

Oration of the President of The African National Congress, Thabo Mbeki, at the funeral of Adelaide Tambo

Benoni, 10 February 2007

Masters of Ceremony,
The Tambo and Tshukudu families,
Comrades and friends:

Today, as we lay the mortal remains of Matlala Adelaide Frances Tambo to rest we will do what the poet Samuel Edward Krune Ngxeke-Mgxeke Mqhayi said was done when the prophet Ntsikane died.

Walila umzi akwatywa
Mhla sashiywa ngu Ntsikane.
Wangcwatya ke, wasalela,
Washiywa apho, kwa godukwa.
Yahlum' ingca kwelo dlaka,
Lomlweli omkhulu wohlanga.

Once more the nation has wept at the passing of Adelaide Tambo. Our grief has even driven away our hunger pains. We have fasted as a mark of the pain we have felt. We will bury her and go our various ways, and leave her alone in her solitary grave. Were we to permit it, the grass would grow and cover the mound of earth that marks her final place of rest, unmindful of the fact that here lies a great fighter for the freedom of the nation.

But even as nature takes its course, with the green grass suggesting that we should forget that here lies a great heroine who fought for the freedom of the nation, those of us who have lived with her during the difficult years through which we passed, but which to others who did not suffer the pain have no meaning, we will know still that though no longer with us, she is with us, still. Of Ntsikane Mqhayi said:

Kanti usekho usathetha,
Izwi lakhe linamava, linencasa, lino mkhitha,
Lele Mbumba ya Manyama.

Even when nature will have put its shroud over her grave, which would forever change from green to brown and green again, we will still hear her unchanging voice. We will hear still, a voice that will communicate wisdom, as it has always done. We will hear words to which we had become addicted, that will serve as the nectar of our souls. We will hear still her voice, so infused with a native beauty and dignity. We will hear still a voice that commands that we should respect the unity of the nation.

The bereaved families, the African National Congress and the people of South Africa have gathered here today to bid a final farewell to a great daughter of our people, Adelaide Frances Matlala Tambo, one to whom we should extend a heartfelt tribute as Mqhayi paid tribute to Ntsikane.

Nobody, and even those closest to her, her children and grandchildren, had expected her departure when it came. Though many of us knew that she had taken ill as we began this year of the 95th anniversary of her movement, the ANC, we also knew that after treating her, the doctors had given the assurance that she had fully recovered her health.

Her sudden disappearance, which has taken her away from us for ever, therefore caused a numbing shock from which it will not be so easy to recover. Throughout our years of struggle we responded to the loss of comrades with the courageous words - do not mourn, but pick up the spears of the fallen heroes and heroines!

For that reason, perhaps we are not entitled to say that we mourn the departure of Mama Adelaide Matlala Tambo. But having just been reminded of the mortality of even the best among us, this at least we can say, that we mourn the early and untimely departure of MaTambo.

We mourn MaTambo's early departure because as they remodel themselves to achieve a new birth, our movement and our country had and have great need to draw on the lessons of ubuntu that MaTambo taught throughout her life, not through her words, but through her deeds.

Last month we celebrated the 95th anniversary of the ANC, of which MaTambo was a lifelong member. As part of our standard vocabulary, and correctly, we describe the ANC as - Lekgotla la Sechaba, Umbutho we Sizwe.

But perhaps because these characterisations have been a regular part of our daily vocabulary for many decades, we may have become insensitive to their real meaning. Indeed, even as we celebrated our 95th anniversary, we may have forgotten that our movement has lived and led for as long as it has, exactly because it is a movement of the people.

As we approach our centenary, which is five years from now, we must constantly remind ourselves of the historical truth and act on its basis, that for our movement to continue to live and to lead into and during the second century of its fighting existence, it must remain a movement of the people - Lekgotla la Sechaba, Umbutho we Sizwe!

And that is why our movement and country have great need to draw on the example that MaTambo set. As Matlala Tshukudu entered the ANC at the young age of 18, she brought with her, into the movement of the people, the fundamental values and the most vital aspirations of our people.

She continued to serve our movement for 60 years because she saw it as the repository and the organised representative of the values and aspirations of the masses who had handed her over to the ANC as an affirmation of their confidence in their movement. Everything about MaTambo's difficult life, and everything she did during that life of struggle, communicates this one message - that to be true to themselves and the people, our long struggle, our revolution and our victory must honour and respect the fundamental and long-established values and the most vital aspirations of our people, which Matlala Tshukudu brought with her into the African National Congress when she joined the ANC Youth League in 1947.

In this regard, she represented not only herself but the great masses of our people of whom she was a proud and faithful daughter. She carried in her soul the example of Top Location in Vereeniging, where she was born, in which African, Coloured and Indian lived together, until the colonial and apartheid system obliterated the settlement, moving the Africans to Sharpeville.

Even at the moment of her death, she remained still, as she has been throughout her life, an example of what it means to be an African and the new South Africans who lived in harmony in the famous non-racial urban settlements, deliberately destroyed by the architects of apartheid, such as Sophiatown in Johannesburg, Lady Selborne in Pretoria, District Six in Cape Town, South End in Port Elizabeth, and her own Top Location.

And that is why today, as we prepare to lay her to rest, we say we mourn the early and untimely departure of a great daughter of our people, Adelaide Tambo. We mourn her untimely departure because it is at this moment that we need her to be with us, to serve as our guide as we strive to ensure that our democratic victory, and our continuing revolutionary struggle, honour, respect and promote the fundamental values and the most vital aspirations of our people, which inspired MaTambo throughout her life. We are nearing the end of the thirteenth year of our liberation. During these years of freedom we have done much that Adelaide Tambo had wished and struggled for throughout her life, in every way to restore the dignity of all our people, both black and white.

For well over 300 years, our country has never been in better condition than it is today, thanks to the humanity of the value system of ubuntu, based on respect for the humanity of every human being, regardless of race, colour, gender and age, which MaTambo represented throughout her life.

And yet even today, as we stand here virtually on the edge of her grave, there are some in our country who, while describing themselves as Africans, refuse to abandon the insulting and stubborn prejudices born of earlier centuries, which define her people as barbaric.

MaTambo willingly surrendered to the nation her husband, the father of her children and the esteemed leader of our people, Oliver Tambo. She took on the difficult challenge to bring up their children single-handed, in a foreign land, because she fully understood the requirement integral to the ubuntu value system that each one of us, individually, must be ready to make sacrifices for the good of the people. Despite the challenges arising out of her obligation to look after her own children, alone, which she faced while she was in exile, she did not hesitate to respond to the challenges confronting other young South Africans to whom she had access, including those of us who lived in the United Kingdom.

Again, in this regard, she was acting in a manner consistent with the ubuntu value system in terms of which the welfare of children and the young is a shared community responsibility, terms of which every adult was necessarily a guardian of every child, regardless of the parentage of the child.

Living in the United Kingdom for three decades, in a country that was not accustomed, when she arrived, to having a significant black population in its midst, she had no problem in relating to the indigenous white majority population, precisely because the ubuntu value system had taught her to respect every human being, regardless of race and colour.

It was precisely that same value system that had taught her that it was right and proper that people of various races should live together in Top Location as good neighbours, because of the deep-seated precept in the ubuntu value system in terms of which all human beings deserve respect simply because they are human.

When she returned home, and without seeking any publicity, she immersed herself in the work to up-lift especially the disadvantaged among our people, focusing on women, the old and the youth. She integrated herself among the ordinary people, especially in this area of Benoni.

She did all this because, again, the ubuntu value system taught her that each one of us must for all time be sensitive to and work to achieve the happiness of every member of the community, with a special obligation falling on the shoulders of those who are fortunate to live a better life than their neighbours.

In times past, the richest in the community in terms of cattle, would lend cattle to the poorest, to ensure that they too had access to ubisi namasi, while being entitled to keep any calves delivered by the cows in the borrowed herd. In modern commercial terms this would amount to an interest free loan.

MaTambo never had cattle to lend. And yet she understood in her very being that the poor were also human beings despite their poverty, deserving of the human dignity that is the sacred right of all human beings. Throughout her life MaTambo therefore saw the poor and the deprived as part of her.

Thus all her instincts always told her that though she had no cattle to lend, yet she had to find the means to ensure that all those in need and therefore part of her had their own small herd to acquire the calves, to have milk to feed the children, to have amasi to feed the adults, and in time to have a beast or two to slaughter in prayer to the ancestors.

There are many people who are with us today, including my own relatives, who have come here with hearts heavy at the sudden death of one so noble, and who can give testimony to what MaTambo did,

without them requesting her to do so, to support them in every way possible during their greatest moments of need.

The ubuntu value system had firmly entrenched in her very soul the understanding that *motho ke motho ka batho*. Accordingly, she needed no special request to respond to the pain suffered by others, caused by the personal tragedies that life occasionally imposes on all of us.

Knowing that as human beings we would forever be able to live as human beings because we would for all time have to treat one another as one another's brother's and sister's keeper, she absorbed into her innermost receptacles of consciousness the deepest meaning of the wisdom conveyed in the idiom of the language of her ancestral Africa.

Knowing that, as the ancients had said, *unyawo alunampumlo*, through her actions she taught us that unlike the omnipotent being, on each of the moments of dawn, *mahlamba ndlopfu*, we would never know what destination we would have reached when the sun set, and the evening star shone alone in the darkening sky, to await, ever so patiently, its multitude of sister stars that would light up the firmament, confirming that there would still be another tomorrow with its dawn.

Adelaide Tambo therefore knew that *iqolomba alinyelwa; umthi wendlela awuchanyelwa*. As we travel along the long road of life that all of us must traverse, we must forever remember that others who will follow in our footsteps tomorrow, but overtake us the day after and become our guides, should never have occasion to accuse us that what we did demonstrated selfish concern about ourselves, with reckless regard of the interests of the generations that have yet to come, as the calves will come from the borrowed herds.

Thus, in everything she did, Matlala taught us that we should never defecate and foul the air in the caves that provide shelter to the lonely traveller when the sun sets, or when the invincible predators take control of the plains.

Neither should we ever urinate under the solitary tree along the road of life, whose shade provides the unknown traveller a brief moment of rest and relief from the assault of the intense heat of the mid-summer of the African seasons, having been denied the blessing of the watery emptying of the heavens, which would come as the African skies bestow on us the life giving and benevolent summer rains.

Thus did she also understand that all those in need of sustenance and a place to rest, who, without warning, knock at our doors at night as unknown strangers, must, at all times, share what little food we have, to give them the strength they need to complete the uncertain journey of life that is our collective and human fate.

And thus did she understand that *isisu somhambi asingakanani, siphambili; ngasemva ngumhlondzo*. Thus did she also understand that *dimpa tsa motsamai di dinyane ja ka diphuyo tsa nonyana*.

Poor as we may be, we should share whatever we have with others in need, understanding that the poor can never make us poorer. The stomach of the traveller is as small as the kidney of the bird and would never finish whatever the household pot contains.

Whatever amount of food we give the unknown traveller, we shall never feel a sense of profligate and unnecessary sacrifice, because whatever we denied ourselves, because we were generous to a fellow human being in need, would never show through a bloated stomach, because it would only serve to strengthen the muscles that sustain the backbone, out of sight of our eyes.

To express this willing sense of sacrifice, so immanent in the ancient African value system of ubuntu, the Bible, (*Ecclesiastes/Intshumayeli: 11: 1, 4 & 6*), says - "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find

it after many days. Siphose isonka sakho phezu kwamanzi, ngokuba wosifumana kwakuba ziintsuku ezininzi.

"He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. Oqgala umoya akayi kuhlwayela; okhangela amafu akayi kuvuna.

"Kusasa hlwayela imbewu yakho, ngokuhlwa ungasiphumzi isandla sakho; ngokuba ungazi ukuba kolunga yiphi na, nokuba yile nokuba yileya, kusini na, nokubanga zolunga ngakunye zombini na. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

MaTambo cast the little bread she had upon the waters. Time and what our nation will do to summon the necessary courage and sense of selfless pride she inherited and represented, will tell whether she will find that bread after many days. She did not prevaricate to see which way the wind blew, allowing the weather-cock to govern what she would do today and tomorrow, teaching us that to be truly human is to be loyal to principled behaviour.

At no time, whatever the circumstances, neither did she hip nor hop, nor hedge her bets, permitting herself to be but a floating cork carried by the waves of the ocean, rudderless, leaving her fate to be decided by the accidental fall of the dice. She knew always that if ever the umbilical cord to the ancestral values of ubuntu, reinforced by her Christian faith were cut, she would cease both to be herself and to be human.

Thus does it cause an immensely unbearable pain that those who caused her pain have a level of courage, that can surely not be human, born of prejudice and a surfeit of conceit, give them the liberty to convince themselves and say this with no sense of shame, that she, her people, her movement, the African National Congress, her struggle sustained at great cost to bring happiness to all South Africans, of all races, colours, classes, gender, age and ability, constitute nothing more than a dishonourable cabal and an effort that, in the end, serves purposes defined by immorality and amorality, that will give birth, inevitably, to a society whose unfortunate citizens are condemned to endure a fate no better than that visualised in Dante's Inferno. I am saying that Adelaide Tambo represented in her very being and lived her life in a manner that served as an indestructible monument to the values and practice of ubuntu. I am saying also that she left us with the charge that the African National Congress must spare no effort in helping to build a new South Africa based on these humane values and practices.

I am saying also that those among us who have the courage and honesty to respect what MaTambo represented, have an obligation, that will demand new sacrifices of them, to strive without relenting, to build a new South Africa within whose very fibre will be integrated the value system of ubuntu, as encapsulated in Adelaide Tambo's life, and which cannot be separated from our goal to create a humane and people-centred society.

On occasion I have wondered, but have never asked, whether the generations ahead of us, such as the one to which MaTambo belonged, felt sufficiently embittered to repeat after the Psalms (Psalm 137):

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" But this I know that I have never known Adelaide Tambo to weep. I have heard her sing, uplifted by the sound of music as much as her lifelong companion, Oliver Tambo, was moved by the beauty of melody that wafts into our ears, our hearts and our souls as we listen to the beautiful arrangements of sound that can only derive from an inspired celebration of human life. But I always knew that Adelaide Tambo always remembered her Zion, her own motherland and the hope it held that, liberated, it would teach itself once again to regulate itself in a manner consonant with the noble values of ubuntu.

This also we must say that she understood very well what Ben Okri meant when he said: "The happiness of Africa is in its nostalgia for the future, and its dreams of a golden age." Her nostalgia for the future and her dreams of a golden age were informed by the certainty that something would be done to restore the dignity of all our people, on the basis of the rediscovery by the nation of the values of ubuntu.

But here she lies Adelaide Tambo before us in a small wooden case, a mere moment before the Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane utters the words that will conclude a life of which we are immensely proud - saying, dust to dust!

I have spoken as I have of Matlala Adelaide Frances Tambo, on behalf of the African National Congress, not because I and all the patriots in our ranks think that because she no longer lives, MaTambo has no possibility to take a false step that would demonstrate that we spoke of her in false words, simply to be charitable at the moment of death.

I have said what I have said, carrying the felt authority of all South African patriots and all our friends across the globe, because I know that MaTambo, forever busy and bustling, always capable both of ire and mirth, blessed with an open heart capable of hiding personal hurt, an intensely private person who could not but be owned by the nation, was a giant who would not be a giant, a commanding general, our Makhado, whose instincts told her that she should strive to be nothing more than a foot soldier.

To mourn the sinking of the Mendi, Krune Ngxeke-ngxeke Mqhayi wrote:

Awu! Zaf' int' ezinkulu ze Afrika.
Isindwe le nqanawa yada yazika,
Kwaf' amakhalipha, amafela-nankosi,
Agazi lithetha kwiNkosi yenkosi.
Ukufa kwawo kunomvuzo nomvuka;
Ndinga ndingema nawo ngomhla wokuvuka,
Ndingqambe njengomnye osebenzileyo,
Ndikhanye njengomso oqaqambileyo.
Makube njalo!

As we proceed to MaTambo's final resting place, next to her husband, father to Thembi, Dali and Tselane and grandfather to their children, our leader and the everlasting source of inspiration of our nation, O.R. Tambo, let us each repeat after Krune Mqhayi - Kwaf' amakhalipha, amafela-nankosi, Agazi lithetha kwiNkosi yenkosi. Ndinga ndingema nawo ngomhla wokuvuka,. Ndikhanye njengomso oqaqambileyo.

There can be no greater honour that our nation bestows on itself than that all of us say, in unity, regardless of colour, race, gender, class and age, that we pray that we will be with Adelaide Tambo on the day of resurrection, as heroes and heroines, as she was, that we will strive to sparkle as brightly as the morning sun, to signal the birth of a brighter day, that like her we would repudiate all cowardice and opportunism, and that we trust that the price we are willing to pay, as MaTambo paid a price to serve her people, will communicate a message that even the King of Kings will hear.

O roballe ka khotso mme oa rona.

As Mqhayi has said on different occasions - Le nto kakade yinto yalonto!...Makube njalo! What will be, will be! And so, let it be!

Issued by: African National Congress