

LUCKY DUBE AND JOHNNY CLEGG'S ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTIONS IN OVERTHROWING THE SOUTH AFRICAN APARTHEID REGIME

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Abstract: The apartheid regime that prevailed until the late 1990s in South Africa transformed the whole population of the country. The Blacks were the main victims of the separate life imposed by the architects of the regime. It then took the Black elite a long time to organize itself and fight back that apartheid regime, using all the necessary means, so that the black majority could regain back their rights to live as free citizens in their own territories. This fight involved a series of intellectuals and activists from the founding fathers of the African National Congress (ANC), to the most cited Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, etc. Yet, those icons are not the only ones who gave their time and know-how in the termination of Apartheid. Ordinary people also played a commendable role in the happy advent of a multiracial South Africa. This paper pays tribute to renowned singers like Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg who largely contributed in this regard, with their artistic achievements. In fact, through their song lyrics, those two activist artists contributed to popularize the noble cause of the fight for freedom and equality for all in South Africa, during the apartheid era.

Keywords: Apartheid, Lucky Dube, Johnny Clegg, activist, contribution

Résumé

Le régime d'apartheid qui a prévalu jusqu'à la fin des années 1990 en Afrique du Sud a transformé toute la population du pays. Les Noirs étaient les principales victimes de la vie séparée imposée par les architectes de ce régime. L'élite noire a donc dû s'organiser pour combattre ce régime d'apartheid, en utilisant tous les moyens nécessaires, afin que la majorité noire puisse recouvrer leurs droits de vivre en tant que citoyens libres sur leurs propres territoires. Ce combat a mis en scène une série d'intellectuels et de militants, notamment des pères fondateurs du Congrès National Africain (ANC), aux activistes les plus cités comme Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, etc. Pourtant, ces icônes ne sont pas les seules à avoir donné de leur temps et de leur savoir-faire, en vue de l'abolition de l'apartheid. Des gens ordinaires ont également joué un rôle louable dans l'heureux avènement d'une Afrique du Sud multiraciale. Cet article rend hommage à des artistes musiciens de renom tels que Lucky Dube et Johnny Clegg, qui ont largement contribué à cet égard par leurs réalisations artistiques. En effet, à travers les paroles véhiculées dans leurs chansons, ces deux artistes activistes ont contribué à répandre la noble cause de la lutte pour la liberté et l'égalité pour tous en Afrique du Sud, à l'époque de l'apartheid.

Mots-clés: Apartheid, Lucky Dube, Johnny Clegg, activiste, contribution

I. Introduction

The Apartheid policy has certainly been one of the most peculiar political regimes in Africa, in the last twentieth century. Affirming that this period now belongs to the history of South Africa is a mere theoretical assertion.

Millions of South Africans and several generations have been molded in a day-to-day atmosphere of fear, brutality and insecurity, since the 1948's general elections, if not since the implementation of the 1913's *Group Areas Act*. However, the laws that formed the backbone of the apartheid ideology were dismantled, in 1994.

The package of mass repression, racial segregation and land dispossession conveyed by the set of laws during that period was almost exclusively directed against the black population. At the same time, those apartheid laws favored the good positioning and emancipation of the minority white community, in terms of population statistics. The peculiar apartheid policy thus rhymed the everyday life of the South African population, elites and ordinary people, blacks and whites... The external world to South Africa in general had to know all this through the media. Both natives and foreigners wrote novels, history books and press articles on the South African's condition. In addition, there is no denying that those channels of communication and even their stakeholders have done their share of the work in the happy unfreezing of the political blockade in Alan Paton's beloved country (*Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1966).

Apart from the classical written documentation, oral sources such as songs, movies, etc. can also be taken into account, especially while attempting to assess the perceptions of the various layers of the population and their reactions towards a system which ruled them for several decades. In this context, artists, singers, actors, etc. can also be considered as history chroniclers to some extent. In fact, like a writer in his books, a journalist through his articles, and sometimes far better than scholars can do, a singer depicts nothing else in his songs but the common realities of the people. Moreover, as ordinary citizens with no necessary sophisticated intellectual background, artists depict more easily the common social realities in their community. Sometimes, an artist uses simpler words to convey a message, better than the way his contemporary novelists and other intellectuals may do, while entertaining his audience at the same time.

Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg, perfectly fall under the above statement. The two singers grew up and emerged in the apartheid era, and through some of their heart-touching artistic achievements (songs), they contributed, in their own ways, in helping terminate the inhumane regime in their country. They were able to achieve this through mass moving and motivation ability, which their masterpiece songs had on the population in general, both in South Africa and throughout the world.

This paper mainly aims at highlighting the above-mentioned artists' contribution, through their achievements in unfreezing the social tension undermining the apartheid South Africa, and their pleas for putting an end to it. It is articulated around four axes: (1) the method, (2) Remembering Lucky Dube, (3) Johnny Clegg: white skin, colorless mind, and (4) A few comparisons.

II. Method

Although we consider the whole works of the two artists as a general framework in writing this article, we are mainly concerned with their lyrics, which have anti-apartheid activism inclinations. However, from his first albums in the early 1980s up to the last one issued in 2006, Lucky Dube has kept a regular and steady activism and mass-awareness rising on the evils of the political system prevailing in his country. The same allegation can be applied to Johnny Clegg whose activism encompassed not only the mere fact of singing, but also his remarkable passion for the Zulu culture, as a non-native of that culture. Like a duty for them, Dube and Clegg used their songs as a tool to tell their people what thought, to warn them against the dangers of apartheid, to protest against it and to denounce it, or simply to educate their people. We have mainly used the two artists' discography to develop this paper. However, going beyond the mere fact of enjoying the listening of one style of music and its sweet melodies, we have gone on to consider the lyrics themselves in their content and the message that they convey.

III. Remembering Dube...

In his forty-three years of living, whose twenty-five years were dedicated to musical career, Lucky Dube issued about twenty-two albums, with a little less than three hundred songs in total. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2019) He was a committed singer, throughout his relatively brief life. Having arisen during the era of the full

implementation of the segregation policy, and having grown up in South Africa (August, 1964 - October, 2007), Lucky Dube was then a first-hand witness and privileged chronicler of the apartheid period. In fact, even though the 1913's *Group Areas Act* already designed the main features of the separate living between the peoples in South Africa, the real apartheid policy started with the coming to power of the Afrikaners, upon the 1948's general elections. Therefore, Lucky Dube was to some extent, a child of the apartheid era. Moreover, in 1961, South Africa became a Republic. The territory soon became an only white man country, with designed reserves (townships) and areas where the native South Africans were confined and forced to live. (*The ANC and the emergence of a democratic South Africa*, 2015)¹.

Lucky Dube's life, like that of his contemporary and ordinary people with black skin color in the South Africa of that epoch was then merely rhythmized with the apartheid regulations in force at that time. As he puts it in one of his songs which has an evocative title, that is *Life in the movies* (Trinity, 1995), living in South Africa at that time was comparable to watching a fiction movie on a screen. Life was a mixture of fear and insecurity in townships: running away from the brutality of the white police and repression of all sorts; working for long hours in quarries, etc. Meanwhile, the Whites lived with enviable standards, having access to the best opportunities in the country. On the other side, the Blacks only got low wages for their work. In addition, their children attended black-designed schools and end up with poor instruction because they were forced to learn the Afrikaans, the white men's language. The logical consequence from these statements were predictable. The Blacks inevitably ended up living in total insecurity, landless, and wandering in the streets of the city. It was without any doubt, a less enviable condition for the Blacks in general.

In the meantime, while the Black elite thought and organized itself to free its population from this Whiteman's domination, ordinary people also did alike, but in another way. Lucky Dube, one of those million faceless and ordinary South Africans, chose Reggae, a music of protest, as his weapon to fight the injustices of the apartheid regime. (*Who's Who Southern Africa*, 2019).

As a black South African who was born and molded in the apartheid era, Lucky Dube was then a privileged observer of the main changes brought about by the Whiteman's segregationist policies and their impact on the Blacks' lives in general. Just as a novelist tells a story, prompted to write something about the realities of his society at a given period, Lucky Dube used his lyrics, especially the ones issued during the apartheid era, to recall true-to-life stories, endured either by himself or by ordinary black South Africans.

Though Lucky Dube first started singing in a local and popular musical genre, he embraced the reggae style immediately (*Lucky Dube, Wikipedia*, 2019). This musical rhythm, known as a committed genre and a channel for expressing peoples' frustrations and claims, served Lucky Dube over the rest of his musical career. He launched his own career by issuing his first reggae music album in the mid-1980s, a period when apartheid was still in force, even though it had already accounted for several killings and destructions among the Blacks. Thus, Lucky Dube started and never stopped, through this musical genre, expressing his opposition to apartheid, until the official dismantling of that political system a decade later.

A year after the issuing of his first reggae album, the government authorities banned the work, because of the message conveyed in the songs. This did not prevent the young and committed freedom fighter to assert his will for fighting the injustices of the white man's policy on the Blacks. He soon issued another reggae album, still with the same commitment to draw the awareness of the international community to the South African condition. Throughout his career, his opinion and mass-awareness rising in his different songs brought him several questionings and arrests by the police. Comparable with many other thousand Black South Africans who struggled for equality and fairness among peoples, Lucky Dube also contributed to the success of this struggle through his committed songs.

IV. Beyond the lyrics

¹Oladjidé A. Moutinou Soumanou, PhD research topic, defended at the Abomey-Calavi University (Benin), p.50.

In 1991, Lucky Dube issued one album (*House of Exile*, 1991), including *Group Areas Act*, a haunting song recalling the *Group Areas Act* (1913), one of the most significant laws which served for the actual implementation of the racial segregation policy in the 1910s. This regulation was in fact the mother of the other segregationist laws issued later on in the 1950s² and in subsequent decades. He sang *Group Areas Act*, as a way of encouraging the then apartheid leaders to keep their promise. In fact, one year earlier (in 1990), President Frederik de Clerk announced the dismantling of this backbone of the apartheid regime. The subsequent effects of this unprecedented political decision on the destiny of the country unleashed some waves of hope among the black populations especially, and in the whole country in general.

Lucky Dube put this once unbelievable dream into a memorable song. The lyrics from that song were a pure testimony of hope and of a dream long time awaited by the Blacks. It sounded like the probable coming of a brighter day of freedom and equal opportunities to all, regardless of the color of the skin. The song was comparable with the dawn of a new day rising, after the long nights of struggle and oppression of all sorts that the Blacks endured. However, with some dose of skepticism about this promise of banning all barriers between Blacks and Whites, Lucky Dube mentioned his hopes and encouragements as follows:

If I'm dreaming, don't wake me up
If it's a lie, don't tell me the truth
'cause [because] what the truth will do,
It gonna hurt my heart.
Being in the darkness for so long now
Mr. President, did I hear you well last night on TV?
You said:
Group Areas Act is going
Apartheid is going...

In the rest of the song, the singer also encouraged the authorities of the country to move on with good actions of hope to the population. He praised the fact that the banning of the *Group Areas Act* would enable Blacks and Whites to mingle and live in a perfect brotherhood without any fear. This was again but a recall from his other song, *Together As One* (*Together As One*, 1988). While rejoicing for the advent of this unfreezing of the social tension, he recalled the other apartheid laws, especially the controversial *Mixed Marriage Act*, which until then prevented interracial marriages.

Most of Lucky Dube's songs retraced the hard but true realities of racial segregation, social injustices and faint hopes of improvement of the situation, endured by a Black child, young boy and simply put, by a native South African confined to live under miserable conditions in townships. Through his prolific discography, he did not fail to echo the collective memories of his people, but also the individual sufferings of a human being, all them crying for justice and social equality between the components of the same society, torn apart by the political and economic interests of one part of the population over the other.

²The period, from 1948 up to the proclamation of the South African Republic in 1961 saw a flourishing of a series of acts intending to severely restrict black people's rights and confine them in the peripherals of the places where white people live. The period was namely that of the implementation of laws and regulations, which prohibited the mixing of Whites with non-Whites. Indeed, by the year of the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, one of the first acts passed by the government was then the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act*, in 1949. In 1950, the apartheid government passed the *Population Registration Act*; the law categorized every South African by race into four main categories (the Whites, the Asians the Coloreds and the Blacks at the bottom). The *Reservation of Separate Amenities Act* of 1953 imposed on black workers who worked in residentially white only cities during the day to use different public transportation, post offices, restaurants, schools, and even separate doors, benches, and counters. There had also been the *Natives Urban Areas Act* and the *Native Labor Act* in 1953, which placed more restrictions on the black majority in South Africa, as discrimination measure between Black and White labors.

V. Johnny Clegg: white skin, colorless mind

While paying a tribute to the departed artist three days after his death in July 2019, *The Guardian* described Johnny Clegg as a South African national hero; a “Singer-songwriter who used music to defy apartheid in South Africa” (*The Guardian*, 19 July 2019).

That description fits Jonathan Paul Clegg, a.k.a Johnny Clegg well. As a perfectly “white” South African child (he was born to an English father and a Jewish mother who immigrated to southern Africa), Johnny represented a kind of contradiction to the apartheid regime, owing to his passion for the Blacks’ culture, especially the Zulu culture. Indeed, in a South Africa sharply divided over the issue of race, Johnny’s biography evokes how, as a white teenager, he deliberately and continuously broke apartheid restrictions on the mixing of cultures, only to satisfy his passion for the Zulu language, its music and dance, and its culture in general. The same biography also recalls how Johnny befriended his parents’ driver then, only to continue to learn more about the Zulu culture. From the latter, he then learnt the rudiments of the language. This passion in him about the African culture continues throughout his lifetime. Even though Johnny Clegg was largely known as a singer, he was also a scholar. Indeed, he held a teaching position, namely at the multiracial Witwatersrand University and at the University of Natal for some years as a professor of cultural anthropology, before devoting himself fully to music.

The other name for Johnny Clegg was the “white Zulu” (*Johnny Clegg la passion Zoulou*, 1988). This is due to the fact that as a white man, he was expected by his white compatriots to remain, at least, silent if he could not praise his own Whiteman’s culture. However, the man was a kind of standing and even stubborn contradiction, a Whiteman praising the Blackman’s culture in a peculiar apartheid South Africa. However, his stubbornness soon paid off.

***Asimbonanga* – the anti-apartheid anthem**

From 1979 until his death in July 2019, Johnny Clegg issued almost twenty albums, in his forty-year musical career. His artistic achievements inevitably conquered the heart of millions of people in South Africa and around the world. Yet, there is one song from his remarkable discography, which has prompted us to write this paper: “*Asimbonanga*”, a song from his third issued album. (*Third World Child*, 1987).

A quick glance at the history of South Africa recalls that in the mid-1980s, apartheid rules were still in force in the country, though a few years later some contingencies brought the apartheid-oriented National Party on power to witness the collapse of their peculiar policy. Meanwhile, Nelson Mandela and some other leading figures of the African National Congress (ANC), a political party, were still serving in prison. The period was also that of the startup of a timid series of negotiations between Mandela and the apartheid government.

Outside the country, the international community started putting more and more pressure on South African leaders to move towards the end of their isolation on the international scene, by putting an end to apartheid. Life continued as usual in the country, with separate living between the peoples. Mandela, who had already been spending twenty-one years in prison, was on the eve of his seventieth anniversary. In the meantime, the government in power arranged for a total discretion on Mandela’s imprisonment. Very little information, if any, were available on him; no picture either. It was a total blackout. Did the government kill him already, or was he alive? The population had no idea of this. Johnny Clegg, quite like an ordinary South African, wondering when would be the end of that enigma issued the song “*Asimbonanga*” (meaning, “We have not seen him”, in the Zulu language).

The song, though censored by the State-owned broadcasting radio started to reach an increasingly big audience among the masses, through word of mouth (Johnny Clegg Wikipedia, 2019). *Asimbonanga* was melancholic in tone; yet it represented at the same time, a life jacket and a melody of hope for the desperate population in general. By singing that song in both English and Zulu, the singer paid a deserved tribute, not only to Mandela, but also to some prominent freedom fighters of the apartheid era, including Steve Biko (1946-1977) of the Black Consciousness Movement, a resistant murdered by the police.

Through his perfect mastery of the Zulu language, the “white” Johnny Clegg demonstrated, through this memorable song, his commitment to the richness of multiracialism. *Asimbonanga* was also a token that in the apartheid South Africa a Whiteman could perfectly embrace the Blackman’s culture, and vice versa. Not only with this song, but also during his career, Johnny Clegg continually broke apartheid laws, which prevented him from playing in a mixed culture group during the apartheid period. Defying the police in his group’s appearances, he survived the cultural restrictions and made his voice heard clearly inside and outside the country.

Years after apartheid was over, the great singer had the pleasure of sharing one precious moment on stage with Mandela who *Asimbonanga* was mainly dedicated to. This occurred during newspaper one concert he gave in Frankfurt in 1997. In one interview he gave the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur*³, Johnny Clegg recounted how Mandela surprised him by coming on the stage, and dancing, during the concert which he was closing with the everlasting *Asimbonanga* song. Johnny later on confessed that this moment represented the greatest stone in his lifetime. As for Mandela himself, he thanked Clegg for contributing to popularize South Africans’ fight against apartheid around the world through his song.

VI. A few comparisons

One can assert that Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg were pure products of the apartheid system, like many other ordinary South Africans. Johnny Clegg was born in 1957, roughly four years before South Africa was freshly declared a Republic (in 1961). As for Lucky Dube, he was born three years after the proclamation of the Republic, under the leadership of Hendrik Verwoerd (1901-966), the Architect of Apartheid. As a black “South African” living and growing in a whites-only republic, Lucky Dube himself suffered the series of apartheid laws, which flourished in the 1950s. The frustrations, which he got from his experiences as a township dweller and as a street wanderer, brought up in a mono parental family, became his main sources of inspiration.

While some used real weapons in guerillas and other political uprising and mass movements, Lucky Dube used his voice, words and microphone to convey the noble message of the necessity for the Blacks to fight and conquer their birthright to live freely on their ancestors’ lands. When referring to the struggle against apartheid, one easily mentions names such as Mandela, Tambo, Biko, etc. although many other personalities had started the emancipation struggle, long before them. It is not exaggerated enough to say that these icons ensured the intellectual part of the struggle for equality. On the other hand and to some extent, some channels like popular songs were but appropriate tools in the hands of those who had no or needed no sophisticated intellectual or university knowledge before taking part in the struggle. We can thus draw a parallel between the “intellectuals” and the “ordinary people” in apartheid South Africa.

To this extent, we regard Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg as the ones among those “ordinary” millions of South Africans who did not necessarily have or need the intellectual background of an attorney like Nelson Mandela to take an active part in the struggle for liberation from the yoke of apartheid. The two singers did not contribute lesser than Mandela and others to the final victory of the commonsense over the peculiarity of an outrageous political system. Daring a comparison, one can say that there had rather been a complementarity between the different layers of the society for the advent of multiracialism in the mid-1990s, in South Africa. If it is agreed that intellectuals draft and design policies and strategies, it is then the artists and culture men in general who popularize and spread the message.

³<https://www.nouvelobs.com/musique/20190716.OBS16018/johnny-clegg-nous-racontait-quelqu-un-est-monte-sur-scene-c-etait-mandela.html>

Conclusion

Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg, though belonging to the same country theoretically, emerged from different “racial” origins in the apartheid South Africa. One was black and the other was white. Yet, despite their prolific artistic productions, the two singers embraced the same vision, in terms of rising the awareness of the whole population (Black, White, Asian and coloured), and denouncing the apartheid regime and its policies. In the course of their remarkable career, both artists had their musical productions censored and banned for ventilation and sale in the then white-ruled South Africa. That is especially true for those of their songs, which squarely took position against the deeds of the apartheid regime. Johnny Clegg’s most known *Asimbonangaw* was issued in 1986 and recorded a worldwide success. Meanwhile, Lucky Dube’s *Group Areas Act* (1991) and *Different Colours, One People* (1993) and many others had met with a great success. Through their songs, the two artists touched the heart of millions of people, beyond words in a novel, or discourses from politicians.

The most renowned heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle endeavoured to achieve success with guns and other weapons on the fighting ground. However, Lucky Dube and Johnny Clegg somehow fought the same struggle with soft but efficient tools, which addressed the mind and heart of the leaders of the country at the time. Today, the apartheid regime belongs to the past (at least theoretically and ideologically). Johnny Clegg, who passed away freshly, and the late Lucky Dube continue to live to some extent, through their musical achievements, like oral memories or archives of that era. While going through their prominent lyrics considered in this paper and scrutinizing them, we come to the conclusion that the two artists were more than songwriters and singers, merely entertaining an audience. They were also committed freedom fighters, and they should be remembered accordingly and celebrated.

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