Mongane Wally Serote
Poet, Soldier and Healer

Mongane Wally Serote was born in Sophiatown on 8 May 1944. He spent his early years in Alexandra township and later attended school at Morris Isaacson High School in Jabavu, Soweto. Upon leaving school, he worked as a journalist. In 1969, he was arrested and detained for nine months in solitary confinement under the Terrorism Act.

In 1972, he published his first poetry collection, *Yakhal' inkomo*, which won the Ingrid Jonker Prize for debut poetry in English. He has since published ten additional anthologies of poetry, three collections of essays, and four novels: *To Every Birth Its Blood, Gods of Our Time, Scatter the Ashes and Go,* and *Revelation.*

Serote played a significant role in the 1976 student uprising against Bantu Education, as well as in the promotion of black cultural values through drama, poetry and other literary writings. His poems, particularly those from his first two anthologies, have been lauded as pivotal to the rise of the BCM in South Africa.

He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Columbia University in 1979. During this time he was exposed to the influences of the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movements. Unable to return to South Africa, he moved to Botswana in 1979 where he, together with the artist Thami Mnyele, established the Medu Art Ensemble in Gaborone. He also joined MK, the ANC military wing. He subsequently held several political and cultural positions in the ANC in London, and elsewhere.

He returned to South Africa in 1990, served in the country’s first democratic Parliament and subsequently
became chief executive officer of the Freedom Park Trust in Pretoria. He is the recipient of several international and national awards, and honorary doctorates.

A distinctive photograph of Che Guevara, with piercing yet tranquil eyes, smoking a large Cuban cigar, is prominently displayed on the wall of Wally Serote’s office in Freedom Park where this interview was conducted. Serote speaks of an Argentinian forensic anthropologist who visited his office a few days earlier. She was part of a team of Argentinians and Cubans who excavated Che’s body from a grave near a Vallegrande airstrip in Bolivia where it was buried following his execution in 1967. She told of his skeletal remains being laid out in preparation for his internment, together with six of his fellow combatants, in a mausoleum in the Cuban city of Santa Clara, thirty years after his death. The remains included his amputated hands that had been preserved in formaldehyde and sent to Buenos Aires at the time of his execution for fingerprint identification. Serote’s visitor told him that while assembling Che’s bones an Argentinian officer stole one of his vertebra to be kept as a souvenir. “Why this relic? Who was Che?” Serote ponders the questions. We discuss his influence on the struggle for liberation across Latin American and the African continents. He was a poet, an author, a soldier, a sacred or mystical icon. To some who view the photographs of his slain body, he is a Christ-like presence. Primarily, he was a guerrilla fighter in pursuit of a new humanity.

By the time Serote decided to take up arms in the struggle against apartheid, he was already a poet – or “one in the making,” he observes. Today he is a trained *sangoma* or traditional healer. Importantly, he is the inspiration behind the design of Freedom Park, which seeks to portray and integrate the conflicts of South African history into an unfinished story of healing. Is he a romantic? “I prefer to see myself as an optimist on a journey into the future,” he observes, adding: “The very best education I have received in life comes from being an activist and member of the ANC. For this I thank the ancestors and my comrades who have journeyed with me.”

He speaks of Alexandra Township where he grew up. It was “a curious and dangerous” part of Verwoerd’s dream of South Africa as a commonwealth of separate nations – impoverished black bantustans and a prosperous white country. In *To Every Birth Its Blood* he writes of the Spoilers and Msomis,
gangs that “brought the movies out of the movie houses into the streets of Alexandra for real, guns, blood and all”. And there were the police. “They came on horseback, in fast cars, in huge trucks, and shot for real …” He recalls the smoke coming out of the hundreds and hundreds of chimneys of small houses and hovels, the crowds of people flowing out of buses, the hasty footsteps, and the faintly-lit streets. His brooding and intense memories are of a place “rumbling, groaning, roaring like a troubled stomach”. He talks of the “caring hand” of his grandmother amidst this chaos and uncertainty, recalling how she went on her knees in order to look him in the eyes when she needed to reprimand him, reassure him or to speak with him about a problem.

When he turned sixteen he was confronted with the indignity of needing to apply for a pass. Refusing to do so, he lived as a fugitive for several years before submitting to the demands associated with getting a job. “I became a very rebellious youth, wrote a poem entitled ’What’s in This Black Shit?’ and read it to my grandmother. I was taller than her by then and she told me to go on my knees so she could look me in the eyes as she sat in a chair, insisting that I destroy the poem, not allowing anger to enter my heart.” He refused to do so, and the poem later was appropriated by the BCM.

Serote went into exile, earned a Master’s degree in Fine Art at Columbia University in New York City and later underwent military training in Botswana, Angola and the Soviet Union. “I was angry, and became a part of a new sense of consciousness and responsibility, which enabled Africans to rise above their submission. The resort to arms was an important step in this direction in my life. At the same time, my writing enabled me to understand what I was doing and why I was doing it. The long epic poems I wrote tell the story of my anguish and struggle to find direction in life. The gun was never an end in itself for me, although the struggle to use it responsibly was never easy. It was part of a bigger quest for a goal that reached beyond killing.”

He recalls being in Botswana in 1980 and hearing a report on the morning news bulletin of armed ANC operatives holding 65 white hostages in a Silverton Bank in Pretoria. The ANC, in its submission to the TRC in 1998, indicated that when the armed guerrillas were confronted by the police “on their way to carry out a mission” they took refuge in the bank. According to witnesses, the ANC cadres informed the hostages that they had no intention of harming them, while explaining that the police were likely to storm the bank. When it happened, it left two hostages and three ANC cadres dead. Serote reflects back on this incident where, he explains, the importance of
discipline was instilled in him. “It reminded me of the height of the bar of responsibility that I had as a soldier and the importance of an oath I had taken while undergoing training as a guerrilla fighter, never to kill white people simply because they were white... I thought of my grandmother, remembering her warning that I should never allow the poison of vengeance to enter me. The Silverton incident motivated me to recommit myself only to use weapons in pursuit of a new consciousness within which the dignity and rights of all South Africans would be respected. I resolved that day never to lose sight of this bigger and nobler objective. It was this that took me increasingly into the sphere of arts, culture and the use of language as a vehicle for changing the mindset of a nation.”

Poet

Serote suggests that it was perhaps because he was a shy and socially-withdrawn child that he became a poet. He remembers getting into serious trouble from his primary school teacher for writing a poem to a girl in his class, when he was too shy to speak to her. Smiling, he suggests that this was the first step in using the medium of poetry to give expression to his unspoken feelings. His published writings are all deeply introspective, used to capture the intensity of the black experience under apartheid, the armed conflict and more recently to give expression to the “African exploration of existence in the wake of the disruption of traditional systems, institutions and communities by colonialism and apartheid”.

It is difficult to respond to the emotional intensity of Serote’s poetry and novels. The applause of scholars and comments of those who never knew the anguish of being driven to take up arms is often hollow and sometimes pretentious. Serote wrote: “When educated people talk, / It’s like waiting in a queue, /And the bus does not come.” A deeply spiritual person, he weighs his words carefully in what until recently was a twofold fight involving gun and words. He felt compelled to take up the gun when other avenues seemed closed to him. He also waged a war of words in pursuit of changing hearts and minds. “In a cathartic sense I needed to deal with myself and show a responsibility to the people of whom I was a part.”

Thinking back on his early writings, he recalls that the resort to arms seemed to be the only way out of what he captures in the metaphor that is the title of his first poetry anthology – *Yakhal’ inkomo*, the cry of cattle in the slaughterhouse. A repetitive refrain creates a silence between poet
and reader: “Another heart has been cut, / Another chest gashed by a knife, 
/A brick cracked another head, / A kierie burst another head”. He speaks of “the pain of humiliation, / like the pain of a raped woman”. He struggles to find the appropriate words to explain his anger and sense of resolve to act against the evil of apartheid. His epic poems, *No Baby Shall Weep* and *Behold Mama Flowers*, provide an insight into the squalor, destitution, death and determination that faced the black community in their struggle for self-dignity and respect. His words are tough and without restraint in capturing the outward reality and inner struggle he faced. What Marxists call an organic intellectual, he was able to give expression to the experience of a cross-section of rural peasants, township shack-dwellers and angry young people who were ready to pay the ultimate price for their freedom. He juxtaposes words of deep intensity with the “ordinary”. In an almost banal manner in *Gods of Our Time*, Lindi wants to go in search of her daughter who left the country, presumably to join MK. Asking for assistance, the answer she receives deepens her intensity: “It’s difficult,” she’s told. “She may have left through Botswana but she may be anywhere, Botswana, Zambia, Angola, Swaziland, even maybe here…” Lindi is silent, “… very quiet and staring as if she did not know what I was talking about.”

The build-up of resentment and resolve captured in Serote’s early writing speaks with timeless significance to each new age. “Where, where does a river begin/ to make, to take its journey/ where does a river begin/ to take its journey to the sea?” Serote celebrates the political transition of 1994. “The price we paid was a huge one. It should never be underestimated.” He pauses. “Now we must heal.” His concern is to heal the “cul-de-sac of race hatred”, the “vestiges of suffering” and “sanity in an insane society”. He writes: “To heal is to heal/ so heal in the manner/ you can heal.” This, he tells, is a “national project” that requires the participation of all South Africans. “It will take time, but we are getting there.” He recalls words he wrote at the height of the BCM: “I do not know where I have been, / But Brother, / I know I am coming.” His commitment is to ensure that the South African consciousness reaches beyond revenge, racial competitiveness and bitterness, towards others. “This,” he suggests, “is not merely necessary to overcome an individual grudge or to gain a level of national serenity for the sake of white people or for the sake of black people. It is for the sake of the nation as a whole and humanity itself.”

For him this quest for peace has its roots in the philosophy of what Tswana people call *botho* and the essential belief of *Motho ke Motho ka Batho*
Committed to a holistic understanding of humanity, Serote speaks of the need for ceremonies, rituals and memorials that draw people into a common sense of humanity. This, he suggests, requires South Africans – all South Africans – to gain an understanding of what he sees as the inclusivity and healing reality of African culture.

“Our objective,” he says, “is eventually to arrive at a thoughtful understanding of how, as Africans, we were tempered, we did, we understood, we felt and gained experience, and how we used the knowledge we acquired in dealing with colonialism and apartheid as well as in these early years of democracy.” His concern is to apply this insight into the reality we face in South Africa in the 21st century.

He speaks of the role of bongaka that cleanse and heal. This enables individuals and communities to reach out to others in the “reconstruction, engineering and moulding of individuals, families, communities and the nation as a whole.” “We need to face the reality of our past conflicts in order to heal and move towards a new sense of belonging. This encounter with our past, robust as it is, unleashes a capacity in us as human beings to reach out to one another, to grow into one another and to make the emergence of a new humanity possible.” Central to this process, he insists, is the institution of lekgotla where differences can be laid bare and common solutions found. “South Africans have got to learn to speak to and with one another rather than at one another.”

Serote stresses the need for a new sense of spirituality and moral rediscovery to bring the unfinished business of the South African democratic process to completion. A believer in the spiritual dimensions of traditional African culture, instilled in him as a child and nurtured in his exile experience through his writing, Serote underwent formal initiation as a sangoma in 2000. He was later appointed chief executive officer of Freedom Park, where he gives expression through art, architecture and design to his sense of belief and commitment to healing.

**Freedom Park**

Serote refers to the challenges he faced in seeking to understand the purpose of the Arts, Culture, Language, Science and Technology Portfolio Committee, which he chaired in the National Assembly in 1994. “This was the beginning of a new era. We all felt the responsibility to promote..."
reconciliation and healing in a deeply divided nation. We also needed to ensure an African footprint on the institutional, political and public identity of our new democracy. Verwoerd had said there was no need for black people to be taught science. We needed to correct this and we committed ourselves to explore the relevance of indigenous African knowledge systems, both with regard to cultural and scientific thinking. Questioning whether the dominant trajectory of unending growth, industrial development and success in the modern world can last forever, he initiated a process of exploring traditional forms of existence, interdependence and self-sufficiency. Serote emphasised the support of the Speaker of the National Assembly, Frene Ginwala, for the endeavour, as well as the participation of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in ensuring “a legitimate and professional uniting of the two worlds”.

“Our concern was to get close to people and we trained 63 students, sending them into rural villages to capture memories and listen to the views of grassroots African people.” We discovered that an estimated 80 percent of people interviewed consult traditional healers as well as western-trained doctors when they are ill. Serote was determined to find a way of blending traditional and modern worldviews in a manner that could heal the scars of the nation. He highlights three dominant themes emerging from his research: “The realisation that a peaceful future cannot be built while the earth is soaked in blood; that many of the people of South Africa who have made huge sacrifices in the fight against apartheid are psychologically and spiritually wounded; and that the country needs to be cleansed, acquiring a new identity and national vision.” The challenge was how to give expression to this in the design, planning, vegetation, and bricks and cement that would become Freedom Park? “I had the support of President Thabo Mbeki and the government to bring together a consortium of architects, artists, landscape engineers, traditional healers and historians. We began to talk, plan and dream. We argued and ultimately found consensus, and a vision slowly began to emerge.” Asked who was behind the vision and the development of Freedom Park, a senior tour guide observes. “Bra Wally and the ancestors.” Serote simply says: “We did it, all of us.”

The outcome is a place of memory within which everyone in a diverse nation can find something with which to identify. Set in the hills surrounding the central Pretoria area, on 57 hectares of indigenous vegetation, 80 percent of which are traditional medicinal trees and plants, Freedom Park is located
across the valley from the more austere and monolithic Voortrekker Monument to which it has now been linked by an access road.

The Park blends the traditional symbols of the cattle kraal, reeds growing in ponds to symbolise an African creation myth, rocks and soil from places of conflict and restoration, with modern architecture and art. It includes an amphitheatre for national events and celebrations, a sanctuary to which people can withdraw to reflect and meditate, and an eternal flame that burns to commemorate those known and unknown who died in the conflicts that form part of South African history. Still in the developmental stage is the hall of heroes, with portraits of a wide cross-section of heroes and heroines who died in South Africa’s conflicts. These include boer General Christian de Wet, Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, OR Tambo and others.

The Park is developed around the Isiwivane and Sikhumbuto projects. Isiwivane provides a spiritual resting place for those who died fighting for freedom and liberation. Boulders were brought from symbolic sites in each of the nine provinces, and placed around other boulders that represent the national government and international community. Sikhumbuto tells the story of South African history, with a focus on the country’s major conflicts: the Pre-Colonial Wars, Slavery, the Genocide of the San and Khoi people, the Wars of Resistance against colonial and boer occupations, the South African War, the First and Second World Wars and the Struggle for Liberation. Cleansing ceremonies were initially held at sites representative of each of these conflicts throughout the country and today “walls of names” have been erected in the Park, inscribed with the names of those known to have died in these conflicts. There is also an interactive video programme which allows visitors to submit the names of people whose names are not inscribed on the walls.

Still in development is the //hapo project, a place that will tell the story of Southern Africa dating back 3.6 billion years. //hapo is the Khoi word for dream. The project will focus on issues of reconciliation and inclusivity. The //hapo project will invite visitors to become part of the history by contributing a story to be left to generations still to come. Rich in symbolism, the design of the //hapo buildings is based on a large slab of rock that has been shattered into pieces by past conflicts, with visitors being invited to draw the separate pieces back together in their imaginations to form an inclusive unity. Central to the project is the invitation to South Africans to complete the unfinished quest for national unity and healing.
Memory and exploration

A construction consultant was on site to meet Serote. He spoke with deep appreciation and a certain pride about the accomplishments in the Park. He asked, however, whether “given the poverty and development needs in the country, we are justified in spending in excess of a billion rand on the construction of the Park?” The conversation was a long one in the hot Highveld sun. We agreed that “it probably is” and suggested a few other areas in which the nation can save money! For Serote art, memory and exploration are part of the healing and empowerment process that is needed to enable a nation, depleted by conflict and the suppression of human creativity, to discover its identity and the inner resources that will enable it to meet the challenges of alienation, poverty and defeat. Will the quest for an African consciousness, drawing on African systems and memories, infused with the contributions of others who live in this country, contribute to the unfinished work of liberation, renewal and transformation? “That’s a question for our children and grandchildren to answer,” is Serote’s answer. Human beings, not least the most creative among us, do not however live by bread alone.

Serote is more than an aesthetic visionary in the abstract sense. He took up the gun when that was needed, facing the hardships of struggle and exile, while ensuring his soldiering and political involvement was kept focussed and renewed through his literary pursuits. He speaks of the importance of words and material representations in his life, before shifting the conversation to his encounter with nature. “The trees, the plants and the grasses that are part of the Park are more than beauty outside of us to be observed. They draw us out of ourselves, into the environment of which we are a part, renewing and healing us, equipping us to go out and do the work that this nation needs in order to fulfil the dream that sustained those who went before us in the struggle for individual and communal freedom as well as material well-being. We need both freedom and material fulfilment to realise our dreams.” He reflects on the Khoi proverb around which the //hapo project is being developed: “A dream is not a dream until it is shared by the entire community. Each of us as individuals needs to find our fulfilment in others.”

In Serote’s latest novel, Revelations, he grapples with the impact of past memories and their scars on the present, as he ponders the future, locating the reader at the heart of the debate on memory and healing. The novel centres on the life of Otsile, a photographer and former MK soldier. He visits Santiago in Chile where, confronted with the atrocities of General
Augusto Pinochet, he meets Sarah, a woman who tells the harrowing story of being brought her lover’s hands in a plastic bag. From there he goes to Zimbabwe, “where the issues of the past were alive in the warm sun of that beautiful country,” and to Mozambique, faced with its past. In each case he brings these memories into conversation with the memories that shape the South African experience. Otsile later meets a headstrong young lawyer, who is also a ngaka, an intercessor between the living and the ancestors. “We’ve liberated our country physically, now we have to emancipate its spirit,” she tells him. Contemplating the haunting presence of the past on the South African psyche, Otsile tells his children: “Not only have we inherited [the burden of the past], but we’ve become responsible for undoing it, while those who created it try to hold the moral ground and blame us for failing to heal it quickly enough.”

Serote’s work as a poet, novelist and healer is far from over. Those who love this land and yearn for its reconstruction need to engage with his remarkable capacity to uncover the inner struggle, that each of us faces in different ways, in our quest for emancipation from the past. In our unstable present, faced with the compounded threats of intense poverty, HIV/Aids, gender violence, xenophobia, ecological crises, corruption, racism and the threat of narrow nationalisms, Serote’s bold imagination and redemptive energy provide an option for us to do so.