TIRO: OLD SOLDIERS NEVER DIE

Presentation by:

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THE FIFTH ABRAM ONKGOPOTSE TIRO MEMORIAL LECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF LIMPOPO TURLOOF CAMPUS, SOUTH AFRICA ON FRIDAY 8TH SEPTEMBER, 2017
In his farewell address before a joint meeting of both the houses of the Congress on the 19th Day of April, 1951, General Douglas MacArthur remarked, “Old Soldiers Never Die.”

Today, we are gathered here to celebrate a soldier who though physically gone, is alive and well. I celebrate this brave soldier who fought for truth and justice for all. I celebrate this soldier who belongs to a class of African leaders who had genuine love for the continent.

The Apartheid architects succeeded in blowing his body apart through a parcel bomb but the bomb could not blow up the truth he lived and died for. Tiro is dead but his spirit is still alive. Long live Tiro!

During its heyday, the Apartheid government monopolised the truth. In the comfort of their luxurious Villas in Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town, they set tunes for all. Every black man and woman was expected to sing and dance to the set tune. They vested upon themselves the power to decide right and wrong, but Tiro defied them.

Onkgopotse Tiro fought but he was not alone. Allow me therefore, to salute some of stalwarts of struggle as we celebrate Abram Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro.

I salute Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, ‘Madiba’. His anti-Apartheid activities under ANC will forever remain in our hearts and minds. He sacrificed his very own comfort, freedom and self-interest for the sake of his people. Jail or death, he was ready. In his closing remarks in the speech ‘I am prepared to die’, delivered on 20th Day of April, 1964, he said,

**During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.**
When the Apartheid government spread propaganda that the struggle in South Africa was under the influence of foreigners or communists, and that he had love for violence, he boldly refuted the propaganda,

> I do not however, deny that I planned sabotage. I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love for violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people by the whites.

I salute Albertina Sisulu, the ‘Mother of the Nation’. She was one of the foot soldiers who fought in the frontline and was ready to bite the bullet from the Apartheid regime. As a mother, an activist, human rights crusader and a nurse, her contributions in the battle field was tremendous. She fought alongside her fellow human right activist and a husband, Walter Sisulu. She was the only woman who was present during the ANC Youth league. She was one of the organizers of the historic anti-pass Women’s March in 1956 and opposed inferior ‘Bantu’ education.

She endured the pain of being separated from her ten-month-old breastfeeding daughter, Nonkululeko (Freedom), in 1958, for the sake of this great Nation. She remarked,

> I had to be in gaol for three full weeks without the baby and I was so sick - my breasts were swollen because I was breastfeeding. I didn't mind that because it was part of the struggle.

Yet, she never regretted. In her remarks to the press, she said:

> Although politics has given me a rough life, there is absolutely nothing I regret about what I have done and what has happened to me and my family throughout all these years. Instead, I have been strengthened and feel more of a woman than I would otherwise have felt if my life was different.

I salute Steve Biko that great High Priest of Black consciousness whose life was cut short by the Apartheid regime. He involved himself in the activities of the National Union of South African Students (SASO) as its first president. He later formed an exclusive black movement to protest against the White supremacy. He believed in Africans getting involved in solving their problems. He said,
We needed time to look at our own problems, and not leave them to people without experience of the terrible conditions in the black townships or of the system of ‘Bantu education'.

Through activities under SASO, he propounded the philosophy of black consciousness. Despite constant surveillance and harassment from the security apparatus, he went ahead to found the Black Peoples’ Convention (BPC) as an umbrella political movement for groups sharing the ideas of 'Black Consciousness'. He faced many restrictions from the State including travelling bans. But he never gave up the fight. He never bowed out of the battle. He was a brave soldier indeed! His words are immortal, he said,

If one is free at heart, no man-made chains can bind one to servitude, but if one's mind is so manipulated and controlled by the oppressor, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do to scare his powerful masters.

I salute Chief Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli. He took over the leadership of Africa National Congress (ANC) from December 1952 until his death in 1967. His 1952 Defiance Campaign brought him into direct confrontation with the Apartheid government. During the Defiance Campaign, Chief Luthuli was actively involved in soliciting and recruiting volunteers. He refused to watch from the fence as his people got oppressed, and stated firmly:

To remain neutral, in a situation where the laws of the land virtually criticized God for having created men of color, was the sort of thing I could not, as a Christian, tolerate.

I salute Thembile Chris Hani who became involved in the struggle against Apartheid while at the University of Fort Hare. During his years in the Western Cape, Chris Hani participated in protests against the takeover of the University by the Department of Bantu Education and came into contact with the South African Congress of the Trade Unions (SACTU). This increased his awareness of the workers' struggle. His was martyred but he lives on.
I salute other greats like Oliver Reginald Tambo and Ahmed Kathrada Peter Mokaba, Robert Sobukwe, Joe Slovo and many other stalwarts whose spirits continue to energize the never ending struggle.

I celebrate Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu. He was the soldier who provided spiritual reinforcement and nourishment to the troop. He marshalled and led Christian soldiers into the battlefield against the Apartheid who boldly remarked,

**We don't want Apartheid liberalized. We want it dismantled. You can't improve something that is intrinsically evil.**

I acknowledge the contributions made by Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Her anti-apartheid activities that saw her get imprisoned many times and isolated made this country to be what it is today. We cannot forget the contributions made by Thabo Mbeki, Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini Zuma and the list is long.

I also salute African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Sam Nujoma, Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, Samora Machel, Modibo Keita among other great African soldiers who fought against the apartheid regime and colonialism.

I do not want to bore you with the long history of our freedom fighters, which I believe the gathering here is well conversant with. But since today is Tiro’s day, my presentation will be incomplete before I invoke his famous speech, the Turfloop Testimony which he delivered 45 years ago. The speech that fuelled his troubles with the Apartheid regime.

In his opening remarks, he quoted R.D Briensmead, an American preacher who said,

**He who withholds the truth or debars men from motives of its expediency, is either a coward, a criminal or both.**

In Tiro’s words, truth means ‘practical reality’. In the speech, he boldly challenged the Bantu Education Act which was structured to justify the Apartheid regime. It was an education system for the black race
whose main objective was to whitewash the minds of the black people with lies and to train them for clerical jobs. The young black men and women, considered by the whites as children of lesser gods, were being trained to be servants of the whites for the rest of their lives and to believe that Apartheid was the best thing that had ever happened to them. Anyone who challenged this ideology would be silenced. Tiro posed a question to the audience which I also pose to you:

My dear people, shall we ever get a fair deal in this land? The land of our fathers. The system is failing. It is failing because even those who recommended it strongly, as the only solution to racial problems in South Africa, fail to adhere to the letter and the spirit of the policy.

Soon after this speech, he was summoned at the office of the University’s Rector to be expelled. Just before vacating the office of Prof J.L. Boshoff, he quoted 2 Corinthians 13:8 which says;

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.

He continued,

The expulsion has made me realise that one can be punished for saying two plus two make four.

These remarks are echoed in Chief Luthuli’s comments,

Laws and conditions that tend to debase human personality - a God-given force - be they brought by the State or individuals, must be relentlessly opposed in the spirit of defiance shown by St. Peter when he said to the rulers of his day: 'Shall we obey God or man?’

When Tiro was martyred, the Apartheid regime appeared invincible, but as Mahatma Gandhi had said,

...All through history, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Always!

The apartheid regime ultimately collapsed.
In our African culture, a man never dies. Brave men and women who stand and fight for justice and truth never die. Therefore, I believe that the spirit of Onkgopotse Tiro, is still alive and well, he is with us today and we must pay tribute to him; the son of Nkokwe Peter and Moleseng Ann Tiro,

Tiro, you are an old soldier,  
You will never die!  
The man from Dinokana  
The unshakable giant, and here you are  
Still calm and brave  
But why are you so quiet and unresponsive?

I haven’t heard from you since February 1974  
What did they do to you finally that made you so quiet?  
You can’t say that you finally gave up the fight  
No! That is not the Tiro I know!  
For the last time I checked  
They expelled you from the university but you never gave up!  
You found a chance to teach history for six months  
And within that time, you managed to conscientised the youth  
You introduced the young people to Black Consciousness philosophy  
You challenged them to question the relevance of history books used in schools  
This, as I know, was the beginning of the Soweto Uprising  
Led by Tsietsi Mashinini, your student

Why are you silent now?  
For you never gave up even after anti-change agents fired you from teaching  
You still led the activities of Black Consciousness across Africa  
You effectively galvanised the young people to rise up against the Apartheid  
You introduced the young people to Black Consciousness philosophy  
You challenged them to question the relevance of history books used in schools  
This, as I know, was the beginning of the Soweto Uprising  
Led by Tsietsi Mashinini, your student

Why are you silent now?  
For you never gave up even after being forced to exile in Botswana in 1973  
You forged links with international movements  
You continued with your underground work of the quest for truth, justice and freedom

Why are you silent now ever since you received that parcel letter?  
What present did they send you in that parcel?  
That silenced you for good?  
Couldn’t you have stayed put a little longer?
Ooh! Tiro, your silence has broken our hearts
But can we hang onto what we cannot change?
This is the reason why I want to praise you; our hero
A patriot who loved his country and continent
Man of the people with a big heart
Man who lived in hope
That come what may, his country must be rescued
From the iron grip of the detractors
You forged the courage and mettle
To stand firm in the face of Apartheid and intimidation
You were propelled by the desire for a better life, dignity and equal opportunities for all
Are your aspirations still alive?

I pose this question to you. Are the aspirations of Tiro still alive?

Have they been realised? How many Tiros do we have in this hall today?

What will you tell Tiro today if you were to report to him about the state of South Africa after the Apartheid?

What will you tell Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Reginald Tambo, Steve Biko, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Thomas Sankara, Ahmed Kathrada, Patrice Emery Lumumba about the state of Africa?

Tiro once asked, “My dear people, shall we ever get a fair deal in this land? The land of our fathers?”

I have an answer for you, dear Tiro. That there has been indeed efforts at a fair deal.

Ghanaians have had their fair deal under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah and some of his successors. He had a vision not just for Ghana but the entire continent, his immortal words still ring through the vicissitudes of time,

Our independence is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of African continent.
During his tenure as the president, Ghana rose up the political and economic ladder. He made Ghana acquire its pride of place in Africa although his country still faces challenges. It is on the path of success.

In Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had his stint. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had a clear agenda informed by the genuine desire to change his society positively. He succeeded in creating a cohesive nation by bringing together over 120 tribal groupings. An intellectual and a politician of socialist persuasion, Nyerere took it upon himself to educate the Tanzanians to achieve the promises of independence through a socialist avenue. He was determined to decimate the exploitative ideology of the capitalist. He championed self reliance in his words,

\[ \text{In rejecting the capitalist attitude of mind which colonialism brought in Africa, we must also reject the methods which go with it.} \]

This legitimised his fond title "Mwalimu" (Teacher). Mwalimu Nyerere believed that his struggle for national unity could be achieved. Through his political philosophy of Ujamaa, he sought to create an egalitarian state. He constantly reminded Tanzanians,

\[ \text{... These Europeans are powerful, where little Belgium is more powerful than the whole of Africa south of the Sahara put together, these powerful European states are moving towards unity and you people are talking about the atavism of the tribe, this is nonsense. I am telling you people, how can anybody think of the tribe as the unity of the future?} \]

He left one lasting legacy: the creation of one nation - Tanzania - where negative ethnicity has no pride of place.

Great men and women who lived in this land before also foresaw a prosperous nation. In the words of Chief Alber John Mvumbi Luthuli,

\[ \text{I believe that here in South Africa, with all our diversities of colour and race; we will show the world a new pattern for democracy. There is a challenge for us to set a new example for all. Let us not side step this task.} \]
South Africans have had their fair deal under the leadership of Nelson Mandela. During his five year-tenure as a president, he worked tirelessly towards national reconciliation. He emphasized on personal forgiveness and reconciliation with much success. He demonstrated his commitment towards reconciliation and national healing by appointing Frederik Willem de Klerk as his deputy after the 1994 elections. In further attempt to bring South Africans together, he encouraged the black South Africans to support Springboks, the national Rugby Team that was previously hated by the blacks, during the 1995 Rugby World Cup held in South Africa.

In the review of President Mandela’s term in June 1999, The Times wrote,

> The five years … have seen a genuine change of political power, widespread respect for the rule of law and none of the political revenge killings that have marked other societies in transition.

In the words of Mondli Makhanya, a former editor in chief of The Sunday Times,

> It is the idea of Nelson Mandela that remains the glue that binds South Africa together.

The Rainbow Nation is not out of the woods yet but it is a Way-farer on the Highway of Success.

However, Africa is not short of leaders who have denied her a fair deal. We have had a good number of totalitarians. One of the ugliest scars on the Africa body politic is the Mobutu regime. The late Mobutu Sese Seko seized power out of the confusion that was brought about following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Mobutu, acting at the behest and with the connivance of President Kasavubu, seized power on the 13th September, 1960 and ultimately took power himself from Kasavubu in 1965. Mobutu's rise to power this early in the life of Congo makes him a first generation leader. Before his violent removal from power, Mobutu presided over a kleptocratic regime and bestrode the socioeconomic, political and cultural life of Zaire like a colossus. In his heyday, Mobutu was larger than life, almost as large as death, but his legacy was destruction.
Africa is still not at ease, famine still bites from the horn of Africa to the South. We still have conflicts in Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, South Sudan. There is unease in Libya and Somalia and tension in other countries.

Some African leaders have fallen deeply in love with power and corruption. So faithful they are that they have developed strong resistance to any temptation to relinquish power.

In the words of Robert Woode, in his book *Third World to First World*:

**Patriotism has been thrown overboard. The citizenry love their political parties more than the nation. Criminals, taking the advantage of the political polarisation are looting assets of the State with impunity. All one needs to do to make money, is to steal and then seek political cover from the existing big political parties … as the citizenry look on helplessly.**

In the face of the mixed report, where are the latter day Tiros to mobilise the public opinion against the reverse gear that has been engaged in some African countries?

Greg Mills, in his book *Why Africa is Poor*, said seven years ago that:

**It will be the coming generation in Africa that will have to deal with formidable challenges.**

I say unto you that it is the generation gathered in this hall that will have to deal with these challenges. You have no choice but to get out of the touchline and play as if it is the final match. Tiro did not wait for the next generation. Anton Lembede did not wait for the next generation or wealth to join the action team. He wore shabby clothes but that did not deter him from founding the ANC Youth League.

Today, our education system is still guided by the ideology of the West. The content of some books used in our Schools, particularly the history books, still dominate the curriculum.
We have been told for ages that the Europeans discovered Mosi-oa-Tunya (Victoria Falls), River Congo, Lake Victoria, Cape of Good Hope, and entirely every natural resource in Africa not withstanding that Africans were living in those places ever since time immemorial.

For ages, we have been made to think that issues of transparency and accountability are values that commenced with European civilizations and cultures. Whereas when *Magna Carta* was being written in England in 13th Century (1215), West Africa was already advancing in the arts and public administration, separation of powers, accountability, justice and responsibility of the government to its citizens. Indeed, the various civilizations that existed in West Africa proved that we were already on the path of development and without foreign influences and interventions, would have grown to be definers of world thought and precepts in several fields.

From the later day explorations and results of carbon dating, we now know that when West Africa had entered into Iron Age, Europe was still completely in the dark ages or in Stone Age. They were still fighting wars for territories when there were well-established West African kingdoms in existence. At the time when these great empires were flourishing, most of Europe was being marauded by Barbarians. As at the time of the advent of slave trade and colonialism, West Africa was doing relatively well in terms of governance with developed economic, social and political structures. This is also the story in the Northern Africa, Southern Africa and Eastern Africa.

Where did we go wrong? What happened to our well-organised Institutions of statehood? When the likes of Tiro, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkurumah, Julius Nyerere among the rest were fighting for independence and freedom, little did they imagine that Africans with their rich background, would come to this stage where lack of accountability and compounding issues of corruption would hold sway. Most countries in Africa have been victims of this pillage and destruction
of established structures of public administration and governance. But dear Tiro, I have some good news for you. We have tried since you left.

There seems to be light appearing at the end of the tunnel. For the spirits of Tiro, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Albert Luthuli, Seretse Khama and other icons, that democracy is slowly but surely beginning to creep into various countries. The ideology of democracy is sinking into our people’s mind and they now know that democracy is a powerful tool of governance. Africa seems to be moving towards a brighter future.

But we must pause and ask ourselves whether the brightness is that of an oncoming train or the dawn of a new era because many are the times when in the search for solace in the desert, a mirage is confused for an oasis. I must also caution that we have not yet attained the ultimate. We must never allow this vision to die again. We have to succeed.

Tiro had thirst for justice and truth. He sacrificed his studies and profession for the sake of it. Peace and prosperity are the children born through intercourse between justice and truth. I therefore ask, are you ready to pursue the truth?

In the words of Julius Nyerere:

**The recipe for development is people, land and good politics.**

And in the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

**Good politics is right action. This is the time to do it, for the time is always right to do what is right.**

Africans have always been told that there are certain things he could not do. That he could not understand mathematics, or physics or chemistry. He was made to believe that he or she is the hewer
of wood and drawer of water. I am now saying that Africans must now choose what they want to do. Americans, Europeans and Chinese have charted their paths. Koreans have demonstrated that it can be done. Indians have put their act together and so are the Arabs. South Africans are making significant steps and the entire continent should be in the running mode for we have crawled in diapers for too long.

Lest we forget, success is deodorant. We must use what we have to achieve it.

We should remember the story of lost ship which goes:

A ship was lost at the sea for several days. Suddenly, it sighted a friendly vessel from. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, “Water, water we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” A second time, the signal, “Water, water, send us water!” ran up from the distressed vessel and was answered again, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” And a third and fourth signal for water answered, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Congo River.

To those of us who think that we have no capacity to transform Africa from within, I would say, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down in agriculture, in industry, in commerce, in domestic services, and in the professions. To put it simply, let us use what we have because for ages, we have always been left on our own.

Let us today make a solemn pact that we are going to convert Africa and make this century an “African Century”, just as it was said in 2014, during the World Cup held here in South Africa, that ‘It is time for Africa”. Let us lift Statements from the shallow depths of a slogans to the firm ground of practice.

Let each of us ask: What am I doing myself to make this century ours? Will it change anything if we just sing and take no action? We have spoken, and a word is the foundation of action. Now let us act and prove that indeed, this is time for Africa.
Oliver Tambo had a vision for this great nation, he said,

    It is our responsibility to break down barriers of division and create a country where there will be neither Whites nor Blacks, just South Africans, free and united in diversity.

Regardless of the state of our continent, we should never despair. If Abram Tiro, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Desmond Tutu would have given up, South Africa wouldn’t have triumphed over the ‘invincible’ Apartheid regime.

There is no room for giving up!

The father of the South African Nation, Nelson Mandela said in his Autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom,

    I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That lays defeat to death.

As we celebrate Tiro, let us remember that the moment is upon us when we should draw on this deep well of human nobility to make this statement into action – that it is time for Africa! We, in all our millions, including those of us who are living in diaspora, will ensure that Africa is not denied what is due to her! And indeed, we will meet the aspiration of Africa we want, The Agenda 2063.

You can call me a daydreamer or a fantasist but I am already seeing Africa envisioned in the Agenda 2063 and beyond.

I am already living in Africa fifty years from now. At this time, the narration about Africa has changed.

At this moment, if Abram Onkgopotse Tiro, Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, Patrice Lumumba and other icons rise up and see what is happening, they will smile, laugh
and dine, and party. Their hearts will be filled with joy. Because they will see an Africa where the Democratic Republic of Congo is settled.

We will have a Central African Republic at peace. Peaceful Somalia, South Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Mauritania, Burundi, Niger, Nigeria, Chad. It will be an Africa without refugees and Peace Keeping Forces. They will find an Africa which no longer suffers from low self-esteem.

They will see an Africa whose young men and women have interest and love for their continent. They will see an Africa where young men and women no longer have to go through humiliation at the Foreign Embassies in search of cards, whether Green or Blue. They will see an Africa where young men and women from Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali and Mauritania no longer drown in the Mediterranean Sea seeking to travel to Europe into latter day slavery.

They will see an Africa whose Education and Health Systems are World class. They will see an Africa whose sick leaders do not seek treatment in foreign lands.

They will see an Africa gleaming with joy as her people move from Addis Ababa to Dakar and Cape Town to Cairo without need for Visas and using a single currency. It is upon us to work towards this dream.

All these things will happen because Africans will have decolonised their minds and will be in control of their own affairs. In the words of Steve Biko,

_It becomes more necessary to see the truth as it is if you realise that the only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality. The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth._
As we remember Warrior Tiro, this is the solemn vow, we must make to make Africa great:

We must have a New Mayibuye.

**Long live Tiro.**

**Long live the struggle!**

Amandla!

God Bless You.

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