



A LEADER WHO WALKED THE POLITICAL TALK TO THE FINISH
MANGALISO ROBERT SOBUKWE MEMORIAL LECTURE BY DR. MOTSOLO PHEKO
AT THE METHODIST CHURCH SPRINGS GAUTENG SOUTH AFRICA 12TH JULY 2014

Prof. Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe is a leader who walked the political talk to the finish. In the Biblical language, he ran the race and kept the faith. He went through a glorious contest with distinction. This is a man that the apartheid colonialist regime so silenced that even his closing speech in Court Case Number 173/60 was expunged from the Court record.

Researchers and film makers thirsty to find his voice in radio stations have searched in vain. The enemy destroyed anything he ever said audibly. He was a banned person to his grave.

As a young man Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe was an omnivorous reader. At school, right up to the University of Fort Hare, he was an outstandingly brilliant student and great thinker.

He grew to be a person endowed with profound intellect, revolutionary vigour and deep spirituality. He had exceptionally disarming humility towards everybody, friend and foe alike. Unashamed of his humble beginnings from which he came, he declared, “I am the son of Sobukwe born in Graaf-Reinet that land of goats....”

Leadership is responsibility and duty to serve the people. Leaders who are servants of the people defend the poor and the powerless and work in their interests. They are not afraid to stand against the mighty. They reject the false philosophy that “might is right.” Might has been found wrong many times.

In the politics of South Africa Sobukwe introduced a new style of leadership. Leaders were to be in front. Indeed, he himself showed the way and many followed him, especially to Robben Island.

Of leadership, he declared, “True leadership demands complete subjugation of self, absolute honesty, integrity and uprightness of character, courage and fearlessness, above all a consuming love for one’s people.” He never called a spade a big spoon. He refused to compromise the birth right of his people – land repossession.

Let me give you a few thoughts of those who observed Sobukwe’s life on the impact of the politics of this country, Africa and internationally. After the Sharpeville Uprising exploded like a huge bomb on apartheid South Africa; Lewis Nkosi, a highly respected journalist described Sobukwe as

“...a tall, distinguished African prisoner, a university lecturer and political leader who at the age of 36 has a rare distinction of having scared the South African government out of its wits....”

Lewis Nkosi elaborated, “Sobukwe helped to orchestrate a crisis that panicked the South African regime and nearly brought about the kind of political situation which too often makes the transfer of power overnight.”

A.P. Mda who was the President of the 1912 ANC Youth League after the death of Antony Muziwakhe Lembede and was then a prominent lawyer said, “ I found that Sobukwe believed that a leader must have total commitment to the struggle of the African people for national emancipation, no matter what hardships maybe or what the obstacles maybe.”

When the University of Ahmadu Bello in Nigeria conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws on Sobukwe posthumously, the Dean of this University chanted, “Honourable Chancellor, I present to you this courageous African revolutionary, this strong believer in the principles of Pan Africanism, this great fighter for the liberation and unity of all African peoples, this symbol of the

struggle against apartheid and colonialism; for the posthumous conferment of the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws....”

Sobukwe Understood That The Struggle In South Africa was fundamentally an anti-colonial struggle, not a mere civil rights struggle against apartheid. Apartheid was the symptom of the disease brought about by the Berlin Act of 26 February 1885 which enabled Europe to partition Africa into its colonies, robbed African people of their countries and used the riches of Africa to develop Europe and under-develop Africa.

Sobukwe knew how land dispossession of the African people came about in South Africa and that a doctor who treats the symptoms of a disease and not the disease itself is bound to fail. He recognised all African kings who fought against the colonial land dispossession of the African people in South Africa.

Some of these are “Uphaqa njelanga, Inyathi yasenhlakanhlakeni, Unokuzila ukudla kwamagwala. Amagwala adlu bubende.” That is King Cetshwayo – the architect of the Battle of Isandlwana – where African spears triumphed over the guns of a well-armed British army.

In today’s Eastern Cape, King Hintsa fell in the Sixth War of national resistance against British colonialism in 1834. The colonial soldiers were commanded by Harry Smith. He still has a town in “New South Africa” named after him and another one called Ladysmith after his wife.

In July 1959, Sobukwe paid tribute to all African Kings. They were the first freedom fighters in this country against colonialism. Among other things Mangaliso Sobukwe said:

“Sons and Daughters of Afrika, we are going down the corridor of time renewing our acquaintance with the heroes of Africa’s past – those men and women who nourished the tree of African freedom and independence with their blood, those great Sons and Daughters of Afrika who died in order that we may be free in the land of our birth.

We meet here today, to rededicate ourselves to the cause of Afrika, to establish contact beyond the grave, with the great African heroes and assure them that their struggle was not in vain. We are met here Sons and Daughters of the beloved land to drink from the fountain of African achievement, to remember the men and women who begot us, to remind ourselves of where we come from and restate our goals. We are here to draw inspiration from the heroes of Thababosiu,

Isandlwana, Sandile's Kop and numerous other battlefields where our forefathers fell before the bullets of the foreign invader....”

A generation that is ignorant of its past has no past and no future. A generation that does not know its past does not know even its present. It therefore, cannot understand its present and plan its future intelligently. The past has determined how the present must be handled.

Sobukwe Got His Politics And His History Correct.

He did not forget that if a realistic and just society is to be created in South Africa, the facts of the political history of this country must not be swept under the carpet. Have you ever read the Union Of South Africa Act 1909 and the Native Land Act 1913?

These are two pieces of legislation that created South Africa. The Native Land Act 1913 legalised the unjust distribution of land and its riches. It created massive poverty and alarming economic inequalities affecting the African people today.

This same law is today hidden in Section 25 (7) of the South African Constitution under a new name – “property clause” while the country's majority people is property less. Millions live in filthy shacks not fit even for pigs. These shacks often catch fire or flood killing many people.

The rulers dangle before the dispossessed of this country “land claims” from the crumbs of 13% allocated to the African people in 1913 and 1936. They are now offered to buy back the property of their ancestors through a dismally failed policy of “willing seller and willing buyer.” But even this, is merely their land which was further seized from 13% through the Group Areas Act of 1950.

Indeed, the country Sobukwe fought for is like the one which Prophet Isaiah described in Chapter 1 verse 7 of this book, when he wrote, “Your land is desolate...Your land, strangers devour in your presence.” – “Izwe lakini liyihlane...umhlaba wenu udliwa ngabafokazi phambi kwenu.”

Sobukwe knew that this would happen if some liberation struggle leaders in this country would confuse the symptoms – apartheid; for the disease colonialism itself.

The apartheid colonialist regime feared Sobukwe. Johannes Balthazar Vorster, the regime's Minister of Justice called Sobukwe a “Heavy Weight Boxer” when compared to his political

opponents in South Africa. Sobukwe understood the essence of the African liberation struggle too clearly to be misled or compromised. He is the only political leader in the history of this country who was imprisoned on Robben Island without even a mock trial. After serving a three-year prison sentence at Stofberg Prison for leading the Sharpeville Uprising, he was imprisoned on Robben Island in solitary confinement. He was guarded by five prison warders with two fierce Alsatian dogs.

In the entire history of the world no parliament ever made a law to govern one man. But in South Africa, the “Sobukwe Clause” was legislated hurriedly by the apartheid colonial Parliament to do precisely that.

Commenting on the “Sobukwe Clause,” the apartheid regime’s Minister of Justice, Johannes Balthazar Vorster said:

“Then we come to the Sobukwe Clause....I appreciate that the principle of this clause is drastic....It is imprisonment that is concerned with the security of the state. It does not relate to any other crime....I have respect for the attitude of Member for Houghton [Helen Suzman]....But I want to say to her...if her amendment were to succeed and Robert Sobukwe were released we would have a fine to do in this country.”

Some Members of the apartheid parliament visited Sobukwe on Robben Island after some years. They voted that Sobukwe must be kept in Robben Island Prison because he had not changed. A member of parliament who was in the group that visited Sobukwe said:

“I asked Sobukwe, have you considered changing your ideology?” He replied: ‘Not until the day of the resurrection.’

Sobukwe Was A Pan Africanist visionary.

He preached Africanism and Pan Africanism in South Africa when these concepts were frowned upon by his political opponents as “anti-white.” But of course, today there is the Pan African Parliament. There has been the Organisation of African Unity. It has been succeeded by the African Union.

It is very clear that if Africa does not unite, she will not defeat the onslaughts of a new form of colonialism threatening Africa’s people. Situations such as Libya, Central African Republic, Somalia, Mali, South Sudan, Boko Haram in Nigeria show that no African state can go it alone.

Sobukwe was an ideological brother and comrade of Pan Africanist luminaries such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Modibo Keita, Ahmed Sekou Toure, Patrice Lumumba etc.

He was a strong advocate of a United States of Africa. He declared, “Besides the sense of a common historical fate that we share with other [African] countries, it is imperative for purely practical reasons that the whole of Africa unite into a single unit....Only in that way can be solved the immense problems that face the Continent.”

Sobukwe died on 27 February 1978. He had envisaged that “By the end of 20th century, the standard of living of the masses of the African people would undoubtedly have arisen dramatically....”

He pointed out that “The potential wealth of Africa in minerals, oil, hydro-electric power and so on, is immense. By cutting out waste through systematic planning a central government can bring the most rapid development.”

There is An Unfounded Criticism Against Sobukwe By His Opponents. For instance, the author of *Long Walk To Freedom* has written: “I was keen to discuss policy issues with Sobukwe, and one of the matters I took up with him was the PAC slogan ‘Freedom in 1963.’ It was already 1963 and freedom was nowhere to be seen.”

It is not clear whether this was just the usual slanting of facts. The official slogans of the PAC have always been “Izwe Lethu!” or “Africa for Africans, Africans for humanity and humanity for God!” Anyway, this is what Sobukwe wrote in the Drum Magazine March 1959:

“Nobody disputes our contention that Africa will be free from foreign rule. What is disputed by many, particularly the ruling white minorities is that she will be free ‘within our life time or by 1963 or even by 1973 or 1984. However, the African nationalist movements which met in Accra in 1958 put 1963 as the target for freedom for all of Africa.”

There were only 8 African States when Sobukwe said this. But by 1963, there were 32 African States and the formation of the Organisation of African Unity on 25 May 1963. By 1984 only South Africa remained an apartheid colony.

Sobukwe was never naive about the liberation struggle he led. Long before the Sharpeville Uprising, Robben Island Prison, Armed Struggle that was initiated by him and his colleague; Sobukwe had warned:

“There is plenty of suffering ahead. The oppressor will not take this lying down. But we are ready, come what may.”

Without Sobukwe’s leadership, the United Nations would never have been seized with the Problem of South Africa for over 30 years. As Frantz Fanon the author of *The Wretched of The Earth* writes, it was through the Sharpeville Uprising led by Sobukwe which made the vile system of apartheid known internationally.

Without this Uprising, there would never have been a United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid. This world body would never have declared apartheid a crime against humanity. As a result of Sobukwe’s leadership the United Nations in honour of the martyrs of Sharpeville Uprising, declared March 21 International Day For The Elimination Of Racial Discrimination. Without Sobukwe’s actions and that of his colleagues, there would never have been Robben Island Prison. Robben Island was primarily meant for Sobukwe and PAC members. That is why they were the first to be imprisoned on Robben Island from 12 October 1962.

Was Sobukwe a “racist”? In a court of law in which he and his 23 colleagues were convicted of leading the Sharpeville Uprising, he stated that he believed in one race only. Asked, “Do you imply that the Africans,... and the whites of this country belong to this race?” He replied, “Correct.”

It is Sobukwe’s organisation that coined the phrase “non-racial” in South Africa. The others were multi-racialists. Sobukwe said there was enough racism in South Africa to multiply it. The experts of English language those days said, there was no such word in English.

Today the constitution of this country talks of non-racial society. Unfortunately no English experts ever afterwards thanked Sobukwe and his movement for giving the English language a new word - non-racialism. They just quietly put it in their dictionaries.

Sobukwe was a pace setter in the politics of South Africa. When he formed a military wing of his Party, others did the same. When he went to Robben Island they followed him there.

Let me give one example. When he appeared in court on 4th April 1960, he reminded the Magistrate:

“Your Worship, it will be remembered that when this court began we refused to plead because we felt no moral obligation whatsoever to obey laws which are made exclusively by a white minority....But I would like to quote what was said by someone before, that an unjust law cannot be justly applied....We stand for equal rights for all individuals....We are not afraid of the consequences for our actions and it is not our intention to plead for mercy. Thank you, Your Worship.”

Two years seven months, after Sobukwe had addressed a court in this mood, a rival political leader on 9th November 1962 followed on the hot pace that Sobukwe had set. He said,

“I challenge the right of this court to hear my case, Firstly I fear that I will not be given a fair trial. Secondly, I consider myself neither legally nor morally bound to obey laws made by a parliament in which I have no representation.”

Sobukwe Was Far Ahead Of His Political Opponents.

His revolution began with the destruction of the enslaving pass laws – the Dom Pass which had conditioned the African people to regard their colonial masters as demigods. They suffered the terrible disease of inferiority complex. For Sobukwe the Dom Pass symbolised men who could never become owners of products and masters of their destiny. They were mentally damaged by the system of apartheid and colonialism and had helplessly accepted their inferior status in the land of their ancestors.

Today, when you look at the mineral complex of our country, both these issues directly contest white minority ownership of land and mineral resources. Sobukwe worked on distinct fronts as thought leader. These were:

1. Africans must be owners of the means of production
2. Africans must be owners of land and minerals
3. Africans must declare their freedom from mental slavery by thinking, working and behaving like free men and women without the continuing mental chains of the Dom Pass that Sobukwe and his colleagues paid high price to destroy through the Sharpeville Uprising.

These are still the biggest challenges faced by our country. Without attainment of these three objectives, there will be worse Marikanas. At some stage the slave conditions of employment,

especially in mines and farms and unjust distribution of land and its resources according to population numbers, will create more uprisings.

Sobukwe became the main target for the racist colonial regime because of these objectives. They knew just how the economic consequences would be for their colonial paradise that economically excluded the indigenous African population.

Sobukwe Was A Man With Deep Spirituality.

He was an inspiration not only as a political leader, but also as a spiritual man. He found fortification, solace and courage in his Christian faith. He defied the demigods of white supremacy who wanted to destroy the image of God in Black people. He refused to bow to the forces of tyranny. In turn they destroyed him physically.

But they could not destroy him spiritually. While people were sending him messages of sympathy for his suffering in Robben Island for no sins of his, he in turn was encouraging them.

There is this letter he wrote to one of his Party members. It read: "I came across some beautiful sentiments, the other day, and I intend to pass them on to you because I know you will appreciate them as I did. This man Gilbert is commenting on 1 Samuel 12:24."

He says, "The Christian fears God, but for that reason he does not fear men. The Christian believes in God, but for that very reason he will not have men tell him what he may believe or not believe. The Christian is dependent on God and that is why he is independent of men. The Christian is humbled before God as his Maker and Lord, and that is why he cannot bow to human masters." 'I say Amen to every word,' Sobukwe concluded.

The deep spirituality of Dr. Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe is manifested also in his favourite English poem.

"To every man upon this earth
Death comes soon or late
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And for the temples of his Gods?"

Prof. Ivan Sertima, a Pan Africanist scholar in the Diaspora was correct when he wrote: “When a star dies, it does not vanish from the firmament. Its light keeps streaming across the fields of time and space, so that centuries later we may be touched by a vision of the fire and brilliance of its former life. The lives of truly great men are just like that.”

Dr. Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe is that kind of star. Freedom is not free. Its price is sacrifice. Sobukwe walked the political talk against fearful odds, with extra-ordinary patriotism and consuming love for Africa. God Bless Africa, her Sons and Daughters.