

The Year of the Dog

a journey of the imagination

2006

It is many months since Jacob Zuma was forced to relinquish the position of deputy president of South Africa. Then he was tried for rape and acquitted. After these remarkable events which got many South Africans wondering about the future of our country, I would like to invite you on a short journey of the imagination. The temperature has gone down somewhat and now we can calmly reflect.

Imagine that you are witnesses to the beating of a dog. Imagine that you are watching Zizi Kodwa, described in newspapers as the ‘spokesperson of the ANC Youth League’, outside the court where Jacob Zuma was recently on trial. Kodwa was reported to have called for ‘the dogs to be beaten until their owners and handlers emerge’. My name, according to reports, was one of four on a list of these ‘dogs’.

Imagine Kodwa leading a crowd that has found a dog to beat and is surrounding it. They carry an assortment of weapons: fighting sticks, knobkerries, sjamboks, metal pipes and pangas. They are about to carry out a revolutionary task: ‘hitting a dog so hard that its owner and handler’ must emerge and plead for mercy on its behalf.

The surrounded dog is terrified, helpless. There is no escape. Its eyes wide open, it watches the crowd inevitably closing in. Suddenly, the crowd pushes Kodwa to the centre, where he towers over the dog. He knows he is being given the privilege of the first blow. He acknowledges the honour as he lunges with his fighting stick. It is a powerful blow. It cracks a rib. The dog howls in pain.

The howl drives the crowd into a frenzied yell: ‘*Bulalan’inja!*’ ‘Kill the dog!’ The crowd weighs in randomly, indifferent to the dog’s pain as its howls and yelps pierce the calls for its death.

Finally, its spine broken, the dog lies on its side, a bloody mess, still trying to raise its head, until a well-aimed knobkerrie blow smashes its skull. This silences the dog forever. The crowd continues, without a sound, to pound the dead dog's body. You hear only the dull thud of blows on the marshy body. What you have just witnessed was not a beating, but an execution.

The crowd then break into a triumphant cry, brandishing weapons in the air. They dance briefly around the dead dog and then begin to move away. Kodwa leads them dancing and chanting: '*awu leth'umshini wam*'. They have just performed a service to South Africa, in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

You have just witnessed, in your imagination, the enactment of righteous brutality. It is the kind that follows belief preceded by unconsidered declaration. Once unleashed it never stops until its objectives have been carried out. You are probably glad that what you have just witnessed happened only in your imagination. But be warned: the reality around you can be as stark as the world of your imagination, sometimes surpassing it. Let me take you down memory lane.

Remember the Native Land Act of 1913 when tens of thousands of Africans were thrown out of their lands 'like dogs'? Many years later, influx control laws were passed and Bantustans were created; hundreds of thousands of African families were uprooted and moved around 'like dogs'. Today, there are farmers who, having exploited them for decades, still throw out black families into the wilderness 'like dogs'.

Do you remember the pass law 'offenders' crowded in apartheid prisons 'like dogs', many of whom were then carted off 'like dogs' to work on white farms as free prison labour? Remember? White farms, mines, factories, construction companies, wherever 'labour units' were required in large numbers, were experienced as places of abuse where people were made to feel 'like dogs'.

Remember 16 June 1976, when thousands of schoolchildren where shot at 'like dogs'? And how, in turn, 'other dogs' from the hostels were sent by the State to attack township dwellers 'like dogs'? It all led to Boipatong, where balaclava-hooded men, bussed in, split the heads of babies with pangas 'like dogs'. We still bus in people 'like dogs' as 'voting fodder' or as 'demonstration fodder', sometimes just outside the court.

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Remember the lonely and gruesome torment of Maki S'khosana, described as the first victim of 'the necklace'? Stunned by kicks and blows and stones 'like a dog' as the tyre was being placed round her neck?

Remember the old women of Limpopo who were killed 'like dogs' because someone said they were 'witches'? Or the man who beat a worker 'like a dog' and then fed him to lions? And consider how, just recently policemen acting on our behalf were killed 'like dogs' by criminals using AK-47s – the weapon glorified as '*imshini wam*'.

You can see why the word 'dog' is never far away in the imagining of violence and abuse in our society. You can see how often we have treated people and things as if they were 'just a dog'. '*Nja-mgodoyi!*', starving dog, is an insult that lays the ground for the beating of someone. '*Voetsek!*' many of us say to people we unwittingly consider 'dogs'. 'Dog' is a pervasive metaphor regularly used to justify righteous brutality.