

*from The Wheel Is Turning—The Struggle
Moves Forward · Alfred Temba Qabula*

1.

Kill them all—the dogs.

Because, they say, they are becoming
smarter.

They do not discriminate:

the ignorant and the wise—exterminated

But still,

truth remains unchanging

it cannot change and lying

causes anger

Our heads—held high

they hide theirs

The struggle moves forward

backwards never.

2.

The English arrived—

and we were made ministers of religion

teachers and clerks

taught to be kind,

humble, trusting and full of respect

but ignorant of the ways our country was governed

we began losing

whatever we cherished for hope.

4.

The struggle moves forward
backwards never
the wagon wheels turn
and their sound's echo
can be heard in our hearts and our souls:
the rightful owner of the coat
stands freezing
rain soaking his bones
shredded by frost and cold winds
But you? You are smug
For your children? Only the best
and he? the crumbs
and troubles
a stranger
coatless in his rightful place.

6.

The struggle moves forward
never backwards at all.
The earth has been gulping innocent blood
— the first blood spilled in this struggle
the very same earth we fought to retain
since then we have noticed your conscience pricking
your heart has found no peace
days and nights you use for pacing

7.

You pace up and down
as ammunition you cargo on innocent people
Coward
you are smudging the prospect of light
Your Casspurs, your teargas and guns
your vans and your dogs
do not dampen the fire
they feed it.

11.

So many people detained
and so many people killed
that resistance should have been over by now
But the wagon-wheel turns
rolling forward
and the struggle continues
Your rulers' merciless detentions
and jails
malfunction
and the struggle continues

13.

Now we are your lambs for slaughter
We are a torturing game for your friends
you look on and laugh at us
when we demand our rights
when we condemn exploitation
and shout about our unpaid labours
you lead us onto paths full of traps
but your days and those of your friends
have been numbered
and your friends will gladly give you away

14.

And then, when our children
complain of their gutter education?
you deliver them for slaughter
too
but remember you do not weaken our struggle
it
strengthens

15.

The day is near
when your murderous weapons
will stand witness
for the higher judges of truth
who won't be bribed with your money
and then the filth of your deeds
will become known
Then we shall clasp you with
the steady grip of our hands

19.

When we gather,
singing and orating our movement's slogans,
we know
that the souls of the people you have killed
are with us in the struggle
Your tyranny cannot overpower our struggle
ours continues going forward
—backwards never
the wheel is turning
by tomorrow you shall be trying to flee
but you shall be eating dust
stamped to the ground like a snake
—a trying punishment awaits you.

20.

The wheel is turning
Oppressor—wake up!
Beware and be conscious of what you are up to
Tomorrow the throne you occupy
will become just another seat for others
the others whom you hate
will not allow you to forget their injuries
which you have inflicted
The wheel is turning
and there shall be no mercy for those killing
innocent children.

The wheel is turning
freedom is nearer
our strength and our dignity
—increasing
we shall conquer
as your time is coming up.

22.

Even for those you did not look like an oppressor
who ignored your actions
and respected you,
you are becoming a monster
they do not trust you anymore
they do not address you as a friend
you are becoming an enemy.
Even those who ignored our struggles
have opened their eyes in horror
because you do not discriminate
and your bullets do not discriminate
everyone's up for the killing

25.

The wheel is turning
the struggle moves forward
backwards, never
the day is drawing closer
when not a single person shall again
be killed by your bullets.
but the people you have killed—
their blood sucked dry
by this drought-stricken earth,
all those killed by amabutho
they will rise up from the graveyards
and with their bare hands
shall tear you to shreds
But you will not die
You will wish you were dead
but you won't be.

26.

The wheel is turning
the struggle moves forward
backwards never
your sun is setting
your days draw near
your friends, your allies
and your propagandists
they will desert you
they shall climb on platforms in front of people
and denounce you.

The struggle continues
and your Saracens
your machine-guns and sten-guns
your aeroplanes
your Casspirs and your kwela-kwelas
your teargas
shall not break our strength
Your day is setting
Maye, unto you that day.

29.

The wheel is turning
the struggle moves forward
we are not to lose strength
we die on the one side
we rise on the other
and continue
on and on with our struggle
until you become mad
a lunatic oppressor
wearing garlands of tree-leaves on your head
and trying to end off your life
because the struggle continues
the wheel is turning.
we move on.

It was during the 1986 Dunlop strike, when we occupied the factory, that I composed and recited the poem you just have been reading: about the wheel turning and the struggle moving forward. It was also after my friend Toto Dwaba was assassinated and found dead at Umtunzini Sugar Plantation. His hands, one of his ears, one of his eyes and his tongue had been cut from his body. He was the Durban chairperson of the Release Mandela Campaign.

The other workers were very pleased with the poem. After a while one of my co-workers came and asked me to whom was this poem directed. I answered that the poem was not directed at anyone. It was rather a response to our situation now in the country. He said that I was lying and that the poem was talking about the Kwazulu authorities and government.

I said: “No, it can’t be because I am quite ignorant about Kwazulu politics. And anyway the poem could not be against them because they are also being governed by Pretoria, and they also suffer like all black people in South Africa.”

He said then that I should write something about the Kwazulu authorities. I said I don’t see myself ever doing that because I am ignorant of all these things. My aim was to praise the machine operators, the turners of wheels in the factories, the roadworkers, the diggers of gold and our organisations through which we were progressing. He left me without saying goodbye.

After a Saturday afternoon workshop on a play about M’kumbane, at about eight in the evening I returned to my uncle’s place, at Amauti, Inanda. My family said that there had been visitors looking for me who claimed to come from an organisation fighting against the removal of people from their places. They were looking for that poet: me. My family were worried because one of them had a revolver under his jacket and, as my little nephew noticed, the car had a Jo’burg registration number and a KwaZulu Police (ZP) third-party.

I told my kin that those people were no friends of mine and they should not co-operate with them. From then there were many more visits, which made me decide to leave home. I have been uprooted since then.