

Robert 'Treeman' Mazibuko (1908–1994)

'When you bury me, give no speeches. Tell the officiating minister to refrain from saying earth to earth, dust to dust and ashes to ashes. This is a cliché 'cause I know this for a fact . . .'

Almost 48 hours later the clarion caller was ready to be buried.

Robert 'Treeman' Mazibuko made his burial wish known last Saturday during a thanksgiving party thrown by his children at Edendale. On Monday the Lord subpoenaed him to his destination.

'Better be said that Mazibuko joins the great men of deeds, great men like Sikhakhane (Reverend E.Z.); the Nyembezis (family of noted scholars and great clergy of the Methodist Church). This will be the best way to plant

inspiration and role models for our young people,' said Mazibuko. May the green teachings of Treeman be cast in some form of everlasting symbolism.

Internationally known as Treeman, Mazibuko was a committed 'enviroman' long before global environmentalism became a widely-accepted discipline.

But those who were lucky enough to enter his spiritual hut know the other side of the ol' man they call Treeman. Like a real tree of life, he had many branches; he was also a formidable philosopher and a down-to-earth internationalist.

In 1992 he was honoured by being asked to plant the 'Tree of International Friendship' in recognition of the countries which helped to establish the training centre that he founded in Edendale.

Of his philosophy, it was based on the power of self-conviction. When he thought he was right, he stood by his conviction, irrespective of what the prevailing experts in a particular field thought.

'We can do without industrialisation, but can we survive without food?' asked Mazibuko more than 30 years ago. Not everybody loved him for his ferocious self-conviction. This earned him the adjective of being 'controversial' in certain academic corridors.

The first time I was privileged to meet him was on December 3, 1978. His different outlook was revealed as I walked into his smart Edendale bungalow at the Edendale Lay Ecumenical Centre.

Hanging on his living room walls was an array of portraits of South African and world leaders. From King Zwelithini to Sobhuza III, the English Royal House, Dr H.F. Verwoed, President Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, Ghana's Dr Nkwame Nkrumah, Winston Churchill and, to my shock of shocks . . . Adolf Hitler!

'Hitler shocks you, I can see that my son,' smiled the philosopher. 'I salute him for opening the eyes of international oppressors in the name of colonists. The world powers could not fight Europe's apartheid and end there. They had to logically complete the job by granting independence to Africa and elsewhere.'

Professor Sibusiso Nyembezi, who was officiating at Mazibuko's 'farewell party' on Saturday, said not half the people who have been officially honoured locally have achieved what Mazibuko has. Nyembezi said the consolation is that new historians are still going 'to write the full story about this man of virtue'. After the party Siphon Ford wondered audibly why universities in Natal ignored Mazibuko when bestowing honorary doctorates? Local Earthlife Africa chairwoman Anne Harley this week called on the city council to immediately recognise Mazibuko's work by granting him civic honours posthumously.

The greatest national honour that the present government can give to Mazibuko would be a decisive democratisation of December 16 as a holiday. Philosophising on it, as he looked into the Blood River massacre, his face was flushed with a sad look to his eyes: 'What a tragedy for this country that a covenant of revenge and vengeance was taken to calendars for continual remembrance. We need to think again about December 16 — especially now that we live in the 20th century'. He said this in December 1978, and he could have updated his wish by saying 'especially now that we live in the Rainbow country . . .'

Looking back at the great philo-enviro-internationalist, I cannot help but say English philosopher Richard Cumberland was dead right when he observed some 300 years ago: 'Better to wear out than rust out'. In Zulu it encourages:



R. Mazibuko

(Photograph: Natal Witness)

‘Kungcono ukuguga kunokukhahlaka’. Born on December 31, 1908, Mazibuko did not rust; he was always an oiled turbo engine until the Creator demanded of us to jointly bid him farewell in flesh, blood and soul on Monday. Hamba Kahle Baba . . .

KHABA MKHIZE

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