

Afrikaans: *a white man's language?*



● **Hein Willemse**, Associate Professor in Afrikaans at the University of the Western Cape, traces the roots of Afrikaans and argues that it is a common heritage for blacks and whites.

Afrikaans the most dangerous drug for our children. This slogan is written on a piece of crumpled paper covering a body. The photograph is poignant in its imagery. In silence it attests to a violent relationship between political might and refusal, white oppression and black resistance.

The image signifies Afrikaans as bearer of savagery, racism and relentless oppression. Absent from the photograph, although present through the dead man, is the stereotype of the brusque, gun-toting boer, or his collaborators.

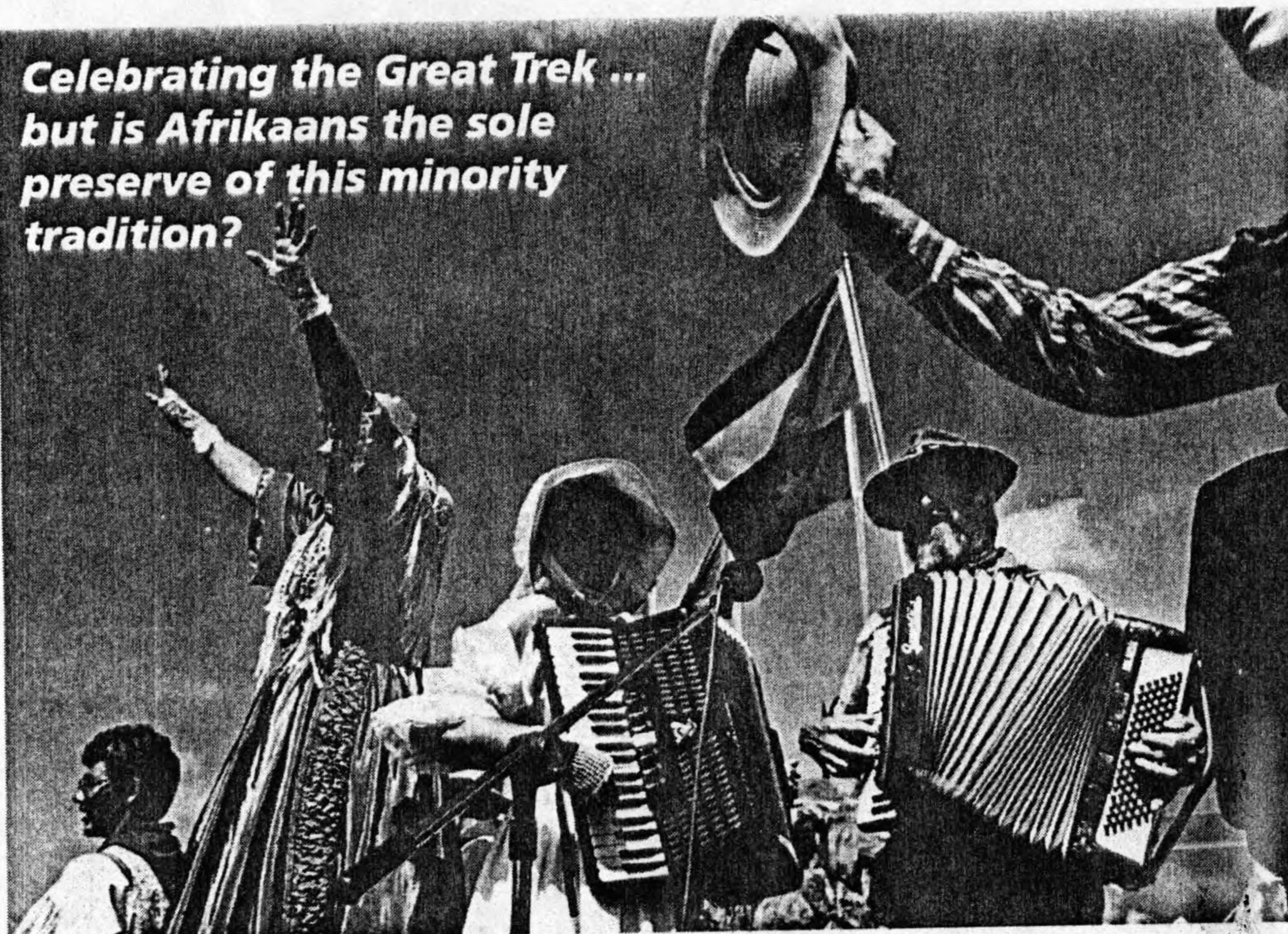
This is one interpretation of the photograph, and perhaps the only relevant one, for in the collective mind the equation has been firmly established: Afrikaans = the Afrikaner = apartheid = political and social oppression. The photograph is a forceful reminder of decades of NP rule and Afrikaner dominance. With reference to Afrikaans the relationship between Afrikaners, the NP, right-wingers and the language appears to be natural and unproblematic. The one denotes the other. No other possibility exists.

GENERAL HISTORY

This image is not surprising. Through decades of Christian National

**Celebrating the Great Trek ...
but is Afrikaans the sole
preserve of this minority
tradition?**

Photo: Paul Weinberg SouthLight



Education the history of the Afrikaans language, as well as the general history of South Africa was interpreted through the eyes of the Afrikaner nationalist. The Afrikaners claimed to be the sole heirs to the language – it was their possession. Afrikaans became the distinctive mark of a chosen people. The language ostensibly had an unmediated link with Europe and its development in Africa was, by the grace of God, a miracle: Afrikaans was the only white man's language to have developed in Africa.

The story of Afrikaans was told, like the story of the Afrikaners, as a history of persecution, colonialism, struggle and eventual victory for the volk. That version of history was imprinted on every pupil who ever dared to enter into a history or Afrikaans-language class.

In the recent past Afrikaner historiography has been severely criticised for shaping and interpreting South African history through the filter of Afrikaner nationalism. The same holds true for the history of the Afrikaans language. The history of Afrikaans is clouded by Afrikaner-nationalist ideology. It was a myth fashioned for the purposes of an emerging ethnic nationalism.

Pupils were taught that Afrikaans was used for the first time in a white school in Paarl, that Afrikaans been exclusively associated

with the Afrikaners since the landing of Jan van Riebeeck, and that its origins were pure and lily-white. But nobody told them that in fact a Muslim school in Bo-Kaap happened to be the first to have Afrikaans medium instruction – out of their own volition.

It was in fact a missionary's zeal to translate the Bible into Afrikaans for his black converts which led to the establishment of the first formal Afrikaans organisation. The first piece of formal Afrikaans appears to have been written in Arabic for the purposes of religious instruction.

By 1903 some Afrikaners had to be convinced that Afrikaans was their language, whereas the Muslim Society in Cape Town claimed it to be their birthright and restricted their organisation to Afrikaans speakers only. A black correspondent of the Genadendal mission wrote to his friend: "I see the whites are now writing in our language."

MOTHER TONGUE

The history of Afrikaans taught in schools is a myth. Like Afrikaner historiography, it is defective, for it represents only the history of a single fraction of the South African population. The history of Afrikaans was ennobled, so that Afrikaans, a melange of ancestries, languages and classes, became the unsullied

European language in Africa. Language historians developed intricate theories of pure European descent, while they systematically played down the historical role black people, ie slaves, free blacks, the Khoikhoi and Africans, played in the creolisation of Dutch and the development of the pidgin, Cape Dutch or Hottentot-Hollands, an earlier form of Afrikaans. A linguist once tellingly remarked that the majority of Afrikaner linguists "tended to transfer their ideals of purity of the white race to their mother tongue and its history."

With the onset of Afrikaner nationalism during the last quarter of the 19th century, Afrikaans was usurped by Afrikaner culture brokers to foster ethnic cohesion. Later a standard form of Afrikaans was developed which looked and sounded Dutch.

For all intents and purposes, this standardised Afrikaans reproduced the values of an emerging Afrikaner middle class. Increasingly the varieties of the language spoken by black people and those not associated with the middle class were stigmatised. Afrikaans became the treasured asset of the Afrikaner nationalist to be imposed through state power.

ORAL TRADITION

A similar process took place with regard to Afrikaans cultural practices. Few people care to take note of the rich Afrikaans oral tradition – created mainly by generations of black speakers of Afrikaans. In the process, the wealth of animal tales and stories of colonisation were retold as part of the Afrikaner's volkslewe and volksgeloof.

In the process the agency of black story-tellers was pushed into the background and silenced. Where it is conceded in the academic literature that black people were primary contributors to the Afrikaans oral tradition, these statements are invariably qualified to suggest that the original was adapted by the Afrikaners.

Afrikaner demagogues and intellectuals sympathetic to Afrikaner nationalism, have maintained a sure grip

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Struggle Afrikaans

Women worker poetry

In contrast to the petty bourgeois image of Afrikaans and Afrikaans literature, it is only recently that attempts have been made to uncover the first South African working class writings from Afrikaner members of the Garment Workers Union, led by Hester Cornelius and Solly Sachs.

These women shared elements of Afrikaner culture, but also showed significant analytical insight in areas directly related to the labour movement. The garment worker literature injected a strong sense of the Afrikaner working class and the role of trade unions in upholding international working class solidarity.

For instance, in one poem, "Die plig van die vrou" (The duty of the woman) Maggie Meyer sees capitalism as "the destroyer of women's freedom and happiness":

Die plig van die vrou

*Die Vryheid het nie lank geduur,
Want wat eers soet was word toe suur.
Toe Kapitaal die oorhand kry,
Was sy die een wat swaar moes ly.
In die fabriek van vroeg tot laat,
Daar leer jy Kapitaal te haat,
Saam word daar 'n besluit gemaak
In 1932 gaan hul uit op staak.
As ons net saamstaan sal ons wen,
Die mans sal dit ook moet erken.*

The duty of the woman

*[Freedom did not last too long,
For what was sweet, then turned sour.
When Capital gained the victory,
She was the one that had to suffer.
In the factory from early till late
There you learn to hate Capital
Together a decision was taken
In 1932 to go on strike.
If we only stand together we shall have victory
The men would also have to agree.]*

Die leeuwelpies is kwaad

*During the eighties it was not
uncommon to hear these songs
during marches:*

*PW is 'n terroris (x3)
Le Grange is 'n murderer (x3)
Ma, ek wil 'n Casspir hê (x3)
Ma, ek wil 'n Buffel hê (x3)
want ek wil die boere moer
Klim op die wa
Klim op Cosatu se wa
Almal wat Cosatu lief het
Klim op Cosatu se wa*

*In other instances oral poets like
Sandile Dikenî exhorts the ANC
Youth League in Afrikaans:*

*En o, laat my dig
oor dade van nou.
Die leeuwelpies is kwaad,
die moeders staan op die dak
gereed vir enige boer wat net wil slaat.
Die slagspreuk: comrades dit raak laat!
Die uur is nou –
die langverwagte uur!
Die uur is nou!
Nou is daar kak in die land.*

*[And oh, let me speak
about our present feats.
The Young Lions are angry,
the mothers are enraged
ready for any Boer who dares to lash out
The slogan is: comrades it's late!
The hour of reckoning is here –
the long awaited hour!
the hour of reckoning is here!
There is shit in the land.]*

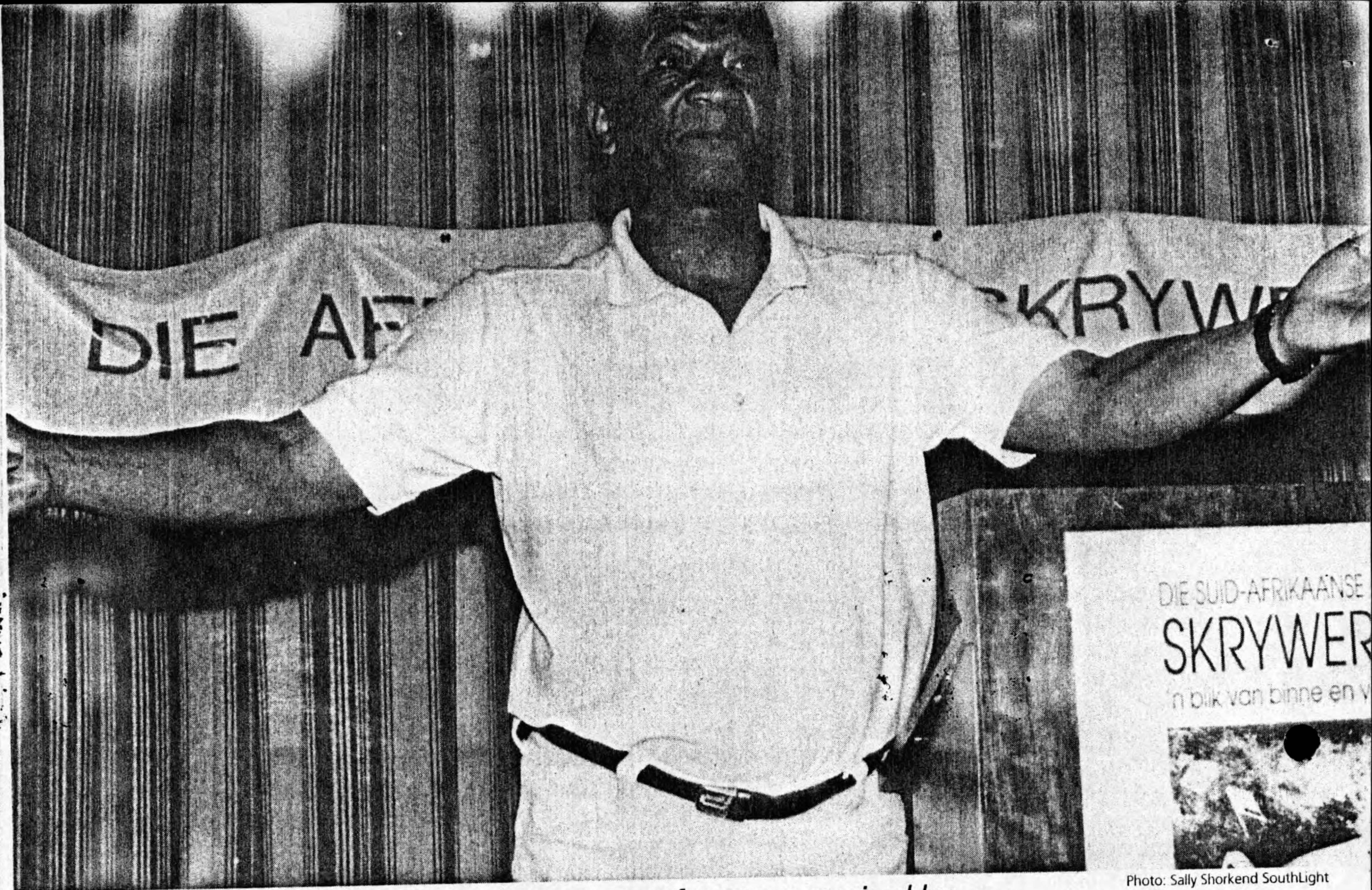


Photo: Sally Shorkend SouthLight

Don Mattera at a conference organised by the Afrikaans Writer's Guild and Idasa

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over the history of Afrikaans and the development and nature of Afrikaans literature. This was the kind of prejudicial knowledge they brought through Christian National Education. The pupils, and among them the oppressed, accepted this at face value. The oppressor's power to determine the truth was accepted and his account of history was not challenged.

DOMINANT IMAGE

It was, however, not the niceties of academic argument which led political activists to understand that the dominant image of Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor was only a half-truth. Afrikaans was as much the language of Bram Fischer as of John Vorster; it is as much the language of Allan Boesak as of Eugene Terre'blanche.

It was in struggle that activists, especially those in the Northern and Western Cape, realised that language was an instrument to be used. The majority of people in those areas speaks Afrikaans and Xhosa.

It was through UDF pamphlets, community newspapers like *Saamstaan*, *Alternatief* and *Namakwanus* that people consciously explored the capacity of Afrikaans and Xhosa to transmit their demands for freedom.

LIBERATION

In these instances Afrikaans became the language of liberation. And in circumstances of repression Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor co-existed with Afrikaans as the language of liberation. The learning process of political struggle also taught activists that language, as a way of producing meaningful sounds, in itself cannot be good or evil. It is the way in which meaning is produced and the actions of speakers which then become the focal point.

Afrikaans speakers, especially those from the ruling elite, often find themselves anguishing about the future of the language in a liberated South Africa. If anything, the strug-

gles waged by black Afrikaans-speaking people have created a secure niche for the future of the language.

It is clearer now than before that language in South Africa is a basic human right. However, when people try to protect and isolate Afrikaans from the vibrancy of other languages in this country, they may lose. For then it loses its character as a common possession to be cherished, something to be shared, a resource to which many South Africans from a variety of backgrounds contributed.

EQUAL FOOTING

It is only in co-existence on an equal footing with other languages that the future of Afrikaans can be secured. For it is when Afrikaans speakers are willing to share resources and help create the environment for the development of all South Africa's languages that their claims to protection and security for their language can be achieved. ♦