Sowetan* and became editor-in-chief as well as a director at NAIL, the parent corporation. Mike Siluma became editor. After joining NAIL’s board, Klaaste’s time was increasingly taken up by executive duties. This was not a happy development for a man whose veins pulsed with adrenaline and news instinct. Someone else now determined what story went on what page. Klaaste tried to have one leg in the boardroom and the other in the newsroom, but it wasn’t easy. And then the NAIL beast devoured him entirely.

The year was 2002. Mike Tissong, a long-time friend and colleague, could not forget what happened: “Klaaste’s headache started when he was told he would have to leave *Sowetan* and relocate to NAIL’s offices in cold, corporate Bryanston. To say it broke his heart is to put it mildly. He came to my office three days later after he was told to move and closed the door. He said, ‘I must tell you something that has been heavy on my heart for a while. I must apologise first because I should have told you earlier. I have been told to pack up and go to NAIL. When I was told this, I was so shocked, I said nothing.’”

It seems extraordinary that someone of Klaaste’s stature, who had done so much for *Sowetan*, could be bossed around like that. Also bizarre is the fact that he wasn’t even allowed to plead his case. Klaaste had flown too close to the sun, and now there was a price to pay: he’d become an executive and had been a fairly pliant editor when NAIL took over. To be sure, he was committed to NAIL and had a lot to offer in the transforming corporate space. But he worried that his nation-building efforts would suffer if he moved from Industria, which, for him, was an ideal base to serve his audience with his activist journalism. The place was close to Soweto and accessible to everyone. If a citizen wanted to see Klaaste,

he or she just boarded a taxi on Commando Road and alighted at *Sowetan*'s gate. In remote Bryanston such easy access would be impossible.

Klaaste just didn't see how things could ever be the same again. The move certainly smacked of a power play on the part of NAIL management. He was now their toy. They paid him. He did as told. But he was lucky to have Linda Frampton as his personal assistant. She was always there for him and tried to make life in Bryanston bearable. Today Frampton says she will miss Klaaste's "presence in my life, his humour and honesty".

More misery came Klaaste's way when *Sowetan* moved his beloved On the Line column from its traditional spot opposite the editorial to a less prominent space. A short while later his photo, hallmark of his column, disappeared while other columnists kept their pictures. Looked at even now, so many years later, it is striking how short his column became. It is as if it now had to compete with adverts as space on pages was no longer guaranteed. Was Klaaste being airbrushed?

The last straw came when the paper's new management allegedly told him that he should write his column only when requested. Effectively, he was told to stop doing what came naturally to him, what he had been doing weekly for years, what he had done so well. "It was like an umbilical cord to his beloved readers was painfully hacked off," Tissong recalled. "Klaaste hardly came to *Sowetan* after that and did so reluctantly, usually for nation building trustee meetings. His heart was broken."

Compounding matters was NAIL's declining fortunes in the corporate world. The black empowerment company that had started out so well, greedily acquiring everything on its path, was beginning to flounder. It unbundled some of its assets. There was talk of retrenchments. Uncertainty reigned. Klaaste never knew what the future held. When he tried to talk to the bosses about possibly getting a tiny space from which to work at *Sowetan*, without interfering with editorial matters, he was reportedly shunned.

All these factors led to the rapid decline of his health, say those who loved him. His friend and colleague Don Mattera certainly believed in this theory. Giving a speech at a memorial service at *Sowetan* boardroom in the wake of Klaaste's death, an emotional Don Mattera shouted from the podium: "They killed him! They killed him! They took him to Bryanston to do nothing. They killed his baby *Sowetan*." He then broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Everyone in the room choked with emotion.

When Klaaste's troubles started, when it was clear that he was getting less space in *Sowetan*, Charles Mogale, editor of newly established *Sunday World* offered him space to write a column called Aggrey on Sunday. *Sunday World* began in 1999 as a broadsheet but

was later turned into a tabloid. Klaaste and Mogale came a long way. Mogale had cut his teeth at *Sowetan*, becoming a Vaal correspondent when the paper was formed. Then Klaaste was the deputy editor, a big man on the rise having just returned from Harvard. In a reversal of newsroom fortunes, 20 years later, Klaaste turned to Mogale, one of his protégés, in an hour of need. Mogale, known for his affable humour and easy-going manner, must have been pained by how shabbily Klaaste was being treated by the powers that be. For Klaaste *Sunday World* was a lifeline. Just as he had done with his *Sowetan* column, he had a chance to spin his magic with words, equally delighting and grating people's nerves with his observations.

When Klaaste was going through a rough time at NAIL, the editor of *Sowetan* was John Dlodlu. He became editor in 2002 and came from *Business Day* where he had been deputy editor. Even today, it pains Dlodlu to remember the rumour that made the rounds at the time that he mistreated Aggrey Klaaste. "I had a good working relationship with Aggrey. We never had any problems with each other. In fact, I kept him as a columnist in *Sowetan* and as an editorial consultant," Dlodlu says.<sup>2</sup> About the disappearance of the Klaaste's column, Dlodlu says Klaaste simply stopped sending it in and that was the end.

NAIL had given Dlodlu a mandate "to transform *Sowetan*, to make it reflect the aspirations of its readers". Suddenly, *Sowetan* tried to appeal to the emerging black middle class by covering more serious stories. A paper that had for so long cultivated a jocular, informal "man in the street" tone, suddenly became leaden and serious. It lost its touch with this repositioning. Disorientated readers abandoned the paper in large numbers. Many flocked to *Daily Sun*, a low-brow rag published by Media24 that was more concerned with *tokoloshes* (mythical miniature ogres) than the rise and fall of interest rates. Conceived by Deon du Plessis, *Daily Sun* became South Africa's largest circulating black daily newspaper. It flourished as *Sowetan* floundered.

For black intellectuals, this was a worrying development – the respected *Sowetan* abandoned for a cheap tabloid crammed with toxic news about their community. What kind of readers delighted in the macabre? Klaaste watched on from the sidelines as the paper he had painstakingly built into one of the nation's leading dailies lost ground to trash. His heart broke even more. Some allege these developments took a toll on his health.

After Dlodlu, Thabo Leshilo took over as editor-in-chief of both *Sowetan* and *Sunday World*. When Leshilo got a Nieman Fellowship to go to Harvard, like Klaaste in 1979, Bongani Keswa, one of the original founders of *Sunday World*, filled in for him. Current

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<sup>2</sup> I interviewed John Dlodlu on September 13, 2014 in Hyde Park, Johannesburg.

editor of *Sowetan* is Mpumelelo Mkhabela. While all these editors have fought to stem the loss of readers, employing many tricks such as redesigning the look of the pages and employing contemporary columnists, the paper has never quite recaptured the vibe and stature encapsulated in its slogan, “The Soul Truth”.

Today, nation building is no longer a concern for *Sowetan*. The nation-building desk was done away with in a major reshuffle in 2012, its activities placed within the marketing department. And that was the end of *Sowetan*’s attempt to maintain an ambitious, socially engaged initiative. It is hard these days to discern any trace of Aggrey Klaaste on the paper’s pages. He lives only in memories of older staff he inspired with his caring nature, wisdom and leadership.

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Curiously, a day before Klaaste died, the Black Management Forum, a powerful voice of black business, awarded him and Steve Biko presidential accolades at a gala dinner in Johannesburg. Klaaste was recognised for his community activism under the nation-building banner. Biko got a lifetime achiever award. Neither men who had cared so much about the upliftment of the black community was present to receive the honour, drink in the udulation and urge their admirers to continue the good fight.

Tellingly, five years before, in 1999, something similar happened. Klaaste and Biko were joint recipients of the prestigious Order for Meritorious Service Class One Gold. The two icons, separated by time, were too big to ignore. Mandela bestowed the Order for Meritorious Service honour on Klaaste in his last act as state president. On that day in 1999, as he sat in the audience, Klaaste must have been mighty pleased with himself. He must have marvelled at the journey he had travelled in his lifetime. The once ragged Sophiatown schoolboy had become a man, and the man was now entering the pantheon of great South African heroes, where his name would stand alongside those of Govan Mbeki, Professor Phillip Tobias, Advocate George Bizos, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Dr Nthato Motlana, Anton Rupert, Braam Fischer, Abram Ongkgopotse Tiro, Harry Oppenheimer, Archbishop Denis Hurley, JB Marks, Chris Hani, Joe Slovo, Duma Nokwe, Helen Joseph, Professors James Khumalo, Khabi Mngoma, Mazisi Kunene and many others.

Klaaste couldn’t contain his happiness about his admission into this elite group. “There is a frisson, a special surge of excitement sitting in the same row with septuagenarians and other leaders who have made their contribution to the country. It’s humbling as I know

there are men and women in my craft more deserving. But to cut all the bull, I feel proud as hell,” he wrote in *On The Line*.

While he might have been a recipient of many other awards and honours, including three honorary doctorates – from University of Transkei in 1992 (Literature and Philosophy), Rhodes University in 1999 (Literature) and University of Durban-Westville in 2001 – the Order for Meritorious Service was a completely different story. It was a jewel in the crown. It was the culmination of a long and difficult journey with his newspaper comrades such as Doc Bikitsha, Joe Thloloe, Percy Qoboza, Casey Motsisi, Joe Gumede, Sy Mogotsi, Sam Mabe, Joe Latakomo, Stan Motjuwadi, Don Mattera, Thami Mazwai, Mathatha Tsedu, Phil Mthimkhulu, Alf Kumalo, Willie Bokala, Joshua Raboroko, Moffat Zungu, Elliot Makhanya and many, many others.

Aggrey had fought alongside all of them in the trenches of journalism. They had seen the worst of apartheid. They had turned to reckless boozing and living dangerously. Some survived to tell the tale. Others were not so lucky. But the larger story is that when they mended their ways, they carved a name for themselves in the history of black journalism, doing so at one of the most volatile periods in the history of South Africa. They reported under fire.

“I bequeath this (award) not only to the nation builders who have worked with us, but to my colleagues who survived a cruel, fiendish apartheid social engineering that tried to turn us into a nation of drunks,” Klaaste wrote, meaning every word.





## EPILOGUE

When Aggrey Klaaste died a flood of tributes poured in from all sectors of South African society. A day after his passing, former President Nelson Mandela visited Klaaste's family in Dobsonville. In paying tribute, Mandela said: "Klaaste will not be easily forgotten because he loved this country. He was an inspiring man and extremely gifted."

President Thabo Mbeki said: "Aggrey Klaaste will always be remembered for his contributions to spirited journalism and nation building. His brave stand against the tyranny of apartheid inspired particularly the youth of South Africa. He represented the established reality of black intellectual achievement, many years before the arrival of democracy for which he struggled."

The South African National Editors' Forum said: "He came from a proud class of black journalists who knew what the term 'reporting under fire' meant. His commitment to the freedom struggle through his journalism and community-based work came at a great personal and professional cost. We will miss his likeable eccentricity, his exuberance of spirit and, most of all, his irrepressible belief in the right to dignity, respect and well being of all people. *Hamba kahle*, Aggrey. May you rest in richly deserved peace."

Justice Malala, editor of *ThisDay*, wrote: "In the late 1980s Aggrey Klaaste was one of very few who realised that the South African story had changed: that the fundamental and peaceful transformation was at hand and that the conflict and confrontation of the past was about to be put on the backburner. With his nation-building philosophy he began to prepare for a new South Africa. It is a tribute to him and others like him that we live in this peaceful, democratic and united country today."

Professor Guy Berger, head of department of journalism at Rhodes University, said: "It should be said that Mr Klaaste was an excellent writer, and a perceptive and honest communicator. He was politically independent and not afraid to point fingers at anyone."

Mosibudi Mangena, President of Azapo and Minister of Science and Technology, said: "Aggrey Klaaste did not have a big body, but he was a huge humanitarian giant, whose profile towered over the landscape of our beautiful country."

Bantu Holomisa, leader of the United Democratic Front, also paid tribute: "Klaaste started the nation building concept long before South Africans gained their freedom, and the programmes he put in place then have long yielded fruit for our children, and many generations to come."

Barney Mthobothi, an eminent journalist who became editor of *Financial Mail*, eulogised: “Those of us who had the honour and good fortune to have come into contact with him – and there are thousands of journalists who went through his hands – will forever be grateful to have been beneficiaries of his boundless generosity. He was a giving man – his time, advice, and a tongue-lashing whenever the occasion called for it. Even at his elevated station, no subject or person was insignificant for his time or attention. He was ready to chew the cud. He was everything we want from a newsman – an exceptionally gifted chronicler of society, brutally frank and honest to a fault. He was a free spirit in the true sense of the expression.”

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About 2 000 people from all walks of life attended Klaaste’s funeral service at Grace Bible Church in Pimville, Soweto. It was a sombre and emotional farewell. A look at the dignitaries present amply demonstrated that a great man had died. There were two Nobel laureates – former state president Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu – along with President Thabo Mbeki, *Sowetan* managing director Mike Tissong, Chief Executive of Johannesburg Tourism Agency Deon Viljoen and many other high-profile friends, colleagues and neighbours.

The cortege then left for Avalon Cemetery where Klaaste was buried. An elaborate black tombstone with glass panels was erected to mark the spot where his body was interred. This was Pinky’s monument to her love for her departed husband and father of her children. It was also a symbol of family strife. Before the funeral there had been some wrangling about which of the Klaaste residences would host the proceedings. Valetta wanted Diepkloof and Pinky Dobsonville. Not knowing that Klaaste had divorced Valetta, some people believed he still lived in Diepkloof Extension. Others chose to believe there had been no divorce at all and took sides in the simmering tug-of-war for Klaaste’s remains. In the end, though, sense prevailed, and Dobsonville was accepted as the main home. As Pinky says, the whole issue was a non-starter since she was the last woman Klaaste married. More drama followed.

A day after the funeral someone smashed the tombstone on Klaaste’s grave. Surrounding graves were left untouched. It was a vicious attack and a desecration of the memory of a man who had done so much to instil peace in people’s hearts. “Whoever did this

has hurt my family,” Pinky said at the time. Perpetrators were never found.

Things got worse. Funds due to her as inheritor of the Aggrey Klaaste estate did not come through when Klaaste’s first family contested his will. Pinky alleges that Valetta was behind the move. “Lawyers had to intervene and point out that I was his legally married wife,” Pinky said. “For about six months we battled before we got any cent from Klaaste’s monies. We had no food in the house.”

She still finds it difficult to talk about the pain she endured after Klaaste died. A staunch Roman Catholic, she insists that she has forgiven her opponent and holds no grudges. But relations between the two women remain very cool. Each exists in her own world with her children.

It’s been 10 years since those sordid events, but the alienation lingers. From time to time Langa, Aggrey Klaaste’s son with Valetta, visits his half-brothers in Dobsonville. He is the only link between Diepkloof and Dobsonville, and possibly the only hope for proper reconciliation between the two sides, an outcome that is highly desired. A united Klaaste family could play a big role in uplifting the name of one of the best journalists South Africa has ever produced. Klaaste’s life story – climbing out of the abyss of booze and self-destruction, caring for the less fortunate, and fostering of united, prosperous and peaceful communities – could be used to inspire others.

That’s what Aggrey Klaaste would have wanted. That was his legacy.



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