



## Nkoli, Tseko Simon (1957-1998)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The founder of South Africa's black gay movement, Simon Nkoli embodied its link with the anti-apartheid struggle. His prominent participation in the campaign for black freedom and his association with that movement's leaders were instrumental in gaining recognition for gay rights in his country. As an AIDS educator and organizer of South Africa's pride celebrations, he worked to unite black and white gay communities in a common cause.

Tseko Simon Nkoli was born in Soweto on November 26, 1957. South Africa's apartheid laws imposed severe limitations on his family's opportunities. He tells the story of how, at age nine, he locked his parents in a wardrobe so they could escape detection from police enforcing the pass laws, which restricted where blacks could live. That experience left a powerful impression that he used later on as a metaphor for living a closeted life.

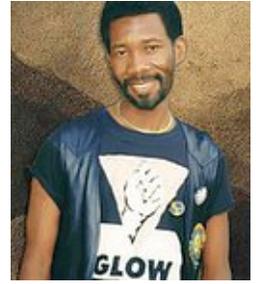
Nkoli spent much of his childhood with his grandparents, low-income tenant farmers on a white-owned estate. He craved education and, against the resistance of the landowner and his grandfather who needed his labor, stole away when he could to attend the rural schools. Eventually he rejoined his mother and stepfather in the Sebokeng township to continue his education.

Nkoli recognized his feelings for other men while a teenager. Identifying as a gay man was confusing because the seSotho word for homosexual is *sitabane*, which implies hermaphrodite. At 18 he came out to his mother, who took him to a priest and a series of local healers or *sangomas* who attempted, unsuccessfully, to argue him out of it. At 19 he met his first lover, a white bus driver named Andre, through a pen pal magazine.

The mothers of both young men opposed the relationship, Simon's because it was gay and Andre's because it was biracial. Simon's mother arranged for him to see a psychologist, who turned out to be gay and assured him of his rationality. Matters came to a head when the lovers made a suicide pact; Nkoli's mother learned of it and intervened. The pair were able to live together once they became college students in Johannesburg. Even then, however, to conform to enforced segregation, Simon had to pose as Andre's domestic worker.

Nkoli's anti-apartheid activism began when he was arrested four times in the student rebellions of 1976. In 1979 he joined the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and became secretary for the Transvaal region. When his homosexuality became known, it was debated among his fellows within the organization. They voted to retain him in the post.

After his first relationship ended, Nkoli found few resources for gay people of color. Most gay venues, excepting a few cruising areas, were in districts reserved for whites. In 1983 his allegiances in racial and sexual identity politics intersected: he came out in an interview in the *City Press*, a black newspaper; he also joined the virtually all-white Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), which maintained an apolitical distance from the apartheid struggle. Receiving little support within GASA for advocating that they relocate



Tseko Simon Nkoli in 2006. Image courtesy Braxton University. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

their social activities away from whites-only facilities, in May of 1984 he started The Saturday Group, South Africa's first gay black organization. It was short-lived, however, because Nkoli's political life soon took a dramatic turn.

In the 1980s Nkoli's student activism resulted in his joining the African National Congress and the United Democratic Front. In 1984 he helped establish the Vaal Civic Association to undertake tenant organizing in the Delmas township. Nkoli and 21 others from the UDF were arrested after a march protesting government-imposed rent hikes and charged with "subversion, conspiracy, and treason," crimes subject to the death penalty.

The "Delmas Trial" lasted four years. While in the Pretoria Central Prison, Nkoli came out to his comrades during discussions of prison sex. This action and the debates it inspired prompted UDF leaders such as co-defendants Popo Molefe and Patrick Lekota to recognize homophobia as a form of oppression.

During the trial, Nkoli's substantiation of his attendance at a GASA meeting was a crucial point in countering the prosecution, which had tried to place him at the scene of a murder. This defense was also a public coming out and brought the Delmas Trial to the attention of the international gay rights movement. The letters of support he received, especially from European activists, were an important demonstration of solidarity. Nkoli was acquitted in 1988 and he and the rest of the "Vaal 22" were freed. However, during his imprisonment, Nkoli learned that he was HIV positive.

Ironically, GASA had withheld its support during the trial. Discerning a need, upon his release Nkoli helped found the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Witwatersrand (GLOW), the first large black-based glbtq organization in South Africa. Beginning in 1990, GLOW organized the country's first three pride marches and became the model for several other gay groups in the black townships.

Nkoli continued his participation in the ANC, meeting with Nelson Mandela in 1994. His visibility in the anti-apartheid movement merits much of the credit in winning the ANC's support for gay rights, support that translated into tangible deeds once the ANC gained power. In 1996 South Africa became the first nation to include "sexual orientation" in its constitution's anti-discrimination clause. This milestone victory for equality is the fountainhead from which many other gains for South African glbtq people flow, including the invalidation of sodomy laws and the recognition of gay relationships.

In 1990 Nkoli became one of the first South African activists to publicly acknowledge his HIV-positive status. He co-founded the Township AIDS Project (TAP) and the Gay Men's Health Forum, working assiduously to bring AIDS education and counseling to disadvantaged populations. He was also a founding member of both the Positive African Men's Project and the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (now the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project), as well as a board member of the International Lesbian and Gay Association.

Playful and irreverent, Nkoli inspired the devotion of South African progressives from all backgrounds and drew an international following. A 1989 speaking tour of Europe, Canada, and the United States raised \$35,000 for TAP.

Simon Nkoli died of AIDS in a Johannesburg hospital on November 30, 1998. A memorial at St. Mary's Anglican Cathedral was followed by a funeral in Sebokeng attended by many of the glbtq and anti-apartheid movements' luminaries. The September 1999 pride march was dedicated to him and included a stop at the newly named "Simon Nkoli Corner" at the intersection of Pretoria and Twist Streets in Johannesburg.

His papers at the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa include his letters from prison, which were the basis for Robert Colman's 2003 play, "Your Loving Simon." Bev Ditsie's film *Simon & I* provides a loving portrait of his final years.

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### **About the Author**

**Ruth M. Pettis** is the Oral History Project manager for the Northwest Lesbian and Gay History Museum Project in Seattle and editor of *Mosaic 1: Life Stories*, a collection of stories from the project's oral history collection. She has contributed articles and fiction to a number of gay and women's publications. She has an A.B. in anthropology from Indiana University and an M.L.S. from Simmons College in Boston.