

Oration at the Funeral of Minister Steve Tshwete

May 4, 2002, Bisho

Members of the Tshwete family,
Fellow mourners,
Fellow South Africans:

Eight days ago, on the eve of our Freedom Day, our country and our people lost one of our most beloved sons. Steve Tshwete, Thangana, passed away at the Tshwane No 1 Military Hospital after a short illness.

Since then the Tshwete family, and we with them, have carried a heavy burden of grief on our hearts. Our souls have refused to be stilled. Our spirits have sunk under the unbearable weight of an unexpected and numbing shock. Silent tears of despair have watered our cheeks and our motherland. The mournful cries of the bereaved continue to echo within our innermost being.

The flags have flown at half-mast. Many within our country and without, have stood in perfect silence to pay their respects. At its regular meeting earlier this week, held in the Cabinet Room in the Union Buildings in Pretoria, our national Cabinet kept the vacant chair and the nameplate of Minister Tshwete in the regular place he has occupied during the last eight years.

Eight days have passed since his death, but nothing has happened to dull the pain. Soon, The Last Post will sound. Soon, the mournful words will ring out - dust to dust.

We will say our last farewells and turn our backs on the grave of a patriot. Health giving water will wash our hands clean of the earth that will forever be the home of our comrade. But will the grief also wash away from our souls!

Had he been alive, the poet laureate, uMqhayi wase Ntab' ozuko, might have repeated what he said when he spoke of the prophet Ntsikane:

Walila umzi akwatywa,
Mhla sashiywa ngu Ntsikane.

Wangcwatywa ke, wasalela,
Washiywa apho, kwa godukwa.
Amhlophe phantsi ko Mhlaba
Amathamb' ento ka Gabha.

Yahlum' ingca kwe lo Dlaka
Lomlweli omkhulu wo Hlanga.

The grass will grow over the grave of another great warrior of our nation, Steve Vukile Tshwete, umlwe! omkhulu we Hlanga. The question we ask is whether the green grass of the land of the Rarabe will also grow to heal the wounds inflicted on the nation by the early departure of Steve Vukile Tshwete!

We ask many questions we would not have asked if Steve Tshwete was other than he was.

He had been old and bent because of the maturity of his years, we would have said his time had come. Had he had the time to place the weight of his years on a staff, umsimbithi, we would have said he was walking steadily towards the abode of his ancestors.

If he had lost his pretence at a sharp tongue, which sought, unsuccessfully, to hide the softest of hearts, we would have known that the day was not far when we would no longer hear his voice.

If he had tired of bringing joy to our hearts with merry tales and chance remarks and wit that made us laugh, we would have known that he was preparing himself for his eternal journey.

Had the fire that burned in his heart begun to wither into the cold embers of extinguished light - the fire of a fighter for justice, of a revolutionary, a dedicated and selfless worker for the total emancipation of our people, a humble midwife for the restoration of our human dignity, a parent concerned about the beautiful Yonda -we would have known that he had run his race.

Had illness laid him low during long, unending and unbearable days, we would have prepared ourselves for the funeral dirge, and the relief that the eternal cycle of birth and death and birth had freed him of the pain of ill-health, permanently.

Had we the signs that sooner or later we would lose one so dear to us, we would not have questioned our loss, nor wondered at his departure. But death has struck suddenly and without warning, with the frightening mystery of a flash of lightening that splits the clear blue skies. Without notice, death has taken from us the apple of our eye.

But as the English poet, John Donne, wrote in memory of a beloved lady that died, we too should raise our voices and say:

"Death be not proud, thy hand gave not this blow
The executioner of wrath thou art,
But to destroy the just is not thy part

But by all souls not by corruption choked
Let in high raised notes that power be invoked,
Calm the rough seas, by which she sails to rest
From sorrows here, to a kingdom ever blest.
And teach this hymn of her with joy, and sing,
The grave no conquest gets; Death hath no sting!"

Standing in front of this silent casket, that cannot impose the silence of the deaf on the indestructible soul of Steve Tshwete, we too challenge the final arbiter and say - death be not proud!

It can never be your part to destroy the just, such as Steve Tshwete was! The grave you have bequeathed to us cannot conquer the immortal spirit of so outstanding a combatant for freedom.

Death hath no sting!

In high raised notes, together we sing the happy song that the just have not been destroyed - the spirit and the example of our Thangana live on!

It is not our part to mourn. It is our right and privilege to celebrate the fact that we were blessed with so rare a gift of a fellow South African, who was simultaneously a genuine friend, a trustworthy colleague, an activist and a leader, a patriot, an internationalist, a human titan who surrendered his life to the cause of all humanity, a principled revolutionary, a true comrade.

As we celebrate the 90th anniversary of the movement of heroes and heroines to which Steve Tshwete belonged and which he led, the African National Congress, we proclaim it to our country and the world to know, that we owe our greatness to the fact that Steve Tshwete served within our ranks.

As we mark this year of the 90th birthday of the ANC, by recalling and reinforcing the spirit of the millions of volunteers for freedom without which our liberation would have been impossible, we must tell the truth that Steve Tshwete was such a volunteer.

During those 90 years, we called on all patriots to join the non-violent struggle for the defeat of the apartheid system. Steve Tshwete answered that call.

During those 90 years, when the stubbornness of the oppressor demanded this, we called on all patriots once more to demonstrate the courage of our forebears by taking up arms against the enemies of freedom. Steve Tshwete responded to that call to arms.

During the 90 years of the life of the people's movement, we enjoined all patriots to choose the hatred of the oppressor, to choose torture, pain, imprisonment and death, rather than condemn themselves to the praises of the apostles of injustice and the everlasting ignominy of traitors to the cause of liberty.

Steve Tshwete chose the suffering of a life of honour rather than the false comfort of a Judas.

During those nine decades, we said, if need be, we should opt for exile from the land of our birth, rather than live in the comfort of homes that had become mere jail cells within an imprisoned society. Thus did Steve Tshwete become a foreigner to his own motherland.

The time came when the ANC - ithambo lenyok' elihlab' elimzondayo! - said that the situation demanded that we should talk to our enemies and persuade them to become common architects of a South Africa that would belong to all who live in it. Our movement said that we should persuade our erstwhile enemies that it was possible for the jailer and his prisoner to work together in a spirit of national reconciliation.

Forever loyal to the principles of his movement and incapable of betraying the humanity of its cause, Steve Tshwete stood in the front ranks of those to whom we should bestow the accolade -blessed are the peacemakers!

When the sacrifices he had made brought freedom to our people, towards the end of a century of extraordinary suffering, we said it remained the charge of all patriots to serve the people of South Africa selflessly, without seeking personal gain or glory, without arrogance and abuse of power, with honesty, dedication and dignity.

Until the day he died, Steve Tshwete lived up to this injunction and served with distinction in the governments that our people have elected freely since 1994.

When the right moment came upon us during the 90 years of the fighting years of the movement of the people of South Africa, the premier organisation of the struggle of the peoples of Africa for liberation and independence, Steve Tshwete took his place in the front ranks of those who fight for Africa's renaissance.

Nothing we have said about Steve Tshwete should surprise us. To the west and east and north of where we stand stretches a great expanse of African space, over which countless numbers perished as they fought to defend the independence and freedom of our country and continent.

He was a grandchild of warrior men and women. He was the offspring of Africans who fought without surrender, with arms and without arms. He represented a tradition that upheld the dignity of all our people, regardless of the price that we had to pay to defend, to secure and to guarantee that dignity. To the end of his life, he refused to betray that noble tradition.

Here, in front of all of us, within sight of the peoples of South Africa, of Africa and the world, lies the cold and still body of one who, not so long ago, walked among us as a giant, a vibrant expression of life itself, with all its paradoxes.

Here, in front of all of us lie the mortal remains of a fearless warrior who loved his mother, his parents, his family, his people and all humanity. Fearless in war, he was unashamedly unrestrained in his love, his human passion, his loyalty to his friends and his people, to his cause, to his life's pursuit.

We have gathered in our thousands to reflect on and celebrate the life of a patriot, who preferred that his person and what he did should never occasion pomp and ceremony, adulation or hero worship.

He was to us more than a comrade. He was to us more than a friend. Of him we can say that the beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places! Oh, how are the mighty fallen! Of him we can say that he was part of our own mortal bodies. He was a particle of our sun. Without him our sun and our being cannot be.

But yet he lives! He lives because we live still, committed to do what he was committed to do. He lives because as long as our people live, determined never to perish, Steve Tshwete will live forever.

Forever will these masses continue to march together in their disciplined ranks, to claim for themselves freedom from humiliation, from poverty and degradation, from marginalisation and dehumanisation.

Forever will these awakened masses march together in their serried ranks, joined in an unstoppable offensive for human fulfilment, in whose vanguard will fly a bright banner inscribed with the words -Long Live Steve Tshwete! The ANC lives! The ANC leads!

I know that among these who are our people, we will find your dear wife and life companion, Pam, MaMzangwa, Ncuthu, descendant of Sartjie Baartman, Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and Ruth First.

Our country conveys its condolences to the entire Tshwete family and expresses its indestructible appreciation of the fact that you surrendered your son to the nation. Our nation will, for all time, treasure and honour what he did, so that we should be human again.

As uMqhayi wase Ntab' ozuko said:

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

Thangana! Krila! Qabane!
Qhawe la maqhawe! Senatla sa linatla!
Ulale ngoxolo! Orobale ka khotso!
Amandla ngawethu! Matla ke a rona!