

**COMMENTS OF THE PATRON OF THE THABO MBEKI FOUNDATION,
AT THE JOANNESBURG BAR COUNCIL DINNER IN HONOUR OF DUMA
NOKWE:**

JOHANNESBURG, OCTOBER 15, 2011.

Mr Thabo Mbeki

Chairperson and Members of the Johannesburg Bar Council,
Distinguished guests at this Dinner:

During the many years when I could have done this, I never asked Duma Nokwe why he decided to become a lawyer, though I knew that he had chosen this path after the apartheid system terminated his teaching career after he was involved in the 1952 Defiance Campaign.

It is right and understandable that you, eminent members of the legal community, should celebrate one who was a distinguished member of your profession, which he joined because of the imperatives of the day.

I speak to you this evening as an outsider to your profession, whose only entitlement to say something about Duma Nokwe, if anything at all, derives from the fact that for some time I had the privilege to interact with him at close quarters.

I first came into direct contact with Duma Nokwe, identified by his close colleagues as PPD, his lovely wife, Sis' Tiny, their children, and both his parents, when I was 19 years old. This was when I lived with them in their house number 7044 in Phefeni in Orlando West and later in Dube, in Soweto.

I am honoured and privileged that this brought me into contact with an outstanding South African and African patriot whose memory we rightly celebrate this evening, as a lawyer.

However, not in contradiction but in addition to this, I would like to invite you also to celebrate your fellow Advocate as an outstanding African intellectual and revolutionary who dedicated his master mind to the achievement of ours and Africa's liberation, emerging as one of the eminent strategists and tacticians of our protracted national struggle which celebrated its victory in 1994, 16 years after he died in Lusaka in 1978.

One of the historic leaders of the struggle for the liberation of Zimbabwe, Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo, was one of the speakers at Duma's funeral.

One of the things which is embedded in my mind about the very sad day when we laid Duma Nokwe to rest at Lusaka's Leopards Hill Cemetery are the very first words spoken by Joshua Nkomo in his funeral oration.

He began with the words – *Laduma libalele!* – the blue skies thundered even as there was no cloud in sight!

This short sentence, itself a proverb, simultaneously made two dramatic statements.

Recalling the name of the deceased, Duma, it said his untimely death was so momentous that it had evoked a thunderous salute even from the gods.

It also said that the unexpected loss of so outstanding an African patriot, to use Shakespeare's words in Hamlet, signalled that, – *The time is out of joint!*

The Biblical Gospel according to Matthew says:

“A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house.” (Matthew 13:57).

Long after Joshua Nkomo had spoken as he did at Leopards Hill Cemetery, in Lusaka, I understood that because of our proximity to Duma Nokwe, we had not understood that he was a jewel on our crown, whose dazzling sparkle other historic African patriots from foreign lands, such as Joshua Nkomo, had admired even from afar!

Before Duma Nokwe became a lawyer, he was that very rare specimen in the context, even then, of the output of our educational system - an accomplished African mathematician.

He was a high school product of yet another rare African specimen as a mathematician and master in the natural sciences, and a musician, Oliver Tambo.

He was a younger comrade to Anton Lembede, one of the few among the African intelligentsia we can justly characterise as a true renaissance intellectual.

He was an eminent member of a group of African intellectuals which included Robert Sobukwe, Godfrey Pitje, Vuyiswa Malangabi-Nokwe, Joe Matthews, Alfred

Hutchinson, Henry Makgothi, Harriet Ngubane and others, whom we must still place on a high pedestal as co-architects of our liberation.

As I knew him, Duma Nokwe never lost respect for the pedigree which his upbringing conferred on him as an intellectual born of a humble working class family.

Constantly, he, with Sis' Tiny, his fellow Fort Hare graduate in the natural sciences, challenged us always to question and come to our own conclusions even about what might be universally accepted as established truths, which included the injunction never to accept the worship of personality cults, referring to themselves.

This served as a double-edged sword against us as the ANC youth leadership when, in 1962, in the aftermath of the launch of Umkhonto we Sizwe, MK, we met Duma Nokwe to tell him that the youth thought the non-violent strategy had run its course, supported the option of armed struggle, and demanded to join MK.

He would not accept our argument that this represented the view of the youth, and asked us to pose this directly to the youth – non-violence or armed struggle! This obliged us once more to tour the region of Johannesburg, Pretoria and the East Rand specifically to ask the youth in this region whether it really opted for armed struggle!

When we returned to confirm what we had originally told him, he accepted our report and said the revolutionary youth had every right to take to the South African mountains to engage in armed struggle.

However, he said the youth would do this without the assistance of the then banned ANC, which had not announced any departure from its policy of non-violent struggle, in support of armed struggle! Further, he said that he could not link us with MK, as, according to him at that point, it was not connected to the ANC.

This placed me, personally, in a very difficult situation. This was because I knew that Duma Nokwe was intimately involved in the armed struggle which MK had launched in December 1961.

On many occasions, deep in the night, I had sat with him to work on leaflets in support of MK and the armed struggle. I also had the responsibility to ensure that these drafts were properly hidden, and safely transported in the morning, so that the Security Police would not find them in the event that they conducted their regular raids, serving at the bottom end of a sensitive underground machinery.

What I have said also makes the statement that Duma Nokwe was a disciplined fighter for the liberation of his people, who fully accepted that his contribution to the struggle had absolutely nothing to do with seeking personal acclaim.

Having learnt my own lesson from this, I understood very well that I could not tell my own colleagues in the youth leadership that the very same person who denied all knowledge of MK, was one of its chief propagandists!

During the same year, 1962, inspired by what Duma Nokwe had told me about the complexities of the then ongoing Treason Trial, and on his suggestion, I travelled to Pretoria to listen to the court proceedings, the better to understand what was happening in this trial.

I did not know that this was the day when your esteemed colleague, the late Advocate Izzy Maisels, would open the case for the defence. In his dramatic opening statement, he questioned the very basis of the case of the State, challenging the prosecution to engage the defence on the important legal question – what is treason?

I was in court that day because Duma Nokwe, forever a teacher, thought that it was important that I, a 19 or 20-year-old, should listen to what was a legal, intellectual presentation about the then conflict between statutory law and natural justice – the contest between justice and the law, between freedom and oppression.

I did not understand then that my visit to the Pretoria High Court was but part of a long and continuing journey of learning and intellectual development, the better to empower me to understand and respond correctly to the imperatives of the struggle for the fundamental transformation of our country.

I left South Africa in 1962. Though I met Duma Nokwe occasionally and briefly in the years when he followed me into exile, effectively I was only able properly to reconnect with him and Sis' Tiny in 1971, in Lusaka, when I came back to Africa after spending the intervening years in Europe.

By this time Duma Nokwe was no longer Secretary General of the ANC, which he was when I left South Africa, when, in a two-person delegation of the ANC leadership with my father, he instructed me to leave the country to carry out a new ANC mission as a student in England.

Somewhat wiser than when I left South Africa in 1962, I knew that I was fortunate that, with others of my generation, such as Mavuso Msimang, Zola Ngcakani and

Chris Hani, I could still call on Duma Nokwe to seek his guidance on the challenges of the day, as we increasingly assumed positions of leadership in the ANC and the struggle.

Duma Nokwe was an exemplar of the high quality of leadership during a challenging period of our liberation struggle. He was an outstanding intellectual and a brilliant mind, who surrendered his rare abilities to the national cause.

Always refusing to parade his immense intellectual capacity as an assertion of his importance, he upheld and sustained the conviction, selflessly, that he and his views were important only to the extent that they resonated with the sentiments of the masses which fate had determined he should lead. He insisted that these masses would also be the final arbiters who would decide whether what he said and stood for was true or false.

Duma Nokwe, your colleague, was an outstanding African intellectual, revolutionary and Pan-Africanist, who understood the challenge our country and Africa continue to face to this day, to combine the enormous capacity of the African intelligentsia with the truly creative mind of the African masses, to achieve the all-round emancipation of all Africans.

Throughout his life he rejected the notion that his mind and his professional and personal welfare should be defined by the prospects of personal gain, and that his public duty to serve the people required that he should abandon his integrity and honesty as an intellectual.

History has condemned you, his successors gathered here this evening, to live up to the example he set as a true disciple of such among our intelligentsia as Anton Lembede and Oliver Tambo.

Perhaps, in similar manner as Izzy Maisels posed the question 50 years ago, but in today's and very different circumstances, you too, even outside the precincts of our venerable courts, will have to pose the complex question – what is treason!

Surely it was right that when Duma Nokwe left the world of the living, the Zimbabwe patriot, Joshua Nkomo, did utter the pregnant words, whose true meaning I know you understand – *Laduma libalele!*

Thank you.