Simon Nkoli

South Africa's first true renaissance man

July 1, 1999 By Mark Gevisser

Simon Tseko Nkoli died of AIDS-related illness on the eve of World AIDS Day last December at age 41. He never got to see South Africa's leaders finally taking the epidemic seriously—something he raged at them about for years. But if there is tragedy in this, there is also Simon's impeccable feel for publicity: If he had to die, he may as well put his passing away to good use.

Simon's brilliance, as an anti-apartheid student leader, as the founder of the black gay movement in South Africa and as an AIDS activist in his later years, was his understanding of the tenet "the personal is the political."

While in jail in the '80s for anti-apartheid activities, he came out to his co-accused during a heated debate about homosexual behavior in jail. So shocked were these anti-apartheid leaders that at first they demanded he be tried separately. But his unique combination of charm and perseverance won out.

Terror Lekota, who was jailed with Simon for years and is now the chair of the African National Congress (ANC), remembers him as one of the most enthusiastic, caring and intellectually curious of his co-accused. And so, when it came to writing the new South African constitution, Lekota asked, "How could we say that men and women like Simon, who had put their shoulders to the wheel to end apartheid, how could we say that they should now be discriminated against?"

Simon joined the white, conservative Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) and proceeded to turn it upside down. Just as he would not accept the homophobia of his black comrades, he could not abide the racism of his white ones. Once his ideas and GASA proved to be incompatible, he founded Gays and Lesbians of the Witwatersrand, which organized South Africa's first Gay and Lesbian Pride March in 1990.

There is a Simon Nkoli Street in Amsterdam; a Simon Nkoli Day in San Francisco. He has an international name recognition few other South Africans share. But the best place to see Simon's legacy is in the vibrant black gay subculture in South Africa's townships. These young men and women are the Nkoli Generation; they saw articles about him in the press, they flocked to him. He made something of a political home for them, giving them an ideology that fused the freedom struggle with a sense of how they might find redemption from their families' rejection through gay

community and activism.

I often watched Simon at safer sex workshops, at funerals, at parties. He had a mischievous smile—“all teeth and eyes,” as his partner, Roderick Sharp, remembers—that could turn even the most glowering old Auntie (not to mention a macho Treason Trialist) into a fan. There are very few South Africans who approached activism as creatively as Simon did.

Simon Nkoli had been infected with HIV for about 12 years, and had been seriously ill, on and off, for the past four. He suffered greatly over whether to go public about his HIV status; but once he made the decision, he embraced it with characteristic fervor. Given both his personality and his understanding of politics, he could not have done otherwise.

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