

THE KHABI V MNGOMA MEMORIAL LECTURE
11. MAY 2012

On 1 December 1994, with the assistance of the late Mary Mxadana (who was at the time President Nelson Mandela's Personal Assistant), I successfully appealed to our iconic Rholihlahla to pen me a few inspirational words, by way of an autograph in his now legendary autobiography: Long Walk to Freedom.

This is what he penned:

'To Reuel,

Throughout the ages and in all countries, men and women come and go. Some leave nothing behind, not even their name. It is as if they never lived.

Others do leave something behind: the haunting memory of evil deeds they committed against their fellow men. Every time their names are mentioned, feelings of revulsion well up in our hearts.

Still others do leave something behind; the good works they do to improve the lives of people."

The man who is the reason why we are meeting in this hallowed venue today, not only stands full square in the latter category - the class of those who leave behind the good works that improve the lives of all people - he epitomises this distinguished category. I speak in the present tense because his works and his presence will be with us now and in the future.

The man who penned the sagacious inspirational words cited above, Nelson Rhoihlahla Mandela, achieved feats of immense importance, as we can all attest. Khabi Vivian Mngoma also achieved a great deal and bequeathed a sterling legacy. As the Harvard University preacher and professor, Andrew Preston Peabody, said of human character: "the force, the mass of character, mind, heart and soul that a man can put into any work is the most important factor in that work"

Forcefulness of character, gravitas and an incisive mind, soulful dedication and diligence are the composite factors that distinguished Khabi's work as Teacher, Doctor and Professor of Music, Parent, Citizen, Neighbour, African Humanist and Philosopher.

Khabi has had occasion to describe himself as:

"... I stem from an African and a Western culture - like all present day Africans (who have had or have considerable contact with Western culture) whether they are conscious of it or not. The authenticity of present day Africa does not just derive from the Africa of the past of primeval forests and primitive instruments - although obviously this should not be ignored. The African of today can play both traditional and contemporary music."

Poignant, powerful, even-prophetic as this description was of the archetypal learned African he saw himself as, the description does not do full justice to his profoundly African personality. I was fortunate to work with him in organising the Ford Choir's Contests and Eisteddfods. The duality of our existence as Africans - an eclectic world view combining Western and African culture - often confuses many, it can and lure them into surrendering or trading their identity in the vortex of globalisation.

I was privileged to have a decade's glimpse of Khabi's life as Chief Adjudicator of the Ford Choirs. I can attest to him as an authentic African, an unapologetic Pan African. He was Afrocentric to the core in that he used Africa as anchor, launch pad and frame of reference as he related to and dealt with the world we live in.

Khabi was a member of a serious-minded organic intelligentsia, of the generation which included Eskia Mphahlele - a leading exponent of the philosophy of African Humanism; Henry Nxumalo - the quintessential journalist; MacKay Davashe - the jazz maestro; JP Mohapeloa - the prolific composer; Mzilikazi James Khumalo - the composer and conductor; Mazisi Kunene - the literary giant and historian; Walter Sisulu - ANC Stalwart; Robert Sobukwe and Zeph Mothoping co-founders of the PAC; SK Matseke, Isaac Matlare and Wilkie Kambule - the ultimate pedagogues. All these were leaders who cared to think and engage in courageous and insightful conversations about the serious challenges of the day.

I am speaking, of course, of the role of intellectuals - not just those who profess to be learned, but all of those who make a thinking contribution to social, political and economic life. Some are so humble they never regard themselves as thought leaders, but in their lives and wisdom they influence us in new directions. To capture the essence of this image of the learned (not just educated) African intelligentsia and their impact on society, I can do no better than cite Woodrow Wilson's observation:

"A man is the part he plays among his fellows. He is not isolated; he cannot be. His life is made of the relations he bears to others - is made or marred by those relations, guided by them, judged by them, expressed in them. There is nothing else upon which he can spend his spirit - nothing else - nothing else that we can see; it is by these he gets his spiritual growth; it is by these we see his character revealed, his purpose, his gifts. A few (men) act as those who have mastered the secrets of a serious art with deliberate subordination of themselves to the great end and motive of the play. These have found themselves, and have all the ease of perfect adjustment."

As we look around today, in search of comparative contemporary African intelligentsia, what do we see? I am afraid more often than not, we observe pseudo intellectuals given to mouthing platitudes and sterile slogans. We observe with chagrin and pain, the would-be educators toying at the expense of their pupils. In other walks of professional and career life, we observe with an unhappy sense of despondency, formations which persist in subscribing to the troglodytic doctrine of racial separation, albeit dressed up in the niceties of complexity. Race is not destiny. Character, vision and a sense of community shape our destiny.

Unfortunately many of our pseudo-intellecetuals disguise the real issues of the day under the garb of racial identity. This they do in place of stepping onto centre stage and redefining

our organisations in our African image, which would grant us the sense of being, having a modern African identity, keyed into the world as it is. It is a diverse, ever changing, mixed world of many cultures and many streams of humanity. We are all in it together.

What can we say of Khabi Mngoma the teacher and mentor?

The citation given to Khabi Mngoma by the Council for Black Education and Research on the occasion of the conferment of an Honorary Doctorate in Music from Wits University in 1987, conveys his message elegantly as follows:

“We salute you, son of Africa, who has taught us the alphabet of Western music and the meaning, the poetry of African music; for having fought through the many years for our music to be recognised as an imperative dimension of education in particular, and our spiritual well-being in general.”

This accolade opens but a window into an arena of the vast contribution to education Khabi made as catalytic agent, Professor, Doctor, Teacher, Philosopher, Mentor, Visionary, Father, Son, African, Humanist Self-Made Man - he was all of these things.

To better appreciate Khabi’s contribution in this regard, we need to delve into the philosophical genesis that informed his approach to educating society. He dedicated himself to CHARACTER BUILDING. At this point it is appropriate to quote Sir Alfred Eckhard Zimmern, a British classical scholar and historian, who contributed to the founding of both the League of Nations Society, and UNESCO. These organisations represent our international diversity. He advised that:

“All true educators since the time of Socrates and Plato have agreed that the primary object of education is the attainment of inner harmony, or to put it into more up-to-date language, the integration of personality. Without such integration, learning is no more than a collection of scraps, and the accumulation of knowledge becomes a danger to mental health.”

Being confident of yourself and your culture you can enter the world as a whole person. I, as a business person who spent about a decade with Prof Mngoma promoting choral music, submit that he was and will remain, as a legend, a world-class personality integrator. We are obliged to pay homage to Khabi, a sage with vision and foresight, who decades ago, beat a distant drum that admonishes us today. His achievement finds an echo in the words of businessman and entrepreneur Roger W Babson, a candidate for President of the United States in 1940. He said:

“A character standard is far more important than even a gold standard. The success of all economic systems is still dependent upon both righteous leaders and righteous people. In the last analysis our national future depends upon our national character - that is whether it is spiritually or materially minded”

Sibongile Khumalo, Khabi’s daughter, observes that his approach was to promote and understand the importance of balance between the intellectual and the spiritual - it was not enough to understand music solely for academic study and qualification. It was his

insistence that those learners who were high achievers in the music programmes he ran, should also master in Mathematics and English, Biology and Geography and other academic subjects. He also insisted that they develop a keen sense of responsibility and citizenship, compassion and empathy, respect for self and others. In essence they must become assets to their communities.

As Chief Adjudicator of the Ford Choir's Eisteddfods, he expanded the competition into a comprehensive vehicle for the advancement of music. Among other things he promoted music clinics, introduced a Composer's Contest, a Conductor's Competition, and much more. He was a true exponent and implementer of the principle of holism. It is thanks to Khabi that conducting maestros like George Gobingca Mxadana of Imilonji Kantu fame and Mzwandile Matthews of Matthews Singers fame arose to serenade the choral music scene. Thanks to him, composers like SJ Khosa hit the scene with contemporary classics like Matimba ya Vuyimbeleri.

In paying tribute to Khabi as a perennial source of inspiration, we can do no better than to echo Henry Adam's proclamation that: "A teacher affects eternity, he can never tell where his influence stops"

Aristotle puts it even better in asserting that "Those who educate children well are more to be honoured than parents, for these (i.e. parents) gave life, those (i.e. teachers) the art of living,"

Khabi persistently pursued excellence. Signal lessons can be learnt from his character-building and insistence on maintaining high standards.

In our present-day environment where mediocre leadership elevate mediocrity to the status of virtue; an environment where instead of raising the bar in the interest of national progress and development, the bars are lowered to achieve pseudo-success and deceptive delivery, Khabi's legacy of diligence, dedication, pursuit of excellence and insistence on high standards must be given even greater emphasis.

What can we say of Khabi's pioneering, inventive and innovative spirit? What can we say about his leadership in practice? Well, by the time he got to his last post as Head of Music at the University of Zululand, he had been a leader and innovator in the cultural and educational spheres as artist, teacher, publisher, cultural programmes organiser, choir conductor and adjudicator, historian, and administrator. He was described by his late friend Dr MV Gumede as nation builder and self-made man who personified a generation that espoused the importance of service and humility.

As a cultural leader Khabi lived by the tenets and philosophy that his bosom friend Eskia Mphahlele described as follows:

"African culture is no museum specimen. It is a dynamic feature of our lives. It has motive force, being active, potent energetic, having influence.

Because it is active, it assimilates, i.e. it adopts - while it can also resist,"

Khabi Mngoma founded the Mayibuye School when the Eiselen Report -precursor and ominous harbinger of the bad news that was Bantu Education -was being implemented. As part of his initiative to save and preserve the African soul he formed the Syndicate of African Artists with Eskia Mphahlele and Isaac Matlare (1960). As musicologist and musician he formed the Ionian Music Society - a milestone in South African Choral Music. He conceptualised and participated in the launch of Ford Choirs - for which he established an esteemed panel of adjudicators that he headed for a decade. I personally witnessed and marvelled at his at-your-service leadership style for eight out of those ten years.

As an integral part of the African intelligentsia of the 1940's through to the 1980's, that I referred to earlier, and a Pan African exponent, Khabi Mngoma envisioned an Africa whose scope for growth is limited only by its imagination. He envisioned an Africa whose intellectuals are nurtured by native founding principles and an insatiable sense of inquiry. He insisted on the realisation of an Africa that seeks to employ the advice, skills and technology of others for own ends towards a chosen destination and NOT to serve the agenda of others. He desired an Africa that is matriarch and sculptor of her own destiny.

As a leader in practice, Khabi Mngoma evidenced probity, humility, integrity and personhood; and demonstrated competence, tenacity and a sense of efficacy. He generated trust, goodwill and confidence. He was gracious, honourable and magnanimous at all times. As a committed team player he fully appreciated that the success of others does not diminish own success but adds to the good of the commonwealth. He deeply believed that the locus of control for Africa's future is within Africa herself. He was as visionary as he was compassionate.

SJ Khoza, one of Khabi Mngoma's erstwhile fellow conductors, captured Khabi's leadership style in the lyrics of one of his classic songs MNTIRHO YA VULAVULA (Deeds speak) as follows:

Deeds speak; They communicate

Deeds speak in a language

A language that's understood by everyone.

Be still, calm and level-headed

Deeds will speak for themselves

Good deeds hide not, not at all

Commendable deeds inevitably manifest themselves,

(With Allegro con fuoco)

Get away you scoundrel
You who live by deception
Get off the way of progress

You, give way!

Be still

Deeds themselves shall speak.

Well, Khabi Mngoma's laudable deeds have spoken. Those who choose to learn from this noble sagacious musical sage can stoop down and drink from the perennial fountain he left for posterity.

We salute you Khabi Vivian Mngorna

Son of virtuoso concertina-playing manskandi

Musician David Zwelonke Mngoma and committed diligent teacher Agnes Matutu Nyembe,

Procreator of musical talent explosions, Sibongile Khumalo, Lindumuzi and grand chip Sibongile Mngoma.

As indigenous to this land as the mighty life-giving Baobab.

You lived, learned and left a legacy.

May your legacy live and linger long.

May your character, character-building, capture the nation's imagination.

We pay homage to you and your offsprings - keepers of the musical culture you so commendably enriched and so generously bequeathed.