

Oration at the Funeral of Joe Modise

8 December 2001

Masters of ceremony,
Members of the Modise family,
Our distinguished friends from other countries,
Compatriots and comrades:

A mere eight days away from the 40th birthday of Umkhonto we Sizwe, we have gathered at this place to prepare to lay to rest the mortal remains of a warrior and a patriot. We have convened on these grounds to celebrate the immortal soul of a patriot and a warrior. We are meeting here to say a fond farewell to another human being, a parent, a friend, a comrade, a leader.

At this moment of parting, each one of us will remember many little things about Joe Modise, that constitute part of the composite picture that makes up the biography of the deceased.

Because he was as human as you and I, that biography will tell a story of positive things and negative things, of victories and of defeats.

Some of those who opposed him while he lived will continue to oppose him even as he lies in his grave. They will engage in a macabre search for the negatives they believe are important to their unrelenting struggle even against the dead.

Nje ngamagqwira, ja ka baloi, in their unceasing struggle to defeat what Joe Modise stood for, they will work to ferret beneath the mounds of the graves, to find the negative things with which to infuse the evil spirits of the night they will strive to conjure up - izithunzela, dithutsela, matukwane.

But we who had the privilege to experience the comradeship of Joe Modise, his hopes and his disappointments, his successes and his failures, will walk a different road.

We will recall the millions of little things that Joe Modise did, that define him as our friend, comrade and leader.

The biography we will write in our hearts and minds will tell the story of a man of courage. It will speak to us of a thinker. It will convey the reality of a man of action. It will paint a picture of a person of loyalty to his cause, his principles, his fellow fighters, his comrades. It will remind us of the personal sacrifices he made.

It will inform all that will care to listen, that Joe Modise was human because he could laugh and cry. He could rejoice and despair. He could play and he could work. He could love and he could hate.

He could stand and dally and appreciate the beauty of the material world, while he steeled himself to understand the painful frozen images of the contortions of violent death. He could

sway in joy to the rhythm of music and he could march in rhythm to the beat of the deadly drums of war. He loved life while he accepted that the price to be paid for a life of liberty might be death.

When we bring together all the little fragments we will recall as we write our own biographies of Joe Modise, each will come to the conclusion that here lie in front of us, the mortal remains of a warrior and a patriot.

Fate imposed the obligation on Joe Modise to live his life during a period of storms and hurricanes in the history of our country. This was a time of hope and despair. It was a time of great heroic efforts and unprecedented sacrifices. It was a time of massacres and a savage attempt to silence those who fought for our liberation.

It is the time when the dawn broke to signal the start of a new day, even as the night sought to claim dominion over both day and night, both the past and the future.

It was that time in the evolution of our country into its future, when the new infant, even when it was a mere conception in the minds of those who were destined to die, was engaged in a difficult struggle to be born.

It was the time in the evolution of our country when the old and decrepit fought to extend its life, by strangling the new being, even as it emerged from the troubled womb of our society.

It was an era of historic decisions. It was the moment when those who lived and had a conscience, had to take epoch-making resolutions. It was that difficult period when responses to the questions of the day by those who lived and had a conscience, perhaps beyond the understanding of they who had to decide, were responses to the question whether freedom would forever be deferred.

Those who lived and had a conscience, like Joe Modise, had to resolve whether they were willing to be midwives of a bright future for the people, or accessories to the act of extinguishing the faint light of hope.

They had to decide whether fear and the instinct for self-preservation would predominate in their hearts and minds, turning their own consciences into their everlasting and constant tormentors, because of what they had been afraid to do. This was a time when life demanded that, as the wise decided what constituted the better part of valour, the bold were required to demonstrate what it was to be a warrior and a patriot.

Joe Modise was born of a people that are heroes and heroines. This is a heritage he refused ever to betray. Perhaps unseen by many who were mere observers, he took his place among the front ranks of those who fought for our liberation during the period of 45 years that led to our emancipation in 1994. After that, he soldiered on to help to rebuild his homeland to which he maintained an abiding loyalty.

Circumstances have decreed that Joe Modise will be remembered and honoured for the work he did as a military combatant, a member and leader of Umkhonto we Sizwe, an architect of our National Defence Force.

It is natural that those who do not know will ask questions about how many bombs he detonated, what rifles he pointed at the enemy forces, what artillery shells and rockets he lobbed into the battle positions of the opposing formations.

These will look for signs of blood and death and destruction as they seek to weigh the worth of the soldier that was Joe Modise. But it was not because he wanted to kill that Joe Modise resorted to the weapons of war.

He became part of the armed rebellion because to have submitted to continued tyranny would have condemned millions to death.

He took up arms to protect life and to expand the frontiers of human dignity. For the same reason, even before Umkhonto we Sizwe was formed, he took his place in the vortex of the storm of mass struggle and unarmed resistance to protect life and expand the frontiers of human dignity.

He viewed weapons as a necessary evil. He insisted that they had to be treated with the greatest caution because they existed as instruments for the denial of life. He knew this and preached the message that the best victories were those that were won with the minimum loss of life.

He was a soldier who loved life and hated death. He was a man of arms who refused to glorify arms or to deify the use of force. He would never accept that the deadly muzzles of the guns should take precedence over the voice of the people.

He refused to agree that military force, however skilfully used, could ever be an alternative to the exercise of power by the unarmed masses of the people, among whom he had served as an activist throughout the decade of the 1950's. For him, force could never be its own justification.

Even as our continent bent down in homage to military coups d'etat that placed soldiers in positions of power as heads of state and government ministers, Joe Modise fought to defeat the abuse of guns. As the opportunity emerged for the peaceful resolution of our conflict, he opted for resort to reason rather than the celebration of war.

Today, members of our National Defence Force serve in various African countries as messengers of freedom and peace. Where they are, they draw wonder that they, who had been enemies, are, today comrades-in-arms.

Reflecting the full kaleidoscope of our colours and cultures, they are a cause of marvel that they come from a country, which only recently was on course towards the most destructive racial war.

No so long ago, elements of this force that is now united, had visited African countries as an instrument of death and destruction. Today, they serve on our continent as representatives of life, of hope, of the dignity of all Africans.

They are the pride of our nation. They bear on their disciplined shoulders an African future of a glorious renewal. They are the representatives of the best that Joe Modise bequeathed to us, a military culture and doctrine that give meaning to the weapons of war only to the extent that they are used to defend peace and to realise the objective, that the people shall govern.

Therein lies Joe Modise's greatest contribution to the practice of war. It is the contribution of a patriot who was not afraid of death. It is the contribution of a warrior who did not place a value on his own life above the freedom of his people. It is the contribution of a soldier who loved humanity more than the destructive logic of war.

He was a soldier of peace. He was a soldier for peace. He helped to construct Umkhonto we Sizwe as a combatant for democracy and peace. He helped to construct the South African National Defence Force as our nation's spear for the defence of democracy and peace.

In his honour, South Africa must take the weapons of war out of the hands of the bandits who murder, rob and rape. That too is part of the peace that Joe Modise desired for his people.

Today, I will do something that, perhaps, should not be done. I will speak in the name of the departed warrior who rests so peacefully in our midst, while we talk and breathe and walk and weep silently, or cry out for all to hear. I will speak in the name of the pantheon of the fearless warriors and patriots of our land, whom Joe Modise has joined. This I would like to say. Do not weep. Do not mourn. Do not clothe yourselves in the garments of grief. Do not impose on yourselves the attitude of pathos that speaks of an adored object forever lost. Do not agree that death has proved that it is the final arbiter.

Consider this, the truth. Time will forever tell the story of Joe Modise. It will speak of him as an architect of a future that is good for all our people. It will say that because of what he did, the point is established, that the Africans of Africa and the diaspora are one people who, as equals, will sit in the grand lekgotla of the nations, to contribute to the fashioning of the decision of what should happen to all humanity.

Time will broadcast the message that because Joe Modise lived, Africa and Africans have constructed a global compact with the peoples of the world, which has given meaning to the necessary condition for the continued existence of all humanity, the practice of human solidarity.

It will convey a tale that is true, that because of what he did, the children of South Africa are able to play their simple and noisy and innocent and humane games and sports in our villages and towns, telling all, that they have a right to love, happiness and comfort.

Time will say that once upon a time we had one among us, our own son, who made it possible for us to be proud that we are South African. It will say that his body was subject to the dictates to which all that are made of flesh and bone must submit.

It will say that death is not possible unless there has been life. Life is not possible unless it is integrated within the cycle of death.

Joe Modise has passed away. We will compose songs to him. As we sing of him, we will also be making a solemn salute to the Luthuli Detachment of Umkhonto we Sizwe, and all other detachments that preceded and succeeded this pioneer freedom column of its time.

We will build a monument to him. We will ensure that in our nation's Freedom Park, he has a place as one of those who played his part, as we progressed from the very origins of the earth and life.

He will be a visible particle in our continuous movement towards the unfathomable eternity of the evolution of the earth, the stars, life and society, as we sustain our flight from the enslavement of a state of unknowing, to the freedom informed by our mastery of the actuality of necessity.

What we will do, and must do, will make the statement that Joe Modise has not died. It will say that like all his fellow warriors, who have given freedom and dignity to us as a people, we know that his spirit lives on among us. That spirit will impel us constantly to honour what he stood for.

It will communicate the command to us to carry out the instructions of the Comrade Commander, who lives on among us; member of the Volunteer Corps of the African National Congress; Commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe; architect of democracy, peace and reconciliation; builder of the armed forces for peace; star of the new South Africa; representative of the international movement of human solidarity; harbinger of hope; Isithwalandwe.

A mighty tree of our forest has fallen. As it came down to rest, its crashing echoes published the fact. The singular noise in the enveloping silence told the story that had to be told. Yet we have not been troubled, because as it died, this living baobab did not perish.

People of our land, do not mourn. Let us walk together in respectful silence of the dead, of the warriors and patriots who live though they are not with us. Let us walk in silent deference and preparation for the quiet of their graves. Our voices will be still because the founding human rites of passage, are an occasion to honour our renewable and everlasting gift of soldiers who are prepared to offer their lives as a sacrament for peace.

Farewell dear bother. Farewell comrade. Farewell Comrade Commander. We will continue to obey your commands. Singamasosha kaLuthuli.

Whatever happens, we will bear witness to the truth of liberation. When the roll call is read on the parade ground, we know we will find your name among those who are present and ready to act in the interest of the people. Together with you, we will continue to serve the people of South Africa.

The Chilean poet and revolutionary, Pablo Neruda composed a poem entitled: "So is my life". So is Joe Modise's life!

"My duty moves along with my song:
I am I am not: that is my destiny.
I exist not if I do not attend to the pain
of those who suffer: they are my pains.
For I cannot be without existing for all,
for all who are silent and oppressed,
I come from the people and I sing for them:
my poetry is song and punishment.
I am told: you belong to darkness.
Perhaps, perhaps, but I walk toward the light.
I am the man of bread and fish
and you will not find me among books,
but with women and men:
they have taught me the infinite."

From Joe Modise, we too have learnt the infinite. And so let us begin our dignified procession of tribute to a patriot and a warrior as we accompany him to his place of infinite rest.