



ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE

ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the youngest of seven children of Hubert and Angelina Sobukwe, was born on 5 December 1924 in Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. After attending local mission schools, he was admitted to the prestigious Healdtown College in Fort Beaufort. It was there that his enduring love for poetry and literature was born under the guidance and inspiration of a teacher he knew as Mrs. Scott.

In recognition of his leadership qualities Sobukwe was first elected senior prefect then head boy. Some years after he left the school a Healdtown Governor would describe him as 'the brightest student we had'. He obtained a first class pass in his matriculation exams and entered the South African Native College at Fort Hare – the centre of black student politics – in 1947. It did not take long for this articulate orator to become the speaker of choice at student rallies and, in 1949, he was elected President of the Student Representative Council.

Sobukwe attracted the attention of Godfrey Pitje, anthropology lecturer, political activist and, later, lawyer, who recalled that 'Sobukwe was towering over all of us, even those on the staff, intellectually, from whatever angle. We readily recognised that he was an exceptional chap.' According to A P Mda, a founder of the ANC Youth League, 'he [Sobukwe] went on to develop our position – mine and Anton Lembede's – to a higher level than that in which we were'

After graduating from Fort Hare, Sobukwe spent a brief time as a teacher in Standerton, where he played a low profile role as an ANC member. He subsequently became a language instructor at Wits, with a glowing recommendation from the doyen of African intellectuals, Professor Z K Matthews. Sobukwe and his family moved into Mofolo location, where his home was a venue for political discussions and meetings of the local ANC branch. He became a significant leader of the Africanist movement within the ANC – a loose alliance of fiery nationalists who rejected white influence in the movement.

In 1959, the Africanists broke from the ANC to form the Pan Africanist Congress, with Sobukwe its first president. Still teaching at Wits, he managed to maintain a balance between his university commitments and the political struggle. He also continued with his studies and achieved an honours degree in languages with a thesis on Xhosa riddles. In 1959 he was asked to represent the university at a conference on African writers.

Although Wits would not accord him the title of lecturer, which was reserved for white academics, the university did resist government attempts to have him removed because of his political activities. However, Sobukwe increasingly felt constrained by his job and, in a letter dated 21 March 1960, a date the world would come to remember as the day of the Sharpeville massacre, Sobukwe tendered his resignation, writing that 'circumstances have arisen which make it necessary, in the interest of the university that I resign, and that my resignation take effect from the earliest date the university may decide.' Ever courteous, he added: 'I wish to thank you for the attitude you adopted in refusing, in the face of terrific pressure, to interest yourself and the university in my political life'

On that fateful Monday, as anti-pass law protestors marched on police stations all over the country, Sobukwe, with a group of PAC member, left his reference book at home and walked to the Orlando police station to give himself up. Along with the 22 others charged, not under the 'pass laws' but under the far harsher Criminal Law Amendment Act, he refused to plead because there was no 'moral obligation to obey the laws made by a white minority'. Sobukwe was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

He served his sentence in an assortment of jails but he was not to leave prison when the three years ended. As the day of his release approached, the Nationalist Government was planning a diabolical revenge. In an amendment to the Suppression of Communism Act, a clause (later to become known as the 'Sobukwe Clause' and which was never used for anyone else) was introduced, providing that anyone convicted under security laws could continue to be imprisoned after the sentence had ended.

The law came into effect on 1 May, two days before he should have regained his freedom. By the time the announcement was made, Robert Sobukwe had been moved clandestinely from Pretoria prison to Robben Island. There he was to spend the next six years of his life in virtually solitary confinement in a bungalow separated by a high barbed wire fence from all but his jailers.

In 1969, Sobukwe finally left Robben Island, only to be banished to Galeshewe township near Kimberley where he was banned from writing, teaching, speaking in public or even praying in church. He was, however, allowed to study law and, after being admitted as an attorney in 1975, ran a one-man practice from a small office in Galeshewe. Restricted though he was, Sobukwe would not be silenced and continued to consult with political activists, including a young Steve Biko, who considered him a saintly figure.

The ultimate non-racist, Sobukwe argued forcefully that there was only one race – the human race. A deeply spiritual man, secure and rooted in his own identity, he reached out and created enduring friendships with people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The banning order that confined him to Kimberley not only restricted his political activities, it also prevented him from seeking the specialist medical attention that might have prolonged his life. He was initially refused permission to travel to another centre to seek medical help and when he was eventually allowed to go to Groote Schuur Hospital for treatment, it was too late. Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe died of cancer in 1978, survived by his wife Veronica and their four children. He was 53 years old.

Robert Sobukwe's call for a Pan African identity has been resurrected in this new century in the concept of an African renaissance. Through processes such as the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, African leaders are attempting to give practical substance to his vision.

We live in an Africa that faces huge challenges – xenophobia, racism, ethnicity and tribalism, dictatorship, corruption, poverty, disease, war, famine and a paralysing

timidity and resistance to the general processes of transformation. In meeting these challenges African leaders in every field in every country would do well to remember Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe's call to his fellow Africans: 'We must be the embodiment of our peoples' aspirations'.

What better embodiment could there be of the best of Africa's aspirations than Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe.

It is 25 years since Robert Sobukwe died. To mark the anniversary of his death and celebrate his life, the University of the Witwatersrand has organised an academic seminar. It is fitting that the University should use this occasion to break with tradition and, for the first time, accord its highest honour, Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, posthumously – to Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, in recognition of his singular and significant contribution to South Africa.