

Ninety Years of Struggle, Suffering and Sacrifice

A speech delivered August 12, 2017 on the occasion of the Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe Tribute Lecture held at the Mofolo Arts Centre in Soweto, Azania (South Africa)

by

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Izwe Lethu Ma'Afrika!

Let me tell you what a great honour it is to have been invited to deliver this inaugural Tribute Lecture. I would like to personally thank the Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe Trust and the Blackhouse Kollektive for ensuring that we honour our women and heroines while they are still alive and among us. My special greetings to both the Sobukwe and Mathe families here represented. And greetings to all honoured guests who have come to give dignity to this historic and momentous occasion.

In her intriguing novel, *'Half of a Yellow Sun'*, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi speaks about the “danger of a single story”, questioning ideas such as the potential of a single narrative to create stereotypes and perpetuate horrendous erasures.

A

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Although women are the bedrock of society, and in fact, the primary nurturers of socio-economic and political revolutions, when history is told, their stories, contributions and experiences tend to be downplayed or erased. Most of the time when the past is constructed, written or told is it presented merely as HIS-story. The male voice and perspective dominate the interpretations of the past, focusing almost exclusively on the deeds of “great men”.

If, and when, the stories of women are told, only those of the popular, already well-known and overly researched about women get retold slightly differently. Only those whose activism was masked by overt theatrics attract public interest and the imagination of scholars, historians and artists.

Conventional wisdom has cast men as the sole actors and agents of socio-economic and political struggles, and has entrenched male-centred experiences of social reality as universal and scientific; women are completely erased, especially the ordinary Afrikan woman.

Very often, and perhaps way too often, histories of social struggles and political revolutions tend to focus only on the men, and women are portrayed and cast as mere “helpmates”. The contributions and sacrifices of many extraordinary women in our history become subsumed by those of the men in their lives. This is epistemic violence against women, and through it women are systematically erased from our memory. Their voices become muted and silenced. In this way, violence and abuse against Afrikan women is not only ensured, it is normalized. Thus, violence against women and children has become a normal feature of the fabric of our society.

The condition of womanhood in Afrika must be the supreme barometer by which we can measure the success, progress and development - or lack thereof - of this great continent. It was the Upright Man, the young Thomas Sankara who once said:

“the question of women’s equality must be in the minds of all decision makers, at all times, and in all the different phases of conceiving and executing plans for development.”

However, today we all bear witness to the appalling conditions of life and the inferior status afforded to Afrikan women in post-colonial Afrikan societies, even though a number of policies and systems purporting to serve women’s rights are legislated. Women continue to suffer the harshest and worst conditions of life under our neo-colonial democracies.

Here at home last year, we bore witness to the systematic injustices to which our young girls are still subjected to in schools because of their Afrikan hair, exposing the inherent euro-centricity of our education system. And earlier this year, with deep shock and pain, we saw and heard about the brutal killings of Karabo Mokoena, Tinyiko Ngobeni, 3-year old Courtney Pieters and best friends Popi Qwabe and Bongeka Phungula.

B

And as the scourge of femicide, violence and abuse against women continues unabated, earlier this week the news and social media were buzzing with reports that the Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Mduduzi Manana, beat up and injured two women at a night club. The telling irony of it all is that he is still the Deputy Minister.

Violence against women, misogyny and patriarchy are perpetually institutionalized through the systematic erasure of the memory and contributions of women in socio-economic and political revolutions. We are made to believe that liberation struggles are the products and field of elite 'great' men only. As a result, history and biographical memory becomes constructed in such a manner that it reflects only a male-dominated theatre.

On 4 March 1966 the then Minister of Justice, B. J. Voster, received a defiant letter with the following words:

"I wish to write to you as I am worried about the health of my husband Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe. When I visited him on Robben Island in January, I saw that his health had deteriorated; I know his health better than anyone else... I cannot accept that he is receiving the best possible medical and other treatments"

These were the defiant words of an indomitable woman, a woman of courage, determination and immeasurable endurance; a forgotten woman who has been largely relegated to the periphery of our imagination, the margins of national memory and consciousness: Zondeni Veronica Sobukwe.

Just two weeks ago, on 27 July, Mama Sobukwe celebrated her 90th birthday anniversary, celebrating nine decades of a life filled with joy, laughter, pain and struggle. As usual, she celebrated her birthday in private, at her humble home in Graaff-Reinet, with family and close friends. There were no journalists, no glamour and no live broadcast. But the tragedy here is that most people in this country are not even aware Mama Sobukwe is still alive.

Born on 27 July 1927 to Kate Mathe and Stini Mathe in Vryheid, KwaZulu-Natal, Zondeni Veronica Mathe was the second eldest of four daughters. Her sibling sisters were Hilda, the eldest, followed by Gertrude, born after Zondeni and Vemba Florence as the youngest of the Mathe daughters. Their father, Stini, was a mineworker at Hlobane where he also acquired an old farmstead; while their mother worked as a local teacher, until she was unfairly dismissed by the then racist authorities.

C

As in most Afrikan families, at their humble farmstead the Mathes lived together with a number of extended family relatives. It was here, at her home, that Zondeni first experienced the institution of racism-white supremacy as the racist settler regime ordered the eviction of her family from their home under the pretext of a safety law. Her family was evicted from their homestead and they were allocated what was then referred to as 'Skomplaas', a small little room, divided with strings and cloth, in which the whole family was cramped.

As children, they overheard conversations and understood the frustrations of their parents resulting from this racist eviction.

Although dispossessed of their homestead, their parents still retained and owned a number of cattle. And each of the four girls was responsible for their own number of cattle, and woke up daily to first send the cattle for grazing before attending school. Their parents were strict, and taught their little girls to be responsible and self-sufficient from the early age of five years.

When they left home and went into boarding school at a mission school, their parents continued to ensure that they could stand for themselves by refusing to buy them casual clothes, with the exception of school uniform. They had to work part-time jobs in the local community to get money to buy casual clothes for themselves. This is where the seeds of Mama Sobukwe's self-determination, resilience and leadership qualities were planted.

She left boarding school and went to study nursing at the Victoria Hospital in Lovedale College. Owing to her supreme wit and intelligence, at Lovedale, Mama Sobukwe gracefully excelled in her studies and became a notable figure amongst her peers.

Disgruntled with the abject conditions Black nurses were subjected to at the training school, she became one of the leaders who organized and led a nurses strike at the Victoria Hospital in 1947. When one of them was summarily expelled, she took over and brought the nursing college to a standstill by demanding her unconditional reinstatement. They caught the attention of the world, exposing the horrid conditions young Afrikan women trainee nurses were subjected to.

Owing to her seasoned leadership qualities, and her prominence in the role she played in the strike, she was one of the representatives of nursing students delegated to meet and discuss the substantive issues behind the nurses strike with Walter Sisulu, then Secretary-General of the ANC.

It was through her activism in this nursing strike that the young Zondeni Veronica met Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe who was President of the Students Representative Council at Fort Hare University College at the time. During the strike Sobukwe came to address the striking nurses and romantic sparks flew between the two. It must be understood that they met as equals in the heat of the struggle for national liberation and he affectionately called her 'Zodwa', a name she is still largely known by.

D

After she qualified as nurse, she went to work in Durban, first in Springfield Hospital and later at McCord Hospital. From here she was further stationed at Ladysmith, working as a nurse. On the other hand Mangaliso, after completing his studies at Fort Hare, proceeded to teach at Standerton.

Mama Sobukwe and her husband relocated to Johannesburg when he was offered a post as a lecturer in African Studies at Wits University. On 6 June in 1954 the young couple got married at the St. Paul's Anglican Church, here in Jabavu, Soweto and, in line with Afrikan tradition and matrimonial rites of passage, she received the customary nuptial name of Nosango.

The couple moved into her mother's house at 1526 B White City, Jabavu in Soweto. After nine months they were allocated their own municipal house at 684 Mofolo Village, not far from where we are. Shortly before they moved into their new house their first child, a daughter named Miliswa, was born. Then shortly before they moved into the new house at Mofolo, their first son Dinilesizwe was born. And finally twin boys, the now late Dalindyabo and Dedanizizwe, were born.

Mama Sobukwe resumed work in between having the children, doing general district nursing and working as a midwife in Soweto. But their young marriage was to be tormented by the brutality of the racist regime hell-bent on destroying Afrikan families and resistance, and protecting interests of European settlers. The Sobukwes got involved in numerous episodes of this struggle at their house in Mofolo.

The historic events of 21 March 1960 marked a turning point not only in the history of this country but also in the family life of the Sobukwes. There is no need to recite the events of that historic day, as they are already known; Sobukwe was arrested following the PAC's Positive Action campaign against Pass Laws that resulted in the Sharpeville Massacre. He was subsequently sentenced to three years hard labour at the Pretoria Central Prison.

The love and affection that Mangaliso had for Mama Sobukwe is expressed in one painful letter he wrote on 26 March 1963, just a few months before he was scheduled to complete his sentence and be released on 3 May 1963. In his letter from Pretoria Central he wrote:

"Since my future is still so uncertain, I thought I should take this opportunity to tell you just how much your courage and love have meant to me during all these years of my imprisonment. Human nature is a queer thing, Darling.

It is quite possible that after a time I may forget what you suffered on my behalf. That is why I want you to have this written Testimony from me so that both of us can go back to it in future. I just wish to say, Child, that you have been a magnificent wife and mother.

E

You have been everything I could have wished my wife to be. And I mean that, Little Woman. And the children, too, will agree with me”.

Indeed on the date of her companion’s release, and unknown to Zondeni (who had prepared a home-coming feast to celebrate his release), Mnangaliso Sobukwe was secretly flown into Robbin Island - blindfolded - where he was further detained until parliament made a law in his name, the infamous *Sobukwe Clause* - to incarcerate him indefinitely. The official excuse given by the racist Voster was that nothing indicated to him that Sobukwe had changed his views or intentions, and that if he were released, he would continue organizing revolution.

On Robben Island, Sobukwe was isolated and kept in solitary confinement. He was regarded as the most dangerous man in South Africa and the only people he was able to speak to were his white prison guards who were also under orders not to speak to him. He was only allowed a few monitored visits by close family and friends.

Mama Sobukwe visited her husband as often as she could be allowed, and indeed, when the government announced that she and her children would be allowed, in addition to their normal visits, to live with him on Robben Island twice a year for 14 days at a time, she became a voluntary prisoner on Robben Island and joined her husband.

In between all this, their children grew up under very difficult circumstances, and missed a lot in family-based early childhood development, because they had to take them to boarding schools in the neighbouring countries at a young age. Life in exile for the children, without father and mother, was not easy.

In another emotional letter written to Mama Sobukwe while incarcerated in solitary confinement on Robben Island, Sobukwe wrote:

“This is the one time that I am indeed grieved that I am not around to express my thanks to and appreciation of you as a wife and mother. I have said it before and I repeat it boldly and gratefully that you are a chosen among the chosen (mokhethoa hara bakhoelhoa). We have come a long way together, and we have watched each other grow and mature. And we have watched the children God has blessed us with grow.

“We occupied a building in Mofolo and turned it into a home. You denied yourself luxuries and worked uncomplainingly to achieve this. The children and I thank you and bless you. You’ve been a widow now for over six years. But you have been a father and a mother both to our children...

F

“You’ve been regular in your visits to me throughout my years as a convict right up to the present day; ever dignified, clam and cool; ever uncomplaining, never whining. You have had your share of sorrow. But it has not been in vain. You have discovered new and true friends in quarters that you did not expect. You have come to know yourself: to know what you can bear.

“I’ll say to you more personally, when we meet. My heart is full because I have come to know what a great woman you are – the true embodiment of Afrikan womanhood”

Unbowed and undeterred, she fiercely challenged Voster, firstly about the injustice of Sobukwe’s indefinite detention, and later about the conditions surrounding her husband’s incarceration on Robben Island. She requested several meetings with the authorities which were never honoured. Her agitations against the dehumanizing thrust of the apartheid regime began to take the form of combative letters that spoke truth to power.

Around 1964 Mama Sobukwe risked arrest by skipping the country to Basuthuland, to visit two victims of a car bombing that was commissioned and executed by the apartheid regime and their agents. The two victims of the bomb attack, Siphon Richard Shabalala and Soyizwephi, are PAC leaders and activists. Both persons are still alive today in Durban and Mthatha, respectively. The two were admitted unconscious in Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Maseru.

Professor Siphon Shabalala, remembers the event as follows: *“being visited and comforted by Prof’s wife (Mama Sobukwe) was the very heaven to us, revolutionary speaking. I shall never forget her courage. We were bound to heal against all odds. One could not die after such a visit”*

As the *Sobukwe Clause* was reviewed and renewed annually by parliament, Mama Sobukwe wrote to the then woman parliamentarian, Hellen Suzman, requesting her to ask certain questions about her husband’s incarceration before parliament. In her letter to Helen Suzman dated 15 April 1965 she wrote:

“Dear Mrs Suzman, I write this letter to you in your triple capacity as a woman, a mother and a parliamentarian of outstanding competence, whose integrity is impeccable, and one who has made a name for herself as a uniting champion of liberty and justice for all men irrespective of race, colour or creed. It is not my intention to go into the aspects of my husband’s present position as this is well known to you, what I am writing to you about is to make certain request concerning his future in Robben Island...”

G

“As you well know the question of my husband’s detention comes up for yearly review in May and I wish to ask you to ask certain questions in parliament. Firstly, how long it is intended to keep him on the Island, and whether in view of his conduct and his health, it would not be possible to transfer him to a place of detention on the main land. Second, what the state of his health is and if it could be possible to arrange for regular visits by an independent doctor and reports submitted to the authorities and his family.

“I am aware of the prevailing atmosphere and that this stand will call for courage, but I feel that this would be a humanitarian act of the highest order and I have full confidence that you will not let me down at this time of hardships and trials for me and my children”

Suzman heeded Mama Sobukwe’s request and made a number of submissions before parliament questioning and challenging Sobukwe’s incarceration. She asked Voster in parliament: *“how long are you going to keep Sobukwe locked up?”*

Voster and the racist regime remained cold, determined to keep Sobukwe “until this side of eternity” they said. Sobukwe had not changed his view, still determined in his quest for the restoration of the land and dignity of dispossessed Afrikan people.

Later on another minister of Justice justified the continued detention of Sobukwe on the grounds that he had refused to change his politicised determination to free the Afrikan people. The *Imvo Newspaper* of 18 March 1988 described Mama Sobukwe’s political role in the struggle as follows:

“Unkosikazi uSobukwe kwintetho yakhe ukhuthaze amakhosikazi ukuba asoloko eyamene nabayeni bawo ekuzabalazeni inkululeko ye-Azania.” [Mrs Sobukwe encouraged women to be united with their men in the fight for the freedom of Azania.]

In the *Drum* magazine June 1978 Stan Motjuwdi wrote: *“otherwise sis’ Veronica, as she was known to be in support of her husband and the political struggle, managed to keep in the background”*. Speaking to Stan in that publication she said:

“you should by now know that I do not like publicity... I always shunned it. In fact my husband did not like publicity either. My ambition is to see my children the way their father did. I want them to be as simple as he was. They must follow in his footsteps.”

H

This shunning of undue publicity by the Sobukwes is elsewhere acknowledged by Mangaliso himself, confiding in an interview to Benjamin Pogrund, that “*my wife is not concerned about material things, you know her well to know that*”.

Shying away from publicity was, and is, not due to political impotence. To the contrary, Mama Sobukwe was tired of the media’s bias in reporting about her husband and took a conscious political decision to refrain from publicity.

Mama has avoided publicity and a public profile because they believed that you cannot be built by the press in a cause for freedom, and will not be destroyed by the press. She is definitely not a celebrity type of personality.

Her several letters to Voster requesting for interviews and meetings with him were all turned down. But as a health practitioner and an activist in her own right, she gracefully single-handedly advocated for the release of Sobukwe from Robben Island, bringing his deteriorating health to the fore.

And when all her efforts failed, she appealed to Voster to allow Sobukwe to leave South Africa permanently on an exit permit together with his family. Voster refused, and Mama Sobukwe asked that she be allowed to stay on Robben Island with Sobukwe, to oversee his health herself. Of course, this request, too, was denied.

A little known fact is that in 1970 Mangaliso Sobukwe successfully applied for a teaching post at the University of Wisconsin in the United States of America, but the racist regime refused his request for a passport fearing the influence he would have outside the country.

Moreover, Sobukwe subsequently applied to leave South Africa permanently with his family in 1971; an application that was also systematically refused by the white settler regime. In his own words Voster said that his department had made a thorough study of Sobukwe and: “*I decided that in the interests of South Africa I could not permit him to go overseas.*”

Early in 1969 Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was released from Robben Island, taken on the prison ferry boat to Cape Town on the mainland. And from here he was driven for about 1,000 kilometers to his new prison – a house at number 6 Naledi Street - where he was to be banished under house arrest with his family until his untimely death in 1978.

After Sobukwe died in 1978 Mama Sobukwe’s struggles and battles with the authorities continued. Just a few days after her husband’s funeral, the racist government threw her out of the house at number 6 Naledi Street in Galeshewe, Kimberley, where her husband was banished.

I

The imprisonment, banishment and eventual death that the Sobukwes suffered, denied Mama Sobukwe a home of her own, for her husband and children. A government spy who was assigned to keep check on them was given the house by the same racist government, as a reward perhaps. She moved to Graaff-Reinet, where Sobukwe was born and raised, after the funeral in March 1978.

In 1985 tragedy continued to follow Mama Sobukwe. Her sister, Vemba Florence Ribeiro, the youngest of the four Mathe daughters, was honeycombed with bullets near her home in Mamelodi, Pretoria, by the South African Civil Cooperation Bureau military/death squad, together with her medical doctor husband, Fabian Defu Ribeiro. Many people are not aware that Florence Ribeiro was in fact Mama Sobukwe's younger sister. The couple supported the Sobukwe family during the hard times and were spotted for murder by the racist regime when they had played a greater role in the uprising of 1984 that started after nine-year-old Emma Sathekge was shot by police. Mama Sobukwe endured this pain without ever thinking of giving up the struggle.

As we conclude with a few lines from a Tribute Poem by the late sage, Es'ki Mphahlele, let us reflect briefly on why Mama Sobukwe, like many other women in our history, remains least celebrated or spoken of.

Mohau Pheko writes somewhere that "*almost every canonized western philosopher is on record as viewing women as inferior, incompetent, or disqualified epistemic or moral agents*". Indeed, European scholars and philosophers like Aristotle, upon whose ideas today's democracy is built, were misogynist. Aristotle believed women were inferior to men. For example, in his much celebrated work, 'Politics', Aristotle writes that:

"as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject".

And in 'Xenophon's Symposium', Socrates also asserts that woman's nature is not wise and inferior to men's.

So ultimately, histories constructed in euro-patriarchal societies called 'democracies' today, shaped and informed by the dominant eurocentric culture that permeates every fabric of our being and social existence, must innately eliminate women. These histories must advertently erase, silence and debase women.

J

Celebrating 90 years for Mama Sobukwe is a major feat. It is a sterling life which is exemplary for all, young and old, men and women, that one can serve, suffer and sacrifice for the freedom of the Azanian masses. Her circumstances do not differ much from those of Afrikan women in the rural areas and at the bottom of the pyramid in the social structure.

Both of them – Zondeni and Mangaliso Sobukwe – have committed body and soul to the concept of genuine leadership in the struggle and have used the description as an epitaph on the grave of Sobukwe. Despite the hardships she was subjected to, she has not wavered or vacillated in her commitment to the ideals which Sobukwe was known for. We must rid ourselves of crass political mediocrity, learn from their impeccable example and imagine a new society. In his Tribute Poem, the late Great Eskia Mphahlele wrote:

*You were there with him,
Daughter of Africa,
At the banging and clanging of prison doors and gates,*

*There in the busy wards where your man
Lay listening to the ravaged beat of his pain.
The ebb of flow of life
From a body*

*Always waiting for someone's paper work.
Someone counting time for a man's life
He would never grasp.*

*You had been there to witness it all,
Man fixed on a course
To set black humanity free:*

*A man breasting the hills
And breaking his feet on rocky road
From college to stockade to the end of his life.*

*Then at last, daughter of Mathe,
The sun came out of you
And your children*

*Blazing from above the eastern skyline
Lighting your way
Through the darkness of your journey.*

K

*Always you were reminded this,
That no-one in all of savage Christendom
Could break your man's mind or spirit,*

*Or trample on sanctity of your home,
Divine gift of the Supreme One
Attended by the ancestors*

*We salute you,
Daughter of Afrika
Devoted wife and mother
Who turned pain into an ever-glowing shrine.*

The PAC women and Afrikans in Mofolo and country-wide proclaim your love of and marriage to Sobukwe, and the painful consequences epitomised the crucibles and essence of the struggle for Afrikan Freedom.

We Salute You, Mother of Azania!

Izwelethu!

L