

We should patent that '76 vintage

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WHILE at the time of the event I was too young to make sense of it, I do have a rather vague idea of the hype of activity around it.

In our little dorp of Kimberley, no activity less than the rush caused by the 1866 discovery of a pretty white pebble — the 21,25-carat yellow diamond at a farm near Hopetown by a young Erasmus Jacob — inspired much hype or attention.

What stuck in my mind was the year 1976 and the attention around some far away place called Soweto. Its kids were led by a Tsietsi Mashinini, who didn't like Afrikaans — something we could not understand, since for us Kimberley folk, Afrikaans seemed like a perfectly normal lingua franca. Matter of fact, we prided ourselves on being some of SA's few darkies who could "gooi die taal".

But the real bonus was that we got to get a few days off while our older brothers and sisters, for some incomprehensible reason, got taken up in the Soweto hype and expressed their solidarity by breaking school windows and taking on the police.

However, in a way, it was also an irritant, because it meant not being able to hang out with my friends: Phapi Monyamane — now an advocate and a distinguished gentleman — and the then unimaginably six-foot-tall (or so it seemed) Khotso Flatela — since killed in exile in the late 1980s.

It meant no long walk home with the coolest and funniest jokester, Tumi Chounyane, who used to make a 20-minute walk home last two hours.

It certainly broke my regular visit to my friend David Carey — now a director at Panasonic — to grab some of his Ouma Kaai's hot- off-the-pan "vetkoek en mince" after school, en route home. Or the free bean and samp soup — brownish, but delicious and always welcome — that the kind Catholic nuns fed us in winter and for which it wasn't much of a bother to stand in a long line.

As such, 1976 holds a special memory in my heart. So much so, that I do not think anyone should be allowed to use 1976 in vain. They should show reverence, as one is inclined to do for valuable brands. The year occupies a certain rare "valuable real estate in the world, a corner of the consumer's mind", as brandsmiths would describe a well-established idea never confused with any other.

While I've since learnt much about the meaning of June 16 1976, what really stands out for me is the number 76 — for many reasons. I believe much of what defines our history, for all ages and races, has its roots not just in the year, but in the number 76.

Granted, a full date — June 16 1976 — is more specific. Julius Caesar had the Ides of March — March 15 — and America has 9/11. But we don't need another full date — it will clutter our memory, as there are just too many to remember.

We already have April 27 1994. So, forget June 16. It's one too many to remember — what with our calendar of a few working days scattered between holidays.

The number 76 has a certain simplicity and conjures a mix of memories — painful and joyful, personal and national.

Similarly, we should not tamper with complex concepts like arithmetic: $7 + 6$ messes up the beauty and simplicity of the number. Thirteen is an eery number. That's why airlines don't have a row 13 and hotels don't have a floor 13 and Friday 13th is never eagerly anticipated. Just so 76.

June is also a bad month for us. Much of the severe chill of this June, reminiscent of my youth in Kimberley, could be that, despite getting ready to host 2010, we can't even field a ball boy in Germany this month as a precursor to our big show.

Instead, South African football's best year has its roots in the 1976 team that featured the first mixed team, which walloped Argentina 5-0. It set the stage for our most glorious moment in soccer, when Eric Tinkler and Neil Tovey partnered with Lucas Radebe and Doctor Khumalo to lift the African Cup of Nations trophy in 1996.

With the World Cup upon us, though, this really isn't the time to bring up these memories, for obvious reasons.

Without television and the VHS video recorder — first introduced to the world and SA in 76 — to capture the memory of June 16 1976, perhaps the most historic event of that year seems like a figment of the imagination.

Not to overstate the by now obvious significance of the number, it's probably worth concluding by noting that Nobel laureate Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the first democratic president on May 10 1994 — his 76th year, buoyed by the resounding support of 76% of those eligible to vote.

So there are many reasons to celebrate, and perhaps we should brand 76 as a distinctive and memorable number, fundamental to our history and heritage.

There is therefore no doubt, we can claim 76 as an asset with greater and more significant meaning than any other country.

For us, the number is associated only with matters of significance. The numerological meaning of 76 is that it is "an excellent number for anyone involved in management or organisation. It can turn ideas into reality."

Much of where we are as a country is the result of our ability to turn ideas into action, with much credit to June 16 '76.

Khotso Flatela and Hector Petersen would be proud how far we've come. Thirty years on, the world is certainly still awestruck. And I, like many other South Africans, now know all about '76, if not of the picture of a dying Petersen specifically. Viva '76.

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