

In Memoriam: Keorapetse W. Kgositsile: Poet Laureate of South Africa



Keorapetse William Kgositsile (popularly known as Bra Willie) was born in Johannesburg, Transvaal (now Gauteng) in South Africa. He passed away on January 3, 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

He attended Matibane High School. Influenced by European writers such as Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence, Kgositsile began writing as a hobby. He soon got a job at the newspaper, *New Age*, where he contributed poetry and news reporting. The *New Age* was a radical anti-Apartheid newspaper edited by political activist Ruth First. Kgositsile, being a member of the African National Congress (ANC), through the newspaper, found a platform from where he could voice his contempt for the system. In one interview he was quoted as saying: "In a situation of oppression, there are no choices beyond didactic writing: either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation."

In 1961, under the instruction of the ANC, Kgositsile left the country. He first went to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where he worked for Spearhead magazine. The following year, he left for the United States of America, where he studied at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania University, University of New Hampshire and Columbia University. He graduated with a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Columbia University, and in 2012, he received an honorary doctorate of Literature and Philosophy from the University of South Africa for his enduring efforts to promote the use of indigenous languages and reading through his engaging poetry.

Kgositsile gained much success in the U.S. He published his first collection of poems, *Spirits Unchained*. It was well received and he was awarded the Harlem Cultural Council Poetry Award and the National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Award. In 1971, he published his most influential collection *My Name is Afrika*, which established him as a leading African poet. Kgositsile wrote extensively about the American jazz scene.

One of the most significant poets in the Pan African movement, he also founded the Black Arts Theatre in Harlem, New York. He befriended fellow poets such as Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000), who wrote an introduction to his collection, *My Name Is Afrika* (1971), and the renowned African American poetry collective *The Last Poets*, a group of poets and who arose in the late 1960s era of Black nationalism in the U.S. that took their name from a passage in Kgositsile's writing.

In 1974 he was a founder member of the African Literature Association together with Es'kia Mphahlele, Dennis Brutus, Daniel Kunene and Mazisi Kunene, among others.

From 1962 to 1975, he lived in exile in the United States of America.

In 1975, Kgositsile took up a teaching position at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In 1977 he founded the ANC's Department of Education, and its Department of Arts and Culture in 1983. In 1978, Kgositsile married Baleka Mbete, then a member of the ANC living in Tanzania. He took up several teaching posts in other African nations, such as Kenya, Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. And he was also an educator at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, the University of Denver, Wayne State University, the New School for Social Research in New York, and the University of California in Los Angeles, California.

When Apartheid ended, Kgositsile returned to South Africa in 1990 (he was vice president of the Congress of South African Writers in the early 1990s). He resumed his political activism, stating that even though Apartheid was officially over, not much had changed. He constantly criticized Black leaders and the ANC government. His poem collection, *When Clouds Clear* was published the same year – the first of his work to be available in his native country.

He previously held the position of Advisor to the Minister of Arts and Culture and holds the same position for Minister Lulu Xingwana.

In 1996 Kgositsile was inaugurated as South Africa's first National Poet Laureate and was later a recipient of the 2008 National Order of Ikhamanga for his contribution to the field of literature.

Kgositsile is best known for taking the resources of poetry from Africa to the African Diaspora in North America and returning the resources of African-American poetry to Africa. Lebogang Mashile, one of the youngest authors ever to win the Noma Award for publishing in Africa, has expressed her indebtedness to Kgositsile, who is often seen sharing the stage with the new spoken-word poets to whom he has been passing on the baton. His influence and inspiration is also acknowledged by established authors such as Mongane Serote, Mandla Langa and Mbulelo Mzamane.

His work includes: *Beyond Words: South African Poetics* (2009), *This Way I Salute You: Selected Poems* (2004), *If I Could Sing* (2002), *To the Bitter End* (1995), *Approaches to Poetry Writing* (1994), *The Present is a Dangerous Place to Live* (1975), *When the Clouds Clear* (1990), *Freeword* with Wilson Katiyo, Charles N. Davis, & Gunnar Rydstom (1983), *Heartprints: Poems* (1980), *Places and Bloodstains* (1976), *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* with Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki R. Madhubuti & Dudley Randall (1975), *The Word is Here*, ed. (1973), *My Name is Africa* (1971), *For Melba* (1971), *Spirits Unchained* (1969). He is also the author of numerous articles, speeches, and other materials. His poems and essays have appeared in numerous journals including *Guerrilla*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Negro Digest*, *The New African*, *Pan African Journal* and *Urban Review* as well as in the anthologies *Black Arts*, *Black Fire*, *For Malcolm* and *Poems Now*.

The many literary awards he received include the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize, the Harlem Cultural Council Poetry Award, the Conrad Kent Rivers Memorial Poetry Award, National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Award, and the Herman Charles Bosman Prize. In 2006, he was inaugurated as South Africa's second National Poet Laureate after the first National Poet Laureate Mazisi Kunene (Professor of African literature and languages at UCLA 1975-1992), and in 2008 he was awarded the national Order of Ikhamanga for excellent achievements in the field of literature and using these exceptional talents to expose the evils of the system of apartheid to the world.

Worldwide appreciation of Kgositsile is evident by the presentations of his poetry, lectures on writing as a craft, revolutionary ideas on arts and culture and anti-apartheid activism. He was a friend and colleague of many at UCLA, including *A:JPAS* senior editor, Itibari M. Zulu. Kgositsile is survived by his former wife (1978-1992) Baleka Mbete, son Thebe Neruda Kgositsile (mother: Cheryl Harris), daughter Ipeleng Kgositsile (mother: Melba Johnson Kgositsile), and son Randy Mafalanka.