

BRIEF ADDRESS
AT THE NAMING OF THE ROBERT SOBUKWE BUILDING
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
MONDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2017

Introduction and salutations

Vice Principal, Prof Tawana Kupe, Robert Sobukwe family and in particular its representative, Mr Dini Sobukwe. Please, Dini, send our respectful and revolutionary greetings to Mama Veronica Sobukwe, that silent heroine of our long and glorious struggle. Mr Manabile David, SRC representative', PASMA student representative Mr Phethani Madzivhandila, students, members of council, executive management and other office bearer of this great University, fellow citizens and compatriots. As always, it is a privilege to be invited to the unveiling of the plaque renaming of the Central Block to Robert Sobukwe Block.

The honour to Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe is welcome and we must thank all concerned for doing so. But the recognition is hopelessly belated particularly at Wits where Mangaliso Sobukwe, as we will shortly hear, left deep footprints of our uprising. Sobukwe lectured at this university. Despite Wits' deeply colonial and racist setting, he wrote the newsletter known as *The Africanist* under the noses of his employers. During 1959 he drafted the founding documents of the Pan Africanist Congress right here before the launch of the PAC in April 1959 at Orlando Hall, Soweto. Here, Sobukwe planned the pass campaign that was to re-ignite our dying struggle. After that campaign the PAC and ANC and the Communist Party of South Africa were banned. That in turn ushered in the armed struggle and the formation of APLA and MK.

Every nation, every people, from time to time, yields from amongst its very own a truly courageous, selfless and visionary patriot who stands tall and apart from the rest. As she or he passes on, the rest of us would know that it was a life well lived. It was a life worthy of celebration. We want to remember great lives for many reasons. First, they are beacons and signposts of public history. Great lives light up the collective path we have travelled. They locate us within our past and shared experiences. There is another forward looking reason for celebrating. From their lives we hope to learn how to live our own lives. We call to memory their visionary and selfless action in order to gird our loins for the difficult task of creating re-imagining our world. We hope to extract from their brave deeds, those abiding values of how best to accomplish present day challenges. Of course, we also remember the departed greats for no more than to thank them for the sacrifices they have made to make our lives bearable.

A compatriot of that order is Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. But who is our celebrants?

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was born on 5 December 1924 to his father Hubert Sobukwe and mother Angelina in Graaf-Reinet in the middle of the Karoo. Sobukwe's modest four roomed home sat on a hill outside town, in a separate location, some distance away from the white settlement.

Both of his parents were working class people, his father worked at the local municipality and later sold fire wood to residents of the location. His mother, besides looking after her own home, worked as a cook at the town hospital and later as a domestic worker for a white family.

After primary schooling, in January 1940, Sobukwe proceeded to Healdtown High School, a Methodist institution of secondary schooling for black youth.

Even at that early stage, Healdtown boasted an enrolment of 1400, boarders. By the 1950's it was an admirable model of black educational advancement. Its teaching staff had reached a 50:50 ratio between African and whites. That in itself was a great source of inspiration to the young black charges of the school.

Very swiftly, Sobukwe rose up the student ranks to become president of the students' representative council. By 1942, he had completed a three year teachers training course. In 1943, he completed the matriculation examination which he passed with a first class and that earned him a bursary to Fort Hare University near Alice.

Sobukwe entered Fort Hare on the verge of the ascendancy of the Nationalist Party to power in 1948. Brute repression and racial exclusion were the undisguised policies of the new ruling elite. They intensified and extended the historical dispossession of the land of African people that took a national legislative form in the 1913 and 1936 Land Act. We are told that when he studied the course native Administration he was horrified by the extent of the oppressive legislative web African people had to endure. He was jolted into a deep resentment over the virtual slavery of African people on their land of birth.

Sobukwe read widely steadily cultivated the love for writing. It is said that Sobukwe subscribed to the West African newspaper founded by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, an early campaigner of the Nigerian independence. He also read avidly the writings of that great Africanist, Dr Kwame Nkurumah.

The political climate in at Fort Hare University was highly charged. 1947, the African National Congress Youth League was born under the leadership of Muziwakhe Anton Lembede, who was highly revered for his intellectual

prowess and his characterisation of the liberation struggle. Sobukwe sat at his feet. Sobukwe interacted with nearly two dozen of very distinguished members of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare. And these included AP Mda, the first president of the Youth League, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Robert Resha, Jordan Ngubane, ZK Matthews, Dennis Siwisa and Nthato Motlana and Mangosuthu Buthelezi. For good measure let me add Robert Mugabe and Seretse Khama.

In 1949, Godfrey Pitje became the President of the ANC Youth League. Under him Robert Sobukwe served, as the national secretary of the Youth League. The 1949 programme of action of the ANC was a product of the youthful militancy of the ANC Youth League, of which Sobukwe was an integral and important part. At the centre of that programme of action was the adoption of African nationalism, as the central platform for organising a national liberation movement, led by African people themselves for the total overthrow of white domination and the establishment of a majority rule within a democracy. This was a radical departure from politics of petitions that characterised the movement up to then.

Sobukwe's heady university days had to come to an end. In early 1950, he taught in the small town of Standerton, Sobukwe remained the national secretary of the Youth League whilst in Standerton,

In 1952 his father died. He acquired a Bachelor of Arts with honours at Wits, subsequently did script reading and editing of language manuscripts for the Oxford University Press. In 1954, he met and married Veronica in Soweto and around June of the same year Sobukwe was appointed to a position at the University of the Witwatersrand. He then moved into a standard four roomed municipality house, at 684 Mofolo, Soweto. In quick succession, little

ones followed. His first child, a daughter was Miliswa who was followed by a son, Dinilesizwe and finally twin boys known as Dalindyebo and Dedanizizwe.

On the political front, he joined the local Mofolo branch of the ANC. Suffice to say that up to April 1958, Sobukwe appeared to have been in a pensive and thoughtful mood. He wrote article after article, as editor of *The Africanist* – a political magazine. These ideas were to be the forerunners of the foundational principles of the Pan Africanist Congress, which broke away from the ANC in 1958 and was formally launched on 6 April 1959. It is well known that Sobukwe was elected as the first President of the PAC.

On 21 March 1960, at the launch of the PAC anti-pass campaign, he resigned from his post at Wits. He made last minute arrangements for the safety of his family and left his home in Molofo. He and his followers themselves up for arrest at the Orlando police station and called on all pass carrying African to leave their passes at home and surrender themselves for arrest. On the 8 kilometre walk to the police station men joined him from neighbouring areas like Phefeni, Dube and Orlando West. As the crowd approached the station most of them, including Sobukwe, were arrested. Sobukwe's clarion call of a pass campaign was headed by tens of thousands. The regime shot in cold blood peaceful marchers in Sharpeville and Langa and Nyanga. A state of emergency was declared. The ANC and the PAC were banned. Umkhonto we Sizwe and Azanian Peoples Liberation Army were formed. Our revolution took a new trajectory.

Sobukwe and his comrades were tried for incitement and sentenced to three years in prison with hard labour. At the end of the prison term the minority parliament made a law, not of general application, but targeting one person, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. The law directed that he be detained indefinitely in a house on Robben Island. The detention lasted for an additional six years.

After his release from Robben Island, in 1969, Sobukwe was allowed to join his family in Kimberley but remained under twelve hour house arrest. He was also restricted from any political activity as a result of a banning order that had been imposed on the PAC. During his incarceration, Sobukwe obtained an Honours Degree in Economics from the University of London and began studying law. He completed his articles in Kimberley and established his own law firm in 1975. Robert Sobukwe passed away on 27 February 1978 from lung cancer.

. Let it for now suffice to say he is one of the clearest thinkers on and proponents of Africanism. I commend his writing to you.

What would they now think?

But that is also true of John Langalibalele Dube, or Sol Plaatjie or Lilian Ngoyi, Ruth First, Anton Muziwakhe Limbede, AP Mda, Steve Biko. Onkgopotse Tiro, Imam Haroun, Braam Fischer Zephania Mothopeng and of Chris Hani. It is also true of the masses of our people who succumbed in perennial revolts from Pondoland to Bambata; from Kwa Langa to Sharpeville, from Soweto to Kwamashu from Villa Paris to Cuito Canavale .

I am really making the point that our struggle for freedom, democracy and equality has many mothers and fathers, who come in all shapes, ages, gender, sizes, origins and race. It was fought by peasants in rural villages; by the unemployed and poor, by working women and men on shop floors across industries; by organised denominations across the religious spectrum; by adolescent youth in every centre of learning; by organised civil society formations and by concerned residents in every urban township; by a bold and defiant and critical media, writers, journalists and artists and indeed even by a discrete group of the white activist who turned their back on apartheid and weighed in with those who sought to destroy apartheid and economic unfairness it spawned. In short, it was a struggle by all of us in our full

diversity, but bound by our commitment to create a just and equal society reflective of who we are, where do we come from and where we want to be within the broader African and global setting. . It is therefore deeply disingenuous to suggest that any of our valiant heroes may be discarded or hidden under the rubble of history. Their ideas will tend to surface and resurface because they are a vital part of a progressive knowledge system.

Here is final my point. If Solomon Mahlangu and Mangaliso Sobukwe took a look at our democratic enterprise today would they see doom and gloom? I think they would. Some things will certainly leave Mahlangu' and Sobukwe agonising

They will be surprised that we lost our moral and ideological compass so easily and so quickly. They will notice that some of the stubborn legacies of past are still with us. More than half of us are still poor, very poor. We have not found a satisfactory solution to spatial apartheid, equitable solution to land question, and housing, access to health care and basic services. We still don't have access to free education for our youth. They won't approve that there is no significant rural development that would have stemmed poverty stricken urbanization. The epicentre of economic power is still vested in a few hands. Mineral resources during their time and now do not trickle down to workers and the broader populace. Race is still a marker of social inequality. The income disparity has become bigger and starker. Only a small crust of the black middle class has advanced economically against the backdrop of nearly a third of us on social grants and another third of our youth unemployed. They will be disturbed that up to now we have not learned how to create jobs for ourselves. After all a claim to liberty is a claim for space to prosper oneself or community. It is not happening. Instead poverty is deepening. We have not skilled our children enough to be entrepreneurs and not job hunters. Quality education and health care is still only for the financially healed. I am afraid I must add and confess that proper access to justice is often a function of one's bank balance.

Above all they will be surprised that we have not learned how to deal and out bad leaders.

Only when we have taken to heart all these matter that Sobukwe then would in an old fashioned way say “you have served, suffered and sacrificed in order to advance the primacy of the interest our people.”

That was my way of thanking this great University for today.

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