

Tribute to Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe
President of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania
Delivered at the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium
United Nations, New York City, March 12, 1978

By Peter H. 'Molotsi

Compatriots and friends,

We are gathered here this afternoon to pay homage to our great leader, Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, founder and first National President of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania because we have known him. We are gathered here to symbolically lay him to rest, to bid him farewell, and to wipe off tears from our cheeks. We are gathered here to reaffirm that the cause for which he paid the supreme sacrifice was indeed a noble one, and that it still has to be met. We are gathered here to take stock of ourselves, who we are, where do we come from, and whereto are we headed. We are gathered here to bind our wounds. After a moment of a relapse and a near collapse we are here to pick up our baggage and luggage, our spear and shield, 'turn our grief into strength', and continue on the journey towards the glittering gates of a free and independent Republic of Azania.

Early Childhood:

Sobukwe was born at a time of great festivities on December 5, 1925, a few days before Christmas Day. He was born of humble parentage at Graff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. Both his parents were part of the burgeoning proletarian found then and now in the sprouting and sprawling commercial centers of Azania. This was a year after General J.B.M. Hertzog had come to power in an alliance with the white Labour Party under the slogan: Workers of the World Unite! Keep South Africa White!! This was at a time when the Industrial (Colour Bar) Act was being enacted to exclude Africans from certain categories of employment. This was at a time when the Africans were striving to assert their rights as workers under the leadership of the ICU (Industrial & Commercial Workers Union of Africa) whose membership had just rocketted to approximately 50,000. The African workers were exuding confidence and enthusiasm. They were generally looking forward to better days ahead.

Sobukwe was born the last child in a family of six boys. The family and parents were convinced that this child was going to be a girl. As it turned out, quite contrary to expectations, the bouncing baby was a boy. They prophetically named him Mangaliso (Wonderful). Someone remarked that the boy was going to perform miracles and wonders. It is said from the time he could crawl and walk the rambunctious boy, breaking a cup and a plate here and there, tearing a newspaper and book now and again, wanted a new arrangement in the house. There was the customary eating, drinking, and merry-making. Young Mangaliso, like most African youths, took on odd jobs to augment the scanty family income. In the meantime he attended primary school in the area. It is said he was healthy and robust, very active in school activities, including sports. Later on in life he contracted asthma, an illness that would require living on the high

altitude of the Orange Free State or Transvaal. He passed Standard VI, gaining a first class pass in 1941. Because of the paucity of schools for Africans he had to leave home for secondary education. He proceeded to Beaufort West. Then as now education for the African was neither free nor compulsory. Despite their simple circumstances Mangaliso's parents had saved enough to cover the cost for his travel, clothing, boarding, lodging, tuition fees, and pocket money.

A Brilliant Scholar:

As a student, it is now generally admitted, Mangaliso was brilliant. His school reports were a challenge to his compatriots and a source of pride to his parents. He completed secondary and high school requirements in the prescribed five years for Africans, gaining a first class Matriculation pass - University Entrance Certificate - in 1946. This was at Healdtown Institute. His headmaster and teachers were so impressed by his superb performance that they raised him funds that enabled him to enter college. He enrolled at Fort Hare University where he gained a B.A. (History & Literature) in 1949, simultaneously gaining a University Education Diploma.

Sobukwe was elected the first president of the Students' Representative Council under a new reorganization scheme that granted greater power to the student body. He was the moving spirit behind many activities and an acknowledged leader on and off campus. He entered the teaching profession in 1950 at Standerton African Secondary School in the Transvaal. He was summarily fired from his post by the Transvaal Education Department for the unpardonable sin of actively participating in the organization of the Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws in 1952. Popular pressure, however, resulted in him being reinstated. He had begun earning a living as a wood and coal vendor. He continued to sharpen his intellect.

The fecundity of Sobukwe's mind had a lasting impact on his students, followers, and compatriots. He was a voracious reader and a prodigious writer. He had a flair for languages and was a past master in the art of story-telling, the key ingredient in African oral literature. The profundity of his thoughts found expression in his unsurpassed concise and graphic style. He gained a B.A.(Hons.) degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1953, and was appointed Lecturer on African Studies and Bantu Languages. Since then, among students and the public at large, he was affectionately known as 'the Prof.'.

His messages and directives to the leaders of the liberatory movement had the ring of scholarly lucidity. He succeeded me as editor of "The Africanist", a monthly organ of the movement in 1958. He held that post until March 1960. After the banning of both the PAC and the ANC "The Africanist" was incorporated into the "Azania News" which continues to be published in exile. Sobukwe continued studying even during the period of his solitary captivity on Robben Island. At that time he smuggled a message that indicated that he was reading and self-teaching to avoid the very real possibility of a mental derangement. He thus gained a B.Sc.(Econ.) degree of London University in 1968. He was transferred from Robben Island to house-arrest in Kimberley in April, 1969.

His erudition was recognized by, among other agencies, the BAD (Bantu Affairs Department) police. His captors and tormentors, the South African regime, offered him a high post to administer the obnoxious Pass Laws on the African people, his followers. Although he would have no employment he characteristically rejected that offer with the contempt it deserved. He once more deepened and broadened his intellectual horizons by delving into the study of jurisprudence. Despite severe restrictions and enormous handicaps he maintained the record of radiating brilliance. He was admitted as an Attorney of the Supreme Court in 1974. Sobukwe, therefore, was by all accounts an accomplished and incisive intellectual who held several degrees encompassing the fields of African Studies, Bantu Languages, Education, Economics, History, Law, and Literature.

A Towering African Nationalist:

The early spark of African nationalism stirred in Sobukwe's breast while a student at Fort Hare. As president of the Student Representative Council he rubbed shoulders with officialdom not only at college but also in the neighbouring African institutions of Bealdtown and Lovedale. The spark, at first dim, grew into a raging flame, that grew into a consuming conflagration, that grew into a towering inferno. This nationalism sought to instill in the downtrodden African masses the feeling of self-confidence and self-reliance. It was geared to liberating them from the feeling of inferiority. It continuously beckoned on them to mobilize and seize the initiative in restoring and salvaging their human dignity. Sobukwe held that African nationalism was the liberatory outlook to achieve the gigantic and historic task for rousing and consolidating the masses in the struggle for democracy.

Sobukwe was elected chapter chairman of the Victoria East Congress Youth League. In that capacity he intervened at the Lovedale Nurses Training School where African women were protesting the poor conditions. There he met his future wife, Veronica Zedwa Mathe, who was leading the women's strike. With Sobukwe's support the women won a resounding victory. His first major clarion call to the African people was contained in a memorable speech that he delivered to the Class of 1949 wherein he exhorted his compatriots to remain true to their own convictions and make a life-time commitment to the cause of African liberation. His greater nationalist impact, however, was to be felt in his role as one of the chief architects and pilots for adoption of the 1949 African National Program of Action. Soon thereafter he fast became a familiar and much sought figure in the lecture circuit where the future of Africa was being discussed.

Sobukwe became the chapter chairman of the Mofolo, Johannesburg, ANC in 1954. At the same time he retained his membership in the Africanist Council that later gave birth to the Pan Africanist Congress. He was overwhelmingly elected the first National President of the PAC (Azania) at the inaugural convention on April 6, 1959.

A Giant Pan-Africanist:

Sobukwe eschewed parochialism in African Affairs. He passionately believed in

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'one Africa, one people, one destiny'. He envisaged the creation of a future United States of Africa "with all power vested in a central government, freely elected by the whole continent on the basis of universal adult suffrage". He said, in 1959, that in such a set up "only continent-wide political parties committed to a continental program cutting across sectional ties and interests; whether of a tribal or of a religious nature, are possible". He wrote:

This will in turn promote the idea of African unity, and the concept of a free and independent African Personality. The potential wealth of Africa in minerals, oils, hydro-electric power and so on, is immense. By cutting out waste, through systematic planning, a central government can bring about the most rapid development of every part of the State. By end of the century the standard of living of the masses of the people will undoubtedly have risen dramatically under an African Socialist Government. Subsistence farming will have disappeared and a huge internal market will absorb a very large percentage of the industrial and agricultural products of the continent.

This was the vision held by Sobukwe and the Pan Africanist Congress: A giant monolithic United States of Africa stretching from Cape to Cairo, Morocco to Malagasy.

The Leader and Organizer:

Once elected to the presidency of the PAC Sobukwe energetically set about building an organisation and a leadership. The Prof. was unquestionably the first among equals in the National Executive Committee. He inspired and commanded unbounded loyalty from his comrades and the broad masses of people in Azania. He was the idol of the people with a broad forehead, a pensive look, a ready smile, an analytic mind, and a charisma that electrified thousands upon thousands in Azania.

He planned the Status Campaign in 1959. He discerned the need for a mental revolution as a precursor to the total revolution. He was for the thorough demolition of the status quo of white supremacy and Black inferiority in Azania. The Campaign would raise to greater heights the level of political consciousness among our people. In his State of the Nation Address (August 30, 1959) he declared that

the campaign will free the mind of the African and once the mind is free, the body will soon be free. Once white supremacy has become mentally untenable to our people, it will become physically untenable too, and will go... Let it be clear that we are not fighting just apartheid. We are fighting the whole concept of white supremacy...until we land on the shores of freedom and independence...We will not look back. We will not deviate, and as the heat of oppression mounts we shall become purer and purer,

learning new lessons, and leaving all the dross of racialism and similar evils behind to emerge as a people mentally and physically disciplined...

Under Sobukwe's leadership the PAC grew by leaps and bounds. In a period of one year the list grew to 250,000 card-carrying members, to the total exclusion of sympathisers and fellow travellers. This figure was verified by the competent offices of the OAU Liberation Committee. On March 21, 1960 he led the Positive Action Campaign that resulted in the tragic shootings at Sharpeville. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in hard labour. On the eve of his release, on May 24, 1963, the South African fascist regime held him on Robben Island under the 'Sobukwe Clause' of the General Laws Amendment Act. They proclaimed that he would never be released "this side of eternity".

In April 1965, in his fifth year in prison, Balthasar J. Vorster, then the so-called Minister of Justice, declared: "I have very good reasons for keeping Sobukwe on Robben Island...He has remarkable organizing ability, a magnetic personality and a divine sense of mission".

Sobukwe was transferred to house-arrest in Kimberley in April, 1969. He lived there until his untimely death on Sunday February 26, 1978. The death certificate indicated he had died of cancer. We, however, have reason to believe that the cancer was induced; particularly since we had earlier been assured by the fascist regime that he would never be free "this side of eternity". He is survived by his wife, Veronica Zwofa, and his four children: Miliwa, Dinileziwe, and the twins Dedani and Dalindyebo.

Farewell, Great Leader!

Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, the Professor, beloved compatriot, great and respected leader of the people of Asania, a great son of Africa, had become a legend in his own lifetime. He has immortalized himself by his works, teachings, and achievements. His place in the history of Asania and Africa is assured. He has now joined the galaxy of our illustrious ancestor-heroes: Uhaka, Hintsa, Khama, Moshweshwe, Sekhukhuni and many others.

Tell them, Mangaliso, that we seek not to be forsaken. Tell them that when you left us to join them in the Great Beyond we were still locked in mortal combat with the forces of reaction, racism, and imperialism. Tell them we need additional strength in the titanic struggle to break loose the chains of oppression and to rebuild the shrines in the free Socialist Republic of Asania.

Robala ka khotsa Mangaliso (Sleep peacefully Mangaliso). You have blazed the trail. You have done your share. From coast to coast, from the city to the countryside in Asania, from the farm to the factory the people have heeded your call. You have shown the light, and the people will see the way.

Farewell, Great Leader!

Long Live the Pan Africanist Congress of Asania!!
Long Live the Revolution!!!

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