

## **Address by President Thabo Mbeki at the Inaugural ZK Matthews Memorial Lecture**

University of Fort Hare, 12 October 2001

### **"He Wakened to his Responsibilities"**

Master of Ceremonies,  
Professor Bhengu, Chancellor of the University,  
Chairperson and members of the University Council,  
Professor D Swartz, Vice Chancellor,  
Premier Stofile,  
Prof JP Hendricks, Executive Dean of African and Democracy Studies,  
Members of the Matthews family,  
Workers, Staff and Students,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

In its Declaration to the Colonial Peoples, the Fifth Pan-African Congress, held in Manchester in 1945 said: "We also call upon the intellectuals and professional classes of the colonies to waken to their responsibilities... Today there is only one road to effective action - the organisation of the masses. And in that organisation the educated colonials must join. Colonial and subject people of the world, Unite!" (*African Intellectual Heritage*: ed Molefi Kete Asante & Abu S. Abarry, Temple University Press, 1996.)

We have chosen the title for our lecture, "He wakened to his responsibilities", from a passage of this Declaration to the Colonial Peoples.

More than 40 years earlier, in 1901, an article appeared in the Boston Guardian, written by one Monroe Trotter. It was entitled "A critique of Booker T. Washington's Plan." In this article, Trotter commented on a public speech that had been made by Washington.

He quoted Washington as saying:

"One farm bought, one house built, one home sweetly and intelligently kept, one man who is the largest taxpayer or who has the largest banking account, one school or church maintained, one factory running successfully, one garden profitably cultivated, one patient cured by a Negro doctor, one sermon well preached, one life cleanly lived, will tell more in our favour than all the abstract eloquence that can be summoned to plead our cause."

Trotter responded to this long held vision of Booker T. Washington in the following words:

" All of this last is mere claptrap...this habit of belittling agitation on the part of Washington, that very thing that made him free, and by which he lives and prospers is one of his great faults if a man with such a blundering can have any degrees in stupidity."

Like the great African-American opponent of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. du Bois, Z.K. Matthews did not accept this claptrap. He was not opposed to Africans buying a farm, building a house, cultivating a garden profitably, preaching a sermon well or living their lives cleanly.

The biographer of du Bois, David Lewis, has written:

" But it was not at first the unravelling of the politics of accommodation that outraged du Bois and the small number of mostly northern, urban, and college-educated men and women soon to be known at the Talented Tenth. Washington's stratagem had seemed plausible enough, at least for a time, as a political approach to race relations. But its cultural dimensions dismayed and finally alienated those African

Americans like du Bois...for whom higher education was not merely a passport to social and professional standing, but the master key to collective empowerment as well." (p 261, W.E.B. du Bois: *Biography of a Race*: Henry Holt & Co Inc, 1993.)

Like du Bois, Z.K. Matthews, for whom higher education was not merely 'a passport to social and professional standing', refused to belittle the agitation which Booker T. Washington described as 'abstract eloquence', but which was necessary to set our people free, so that they could, in freedom, be able to do the normal things which Washington urged upon an abnormal society.

Rather, Z.K. heeded the call made by the outstanding African, African-American and Caribbean patriots of 1945 and later years that the intellectuals and professionals in the colonies should waken to their responsibilities.

Accordingly, he, a leading intellectual, engaged in the mass mobilisation, in other words the agitation, to which Booker T. Washington was opposed, and to which black freedom fighters in Africa and the Diaspora were committed. And this he did while practising his craft at this historic place of learning, the University of Fort Hare.

In this instance, clearly history turned in mocking laughter upon those who had wanted Fort Hare established in our country, so that it could produce our own little copies of Booker T. Washington.

The recently published book, "A Marriage Made in Heaven", quotes an editorial carried by the newspaper South Africa, in its edition of January 21, 1911. Arguing in favour of the establishment of Fort Hare College, and specifically to inculcate among the educated natives the ideas propagated by Booker T. Washington, it wrote:

"Nobody is so much interested in the welfare of the South African natives as are the White South Africans, with whom the progress of the coloured neighbours towards civilisation is a matter of vital importance...But, despite all that the White man might do for him, the future of the native must rest with himself, and the best of assistance that can be given is to provide the opportunities and to show the natives how to take advantage of them.

"As was pointed out by the Native Affairs Commission, the chief opportunities lacking to the natives were in the direction of higher education, which had led to a number going to America in search of college instruction, where they had imbibed ideas of a racial and political character such as were not in accordance with the peaceful development of South Africa...

"Altogether, the scheme (to establish Fort Hare College) is by far the most promising that has yet appeared for the uplifting of the natives and the putting them upon a path which should lead to their permanent elevation as a race, by which means alone can they come to take a worthy share, under European guidance and control, in the future of their native country." (pp 172-3).

Among the "number (who went) to America in search of college instruction, where they had imbibed ideas of a racial and political character such as were not in accordance with the peaceful development of South Africa...", and therefore spurned the teachings of Booker T. Washington, were such outstanding leaders of our people as Pixley ka Isaka Seme and Charlotte Maxeke.

It was out of the same Fort Hare College that Z.K. Matthews emerged, imbued with "ideas of a racial and political character such as were not in accordance with" "European guidance and control" (of the natives), who would be forced to practise their trades in "their native country", the native reserves recommended by the Native Affairs Commission.

As Z.K. Matthews graduated at this place more than 75 years ago, the editor of the newspaper South Africa, could not have known that by refusing to be a "mis-educated native", Z.K. Matthews had, in fact, defeated the grand design of the perpetual subjugation of our people.

In the end and finally, his critical victory against the intellectual enslavement of the African native, both provided the basis for and found its full and open expression in the defeat of white minority rule in 1994.

With regard to the matter of the 'mis-educated native', in 1933, the African-American, Carter G. Woodson, published a tract entitled "The Mis-education of the Negro." Of this mis-education, he wrote:

"The 'educated Negroes' have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well in their mixed schools, Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African...For example, an officer of a Negro university, thinking that an additional course on the Negro should be given there, called upon a Negro Doctor of Philosophy of the faculty to offer such work. He promptly informed the officer that he knew nothing about the Negro. He did not go to school to waste his time that way. He went to be educated in a system which dismissed the Negro as a nonentity...Even schools for Negroes, then, are places where they must be convinced of their inferiority...The so-called school, then, becomes a questionable factor in the life of this despised people...In schools of theology Negroes are taught the interpretation of the Bible worked out by those who have justified segregation...Negro law students were told that they belonged to the most criminal element in the country...In medical schools Negroes were likewise convinced of their inferiority in being reminded of their role as germ carriers...In history...he was pictured as a human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason...Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do." (p 656).

Z.K. Matthews was born exactly a century ago. Together with Edwin Newana, he graduated at Fort Hare 77 years ago. He passed away 33 years ago. As we stand here today and consider our country, ourselves and where we are, relative to the important dates in our history demarcated by the life progression of Z.K. Matthews, we can see that we must speak of generations of African experience.

Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews helped in a decisive manner to define that experience, in part by opening the eyes of those who became his students inside and outside the process of formal education, to the liberating power of real education.

In his address to the University of Cape Town in 1961 at the Third TB Davie Memorial Lecture, entitled "African Awakening and the Universities", ZK Matthews points out that:

"The Africa with which we have to deal to-day is one which is full of new attitudes to old practices and new types of reaction to previously existing systems. The central factor in the African awakening is the emergence of new ideas, strange men and other ideas. It is in the minds of Africans that revolutions which are rocking the foundations of African societies are taking place."

The central factor in the African awakening is the emergence of new ideas, so said Professor Matthews! To ensure that the point he was making was understood, he went on to say that it is in the minds of Africans that revolutions which are rocking the foundations of African societies are taking place.

In the same Memorial Lecture, ZK said:

"The continent of Africa is a large slice of the world, and in terms of human and natural resources is an area which can no longer be ignored whatever the position may have been in the past. The peace and security of the modern world demand that the problems of Africa emergent should be tackled with energy and determination and that all the skill, the ingenuity and the collective wisdom of all interested parties should be brought to bear on the situation."

In this way, being an intellectual who had awakened to his responsibilities, he called for a revolution in the minds not only of Africans but of all humanity, so that Africa could overcome the legacy of centuries of slavery and colonialism. Correctly, he said that the peace and security of the modern world demanded that we and everybody else should evolve new thinking about Africa.

In making this call, he joined others among our African intellectuals who, before him and during his time, had also awakened to their responsibilities.

Already in 1906, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the African patriot, had spoken passionately about the regeneration of the continent. He said:

"Yes, the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period! By this term regeneration I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence."

He continues with a moving verse:

"O Africa!  
Like some great century plant that shall bloom  
In ages hence, we watch, thee; in our dream  
See in thy swamps the Prospero of our stream;  
Thy doors unlocked, where knowledge in her womb  
Hath lain innumerable years in gloom.  
Then shalt thou, walking with that morning gleam,  
Shine as thy sister lands with equal beam."

(p40, *ANC UMRABULO*, number 12, September 2001)

For his part, as he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, Chief Albert Luthuli, the President of the ANC from 1952 to 1967, said:

"Our continent has been carved up by the great powers; alien governments have been forced upon the African people by military conquest and by economic domination... In these times there has been no peace; there could be no brotherhood between men."

He continued:

"But now, the revolutionary stirrings of our continent are setting the past aside. Our people everywhere from north to south of the continent are reclaiming their land, their right to participate in government, their dignity as men, their nationhood. Thus, in the turmoil of revolution, the basis for peace and brotherhood in Africa is being restored by the resurrection of national sovereignty and independence, of equality and the dignity of man."

Thus, throughout an entire century, our foremost intellectuals, exalted by the masses of our people, the uneducated workers and peasants as their true leaders, firmly rejected the proposition advanced by Booker T. Washington that the struggle for liberation was "abstract eloquence that can not (or should not) be summoned to plead our cause."

At all times, these intellectuals refused to be so dehumanised and deprived of their identity and pride that they should submit to becoming 'mis-educated Negroes' or 'natives', as the case may be.

Rather, these African natives felt a spirit of communion with the white American democrat, Walt Whitman, who, in his poem "Years of the Modern", wrote of a mass, universal and non-racial struggle for progressive change.

"Years of the modern! years of the unperform'd! Your horizon rises, I see it parting away for more august dramas, ... I see tremendous entrances and exits, new combinations, the solidarity of races, I see that force advancing with irresistible power on the world's stage, ...I see this day the People beginning their landmarks, (all others give way;) Never were such sharp questions ask'd as this day, Never was average man, his soul, more energetic, more like a God, Lo, how he urges and urges, leaving the masses no rest! His daring foot is on land and on sea everywhere.... interlinks all geography, all lands; What whispers are these O Lands, running ahead of you, passing under the seas? Are all nations communing? Is there going to be but one heart to the globe? Is humanity forming en-masse, for lo, tyrants tremble, crowns grow dim, The earth, restive, confronts a new era...."  
(*A Choice of Whitman's Verse*, Faber and Faber, London 1968, pp. 134-135)

Perhaps before his time in his own country, Whitman speaks boldly of new combinations, the solidarity of races. He sees this force advancing with irresistible power on the world's stage!

He hails each who would dares to fight for the emancipation of all humanity, saying of these - Lo, how he urges and urges, leaving the masses no rest! His daring foot is on land and on sea everywhere.

If, indeed, Walt Whitman was ahead of his time in his own native land, he did not speak too soon for our own intellectuals.

The best among these did not hesitate to say that Africa would, in time, gleam and shine as her sister lands with equal beam, that without Africa there could be no peace and security in the world and that our people everywhere, from north to south of the continent, were reclaiming their dignity as human beings. And yet, for everything that has been done and said, for all the indelible glory that belongs to the life and contribution of Z.K. Matthews, there are still some in our midst who would rather that they remain 'mis-educated Negroes or natives'.

There are those, among us, who have been 'taught from books of the same (racist) bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another that have served for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do.'

To quote Carter Woodson, these have studied in schools of theology where the Bible is interpreted by those who have justified segregation; law schools where they are told that they belong to the most criminal element in the country; medical schools where they are likewise convinced of their inferiority by being reminded of their role as germ carriers; schools where they learn a history that pictures black people as human beings of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason.

Thus does it come about that some who call themselves our leaders join a cacophony of voices that demand that we produce statistics that will show that, indeed, we belong to the most criminal element in our country.

And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease.

These have no possibility to derive inspiration from what Pixley Seme said almost a century ago, that Africa is like some great century plant that shall bloom in ages hence.

Convinced that we are but natural-born, promiscuous carriers of germs, unique in the world, they proclaim that our continent is doomed to an inevitable mortal end because of our unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust.

There are some who thought that Fort Hare would become a place of mis-education that would produce Africans who would 'have the attitude of contempt toward their own people'. Z.K. Matthews proved them wrong.

For his support he had the inimitable Billie Holiday, who sang "Strange Fruit" in the way that she sang the Blues:

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves, blood on the root  
Black bodies swinging in the  
Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees  
Pastoral scenes of the gallant South  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning  
flesh  
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop  
Here is a strange and bitter crop."

The last time I personally saw Z.K. Matthews at this place of learning was in 1959. Then, we were students at the other historically important educational centre in the Tyume Valley, Lovedale Institution. In that year, the students at Lovedale went on strike, as the system of Bantu Education, which drove Z.K. Matthews out of Fort Hare, began to place in its icy grip an educational institution that was, then, 118 years old.

Two or three of us were sent by the ANC Youth League leadership at Lovedale to consult with the Youth League leadership at Fort Hare. To our surprise and consternation, as High School students, we found ourselves in the same room as Z.K. Matthews, discussing with him and his young comrades at Fort Hare how we should conduct our little, but for us, momentous struggle in Lovedale, on whose Board of Governors Professor Matthews served.

Here, at the tender age of 16, we came face to face with a leader of our people and were amazed that we could debate with the leader whom we knew from our secret discussions in the branch of the Youth League at Lovedale, had initiated the process that led to the convening of the Congress of the People and the adoption of the Freedom Charter.

In his biography of Z.K. Matthews, Willem Saayman writes about this period in Z.K.'s history:

"The idea of calling together a kind of 'congress of the people' to express the political wishes of the disenfranchised in South Africa apparently rose in ZK's mind while teaching at Union Theological Seminary in 1952-1953.

"He publicly made an official proposal to call together such a congress - with a view to the drawing up a 'Freedom Charter' - in his capacity as Cape leader of the ANC at the Cape Congress of the party in Cradock on 15-16 August 1953. All the people of the country, irrespective of race or colour, should participate. The Cape Congress accepted this proposal. Within months a national conference did likewise, and thus convening the Congress of the People became deliberate policy."  
(from *A Man with a Shadow; The Life and Times of ZK Matthews*, Unisa Press, Pretoria, p. 74)

As had been said at the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945, Z. K., the intellectual, had wakened to his responsibilities, successfully to initiate an historic process within the ANC, the parliament of the African people, and the broad democratic movement.

This led to the organisation of the masses to elaborate and adopt a policy document, the Freedom Charter that stands at the centre of our vision for the fundamental transformation of South Africa.

It was in these ways that Z.K. was at one with W.E.B. du Bois that higher education was not merely a passport to social and professional standing, but the master key to collective empowerment as well. As an activist for the defeat of white minority rule, he sought to ensure that his intellectual prowess and intelligence were used to ensure the proper organisation and mobilisation of our people for freedom.

It was a privilege for those of us who walked across the Tyume River to consult him about how we might conduct ourselves in a very small skirmish against an enemy that considered itself to be right and invincible.

A million of these little skirmishes, waged across the globe, won us the democratic victory built on the refusal of Z.K. Matthews many decades earlier to submit to mental enslavement. This victory has also given us the possibility to return to the vision enunciated by the best among our intelligentsia, including Z.K. Matthews, that Africa must be free.

Because of what these hero and heroine intellectuals and professionals did, who preceded the Fifth Pan-African Congress and to whom this Congress made a special call, such as Tiyo Soga, Pixley ka Seme, Charlotte Maxeke, John Dube, Sol Plaatje, S. M. Makgatho, Anton Lembede, Chief Albert Luthuli, Z.K. Matthews, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Robert Sobukwe, Godfrey Pitje, Don Mtimkhulu, Ernest Galo, Steve Biko, Chris Hani and many others, we have found it within our possibilities to proclaim this, the 21st century, as the African Century.

Perhaps if we had the power to make them talk, the old silent walls of this University would whisper to us that they have listened to generation after generation of eager and enthusiastic Africans, striving to expand the frontiers of knowledge as well as ensure that thus armed, they do what they have to do to change especially the African world.

Because of what Z.K. Matthews and others did, Africa has taken important steps towards the establishment of the African Union (AU), to realise a dream that is a century old, of uniting the peoples of Africa.

In addition, today Africa has a comprehensive and workable development strategy for the socio-economic regeneration of the continent in the form of the Millennium Partnership for the African Recovery Programme (MAP), also known as the New African Initiative.

The intellectuals and professionals who work in this historic African centre of learning have a responsibility to occupy the space of the wakened intellectual that Z.K. Matthews helped to create and thus contribute meaningfully to the reconstruction both of our country and our continent.

It is not possible that anybody can both be a Fort Harian and an intellectual or professional, who views higher education as merely a passport to social and professional standing.

There is work to be done, which requires the engagement of the wakened intellectuals and professional classes of a continent engaged in a struggle for its renaissance.

Fort Hare University has an obligation to honour the great legacy of those who passed through these corridors before. Accordingly, it must occupy the front trenches in the struggle for our renaissance, which includes the urgent process of reclaiming our identity, our dignity and our pride as Africans.

Zachariah Keodirelang Matthews, whom we salute today, was for us, a path-finder, a teacher to millions of our people, an educated and cultured African of the calibre and commitment that Whitman describes, of "sharp questions", "his soul more energetic", "leaving the masses no rest".

Today, we pay tribute to a great leader, who was not content to rest within the relative comfort of an academic career. He knew this without any need to proclaim it in words, that his learning had to be used in the service of his people, who deserved nothing less than genuine freedom, including freedom from ignorance, freedom from want, freedom from oppression and abuse, and freedom from indignity and loss of self-respect.

We are blessed that the quest for our renaissance began a long time ago, as a consequence of which we have accumulated invaluable experience of what we must do to succeed and what we must not do, if we want to avoid failure. Although he no longer walks the corridors of this university, we know that even in his absence, Z.K. Matthews continues to speak to us and to lead us.

Together with him, we have made a long and hard journey. But with our concerted and sustained collective efforts, the horizon will no longer be a mirage; the back-breaking steep rises of our hills will transform into flat plateaux; our hearts that might have turned to stone will warm to the laughter of the contented African child; no more hunger, no more senseless wars, no longer victims, no longer the forsaken and marginalised. In our time, we shall reclaim our rightful place and, at last, lead lives that are worth living.

It would have been good if Z.K. was with us in Fort Hare and in Alice today, accompanied by his lifelong partner, Granny Matthews. Time has dictated that both and neither of them should be here.

We are honoured that those who share their blood and convictions are with us at this place, which they, their descendants, knew or imagined, as they progressed through their rites of passage to adulthood and a new birth as patriots.

Towards the end of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon tells us that:

"... what we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day.... For Europe, for ourselves, for humanity, for comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts and try to set afoot a new man."  
(Penguin Books, London 1961, pp 254-255)

We are privileged and strengthened that, even in his physical absence, a century after he was born, we have at our side and in our vanguard, Z.K. Matthews, with whom we will turn over a new leaf, work out new concepts, try to set afoot a new man and thus reconstruct and give birth to a new Africa.

I thank you.

**Issued by The Presidency**