“We can only imagine: A Tribute to Onkgopotse Abram Tiro”

By Dr Reuel J Khoza

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Master of ceremonies
Members of Abram Onkgopotse Tiro’s family and your kith and kin
Chairman & Members of Council
Vice Chancellor Mahlo Mokgalong and your Deputy Vice Chancellor
Members of Senate & Deans of Faculties
Staff Members both Academic and Administrative
Students, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

As I stand here today, very close to the spot where Onkgopotse Abram Tiro delivered a magnificently brave speech some 30 years ago, I am moved to imagine something that could have been. I invite you to join me on a quest into that past and the future it promised. We can only imagine what a 65-year-old Onkgopotse would have accomplished to date, had he been allowed to live, in politics, education and leadership in general.

I am deeply honoured to deliver the first Memorial Lecture in Tiro’s name at the University of Limpopo. I stand before you as a humble inheritor of the tradition of thought expressed by Tiro on this campus on a fateful day in April 1972.

Onkgopotse Abram Tiro was born in 1947 in Dinokana village, near Zeerust, and assassinated 1 February 1974. Nipped in the bud. That’s a short life! It is a tragedy that he is not among us today as one of the wiser elders arising from years of struggle and tempered by the experience of oppression. There were defining moments in his life, from the day he was elected President of the SRC by a student body hungry for true
representation – we observe clear evidence of his leadership potential. Then there was his time as a teacher at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto – one of the great breeding grounds of freedom – where Onkgopotse had a golden opportunity to conscientise students en mass. The worst moment, we know, was the occasion of his death from a parcel bomb in Botswana where he had taken refuge. Having been expelled from Turfloop for his outspokenness he was completing forms to further his studies with UNISA when his life was abruptly and fatefully terminated. A student known only as Lawrence, ostensibly from the overseas university exchange programme, brought a letter that exploded on opening.

We can only imagine the images and thoughts characterised by expectations, hopes and fears, that must have flashed through his mind.

- He had dreamed of lofty academic ambitions that could only be realised in a free and freedom loving country.
- He had waged the liberation struggle waged from within and without this land of ours.
- He sought a supportive international platform to assist a future democratic South Africa to free itself of ignorance, poverty and racial segregation.
- He believed fervently in a national leadership beholden to one cardinal interest – the national interest.
- He identified deeply with the oppressed and felt a deep sense of community with those at the receiving end of injustice.

Between receipt of that letter and that moment when he was blown to smithereens, the mind of a blossoming great son of the soil was lost to us. As were his vision and mission.
Who was Tiro the man, Onkgopotse Abram Tiro? We can peep through the keyhole of his epoch-defining graduation speech. We can sense his value as a leader at university, in the activities of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and the Black Peoples Convention (BPC). To me, the following are marks of the character of the man: courage, consciousness, conscientiousness, commitment, caring, compassion and passion, a sense of destiny and vision, a bias for action. He was pre-eminently concerned with the national interest not narrow self-interest.

These are the personality traits we can recognise as a moral compass. Manifestly, he was to leadership born, then made; equipped with confidence and forged in the heat of struggle. Let us reflect earnestly on what he stood for and proceeded to implement empirically.

In education he insisted on adherence to high standards and quality, lamenting Bantu Education with its attendant sinister aim of producing deficient human beings merely for the world of work and servitude. The education system created by Dr Hendrik Verwoerd in 1953 was grotesquely at odds with true empowerment and upliftment. Worse, the racially biased and inefficient education administrators who implemented it were filled with an ideologically warped sense of purpose and responsibility that prevented them from engaging with critics.

But we are not free of these factors today. And lack of purpose and responsibility are with us again. We find administrators and educators with a lackadaisical attitude to the future of our children. And even some who claim to reflect the will of communities seem not to realise the value of education. Gross irresponsibility was witnessed in Kuruman recently, where the future of 16000 children was wantonly destroyed by a rogue pseudo-political element demanding tarred roads. It should be as clear as daylight to
these rogues that if you want to have a tarred road, the only way you can have it is to build it by engaging the authorities. That, and be constructive in harnessing resources.

If one is in search of better jobs it does not help to burn down the factory. If one needs better education, physically assaulting the educational authorities and burning down buildings will not help. If housing is the goal, only building and construction will produce that end. To destroy anything personal or property cannot bring us closer to the goal that we seek.

I am certain Onkgopotse would have argued these cases cogently and forcefully. We can only imagine...

I can almost hear his voice raising fundamental questions about methods of dealing with our compatriots: force or populist slogans instead of by means of reason and moral suasion. Or take our method of dealing with economic reality in the form of unemployment, poverty and famine by bewailing our plight while we steadily perish. Tiro is not here personally to raise questions, so we can only imagine.

What kind of education system have we spawned? Recently there has been an effort to review the legacy of Dr Verwoerd by suggesting that in some respects Bantu Education produced better quality matriculants and graduates (albeit on a small scale) than our current dispensation is capable of doing. Verwoerd was undoubtedly a racist; he believed in the utter separation of what he regarded as different cultural groups marked by skin colour. But he was also an academic and a theorist. He did believe that blacks should have their “own” education up to the highest levels, so long as this took place in their “own” homelands and institutions. Yet no matter how commendable his ideas may have seemed, they were in practice destructive of true education. This led Tiro to attack the system in its fundamentals.
Our educational system lately does produce impressive numbers of graduates, but many fail to gain employment. They are ill prepared for the world of work. Of discipline, administration, marketing, accounting, business management, innovative thinking, science and technology. Meanwhile our educational leadership seems impotent and hesitant, coming to a standstill on issues like the provision of textbooks to Limpopo schools. Our leaders vote substantial budgets and set the money aside whilst they engage in polemics about whether and how to use funds for subsidising youth employment. The indecisions boggle the normal mind.

We can only imagine how Onkgopotse would have helped us resolve this paralysis, this national impasse.

Tiro’s education address exemplified the intellectual engagement with vexing issues of the day. Intellectuals by and large provide the thought leadership of society: connecting ideas with deeds. They ground morality and political strategy in patterns of understanding that give meaning and purpose to social action. They expound principles. They fashion programmes. They tackle problems and find solutions. Can this be said of today’s South African intelligentsia? Intellectual activity today is like a selfish and withdrawn exercise of the mind intent on making gains for the self or narrow groups. It seems far from the kind of courageous conversations and engagement that Tiro called for.

Tiro’s belief in one South African education system for all, one nation, and one Africa has rung through the years. It has influenced me deeply. Although I became a businessman and not a politician, I have sought to advance the vision of a united, inclusive country and a united, inclusive, developing Africa. I have sought to follow the creative vision of Tiro and his generation of young thought leaders.
We can only imagine how a lively and productive school education system freed of the mental shackles might have arisen from the misery of Bantu Education. We crave global standards of knowledge, skills development and critical thought. But our schools are in crisis and in some respects educational levels have declined since apartheid. We can only imagine how Tiro might have felt if he had seen this happening.

Let me dwell on the subject of the imagination. In his speech, Tiro made it very clear what he stood for. He said:

> The magic story of human achievement gives irrefutable proof that as soon as nationalism is awakened among the intelligentsia, it becomes the vanguard in the struggle against alien rule. Of what use will be your education, if it is not linked with the entire continent of Africa it is meaningless.

He knew the evil system of apartheid would fall. Notice his optimism about human progress; his trust in national liberation to free people from alien rule; and the importance he attaches to the the intelligentsia in this process of upliftment and progress. These are common themes of the 1970s, the era of African liberation – but most significantly today they emphasise the connection between education, and a holistic vision of the African continent as one, rather than many nations. In my view the intelligentsia comprises thinkers at all levels and in all fields of life, from academia to business, from the labour movement and NGOs to government and boards of directors. We are all stakeholders in the human project of discovery and development. We can all imagine what that means.

Tiro’s inspiring vision of the future – his imagined South Africa – was (we should remind ourselves) delivered in the darkest days of apartheid. The greatest defining moment in his life was his testimony in what became known as the Turfloop Testimony – and it reached its climax when he declared prophetically:
The day shall come when we shall be free, when every man and woman will breathe the air of freedom. And when that day shall come, no man, no matter how many tanks he has shall reverse the course of freedom.

That it proved so prophetic, that his vision came to pass in the form of a free and united South Africa with a mission in Africa, proves the power of the imagination. It proves that the imagination can move mountains. Ironically, at the beginning of his speech he chose to quote Prime Minister John Vorster who had told a meeting of the Afrikaner Studentebond (ASB) that "No Black man has landed in trouble for fighting for what is legally his." Tiro scoffed at the hypocrisy of Vorster but took him at his word, and made this statement his launch pad. In so doing turned a lie into an enduring truth: his guiding principle was that the “truth” had to be spoken.

Speaking truth to power was never more courageously done. Sitting in the audience were the white academics and administrators who had tried by all means to keep the lid on dissent at Turfloop. They surely stirred uncomfortably in their seats, with rage and shame, as this young upstart of a student leader told them their fortune! And he was to pay for it by being expelled from the university and finally killed by a parcel bomb in Botswana where he had taken refuge.

Tiro believed that “truth” meant the practical reality of life as it was experienced by blacks under apartheid. It was not what the apologists of the system, like Vorster, said about it, but the actual impact of the system on our lives that told us the truth. And in enunciating this truth Tiro called up all the powers of the imagination to envisage a new, better, creative future for blacks and all Africans. We who are the inheritors of his imagination have sought to implement discovery and development on whatever walks of life we follow.
For me, discovery means innovation, and development means entrepreneurship. The future I imagine is of a South African nation that develops its citizens from a sound education system to become full participants in society, the economy and politics. That was the vision embodied in our Constitution which rests on the principles of Ubuntu, or human commonality, compassion and creativity. After the horrors of apartheid we knew that never, and never again would we want to divide our people. We knew that tolerance and inclusiveness had to be our watchwords. Only by drawing on the potential of all people from diverse backgrounds could we take our place in a highly competitive world and assert our role as champions of human rights, dignity and democracy.

But disillusionment is setting in. Sadly, we are being disappointed on a day-to-day basis. Crime and corruption stalk the land; many learners leave our government schools as semi-literate and semi-numerate due to the lowering of educational standards; the economy is limping; and leaderlessness is a feature of our major institutions. We seem to have lost our moral compass. We can only imagine how Tiro would have condemned this situation and recalled us – in the spirit that the truth must be told – to the destiny that he believed in.

Let me dwell on the word “destiny”. The moral compass, the direction-finder of our national life, is the imagination of a better future, an imagination that drives action. A comparison will help.

After the Second World War, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill won a Nobel Prize – no surprise in that, perhaps, as he had led Britain magnificently through the conflict. But it was what he won the prize for that surprised many and continues to surprise today. He won the 1953 Nobel Prize for Literature! The citation said the award was “for his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values”. Of course, we all know of his stirring
wartime radio speeches; but who remembers that Churchill was also a student of British military achievements and also wrote a 4-volume *History of the English Speaking Peoples*? It was this background that informed his vision of national destiny and his complete rejection of Nazi ideology and fascist methods of rule.

When we speak of visionary leadership we mean a leadership that is founded on a deep understanding of the past and strives for a future that is consonant with the moral and spiritual values of the past. That is what Churchill, Gandhi, Mandela and other great visionaries have embodied. Each derived a holistic understanding of destiny from their origins.

I believe that Tiro’s approach to apartheid was similarly founded on an appreciation of black culture, history and destiny. He was a mere 13 years old when the massacre of Sharpeville occurred; and his famous speech preceded the Soweto uprising of 1976 by four years, while he did not live to see the youth revolution that he started as he was killed in 1974. Bracketed by these dates, his life is contextualised by struggle: first, the transition from peaceful protest to armed insurrection after Sharpeville; and then the upsurge of angry children and teenagers who faced down security force guns with little more than banners and stones.

As a boy Tiro was born into a poor family. His mother eked out a living by being a domestic worker in Emmarentia, Johannesburg. With his two brothers and sister he experienced the sharp end of poverty and it is not surprising that he became a student activist later on. It would have taken great dedication to pass matric in those days under the Verwoerdian shadow of Bantu Education, and when Tiro enrolled at Turffloop he was well prepared, mentally and emotionally, to take on the system.
He embraced Black Consciousness particularly as it related to education, championing the SA Students’ Organisation, SASO. He understood full well that identity, language, belief in God, and trust in an Africanist future must form the foundations of our human destiny on this continent. We are not European or Indian or American but we are human and African. We have our own future to fulfil. Thus, while we share the universal traits of all humanity, we have distinct belief systems and traditions, like any other cultures. With its huge diversity of peoples, Africa can only unite by encompassing differences and being inclusive.

One can only imagine such a united Africa even today; but Tiro was capable of imagining it even then.

Let me turn to this issue of inclusivity. I mentioned the great visionary leaders. Other great leaders in our times, such as the founder of Pan Africanism in South Africa, Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, have unfortunately been sidelined by the ruling hegemony. In this process of exclusion I would include Tiro himself due to his affiliations with Black Consciousness. Even Steve Biko has only recently and grudgingly been accorded fuller recognition by the mainstream.

One can only imagine how much healthier our political life would be if the principle of inclusivity were honoured by those who currently rule in the name of the people. We have a right to think that the phrase “the people” means all the people of this great land, not merely those who won acclaim for their role in putting one party in power. It should at the very least acknowledge the role of those who lost their lives in the common struggle for freedom, whether or not they toed the party line. Our list of heroes and heroines should include Mthuli Shezi; Mapetla Mohapi; Bokwe Mafuna; Barney Pityana; Saths Cooper; Strini Moodley; Harry Nengwekulu; Drake Koka; Jerry Modisane; Mamphela Ramphele; Muntu Myeza; and many more. Tiro himself quoted Helen
Suzman in the conclusion to his speech; and we should remember that there were anti-apartheid activists like Ahmed Timol and Dr Richard Turner who were assassinated, just like Biko and Tiro.

Is there an alternative to one-party hegemony? One can only imagine – one MUST imagine – that there has to be! Those who govern us now remain the standard-bearers of our liberation but in many eyes they have fallen from grace, especially with the virtual collapse of much that goes by the name of public education. Hegemony I would define as the totalisation of an ideology through every working institution and every mental assumption made about what is correct for the country. In our times it has been a creeping totalisation as one institution after another has come under the sway of dominant cliques. Checks and balances are disappearing. We must resist this totalisation, just as Tiro himself and many others resisted the crude hegemony of apartheid which came eventually to be called a “total strategy” – and of course, it failed, but not before much more blood had been spilled.

Tiro’s act of imagination was to attempt to forestall bloodshed on a grand scale. He appealed to the enlightened self-interest of his white audience when he said:

To those who wholeheartedly support the policy of apartheid I say: Do you think that the White minority can willingly commit political suicide by creating numerous states which might turn out to be hostile in the future? We Black graduates, by virtue of our age and academic standing are being called upon to bear greater responsibilities in the liberation of our people.

This is an appeal to the common sense of the oppressors: reform or face catastrophe. It fell on deaf ears.

One can only imagine how much suffering could have been avoided if those arrogant and myopic white listeners had attended to the carefully chosen words of the young
black SRC President. There is an element of the speech that we today must re-absorb into our national life: the importance of true intellectual engagement between adversaries. If we wish to avoid totalisation we need our dialogues to be honest encounters between those of differing views and interests, rather than a charade of egg-dancing around the issues.

Let us imagine how the intelligentsia at all levels and in all walks of life could cease to grumble behind closed doors and instead to speak truth to power. Imagine if Presidential elections were held on an open basis, with nominations, primaries and due political process to bring the best candidates to the fore. Imagine if our Parliamentary representatives were elected on a constituency basis where voters could question their personal contributions to the nation. Imagine a free and open play of debate over nationalisation where business leaders are not afraid to speak up. Business has been weak in this area; but so have our media, our academic bodies, our NGOs and many others – all seeking to stay on the right side of the powers-that-be to avoid material damage to themselves.

We must breed a new sense of respect for players on opposite sides of arguments rather than damning them for who they are or blaming them for saying uncomfortable things. In my opinion, the main effect of the rot in our education system has been to reduce the level of informed and critical thinking among the citizenry. People with grievances take to the streets in spates of random violence rather than using their voices in reasoned debate and using votes to bring about change.

Tiro became the victim of a stupid and dangerous bureaucracy that would not – could not – listen because it was ideologically hidebound and refused to engage with reasonable opponents. We must not repeat that error. The answer to hegemony is not counter-hegemony or another ideology bidding for total power. The answer is
inclusivity. The answer is to recognise doubt and opposition as forms of showing loyalty to the greater good. To achieve this level of tolerance we need the power of the imagination. Our imagination should be invoked to spell out better alternatives for a nation in trouble – as indeed we are a nation in trouble today.

We expect the intelligentsia to engage in robust dialogue with the citizenry as stakeholders in government and with the authorities as those who currently wield power. We regard intellectuals as the moral compass of our day and age, the conscientising voices of our communities, and the standard bearers of our causes.

Does South Africa’s contemporary intelligentsia meet these criteria? Do they not set themselves apart as a kind of priestly elite, lording their learning over us? As we look around, do we observe intellectuals of courage and devotion committed to the cause of right and truth in our ethically broken political economy?

Arguably the most important and urgent challenge of our time is our national plan, our vision, how we mean to grapple with our destiny as people. Today we are presented with two contending national plans: the comprehensive, pragmatic and visionary National Development Plan coordinated, crafted and presented by Minister Trevor Manual, vs. the ideologically informed equally comprehensive “Economic Growth Plan” championed by minister Ibrahim Patel. In classical analytic terms, we are as a nation faced with a double approach avoidance conflict, two contending valences with a combination of positives and negatives. The African equivalent of this conflict is captured in the Xitsonga proverb MHISI YA MIKOKA MIMBIHI YI TA PHATLUKA NYONGA (the hyena that persists in pursuing two tracks simultaneously at a Y-junction ends up by self-by circuiting.) Clearly the nation must avoid this ominous catastrophe.
Recently, as service provision protests have escalated into naked warfare on the streets, we have been plunged into a seemingly inescapable repetition of our dark past. Why? Because the nation, led by its intelligentsia, has not risen to the challenge of building better relationships for a better future.

Now the shootings at Marikana bear witness to the folly of neglecting the interests of exploited miners and failing to recognise their grievances until it was too late. We see what happened when relationships between unions, workers, mine owners, police and government authorities broke down to the point that all simply looked after themselves. None attended to danger signals when they were plain to see. The result was a ghastly echo of Sharpeville and Soweto, though the issues were different and the outcomes will be vastly different. The country now faces a challenge to come to terms with the shedding of the people’s blood by the very forces that supposedly represent our liberation.

In this dark hour we can only imagine how relationships must be rebuilt to ensure even-handedness, justice and reform. We need a fair deal for the miners, a truthful account of what happened at Marikana, and honest reappraisal of the role of the police in keeping public order. Beyond that we have to seek a new Truth and Reconciliation to rehabilitate our faith in the South African dream.

I turn last to what Tiro said about the challenge to his fellow students.

In the light of what has been said above, the challenge to every Black graduate in this country lies in the fact that the guilt of all wrongful actions in South Africa – restriction without trial, repugnant legislation, expulsions from schools, rests on all those who do not actively dissociate themselves from and work for the eradication of the system breeding such evils.
Tiro had started his speech with references to the education system but he ended by broadening the argument to national issues. He envisaged conscientious intellectual work. Those who knew and understood the evils of the system were duty-bound to tackle them, speaking out as he has done, and actively encouraging others to do so. This clarion call, remember, was spoken while the tribal leaders and white administrators and academics listened.

What South Africa sorely needs today is an intelligentsia with tough minds, characterized by incisive thinking, appraisal, and decisive judgment. To gain relevance our elite need to develop minds that are sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of false legends and liberation myths, and sifting the true from the false. Today's graduates need a strong, austere quality that makes for firmness of purpose and solid commitment to doing what is right, with a sense of urgency.

How much more do we need a Tiro today. One has to stop merely imagining and start turning the power of imagination to the common good of all. Robert G. McCracken admonishes: “The world is not perishing for the want of clever talented or well-meaning men (people). Its perishing for the want of men courage and resolution, who in devotion to the cause of right and truth, can risk above personal feeling and private ambition”.

Let us finally turn to Africa and Tiro’s dream of an all encompassing African identity. He was a Pan Africanist. At a time when apartheid paranoia prohibited us to read and relate to our African leaders and what they wrote, Onkgopotse read and quoted Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah profusely.

This was long before there was any talk of African Renaissance. My sense is that given longer to live he would have admonished that the concept of an African Renaissance for many people appeals more to the psyche than the pocket. That it trips more easily of the
tongue of the political leader than the business leader. That without economic content and form the African Renaissance will remain largely a mirage shimmering in the arid political and economic wasteland that characterises much of Africa. He in all probability would have advised African leaders to acknowledge that the vision of an African Renaissance can only be realised if it is seen as a practical foundation stone. It must create the environment and political framework for sustainable socio-economic growth.

We can only imagine. For many the African Renaissance appears to an African feel-good phrase rather than a practical scheme for our economic well-being. My sense is that Tiro would have espoused and advocated an extensive, integrated visionary yet pragmatic African Renaissance. A renaissance whose objective would be to bring about an Africa whose scope for growth is limited only by its imagination. A continent whose children are fed by native produce. I imagine he would have championed an Africa whose intellectuals are nurtured by native founding principles and insatiable inquiry. He would have been a leading exponent of an Africa that seeks and employs the advice, skills, technology and resources of others for own ends and to a chosen destination. There is no shame in collaborating with outsiders. But Tiro would have insisted on an Africa who is matriarch and sculptor of her own destiny.

I can only imagine.

Africa will be the instrument of her own salvation through her transformational leadership. I bet that if Tiro had lived to this day, he would have been an integral part of such transformational leadership whose defining features are probity, humility, integrity, and compassion, demonstrating competence, tenacity and a sense of destiny and efficacy. He would have been part of a leadership that generates, trust goodwill, and confidence and is politically and personally as gracious honourable and magnanimous in defeat as in success. A leadership that deeply believes that the locus of control for
Africa’s future is within Africa herself. His leadership contribution would have helped to bridge the schisms and cleavages wrought by religious, tribal, social, ideological, economic and political diversity that characterises much of Africa.

We can only imagine.

My fervent wish is that this memorial lecture will help move us from being merely “talented or well-meaning people” to “people of courage and resolution who in devotion to the cause of right and truth” can lift our beloved nation onto a worthy, healthy morally sound and prosperous plane. We owe it to the spirit Onkgopotse Abram Tiro, we owe it to ourselves we owe it to prosperity.

I thank you.