

## Statement at the 90th Birthday Celebrations of Walter Sisulu

18 May 2002

Xhamela, thole lomthonyama, bhongo lesizwe, Sithwalandwe, in tribute I present to all who care to listen, "An African Elegy":

We are the miracles that God made  
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.  
We are precious.  
And one day our suffering  
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

There are things that burn me now  
Which turn golden when I am happy.  
Do you see the mystery of our pain?  
That we bear poverty  
And are able to sing and dream sweet things

And that we never curse the air when it is warm  
Or the fruit when it tastes so good  
Or the lights that bounce gently on the waters?  
We bless things even in our pain.  
We bless them in silence.

That is why our music is so sweet.  
It makes the air remember.  
There are secret miracles at work  
That only Time will bring forth.  
I too have heard the dead singing.

And they tell me that  
This life is good  
They tell me to live it gently  
With fire, and always with hope.  
There is wonder here

And there is surprise  
In everything the unseen moves.  
The ocean is full of songs.  
The sky is not an enemy.  
Destiny is our friend.

This poem, entitled "An African Elegy" was written by Ben Okri, a Nigerian and an African. On this great day for you and us, I have dared to borrow the voice of Ben Okri, a Nigerian and an African, to sing the praises of a South African and an African.

You too, Xhamela, are a miracle that God made to taste the bitter fruit of time. You are precious. Your suffering that spans thousands of days and thousands of days, has turned into the wonders of the earth, when it might have felt that "tomorrow and tomorrow creeps on this petty pace from day to day, until the last syllable of recorded time."

You too know poverty but have never cursed the air whether it was warm or cold, because it was the air of your motherland. Neither have you cursed the bitter fruit even when it tasted good to others who caused your suffering.

You have never cursed that the lights of joy bounced gently on the waters of your native land, far beyond your reach, because others denied you the possibility to reach out to the light.

Even as you and your people suffered pain, in silence you blessed the things that made it possible for you and them to laugh and live and uphold their dignity as Africans and refuse to bend to the tyrant, despite their tattered clothes and the lashes on their backs.

You too hear the dead patriots singing, as we hear our martyred men and women and children sing a song that tells us to live our lives gently, with the fire that burns the past to give life to the new, gentle in our hearts, with fire in our souls - always with hope, always able to sing and dream sweet things.

Seeing all these things, you have known that here there was always surprise and wonder, even as those who thought they had inhuman power, believed they were blessed with the gift to end all surprise and wonder.

Even as these, who defined themselves as super-human, sought to turn your human existence and the human existence of your people into a lifeless and nightmare wasteland of despair, you knew that the unseen moves, and in moving, moves everything.

Surrounded by desolation, the things that burned you and your people in a seemingly unquenchable fire of pain turned golden because the oceans, the Indian and the Atlantic and in their confluence, sang for you a happy medley of songs.

For all its thunder and its dying murmur, for all its lightening and rainbow lights, and hail and driving rain and tumbling clouds and stars that seem so still, you knew that the changing African sky, blue and black and grey and gold and unfathomable, was not an enemy.

You knew that despite the efforts of those who would deny life, all nature spoke to you and your people and said that the pretended anger of the African sky foretells a future of rain, a harvest of fertility and life and good living. The dead sang a refrain for you and your people telling of the miracle that was at work - pula! nala!

As the seasons bade each other farewell and welcome, the air they breathed remembered the sweet music of unending renewal, and the inevitability of the outcome of your suffering which has turned into the wonders of our earth, which has made it possible for a nation to speak in unison and say this life is good and will, in time, be better still.

At all times, destiny has been our friend, and you its architect, and we the miracles that God made to taste the wonderful creation of your suffering.

I, with Ben Okri, sing this song of praise because to have done otherwise would have been to tell an untruth. The telling of a falsehood would have denied the mystery of our pain, which was mysterious because it gave birth to golden moments of happiness, because it caused us to endure without losing hope, because we had a Walter Sisulu in our midst.

In all I say there is no extravagance. In everything Ben Okri says, there is no presentation in bright and pleasing hues of what should be displayed in its actual being, ugly and venomous.

In our company sits a son of our people, a husband, a father, a grandfather in his own family, an uncle, a cousin and all the things that define people that have sprung from a common chain of birth and death and birth.

Every space in this place that he dignifies by his presence, is occupied by a material force of joy, of celebration, of triumph, of a people reborn. Together we sit in wonder and wonderful surprise that we could have one with us with whom we feel an intimate companionship, but whose life and being gives us the entitlement to say to the peoples of the world, that we are precious.

We shall say this today and say it again tomorrow without hesitation, and without the embarrassment of a felt moment of exaggeration.

This we will do because in his 90 years of life, Walter Sisulu bestowed on us the gift of an African life that gives us the right to claim, as Ben Okri did, that we are the miracles that God made, whose suffering made it possible for humanity to rejoice that we are a portion of the common humanity.

Fate has decreed that even as we meet here to celebrate life and the continuation of new beginnings, we should, at the same time, be saying and adieu! full of pathos, to a person whose existence and life challenged us in every way to be human.

I speak of her during this moment of happiness because I know that Walter Sisulu would speak of her in admiration as a star in our firmament.

Today in Cape Town, the mortal remains of Sis' Fiks, Fikile Matthews, life companion, comrade and wife of Joe Matthews, are being laid to rest.

Of her it can never be said that like the flowers of the barren wild, she blushed unseen and wasted her fragrance on the desert air. Of her it can be said at her passing, which feels like an unwelcome dream, and as the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats said:

"I dreamed that one had died in a strange place  
Near no accustomed hand;  
And they had nailed the boards over her face,  
The peasants of that land,  
Wondering to lay her in that solitude,  
And raised above her mound  
A cross they had made out of two bits of wood,  
And planted cypress round;  
And left her to the indifferent stars above  
Until I carved these words:  
She was more beautiful than thy first love,  
But now lies under boards."

Sis' Fiks was more beautiful than all our first loves. The beauty of her being said to all of us that fortune attends us as we search for an example of one, such as Walter Sisulu, that we can attach to ourselves as a human being whose existence can give meaning to our won lives, which we seek to describe as human and honourable.

Sis' Fiks lies in solitude under boards. Because of her, we live on with the possibility that by respecting what she was, we will prove Ben Okri right, that we are the miracles that God made, as she was.

Farewell, Sis' Fiks. Sincere condolences to our colleague, friend and leader, Joe Matthews, his family and relations. But even as we say this, we also celebrate and rejoice that we had so precious a gift as the late Fikile Philips-Matthews was.

At a time such as this, it is not possible not to recall, fondly and with emotion, the memory of her parents-in-law, ZK and Granny Matthews.

In their time and at their pace, the centuries have taken each its run and defined at all moments what our future shall be. The unseen moves of every century have presented us with surprises and wonder. They have challenged us to await the pronouncement of time about the offspring of the secret miracles at work.

But at all times, they have blessed us with the possibility to celebrate the lives of African heroes and heroines, such as Walter Sisulu. At every turn and every year, they have rewarded us with the assertion of our humanity with the gift of patriots such as Walter Sisulu, who taught us that we should live our lives gently, with fire, and always with hope.

It may be that this year will never be like any other. Walter Sisulu is 90 years old. His organisation, which owes its existence so much to what he did and who he is, is 90 years old. Eight years short of two centuries of absence from the land of her birth, this year Sartjie Baartman came home.

Her tormented spirit will at last find peace during the same year and at the same place as her people, the peoples of Africa take new steps to vanquish a legacy as old and older than her exile in Europe.

During this year of the 90th birthday of Walter Sisulu, his people, the continental kith and kin of Sartjie Baartman, will bring themselves closer together in the African Union, begin to rebuild their lives and define afresh their place in the world, by ensuring the realisation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

What Ben Okri said, is coming to bloom. The suffering of Sartjie Baartman and the sacrifices of Walter Sisulu are turning into the wonders of the earth. Whatever direction the ill winds blew during interminable time, it is possible now to say that destiny has always been our friend.

It is now possible to say that today we know what the life and example of Walter Sisulu meant in our long journey to that destiny.

It meant that to arrive at our appointment with destiny, we must, like him, be loyal to our people and their cause, honest in our purposes, humble in our conduct, constant in our good humour, devoted to the imperative for human solidarity, truly African, and principled, without counting the cost.

We are met here today to celebrate 90 years of one who has been and is all these things. In his presence we would be turned timid by the degree of our veneration if it were not for the fact that Walter Sisulu is and has been for many decades, both a leader and a man of the people.

As such a man of the people, he is to all of us also a comrade who will work side by side with us a volunteer, a general who commands and fights among our ranks as a foot soldier, our leader who is also our comrade.

These circumstances say to us that today we must join Tat' uWalter and Mam' uAlbertina, Max and the other children in a real and happy celebration, without pomp, without the stiff formality of alienation from the people's hero whose life we celebrate today, without an obsequious deference.

Mama, thank you very much for what you are and who you are. Thank you very much for what you have done to lead us, in your own name, and what you have done to enable your dear husband to lead our people.

"Hayi inyhweba yomntu ongahambiyo ngecebo labantw' abagwenxa,  
Ongahambiyo ekhondweni lamatshijolo,  
Umnt' ongadlelaniyo nabaphoxisayo.

"Unjengomth' otyalwe ngasemijelweni yamanzi,  
Umth' ovelisa iziqhamo ngexesha leziqhamo,  
Umth' omagqabi angasoze abune.  
Ewe, konk' akwenzayo umnt' onjalo kuyaphumelela."

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

Happy birthday, Xhamela!