

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe

Godfrey Pitje:

In this major address delivered at the funeral of Robert Sobukwe in Graaff Reinet on the 11 March 1978, Godfrey Pitje paid eloquent tribute to the friend whom he first met as a fellow student at Fort Hare.

THE MOST formative years of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe were the years he spent at Healdtown Methodist Institution at Fort Beaufort. It was at Healdtown that Robert learnt to see, not Xhosa, Zulus and Shangaans; not Sotho, Pedi and Chuaná people; but Black people, inhabiting the "dark" continent of Africa. For him there was no tribalism, no ethnicity. It was at Healdtown that the thin line separating the English from the Afrikaner; Nationalists from the United Party members paled into insignificance, and young Sobukwe began to see only Whites. True, among them he did see Missionaries and liberals. But he was very critical about the rôle they played in African affairs. He read about Cape Liberals and the Cape liberals of Schreiner and others and was quick to see how useless they were when the Cape blacks were disenfranchised. He saw how the doyen of white liberals, J H Hofmeyr, remained in the United Party and even acted as Premier during the absence of Jan Smuts. Smuts the international humanist and elder statesman had said in 1942: "... segregation has fallen on evil days ..." but in South Africa he pursued the policy of segregation rigorously. Smuts the premier of South Africa was ruling South Africa with the massive support of the English and in the process diametrically failing to respect human rights and human dignity. It was at Healdtown that he learnt the fundamentals and rudiments of the English language through which medium he was to express his thoughts in clear and concise terms.

Student leader

It was at Healdtown that he first became a student leader, and using that as a beginning, became leader of the then young South Africa. And it was as such that I first met young Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe at Fort Hare University College, in the late 1940s. He spoke on behalf of the freshers of that year, and soon many on the campus, both staff and students, were saying: "This young boy will go far." "This is not the last time we shall hear of him." But what exactly was expected of him? Think of a white student protégé such as J H Hofmeyr: Rector of a University? Councilor? MPC Administrator of a Province? MP? Cabinet? Prime Minister? In 1948 Smuts fell and the Nationalist Party of Dr D F Malan formed a government. In

1948 Robert became a founder member of the then ANC Youth League branch at Fort Hare. That branch included young men some of whom have become national figures. Dr Molamé, who is languishing in gaol for leading his people, is chairman of the Committee of Ten. In the Fort Hare branch Robert became a member of what one may call the foreign affairs committee. He and others in this group read practically all that was available on black Africa, and used the newspaper, *Inkundla*, as a medium. They read newspapers from all over Africa and were influenced by the writings of Kwame Nkrumah, Marcus Garvey and Dr Nnandi Azikiwe. They subscribed for papers like the *West African Pilot*. In terms of the Native Administration Act No. 38 of 1927 Section 1, the Governor General is the supreme chief of all the natives.

The basic creed of the Youth League was *African Nationalism or Africanism*, its basic belief was that Africa was the black man's continent, and its goal was the liberation of the black man from foreign domination and discrimination. They claimed every inch of the soil of Africa and discarded the conventional Ladies and Gentlemen in their meetings and conferences in favour of *Sons and Daughters of Africa*. They spoke of *Sons of the Soil*. They rejected the theory that the African is a newcomer on the southern tip of Africa, having theoretically migrated from somewhere in Central Africa. And as some white theoreticians are wont to say: "the white man arrived first and found the country uninhabited. They pooh poohed questions like: who built the Zimbabwe ruins? Therefore Sobukwe would never have accepted — supported Homelands. Power is not at Ulundi, Umata, Seshgo, Mmabatho. Power is in Pretoria.

Slave mentality

They were at pains to explain that this did not mean that they were anti-white, or anti-anybody. They were merely pro-Africa. They saw the dangers of what was called the "slave-mentality" and sought vigorously to rid themselves and other black men of this slave-mentality. In this context Robert would no doubt have endorsed the view of the Revd Benjamin E Mays who said: "The greatest damage that the white man did to the black man through slavery and segregation was to beat him down so much that millions of negroes believed that they were nobody". They were extremely anti-communist. And yet paradoxically, several of them in later years were banned, gagged and restricted under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.

They were accused of being tribalists and

racists, of being narrow and parochial, of using immoderate and extreme language. They found solace in the words of Dr Nnandi Azikiwe who wrote: "Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell a man moderately to rescue his wife from the arms of a ravisher; tell a mother to extricate gradually her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but do not ask me to use moderation in a cause like mine." Robert hated fence-sitters. He wanted active participants in the struggle for liberation. He venly believed in the creed: "Those who are not with us are against us. This then was the Sobukwe who left Fort Hare at the end of 1949, to become a teacher at Standerton. And what a teacher! It was in Standerton that he became a local preacher in the Methodist Church. And what a preacher!

Total involvement

While in Standerton he identified himself completely with the needs and aspirations of the local populace. He took part in every conceivable activity of the community. Yet he was to hear Dr H F Verwoerd tell the Senate on 7 June 1964 that "The Bantu teacher must be integrated as an active agent in the process of the development of the Bantu community. He must learn not to feel above his community, with a consequent desire to become integrated into the life of the European community. He becomes frustrated and rebellious when this does not take place, and tries to make his community dissatisfied because of such misdirected ambitions which are alien to his people." He was to hear Dr Verwoerd's Secretary for Native Affairs, Dr W W M Ezeles, say of mission schools (that is schools like Healdtown where Robert had been trained) that they "... had in their followers the desire to place their ability, their integrity and their initiative at the service of the community as a whole". Also that "... the schools existed within the community but were not of it." The die was now cast. He had to leave teaching. We are thankful that the University of the Witwatersrand gave him a chance.

The University of the Witwatersrand is perhaps the most liberal of English-medium universities in South Africa. Yet even at Wits he could not be head of the department of African Studies. He could not be a professor — the people called him "Prof."; not a senior lecturer; not a lecturer; not an assistant-lecturer, but was termed "language assistant", whatever that means. What a sad commentary on our South African way of life!

Be that as it may, at Wits Mangaliso matured politically. He began to question the general direction of the then ANC. In particular he

questioned white influence and white participation in the liberatory struggle. He felt that the leadership of the ANC was slipping out of black hands. He believed that they were departing from the beaten road. That they had abandoned the creed of African Nationalism on which he had originally been recruited into the Youth League. The more he pondered the situation, the more he found himself at the crossroads. Ultimately the inevitable happened. In 1958 he broke away from the ANC to form the then Pan African Congress.

Magnetic personality

In terms of numbers his PAC was small.

But make no mistake. There were many who remained in the ANC who shared his views. There were many outside political organisations who thought like him or were much influenced by the force of his character and determination. His influence grew in ever widening circles and reverberated through the length and breadth of South Africa. No wonder Prime Minister B J Vorster is said to have described him as a man with a "strong magnetic personality". It was this "magnetic personality" which led young blacks to march to various Police Stations to surrender their reference books on the 21st March 1960. And make no mistake. The Pass laws have always been regarded as the black man's enemy number one. They literally haunt the

black man from birth to the grave. One cannot register the birth of one's child without a pass; nor can one find a grave for one's dead without a pass. Therefore 21 March 1960 was the turning point in the black man's struggle for liberation. On that day Mangaliso ushered a new era.

He was a man; not only a man, but a man. He is today no more with us. But his spirit lives on. It is the same spirit that survived three years in gaol. It survived a spell on Robben Island. It could not be gagged and restricted and confined to Kimberley. Our Moses is no more with us. He has been told in no uncertain terms that he will not see the new Africa. His noble spirit will lead us to our Canaan.

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