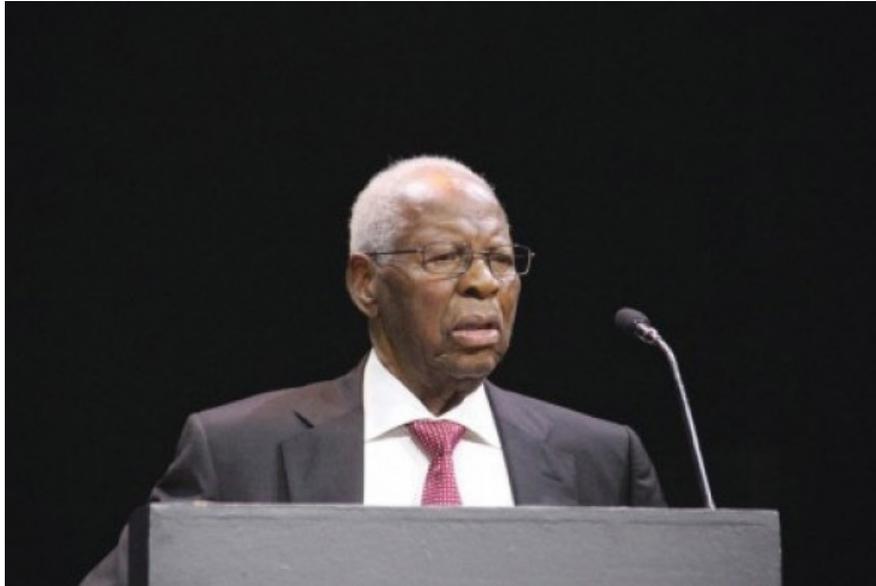


Gobe Matenge (1926-2018)

*Key Dingake**



I received the news of Gobe ‘GW’ Matenge’s passing from his daughter, Tsompie, on 26 April 2018 with great sadness and sorrow. Over the years, since GW commissioned me to write his biography: *Unearthing the Hidden Treasure: The Untold Story of Gobe Matenge* my relationship with him and his family deepened. We became one family –his children my sisters and brothers.

GW’s passing was not only a loss to his family, friends and relatives, but it is a great loss to the country too. A larger than life figure has fallen. The mighty tree that sheltered the young and old, the poor and rich has fallen. The aftermath of this loss shall be felt in many parts of our republic, not least in Matenge village where GW used to pay for uniforms of school going pupils.

Death may have succeeded to physically separate us from this iconic son of the soil, but it cannot succeed to kill his name and deeds in this, our earthly world. Although GW did not play any visible and prominent part in the nationalist movement that ushered republican politics in our country he was instrumental in building certain aspects of our identity as a people and nation. For instance, he contributed in ensuring that the song ‘Fatshe Leno Larona’ is chosen as our national anthem. As GW explained to me, ‘Fatshe Leno Larona’ composed by Tumediso Motsete was more appropriate than other competing songs because it was unique and exuded national pride. The preferred song, according to GW, captured the pulse of the nation and expressed the joy and patriotic mood of the people at having taken control of their affairs.

Our country has lost an exceptional human being whose kind we may not see again. He was extra-ordinary in many respects. He was a snappy dresser, with a passion for a white shirt. His children say they often lost count how many times in a day he would brush his teeth. His brother Robert once told me that GW exhibited propensity for being clean at all times during his early days.

GW was well known for his punctuality. He doesn’t like people who don’t respect time and he was hardly sympathetic to any excuse proffered for not keeping time. His contemporaries say that he was not a great fan for quorum in meetings because he firmly believed that having quorum should not stand on the way of delivery.

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All those who knew him well would testify that he was a man of unbending principle. It is in the class character of the middle class to blink and equivocate in the face of injustice. No so GW. On principle he never equivocated. At the time he permanently fell asleep he remained committed to a fairer and better society for all. He was famous for being even handed. As a District Commissioner in Kanye he used to reprimand the Special Branch Police who were mandated for reporting on party political meetings for filing reports only on the opposition, telling them in no uncertain terms that they must file reports of all political meetings.

From humble beginnings, in Matenge, a small village tucked away in the North East of Botswana, he achieved so much and touched so many hearts with his regal posture, dignity and sharp intellect. He was one of the Elders of our nation that had a profound impact on our democracy. He was principled, warm, loving, empathetic, thoughtful and kind. He was humble in the way he treated everybody, no matter how they ranked on the social ladder in this class divided society of ours.

GW was humble and wise. He would listen very intently to a debate; nod if in agreement, but maintain stony dignified silence when not in agreement and on occasions he would quietly shake his head in disagreement, and once the speaker is finished, he would clear his throat, chuckle and engage. He respected everyone's opinion, no matter how humble their station in life and treated them with respect and dignity. He commanded without issuing commands and he would offer his path breaking wisdom. He had an unmistakable sense of purpose and justice especially for the poor and the marginalised.

Somewhere in the book of Luke it is reported that Jesus spoke about preaching the gospel to the poor, about healing the broken hearted and proclaiming liberty to the captives. GW was not a religious man, but his mission in life was to uplift the poor; to end the indignity brought by poverty and to fight against discrimination based on ethnic, gender and other irrational grounds. GW had hoped that the Balopi Commission set up to address the issue of equality of all segments of our society would finally lay to rest complaints of ethnic inequality; and was disappointed that this was not so.

This tribute is not the place to give a full account of who GW is. What I hope to do is to sketch, in broad strokes, his remarkable life journey, just to give a sense why he was so much loved and respected. My hope is that young people will learn something positive from his life experience. At the end of this sketch, I will outline in summary form what I think the valuable lessons of his life are to the youth of our country.

GW believed in political pluralism. This is a man whose political home was in the Opposition, but some of his best friends came from the other side of the political divide. He counted amongst his best friends former President Festus Mogae and David Magang, amongst others. This generation of leaders represent who we are as a people – a trait that unfortunately appears to be on the wane. In the contemporary Botswana, one can pay a crippling price for holding a different point of view. We should refuse to go in this direction. It is alien to who we are as a people. It is a deadly seed to cultivate.

GW may have been critical of his government, but not once did he doubt the patriotism of its functionaries. He was tolerant and decent in his politics. He did not believe in the politics of abuse and insults. He was dignified and civil and made politics seem so natural like breathing oxygen. He always insisted that critiques of the establishment must articulate robust policy positions that can drive the country forward. GW served our country with distinction, more pre-eminently as a District Commissioner and Permanent Secretary. He was once tasked with the organisation of the 10th Anniversary of Independence Celebrations a task he discharged with pride and distinction.

I end this tribute with a humble call to those who have power to make things happen. As a nation we need to honour every Motswana who deserves to be honoured because there is verifiable evidence that supports such an honour. I think there is sufficient evidence to support a plea that GW must be honoured in some form. Perhaps, we as a nation could name some street, space or building after him so that

future generations can read about him and be inspired.

It seemed natural that such a towering patriot became the Chairman of the Botswana Society. According to the historian Professor Neil Parsons:

I remember a conversation I had (when I was Honorary Secretary of the Botswana Society) with Sylvia Cooke (Executive Secretary) in the Botswana Society Office in the National Museum, when she said that Alec Campbell was retiring and that she and Alec were wracking their brains about a suitable successor. I raised a few names that I was told had already fallen by the wayside. At that moment Gobe breezed into the office, greeting Mma Cooke as was his wont as 'my Dear'. After conducting some matter of business quickly and efficiently, with great charm, he swept out again. Mma Cooke and I then looked at each other, and I was the one who said: There's your next chairman!

As they say the rest is history because Gobe Matenge did become the Chairman of the Botswana Society. His tenure as the Society's Chairman was the most productive years in its existence. Long after he had retired he continued supporting the Society with his personal resources whenever possible. For instance, a few years ago he contributed funds for the Society to host an evening event at Phakalane Gold Club.

Acknowledgement

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