

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe: Acknowledging the Legacy of a Pan-Africanist Hero

by

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Abstract

This paper seeks to reaffirm the enduring contributions of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, one of the most ignored iconic figures in the history of the South African struggle against colonial-apartheid. Thus, it argues that he was the most feared crusader against colonial-apartheid but through tendentious historiography his legacy is being wished away from the history of the country, although only now is he being acknowledged by students desperate for answers in the context of decolonial 'new South Africa'.

Key words: Pan-Africanist, Sobukwe clause, Sharpeville Massacre

The Making of an Icon

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, who died forty years ago, was one of the most prominent pan-Africanists to have come out of South Africa. He was born on 5 December 1924 in Graaff-Reinet in the Cape Province as the youngest of six children. The family had meagre resources but emphasised the importance of education to the children. His father, Hubert Sobukwe, worked as a municipal labourer and a part-time woodcutter. His mother, Angelina was a Pondo of the Xhosa ethnic group and worked as a domestic worker and cook at a local hospital. Sobukwe's grandfather left Lesotho (then known as Basutoland) to resettle in South Africa around the time of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 – 1902.

After completing Standard 6, he enrolled for a Primary Teachers' Training Course for two years but he was not given a teaching post. He then enrolling at the Healdtown Institute in 1940 for his high school. He spent six years at Healdtown studying with the financial assistance provided by George Caley, the school's headmaster, and completed his Junior Certificate (JC) and matric. Healdtown was a Methodist college which was by all accounts a major institution for black education. While at Healdtown, his academic excellence drew attention to his teachers and he was known by his fellow students as a brilliant, eloquent, persuasive and dynamic person with a great command of the English language.

In 1947, after turning twenty-three he enrolled at Fort Hare University where he subsequently joined the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). During this time, he proved himself to be a great orator whenever he made pronouncements on various issues. His fellow-students chose him to speak on their behalf at the 'fresher's social' at Wesley House where he was staying. Sobukwe took the opportunity to launch a venomous attack on parochialism and the frivolous attitude of students in the hostel. Seeing a disturbing disconnect between the school environment and the lived experiences of African people, he pointed the hypocrisy of the school and the injustices suffered by African people thus puncturing missionary paternalism. It was vintage Sobukwe with fierce determination to set the record straight and demonstrate to the oppressed why they should not be pliant simply because of white paternalism.

In 1948, during his second year he decided to do a course in Native Administration which dealt with the laws governing black people. He began to understand and appreciate the shocking existential reality of his people and thus began his political conscientisation. Apart from books relating to his course of study, he immersed himself into reading a wide range of material on Africa. Critically, he subscribed to the influential *West Africa Pilot*, the newspaper founded by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. As Sobukwe developed his interest in understanding the nuances of the deplorable African condition not only in South Africa but the entire continent, on 26 May 1948 the Afrikaner National Party came to power and instituted and institutionalised apartheid.

By that time the ANCYL had grown into an aggressive force within the African National Congress. Sobukwe and his two friends Dennis Siwisa and Galaza Stampa started working on a daily commentary called *Beware* highlighting the deplorable conditions of African people and the need for liberation, the importance of non-collaboration and critiques of Native Representative Councils and Native Advisory Boards. On account of his enunciation of the African struggle Sobukwe was elected as the first president of the Fort Hare Students' Representative Council in 1949.

During the same year, he met 21-year-old Veronica Zodwa Mathe, who came from Hlobane in Natal but was a nurse in training at Alice Hospital. The couple married four and half years later (Pogrand, 2017). In 1954 after moving to Johannesburg and settling in Mofolo, Sobukwe became a lecturer of African Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). So good was Sobukwe at his work that many started referring to him as 'Prof', a nickname which was later used by many political admirers. During his time in Johannesburg he edited *The Africanist* newspaper and soon began to criticise the ANC for allowing itself to be dominated by what he termed "liberal-left-multi-racialists" whose interest was preserving white domination and stalling the African struggle. In 1958 he completed his Honours dissertation at Wits entitled "A collection of Xhosa Riddles".

In his uncompromising writings and pronouncements, Sobukwe opposed the idea of 'South African exceptionalism' as this decoupled the country from Africa as the country's organic roots and political and economic umbilical cord. He was strongly pan-Africanist, believing that the future of South Africa should be in the hands of indigenous Africans. As a result of his scepticism towards the multi-racial path the ANC was following, Sobukwe became instrumental in initiating and leading an Africanist breakaway from the ANC in 1958.

In 1959, Sobukwe founded the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) as he viewed the ANC as a byword for extreme compromise and failure to articulate the authentic struggle of African people. Although apartheid was crushing to indigenous Africans, he did not want the struggle to suffer from merely addressing the immediacy of apartheidism but to address the entire colonial edifice. In this respect, he was a strong believer in an Africanist future for South Africa. Sobukwe distinguished himself as a pan-Africanist at the time the racist apartheid regime was trying to make sure that indigenous African people cut their political, economic, aesthetic and cultural ties with the rest of the African continent (Lebakeng, 2001). For him 'what happens in one part of Africa to Africans must affect the Africans living in other parts'. For him, it was the sacred duty of every Africanist to strive for the United States of Africa and dispel the myth of South African exceptionalism. In this regard, Sobukwe's point of departure and reference, inspiration and passion was his beloved African continent.

On 21 March 1960, the PAC led a nationwide protest against the hated Pass Law which required black people to carry a pass book at all times. Sobukwe led a march to the local police station at Orlando, Soweto, in order to openly defy the laws. He was joined *en route* by his followers to present his pass to a police officer. By so doing he purposely made himself guilty under the terms of the Pass Law of being present in a region/area other than that allowed as per his papers. In a similar coordinated protest on the same day in Sharpeville, police opened fire on a crowd of PAC supporters, killing 69 in the Sharpeville Massacre (Kgosana, 1988; Lebakeng, 1991; Ntloedibe, 1995).

Sobukwe was arrested and on 4 May 1960 he was charged with and convicted of incitement and sentenced to three years in Robben Island for inciting Africans to demand the repeal of the pass laws. He refused to appeal against the sentence, as well as the aid of an attorney, on the grounds that the court had no jurisdiction over him as it could not be considered either a court of law or a court of justice. Sobukwe was kept in solitary confinement but permitted certain privileges including books, newspapers, civilian clothes, bread, etc. He lived in a separate area on the island where he was strictly prohibited from contact with other prisoners. Sobukwe was subjected to this special treatment because the South African government had profiled him as a more radical and difficult opponent to contend with and therefore had to be separated from all other prisoners in Robben Island.

After serving his sentence, the new General Law Amendment Act was passed, resulting in the 'Sobukwe clause' which allowed his imprisonment to be renewed annually at the discretion of the Minister of Justice. Consequently, he was interned on Robben Island for further six years. On face this statute seemed to grant broadly applicable powers, but in essence it was specifically intended to authorize the arbitrary extension of Sobukwe's imprisonment. Sobukwe was the only person imprisoned under this clause. Due to his sense of purpose and determination to achieve the liberation of Africans, Sobukwe was considered to be extremely dangerous by the colonial-apartheid regime in South Africa.

Sobukwe had personal authority emanating from his charisma. He was a powerful speaker who could move people to action. But his strength as a leader lay not only in his ability to see what needed to be done, but in his ability to carry it out, regardless of personal consequences. The then Minister of Justice, JB Vorster was actually quoted in the racist parliament as grudgingly saying that the reason for wanting to keep Sobukwe behind bars, even after serving his full sentence, was that "we are dealing with a person who has a strong magnetic personality, a person who can organise, a person who feels that he has a vocation to perform this task {of overthrowing the government}.

Prison was a lonely place for Sobukwe. Isolated from other prisoners, he would hear them shouting as they played football from afar. Instead of this situation demoralising and breaking his spirit, he immersed himself in studying. With a positive attitude towards education and convinced that acquiring education meant service to Africa, during his imprisonment he received a degree in economics from the University of London and further studied for a law degree.

Sobukwe was released from Robben Island in 1969. He was sent to Kimberley which was 500 kilometres from where he had previously lived in Johannesburg prior his imprisonment. Although he was allowed to have his family but he remained under house arrest. The government considered Kimberley considered far and remote enough and, therefore, as an area where he could not easily foster subversive activities. Moreover, he would also be easily monitored by the state security apparatus.

Impact, Influence and Legacy

Sobukwe articulated his law degree with the help of a local lawyer, in Galeshewe, Kimberley and thereafter started his own practice in 1975. He was so determined to serve, sacrifice and suffer for the oppressed and exploited African people in South Africa and broader African struggle that to his followers and admirers he was 'a man who refused to give up'. In his legal practice he never charged fees for his services to the poor local communities.

Although initially scared of him due to the propaganda of the racist apartheid regime, the local communities soon warmed up to him. In a country where indigenous African people were arrested at the slightest provocation and with so many of them poor, Sobukwe was like a saviour. One of the beneficiaries of Sobukwe's legal assistance was a young Yvonne Mokgoro who was to become a Constitutional Judge under the new dispensation in South Africa.

As a pan-Africanist, his strong convictions and active resistance inspired many other individuals and organisations involved in the South African struggle, notably the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Despite his influence, Sobukwe did not want his followers to create a legend or icon out of him. He admonished them so many times as he feared that this will detract from the centrality of the struggle and the agency of people to liberate themselves would be down played. Hence on hearing about the untimely death of Steve Bantu Biko in the hands of racist security forces he said, 'never pin all your hopes on man because when he is gone you will lose your strength. Rather put your trust in the cause for therein lies your strength'.

The Sobukwe-led Sharpeville Massacre was a turning point or defining moment in the history of the South African struggle against colonial-white minority settlerism. After fully appreciating the horrors of colonial-apartheid, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared this vile and anachronistic system a crime against humanity. It was this moment which affirmed the centrality of the armed struggle and a move away from petitions which characterised the stale approach to fighting the regime in South Africa. Both the PAC and ANC declared armed struggle as a way of overthrowing the regime in South Africa.

Until students started evoking the name of Sobukwe, it seemed that the silence imposed on him during his lifetime cast a spell which has never really been broken (Mompei, 2007). During recent South African student demonstrations for free and relevant education his name was clearly a signifier of resistance, reversal of epistemicide and propeller of de-colonisation. There is a recognition of the state of decoloniality charactering post-1994 South Africa and the need to assert Africanness. Many students have become disillusioned with the appeal to and authority of whiteness. They demanded that symbols such as universities and other public spaces be named after Sobukwe as part of honouring his contribution to the African struggle. After all, as far back as 21 October 1949, during his speech at the 'Completers' Social' he asked a pertinent and enduring question relating to education: "...we are told that in ten years' time we might become an independent university. Are we to understand by that an African University predominantly guided by European thought and strongly influenced by European staff?" Sobukwe was problematizing the colonial nature of South African universities and this challenge has conveniently escaped those who run South Africa today.

A Tragic Loss for Africa

Sobukwe was hospitalised in 1977. His doctors requested that the authorities allow him freedom of movement on humanitarian grounds. This request was refused indefinitely. The government deliberately made it harder for Sobukwe to receive treatment by insisting that he should comply with the conditions of his restrictions, despite his evidently failing health. On 27 February 1978, at a tender age of 54, Sobukwe died at Kimberley General Hospital from what the post-mortem conducted by the government physicians was lung cancer. His funeral was held on 11 March 1978 and he was buried in Graaff-Reinet. Suspicions remain to this day on account of the several surgical operations that were performed on him that he might have actually been poisoned.

The archbishop Desmond Tutu had this to say about Sobukwe “I am greatly privileged to have known him and to have fallen under his spell. His long imprisonment, restriction and early death were a major tragedy for our land and the world’. Indeed, his death was a tragic loss; the loss of an inspirational pan-Africanist visionary. What is even more tragic and disgraceful is that because of the tendentious nature of South African historiography, very few of today’s youth know what he stood for or appreciate his self-less contribution to the South African struggle for decolonisation (Lebakeng, 2001). Part of the problem is the dangerous and disempowering tendency in South Africa to demonise, downplay and marginalise struggle icons who were not affiliated to the ruling party.

Knowing our heroes and heroines, both living and departed, is a sign of self-respect. Familiarity with the ideas of Sobukwe is a sign of self-liberation for “he was the liberator of the mind” (Mompei, 2007). South Africa and Africa need to acknowledge this great son of the soil. Otherwise history will force us to do so. For South Africans this history has begun. As Seepe points out “as we enter the period of disillusionment with the so-called rainbow nation that excludes the centrality of African content, we need to ... reclaim our heroes, learn from the our past ... Sobukwe’s literary and political contributions are a necessary antidote to the meaningless but intoxicating language of rainbowism” (Seepe, 2008). One way of appreciating both the force and importance of the retrieval of this historical legacy is by treating Sobukwe not merely as a biographical narrative or historical persona, but as a signifier. According to Hook, Sobukwe functions precisely as a signifier for a cluster of ideas and aspirations routinely excluded – indeed, repressed – from the post-apartheid public sphere (Hook, 2016).

Unfortunately, repeated opportunities to commemorate Sobukwe’s legacy were met with a telling silence: “This silence tells us, in its own unique way, of an official quest to forget Sobukwe ... Attempts to erase Sobukwe’s memory in our public consciousness are indicative of how those in power legitimise themselves.” (Ndletyana, 2013). Ultimately, Sobukwe’s name will be anchored in letters of gold in the iconic list and this will be forced upon us not by those running the country but by existential realities confronting South Africa. His intellectual, political and economic representations, left behind for posterity, still enunciate the South African struggle in a way very few South Africans have.

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