

Sir Ketumile Masire's Contribution to the Betterment of the African Continent

*Thabo Mbeki**



Sir Ketumile Masire sharing words of wisdom to the attentive President Thabo Mbeki. Courtesy of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation

Master of Ceremonies, Your Excellency, Sir Ketumile Masire, Members of the Board of the Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation, Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen: I would like to thank the Board of the Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation for making it possible for me to be here this evening to participate in this important fund-raising dinner. I am certain that none of the distinguished guests present here need any convincing by me, or anybody else for that matter, about the need for all of us to do everything we can to help generate the means to enable the Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation to carry out its important work. I am convinced that all of us as Africans should consider ourselves very fortunate that President Masire and his collaborators took the decision to establish the Masire Foundation.

This meant that we now had, and have, an institution which would enable our leader, Sir Ketumile, now retired from engagement in matters of state in Botswana, to continue to serve the peoples not only of this country, but also of Africa as a whole. Many of our former African Heads of State and Government have established Foundations similar to the Masire Foundation. I know that steps will be taken to establish a formal network of these important Foundations, to ensure that we pool their collective capacities to advance the shared agenda for the renaissance of Africa, drawing on the experience of the outstanding sons and daughters of our Continent who were our Heads of State and Government.

In this context, I have absolutely no hesitation in affirming my own belief that the Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation will serve as an eminent member of the network of the African Foundations to which I have referred, and therefore, an important vehicle through which the African patriots of Botswana will continue to make their contribution to the renewal of our Continent.

In this regard, I would like to mention an African organisation of which Sir Ketumile is an esteemed

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and founder-member. This is the Africa Forum, which is chaired by H.E. Joaquim Chissano, former President of Moçambique. The Forum is made up of some of our former Heads of State and Government and other leaders, such as former African Secretaries-General of the United Nations, Secretaries-General of the OAU and Chairpersons of the AU Commission, and other bodies such as the African Development Bank.

Sir Ketumile, together with his colleagues, took the correct decision that membership of the Forum would only be by invitation. He has, therefore, been central to the process of building an eminent African organisation which has excluded from its membership those among the historical corpus of African leaders who acceded to power by undemocratic means, or otherwise conducted themselves in a manner which helped to perpetuate the insulting notion that, virtually by definition, Africa's leaders are corrupt, dictatorial and therefore anti-democratic, and self-serving.

Personally, I am very proud that one of my own leaders, Rre Ketumile Masire, was instrumental in setting up an important organisation we truly own as Africans, such as the Africa Forum, on which the peoples of our Continent can depend as a reliable defender of their interests.

I have also mentioned the Africa Forum because I am convinced that in our immediate future, the Africa Forum will play an important role in helping to provide the leadership that Africa needs, in support of our contemporary African leaders, during a very challenging period in the continuing struggle, among others to ensure that as Africans we take our rightful place among the global community of nations.

Earlier I thanked the Board of the Masire Foundation for making it possible for me to be present at this Dinner. I must now confess that this is only part of the reason I am happy to be in Gaborone once again. Some among us this evening will know that the first time I came to this city was in 1962, almost exactly 50 years ago, take away perhaps only four months. Then, I was part of a group of young South African students on transit through the then so-called Bechuanaland Protectorate, intended to travel by road via the then South and North Rhodesia, to Tanganyika, from there to fly to England to study Economics at the very new University of Sussex.

However, the South Rhodesian Police arrested us for illegal entry into this then British territory and thus interrupted our journey. This colonial Police Service had us locked up at Bulawayo Prison for a month, and secured a court decision that we should be deported back to South Africa, fortunately via Bechuanaland. We returned to Gaborone by train, took a charter flight from here, which had to refuel in Blantyre in then Nyasaland, onward to Dar-es-Salaam. That was the first time all of us were in an aeroplane. You can imagine the mixed feelings we all shared of both excitement and anxiety, not knowing whether the very slow propeller-driven plane would actually deliver us safely without falling from the skies, and whether it would take us to Dar-es-Salaam or Jan Smuts Airport in Johannesburg, or a similar South African airport.

At the end of our adventurous journey from South Africa to Tanganyika, as young South Africans we said to one another that we were very fortunate that some members of the ANC originally from Bechuanaland, who had worked and been active in the South African struggle, such as Motsamai Mpho, had returned to their ancestral home, and that even then, the Bechuanaland administration, sensitive to the views of the people of the Protectorate, such as Ketumile Masire, unreservedly accepted that they had a duty to assist us to achieve our objective to get to Tanganyika.

Thus, 50 years ago, Botswana established itself in my own consciousness, even before its independence in 1966, as a vital bridge between apartheid South Africa, which was part of the African colonial construct, and liberated Africa. As such a bridge, and especially after her independence, it was inevitable that Botswana would have to carry a particular historic burden.

When I first came here 50 years ago, as I and other visitors had been

directed by the colonial masters, we knew this locality as Gaberones, not Gaborone. As I recall it, Gaberones consisted of a Railway Station and an attached Station hotel, so-called, and, some distance away, what was called The Village, which, among others had a Police Station and a Magistrate's Court, and absolutely nothing in between.

When I returned here 11 years later, in 1973, Gaberones was now Gaborone, and there was no empty space between Gaborone Railway Station and The Village. Gaberones had become the important Botswana town of Gaborone, capital of an independent African Republic. Even later, as the negotiations progressed in South Africa, leading to our liberation in 1994, the process also began of the dismantling of the system of the international isolation of South Africa.

Following the establishment of the non-racial South African Football Association, I believe in 1991, South African soccer was re-admitted into FIFA, making it possible for our country once more to participate in international soccer competitions. The very first international match South Africa played thereafter was staged here in Gaborone, at the National Stadium, with teams from our respective countries playing a friendly game, I think in 1992. A few of us drove from Johannesburg to witness this historic but friendly game, which I think the Botswana team lost, but whose intent and spirit had little to do with sporting prowess, and everything to do with what I have said –about Botswana serving as the bridge in the historic transition from apartheid in South Africa to African liberation. The soccer game that was played here in Gaborone, sometime before our liberation, enabled our respective peoples to celebrate what was to come –the emancipation of your brothers and sisters, your kith and kin, from across the border.

The fact of this game, and the spirit of the game, 30 years after I had passed through the then Gaberones, then and now Gaborone, confirmed what I have said, that Botswana served as an historic bridge between an apartheid South Africa isolated from the rest of Africa, and a liberated South Africa fully integrated both within independent Africa and the rest of the world. When I returned to Gaborone in 1992, as a soccer fan, I could see very clearly that the town I had seen three decades earlier had grown into a city, a magnificent prayer to the future, to borrow words from the Russian and Soviet playwright, Maxim Gorky, which growing Gaborone now is.

I must, therefore, make yet another confession. This is that, personally, I feel that I am linked to Gaborone, and therefore Botswana, by an unbreakable umbilical cord. I know this as a matter of fact that my own growth into adulthood, and, hopefully, maturity, has mirrored the development of the Gaberones of 1962 into the Gaborone of 2012.

Thus, will I forever refuse that anybody should separate me from this city and the sister African people of Botswana who constructed it, and, according to what I have said, who therefore, also made it possible for us to achieve our liberation, giving me the possibility to live and work across your border as a free human being and African.

Present at the centre of everything I have said, as a constant and important player, has been our principal Guest of Honour this evening, Sir Ketumile Masire. It may be that some or many among us present here this evening might consider the bland statement I have just made about President Masire as a self-evident assertion.

However, I would still request your permission to allow me to use this occasion to explain myself. During the 1973 OAU Summit Meeting in Addis Ababa, the late President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, presented the then President of Botswana, the late Sir Seretse Khama, with an immensely difficult request. He asked that the Government of Botswana should allow the ANC to open a representative office in Gaborone, similar to its offices in Tanzania and Zambia, and other African states further to the North. Courageously, as a member of the formative 'frontline states', and given that Botswana shared borders with South Africa, Sir Seretse accepted this request, in principle. However he asked that the ANC should

present this request to him and his Government in writing, and have it delivered to him here in Gaborone by emissaries whom Oliver Tambo trusted. These emissaries would also have the task to assess how the ANC representatives would operate, in a manner that would be sensitive to the security of Botswana, bearing in mind that it was an immediate neighbour of apartheid South Africa.

I was privileged to travel to Gaborone, together with one of our late leaders and trade unionists, John Gaitsewe, to deliver the letter from Oliver Tambo to President Sir Seretse Khama. For over a year, I had regular discussions with the staff in the Office of the President, then led by Archie Mogwe, about this matter of the placement in Gaborone of an ANC Official representative. This ultimately happened in 1974.

During the period between when I came to Gaborone as Oliver Tambo's messenger, and when the official ANC representative arrived in the city, I learnt some important lessons about the leaders of Botswana. One of the most significant among these was that these leaders were consummate diplomats, strategists and tacticians, never to be taken at face value. For more than a year, Sir Seretse and his staff did not respond to Oliver Tambo's letter, even to acknowledge it in writing. There were two strategic advantages to this manner of proceeding. One of these was that it made it possible for me to stay in Botswana virtually indefinitely. Whenever I had to visit the immigration offices to extend my stay, and to the puzzlement of the officials, I would always say that the President's Office had agreed that I should stay in the country to carry to Lusaka a message from this Office, and therefore that I had to wait for this message. I knew that if they cared to ask, the President's Office would confirm what I had said. At the same time, the Botswana Government could tell Pretoria that it had not agreed that the ANC should establish an official presence in Botswana, which accounted for my extended stay in the country.

In the meantime, consistent with the firm conviction of the President of the Republic, Sir Seretse Khama, and his vice president, Rre Ketumile Masire, about the imperative to support the struggle for our liberation, the Government of Botswana gave us, the ANC, the space to establish for ourselves the ways and means to work in Botswana in a manner that would not unnecessarily compromise the extremely delicate position of the country relative to apartheid South Africa. I would like to believe that we did indeed succeed to create the base and mechanisms for us to operate from Botswana as a vitally important forward base in the struggle for the liberation of South Africa, without recklessly compromising the security of the Republic and its Government, and the safety of the population.

Obviously, in this regard, I must acknowledge the reality that these mechanisms would also have been penetrated by the apartheid intelligence services. However, by the time the ANC Representative assumed his position in 1974, namely, our political and military veteran, Isaac Makopo, he could act only as a 'diplomatic representative', – theoretically, and in principle, – with no responsibility for, and with no contact with the already established ANC 'underground machinery' in Botswana.

In this context, I can, today, say that the late and outstanding Botswana and African patriot, Kgosi Lentswe [Linchwe II], was part of the machinery we established before the ANC representative arrived, which enabled the ANC to pass war materiel through Botswana, to enable us to carry out military operations in South Africa. Kgosi Lentswe and I had a brief and discreet interaction at the Gaborone National Stadium during the 1992 soccer match to which I have referred, relating to our war materiel still under his control. We agreed that he would tell the Botswana Police that, because of his position as a traditional leader, he had 'accidentally' come across sensitive information that there were weapons at locations he would identify, so that the Botswana Police could retrieve these. Neither he, nor ourselves, wanted these weapons of war to end up in the hands of either the public in general, or criminals.

By this time, because of the change process in South Africa, we did not need weapons of war. We were comfortable and happy that whatever we might have needed in the past, in a situation of violent conflict in South Africa, should be inherited by the Government of Botswana. To this day, I remain convinced that whatever Kgosi Lentswe told the Botswana Police was not new to them, as I believe they knew about the

arms caches, but accepted that these were a necessary part of the just struggle for the liberation of South Africa.

In this regard, permit me to mention only one other important incident which, I am certain is generally not known, even here in Botswana. The late President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, attended the 1976 celebrations of the 10th Anniversary of the independence of Botswana as a guest of the Government. We decided to take advantage of Oliver Tambo's presence in Gaborone to arrange for him to meet Steve Biko who, at that time, was restricted to the magisterial district of King William's Town in the Eastern Cape. Arrangements were made for him to be flown out of King William's Town at night to Gaborone. He would meet Oliver Tambo the same night and immediately fly back to King William's Town the same night. By sunrise, when the South African Police might check on him, he would be back in his house. Unfortunately, the operation failed, as Steve Biko could not fly out as planned, because all of a sudden the South African police mounted open and visible surveillance over him on a 24-hour basis. This meant that he could not leave King William's Town secretly.

We later found out that the reason for this abnormal surveillance was that Steve had informed one of his trusted contacts about his impending visit to Gaborone, on a confidential basis, little knowing that his confidant was in fact an officer in the South African Security Police. The reason I decided to tell this story is that all the arrangements for Steve Biko's plane to land here and for him to be transported to a 'safe house' to meet Oliver Tambo, and back to the landing strip to fly back to South Africa, were made by the then Botswana Police Commissioner, Simon Hirschfeld.

The story I am trying to tell is that Botswana was genuinely a Frontline State, and despite its vulnerability to possible punishing reprisals by the apartheid regime, played a critical role in the struggle to end the apartheid system. We can truthfully say that thanks to the principled and courageous leadership provided by Sir Ketumile Masire and others, Botswana stands out as one of the important African architects of the new democratic South Africa.

Thus it was that even after the June 1985 terrorist Gaborone Raid of the South African Defence Force, and as was the case in 1973 when the South African patriot, Ongopotse Tiro, was murdered in this city through a letter bomb, the Government of Botswana, led by President Masire, refused to be intimidated into turning its back on the struggle for the liberation of South Africa.

Sir Ketumile Masire is to us a tried and tested fighter for the liberation of the peoples of our Continent and the entrenchment of democratic rule, an experienced activist for the development of Africa, as exemplified, for instance, by the evolution of this capital city from what it was in 1962 to what it is today. It was because they recognised that in him Africa had an invaluable asset, that the OAU, the African Union and SADC chose him respectively:

- to chair the Panel of Eminent Persons to investigate the horrific 1994 genocide in Rwanda;
- to facilitate the Inter-Congolese negotiations; and,
- to help the various political formations in Lesotho to end the scourge according to which the country regularly experienced mutinies by the security forces after every General Election.

In this context, and as an aside, while I fully support the campaign against smoking, which is as a threat to public health, I must also confess that I always looked forward to the Summit Meetings of the Frontline States because President Masire would regularly bring me my favourite pipe tobacco, which I

could not get in Lusaka!

As I draw towards the end of my comments this evening, let me quote from two paragraphs in the Introduction to the Report of the Panel that was led by President Masire – Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide. As you will recall, this terrible 1994 genocide resulted in the massacre of a million Rwandese, in the short period of a hundred days. The Panel said:

Rwanda has transformed certain of its killing fields into memorial sites, and we visited some of them. We confronted the twisted remains of literally thousands of people still lying in the very classrooms and churches where they had been mercilessly slaughtered only a few years before. It was easy to see, especially in the schools, how many of the murdered were young children. We were left numb. There was nothing to say. We met with victims and heard their almost unbearable stories.

It went on to say:

There are many aspects of this story (about the genocide) that defy our understanding. Almost the entire world stood by and watched the genocide happen. Influential outsiders worked closely with the perpetrators. The victims were betrayed repeatedly by the international community, often for the most craven of reasons. At times, examining other atrocities throughout history and throughout the world, we have had much cause to wonder about humankind's humanity. Still, in the end, we remain satisfied that the genocide in Rwanda was an aberration, that killers are made, not born, and that such tragedies need never happen again. It is in the world's hands to make sure that it will never happen again. It is to that conviction that our report is dedicated.

When I read these words, I thought that I could hear the voice of the Chairperson of the Panel, Sir Ketumile Masire –the voice of a very humane and outstanding African leader denouncing in rage, but in measured tones, consistent with his humility, all practice characterised by inhumanity, injustice, dishonesty and abandonment of ethical and principled behaviour.

The current May 2012 edition of the magazine *New African* carries on its cover page the words, 'Ripe for Change: Why a New Breed of African Leadership Beckons'. In its Editorial which addresses this issue, it says: 'Nearly halfway into 2012, a year in which Africa is expected to become the second fastest-growing region in the world, the issue of leadership –good leadership, that is, (a principal factor in the downfall of the Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gathafi [sic] governments) – could not be more paramount'. I am certain that all of us will agree with the '*New African*' that good leadership is one of the paramount issues which our Continent must continue to address. We are very fortunate that we have our eminent senior, Sir Ketumile Masire, to serve as a role model in terms of the kind of leader which Africa must nurture.

We share a common and important responsibility to provide the Masire Foundation with the means that would help to ensure that Sir Ketumile does what he has to do, to continue providing us with the principled and quality leadership which Africa needs.

Thank you.

Acknowledgement

This was an address by the Patron of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation, President Thabo Mbeki, at the Sir Ketumile Masire Foundation Fund-Raising Dinner in Gaborone, 11 May 2012. The speech is published with consent of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation. It was obtained at <http://www.mbeki.org/2017/06/23/address-of-the-patron-of-the-tmf-thabo-mbeki-at-the-sir-ketumile-masire-foundation-fund-raising-dinner-gaborone-may-11-2012/>, accessed 10 April 2018