

A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE CUT SHORT: BATHANDWA NDONDO MEMORIAL LECTURE

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Introduction

Programme Director,
Office bearers and members of SASCO,
Walter Sisulu University management and staff,
Honoured guests,
Friends and comrades
Thank you for the invitation to present this memorial lecture.

As you all know, SASCO and this University occupy a very special place in my heart. Both the university and the person whom we are honouring tonight played a very formative role in my own political development. Cde Bathandwa Ndondo - 'Bura' as he was affectionately known - is a hero of our struggle for liberation whom I greatly admire and sacrifice must never be forgotten. I consider myself fortunate in that I followed in the second wave of activism pioneered by Bura and his comrades. I started studying law at UNITRA in the year of his murder. It is especially significant that this memorial lecture is being held during April - Freedom Month - as it is an appropriate time to pause and take stock of the road we have travelled and the challenges facing us as a nation.

Let me therefore congratulate the organisers of this memorial lecture for their initiative in keeping alive the memory of Cde Bathandwa. Let me also congratulate the Bathandwa Ndondo Branch of SASCO at Walter Sisulu University. I am told that this branch was declared to be the biggest and most vibrant SASCO branch across the country by the 19th National General Congress. I am also pleased to see that

SASCO currently leads the SRC at this university. We have recently seen that at some other universities progressive organisations like SASCO have lost ground to other formations. It is fitting that you are honouring the memory of Bathandwa Ndongdo in both words and deeds.

In the time available to me I would like to explore with you the biography of Bathandwa Ndongdo, then discuss the significance of his death, examine some of the challenges facing us in South Africa, and then extract some lessons from the life of Bathandwa Ndongdo.

Biographical Outline of Bathandwa Ndongdo

Not too long ago I would have expected everyone in the audience to be able to recite the history of our Comrade Bathandwa Ndongdo. Now, 22 years into our democracy I no longer take this for granted.

Bura - Bathandwa Ndongdo - was born on 06 July 1963 in Tsomo, to Lulama Sidumo (née Ndongdo). In his early years Bura was raised by his grandmother. Following the death of his grandmother, his mother took him to her elder sister's family, the Ntsebezwas, in Cala to raise him. The Xhalanga area has long been one of the places that has produced activists and revolutionaries. He completed his primary schooling at Cala and matriculated in 1980. Bura then registered at the University of Transkei (UNITRA) in January 1981 for a BProc. At UNITRA, he was elected to the Student Representative Council (SRC). A year later, he was suspended from UNITRA for political activities. After he was suspended, he returned to Cala, where he was employed at the Health Care Trust. His commitment did not wane. During 1984, the security police harassed and detained Bathandwa Ndongdo on numerous occasions for his political activism.¹

¹ Biographical details drawn from SA History on Line website, <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/bathandwa-ndongo> (site visited 12 April 2016); T. Bell and D.B. Ntsebeza, *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid & Truth* (London: Verso, 2003), 168-195; Remembered website, 'Obituary Bathandwa Ndongdo', <http://remembered.co.za/obituary/view/17873> (site accessed 12 April 2016).

On 24 September 1985, Cde Bathandwa was picked up at his home in Cala by a unit involving South African Police member Mbuso Enoch Shabalala, Transkei police Sergeant Gciniso Lamont Dandala and askaris Silulami Gladstone Mose and Xolelwa Virginia Shosha. He was shot dead in cold blood in broad daylight in the centre of Cala town. One of the eyewitnesses, an elderly woman, asked the police. 'Whose child are you shooting like a dog?' The female askari involved, Xolelwa Shosha, is reported to have replied, 'This dog must not pretend to be dead before he has given us the information we want.'²

Later, the Transkei President Chief K.D. Matanzima publicly announced that Ndondo had been killed because he had been involved in the Mthatha fuel depot bombings. Matanzima's statement was quite simply untrue, but it proved to be an embarrassing public admission of the activities of government hit squads. The fuel depot in fact had been bombed in a daring MK operation by a unit under the command of Dumisani Mafu. Amongst the comrades very active in carrying out armed attacks against the Transkei regime in this period were Zola Dubeni, Atwell Mazizi Maqhekeza, Mzwandile Vena, Pumzile Mayapi, Sisa Ngombane, Ndibulele Ndzamela and Welile Salimani.

Bathandwa Ndondo was a committed activist and revolutionary, but he had nothing to do with the fuel depot explosion. He was in fact killed for something he did not do. This does not detract from his contribution in any way. There were many terrains of struggle, but this does show how much the Transkei authorities feared his political activities and mobilisation of people against an unjust regime and confused his activism with armed action.

The Transkei police then repressed the funeral arrangements for Bathandwa Ndondo with a very heavy hand. They intimidated

² T. Bell and D.B. Ntsebeza, *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid & Truth*. (London: Verso, 2003), 175.

anyone remotely associated with the arrangements. To their enduring shame, the Roman Catholic Church, which the family had counted on to provide a priest to officiate, even refused to help. Eventually, an Anglican, the Reverend Edgar Ruddock, conducted the funeral service where the mourners were monitored by heavily armed police with armoured vehicles. The Transkei security forces turned back all the vehicles heading to the funeral from outside Cala. Mourners wearing T-shirts with the slogan 'Rest in Peace Bathandwa Ndondo' were also arrested. By the end of October, fifty-one people had been detained.

I would like to pause a moment and emphasise that people today have forgotten how brutal the Matanzima regime in the Transkei was in the 1980s. Under the influence of apartheid death squads like the notorious Vlakplaas unit, the Transkei regime conducted State-sponsored terror and murder almost with impunity. One cannot mention the death of Bathandwa Ndondo without also acknowledging the heroism and sacrifice of many others. The Ntsebeza brothers, Dumisani and Lungisile were instrumental in challenging the authorities in every possible way to prevent them literally getting away with murder. As a consequence they (and many others) were detained, harassed and banished. It was largely through their efforts that the Transkei regime and apartheid police were not able to sweep Bathandwa's death under the carpet and move on with impunity.

Significance of death of Bathandwa Ndondo

Cde Bathandwa's untimely passing was significant for a number of reasons. Firstly it exposed to the whole world the violence and brutality of State-sponsored murder in South Africa's bantustans. K.D. Matanzima's admission of extra-judicial killings lifted the lid on death squad activities. It destroyed the last vestiges of credibility the Matanzima's had. It also galvanised support for the liberation struggle amongst ordinary people. The activities of MK within the Transkei increased significantly as the armed struggle intensified. Above all, his death marked the passing of a young man who had

dedicated his life to his people, a young man who had showed so much promise as a leader and as a revolutionary activist. It was indeed a young life cut short.

But Bathandwa's death was an also an important symbolic moment in South African history. It symbolises the heroic struggle for freedom, even in the face of overwhelming odds. It symbolises the indomitable human spirit. It symbolises the struggle of good against evil. That is why should never allow the memory of Bathandwa Ndondo to fade. It should continue to serve as an inspiration for current and future generations. His passing should continue to serve as a reminder that when faced with a choice between right and wrong, the choice should always be to choose to do the right thing.

Challenges facing us in South Africa today

Today, as a country we are at the crossroads. The discourse and introspection sparked off by the 2015-16 student activism around #RhodesMust Fall and #FeesMust Fall have broadened to cast a sharp light on many of the unresolved issues of transformation of our society, our values and the credibility of our political institutions. The processes started off by student activism now challenged all of us to think deeply about where have come from, where we are and above all, where we need to be going as we continue to strive to build the kind of society envisaged by the drafters of the Freedom Charter, those who sacrificed their lives for our freedom and the drafters of our Constitution. It is your generation that has brought home to us that we cannot continue along the path we have been treading, that we need to confront the challenges we face and overcome them. In a sense, the universities today are a microcosm of our society. What started off as protests within the higher education sector have become a broader societal issue.

The challenges we face are many: poverty, inequality, unemployment, land reform, access to economic power in our country, racism, social cohesion, national identity, state capture, corruption and many other things. Essentially all these challenges fall

under the heading of decolonisation. Decolonisation, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o accurately argued, is about rejecting the centrality of the West in Africa's understanding of itself and its place in the world.³ It is about seriously examining the tangible and intangible aspects of our society that we have inherited from our past and consciously deciding on which values, institutions and processes we want to build a society for our children and our children's children. Elsewhere in the world debates about decolonisation of society have been raging, but in South Africa we have been largely been conspicuously quiet.

Professor Achille Mbembe, one of the eminent people recently appointed by the Gauteng Premier, David Makhura, to an Eminent Group of Nation-Building and Social Cohesion Champions (to address issues of social cohesion, racism and xenophobia in Gauteng) has written of this crossroads moment in our country's history,

Twenty one years after freedom, we have now fully entered what looks like a negative moment. This is a moment most African postcolonial societies have experienced. Like theirs in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, ours is gray and almost murky. It lacks clarity.⁴

He goes further to argue that,

A negative moment is a moment when new antagonisms emerge while old ones remain unresolved.

It is a moment when contradictory forces - inchoate, fractured, fragmented – are at work but what might come out of their interaction is anything but certain.

It is also a moment when multiple old and recent unresolved crises seem to be on the path towards a collision.⁵

This is exactly the kind of critical thinking we need as a society to understand the nature of the challenges we face. We need this kind of

³ E. Prinsloo, 'The role of the Humanities in decolonising the academy', *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 15:1 (2016), 165; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2004), 88.

⁴ A. Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive', website, <https://africaisacountry.atavist.com/decolonizing-knowledge-and-the-question-of-the-archive> (site accessed 11 April 2016), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

intellectual rigour to help us to see the broader picture of issues we are trying to address.

Lately our judiciary has been prominent in the news. The independence of the judiciary, the transformation of the judiciary, and the judiciary as guardians of our Constitutions are all issues in the forefront of our consciousness. When I reflect these issues, I am struck by the important role played by UNITRA in shaping generations of legal minds that occupy prominent positions in our judiciary today. There are many people one could mention: Adv. Dumisa Ntsebeza, Judge President John Hlophe of the Western Cape Division of the High Court, Justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga of the Constitutional Court, Justice Christopher Jafta of the Constitutional Court. These were the lecturers and contemporaries of Bathandwa Ndondo at UNITRA in the 1980s. I cannot help but pose the question that if Bura's life had not been cut short at the age of 23 years, would he not be occupying one of the positions in the highest courts in one of the land? Right from the outset of his legal training he displayed a sharp mind, dedication, commitment to the struggle and ability to mobilise and organise. There is little doubt in my mind that were he alive today, Bura would be amongst our finest legal minds occupying a position of great significance.

In talking about legal minds and Mthatha in the 1980s, I would also like to digress slightly and mention Pumzile Mayapi. You might have seen the report in local press recently that carried the remarkable story of Cde Pumzile Mayapi.⁶ Cde Pumzile left his law studies at the University of Fort Hare to join MK. He was one of several MK cadres like Attwell Maqkeza, Dumisani Mafu, Mzwandile Vena, Sipiwo Mazwai, Vusumzi Pikoli, Pakamile Ximiya and Sizwe Kondile who were at university together and who then joined the armed struggle. Cde Pumzile was an active member of MK in the Transkei in the late 1980s.

⁶ *Daily Dispatch*, 11 April 2016, 'From death row to legal eagle'.

He and other cadres successfully carried out a number of MK operations; one of these was the bombing of the Wild Coast casino in April 1986, less than a year after the death of Bathandwa Ndondo. He was later arrested and sentenced to death in 1989. After spending a considerable time in death row here in Mthatha, he was released in the transition to democracy. Following his release Cde Pumzile resumed his studies and has just been admitted as an advocate in the Grahamstown High Court. I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to Pumzile Mayapi for his dedication and his commitment. His is also a story that should inspire us all. It also emphasises that the struggle for liberation in the Transkei in the 1980s was interconnected and that we need to honour all of those who sacrificed for our freedom.

Conclusion

Programme Director, comrades and friends I would again like to thank you for the invitation to present this Bathandwa Ndondo memorial lecture. It is very important that we continue to honour the memory of all activists who sacrificed for the freedom we enjoy today – those who are still amongst us and those who have passed on.

The struggle in South Africa has moved on to a new terrain today. But the best way we can perpetuate their memory is to apply the principles of hard work, self-sacrifice, honesty, discipline, integrity and dedication that Cde Bathandwa Ndondo displayed to address the challenges facing us today.

One of the ways we can truly honour them is to stay true to the ideals and principles they strived to uphold. The most fitting living memorial we can build to all of those who, like Cde Bathandwa Ndondo, paid the supreme sacrifice is to build the kind of society they would have wished to see.

I thank you.
