

Professor Ntongela Desmond Joseph Masilela - A Tribute

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Ntongela Desmond Joseph Masilela was born on 9th December, 1948 in Orlando West/Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa and passed away on 6th July, 2020 in Roi Et in the Isan region of Thailand. He was the first-born son of Dr. Albert Mahlathini Magija Masilela and Mrs. Florence Vuyiswa Masilela and elder brother to Aubrey Monde Xavier, Godfrey Basuke Mzwandile, and Siphon Temba Buxton. Florence Vuyiswa was the daughter of Tata Xhala and Makhumalo Mtshabe, both of Tsomo, Eastern Cape. Albert Mahlathini was the eldest son of Mr. Joseph Somkgukulushi Masilela of Rapotokwane, of the Province of Limpopo, and Bella Nomakhosi from the Chidi family in Pieterskraal. Their love for education so impacted the young Albert Mahlathini that he was among the first, if not the first, to acquire a university degree in that village. This love of education was passed down through four generations of Masilelas - it resulted in Ntongela Masilela, who was an internationally renowned South African intellectual historian and Marxist scholar.

Ntongela Masilela began his primary education in South Africa attending Thulasizwe Community School and Montebello Primary School. He completed his secondary and high school in Los Angeles, USA and at Upper Hill High School (formerly Delamere Boys School) in Nairobi, Kenya. He credits these years in Kenya, and the influence of Professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah, who first introduced him to the writings of Frantz Fanon, as particularly formative in guiding him to his intellectual career. He was awarded a scholarship to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the alma mater of Albert Mahlathini Magija Masilela, where he obtained a Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD) in Sociology in 1977. His dissertation was titled "Theory and History in Marxist Poetics".

After his studies, Professor Masilela held a research position at the Fanon Research and Development Center, which is affiliated with the Department of Psychiatry of the Charles R. Drew Postgraduate Medical School and the Martin Luther King, Jr. General Hospital in Compton, California (USA). Professor Masilela returned to Kenya in 1979, where he taught at the University of Nairobi. He later moved to Poland and studied at the Łódź Film School in Łódź, and subsequently he lived in the former Federal Republic of Germany where he wrote articles on African and European dance, African politics, theory, culture and intellectual history, while participating in conferences during his years as a post-doctoral fellow in the Media Studies Department at the Technical University in West Berlin. During his time in Poland and West Germany, he met and married his first wife, Urszula Wanda Masilela. His two daughters, Anna Vuyiswa and Nomaduma Rosa, were born in Europe. In the time between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990, Ntongela and his family relocated to the United States of America.

Professor Masilela was a tenured professor at Pitzer College of the Claremont Colleges in Claremont, California (USA) for over twenty years. He taught literature, cinema studies, developed an interdisciplinary major, and established a research center for the study of African intellectuals. Professor Masilela's greatest scholarly contribution was his research into the intellectual history of nineteenth century black South African writers, poets, and public intellectuals. He developed an unparalleled archive of articles and newspaper clippings which reflect the intellectual contributions of black South African scholars and writers. He published a series of books chronicling his research as well as anthologies which gathered essays and articles he had unearthed in his tireless research. Titles include: *Black Modernity: 20th Century Discourses between the United States and South Africa* (1999); *Internationalism and Nationalism in Medicine: Henry Sigerist* (2005); *The Cultural Modernity of H.I.E. Dhlomo* (2007); *An Outline of the New African Movement in South Africa* (2013); *The Historical Figures of the New African*

Movement: Volume I (2014); *A South African Looks at the African Diaspora: Essays and Interviews* (2017), all published by Africa World Press. He also co-edited a collection of essays on South African cinema with his colleague Dr. Isabel Balseiro, *To Change Reels: Film and Culture in South Africa* (2003). In addition to his individual publications, Professor Masilela contributed countless articles to a wide array of international journals and anthologies, and participated with boundless intellectual energy in international academic conferences and symposia, often returning to South Africa upon invitation during his later years. Upon his retirement, he moved to Bangkok, Thailand to live with his second wife, Wasana Suesena Masilela, where he continued to make intellectual contributions to the field of South African intellectual history.

Professor Masilela cited the following intellectuals and artists of the twentieth century as profoundly influencing his work: Henry E. Sigerist, Manfredo Tafuri, C. L. R. James, César Vallejo, Frantz Fanon, and H. I. E. Dhlomo. His mentors included the Pan-Africanist Dr. Ras Makonnen and the South African author and professor Es'kia Mphahlele, whom Professor Masilela would frequently visit in Lebowakgomo, Limpopo Province; close friends and colleagues included the South African poet Mazisi Kunene and renowned Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, amongst others.

Professor Masilela has contributed greatly to the writing of the intellectual history of South Africa. In the words of H. I. E. Dhlomo, the towering South African cultural historian and intellectual to whom he devoted much of his academic writing: "One thing, so far we have been guilty of, [is] neglecting our cultural men. They write and write, but very little is written about them... We need more books by Africans on Africa... Another book we need is on the New African. Let us forget our lamentations for once, and tell of our achievements." (H.I.E Dhlomo, "The Cultural Front", *Ilanga lase Natal*, October 25, 1947). Professor Masilela was a lifelong Marxist and much of his writings and research can be accessed for free on his research website, THE NEW AFRICAN MOVEMENT: <http://pzacad.pitzer.edu/NAM/>. His greatest hope was that his work be continued, as many histories forgotten or erased still need to be unearthed and shared.

Ntongela Desmond Joseph Masilela is survived by his two daughters, Anna and Nomaduma; their mother Urszula; his loving wife Wasana; and two brothers, Aubrey and Temba, and their extended families in South Africa, Kenya, Poland, and Thailand; as well as respected colleagues in South Africa, the United States of America, and around the world.

Ndongela Sombana Sanyakomo