

Gaongalelwe Tiro, *Parcel of Death: The Biography of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro*

Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2019, 244 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1-77010-649-9.

The story of Onkgopotse Abram Tiro is one of the most melancholic and tragic stories in the history of South Africa's struggle for liberation. Although Tiro knew that 'No struggle can come to an end without casualties. It is only through determination, absolute commitment and self-assertion that we shall overcome', he didn't deserve to die the way he did. Nobody, especially a twenty eight year old person, should die the way Tiro died; and when the 'new' African National Congress (ANC) government in South Africa as well as the government of Botswana, where Tiro was assassinated, are supposed to reveal what they know about his assassination refuse to cooperate.

The martyr of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) died for the truth. He was the first of South African freedom fighters to be killed by a parcel bomb by the apartheid government. The author says the pre- and post-apartheid authorities failed to bring Tiro's killers to justice, neither did they make any discernible, credible effort to do so. He continued to write, 'His mother, Moleseng Tiro, died a broken woman in 2003 after her plea to the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for an investigation into her son's death was not heeded'.

Yet during the 1974 funeral of Tiro in Botswana, Mendi Msimang and Thabo Mbeki tried to take over the running of Tiro's funeral and BCM leaders like Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu put their feet down. They told Msimang and Mbeki that Tiro was not an ANC member and that they were running Tiro's funeral. They said they would invite Msimang as a speaker. During Msimang's condescending speech, he said the BCM should submit to the ANC and join its youth section.

Tiro's case hasn't been resolved after more than forty years because the ANC is hostile towards the BCM. In his book, *Preparing for Power: Oliver Tambo Speaks*, published in 1987, Oliver Tambo (then ANC president) expresses his paranoia that the BCM was going to supplant the ANC. He also disparages the BCM and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the same way Nelson Mandela does in his autobiography *Long Way to Freedom* which I reviewed in January 1995 for Botswana's weekly newspaper *Mmegi*. I criticised Mandela for mentioning the parcel bombing of Ruth First and Jenny Schoon but not that of Tiro. When he visited Botswana, he went to Tiro's grave in Gaborone. In those books, neither Tambo nor Mandela mentions Tiro's tragic death. Tambo only mentions Steve Biko, Mandela mentions neither Tiro nor Biko.

Parcel of Death with beautiful photographs, all of which I was seeing for the first time except one, chronicles Tiro's history from his humble beginnings in Dinokana village, which is in the province now known as the North West where he began and completed his schooling before going to Turfloop University (now called the University of Limpopo). He was an intelligent student passing his grades with first class.

Tiro came from the Bahurutshe ethnic group whose historical background the author brilliantly captures in the book. The trials and tribulations of people in that area; their encounter with settler colonialists are also delineated, and the revolt against the repressive pass system in 1957 which halted all schooling until 1960 during which time Tiro worked in the manganese mines in that area. The book is a good source of history of the Bahurutshe.

There are three issues the author clarified; Tiro was not born in 1947 but in 1945. Tiro influenced Tsietsi Mashinini but didn't actually teach him in class. He also didn't teach at Kgale (St Joseph's College) in Botswana but was a guest of an old friend, Kgomotso Mogapi, who was a teacher at Kgale. Mogapi was the one who gave a student known as Lawrence Mphafe a parcel that killed Tiro to go and give it to Tiro in Mogapi's house inside the school premises. After it exploded people didn't immediately go to Mogapi's house. Mphafe is still alive and spoke to the author.

Tiro is one of those heroes of the South African struggle for liberation who have been written out of history yet he made history. I have written in the past that the political work Tiro embarked on in five or so years surpasses what the ANC did in the thirty years they spent in exile.

Tiro began at the lower levels during his schooling to shine as a leader. For example, he made a brilliant speech at Barolong High School, his alma mater, in Mahikeng.

What was little known about Tiro was his activism in the church. He fought against racism in the church. Tiro was a devout believer and churchgoer, a Seventh-Day Adventist congregant. He was a morally upright person, a non-smoker and teetotaler.

When he went to study History at Turfloop University in 1969, he became involved in student activism and got involved with the BCM. The student organisations that existed at universities at the time the African Student Association, African Student Union of South Africa and the Progressive National Student Organisation were subdued. Students who formed the South African Student Organisation (SASO) the torch bearers of the Black Consciousness Movement had broken away from National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) which was a predominantly white student body.

Tiro was elected to the Student Representative Council body before his third and final year. He mobilised students across the length and breadth of South Africa. He graduated in 1971 and in 1972 during the graduation ceremony he delivered one of the best valedictory speeches in the country after Robert Sobukwe's 1949 Fort Hare University graduation speech. He spoke nothing but the truth which angered university and government authorities. He was then expelled. However, his expulsion caused unrest at other universities and colleges. Students across South Africa especially boycotted classes in solidarity with Tiro.

He continued mobilising students and communities after he was expelled from university in 1972. After his expulsion from university, he was employed as a history teacher at Morris Isaacson School in Soweto which was facilitated by PAC second president and founding member Zephania Mothopeng. During those years Tiro was invited to address students at other high schools, spreading the gospel of black consciousness. Tiro's biographer also spoke to the students Tiro taught and had influenced. His teaching career at Morris Isaacson was short-lived because apartheid authorities urged the school to expel him.

He also addressed students at Fort Hare University on 6 April 1973 to commemorate the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

The book doesn't mentioned PAC founding president, Robert Sobukwe, as one of the leaders who influenced Tiro and the BCM. However, anybody who has read about Sobukwe and the PAC will tell that Sobukwe and the PAC did influence Tiro and the BCM. The PAC was launched on 6 April 1959, a day that was deliberately chosen to coincide with the arrival on the shores of South Africa of Dutch settlers led by Jan van Riebeeck in 1652.

Many people these days understand that the anti-pass campaign which led to the Sharpeville massacre was organised by Sobukwe and the PAC. Therefore there is no way Sobukwe could not have influenced Tiro. In one of Tiro's speeches he echoes the philosophy of the PAC when he says whites will live in South Africa on conditions laid down by the African people and that did not mean he was anti anybody but pro-black. Sobukwe said the PAC was not anti-anybody but pro-Africa and that an African is a person whose loyalty was to Africa and lived under the democratic rule of the African people. Tiro was well-read, there is no way he could not have read or known about Sobukwe. The author writes that 'Tiro had the kind of charisma that is normally seen in special people such as Madiba [Nelson Mandela]' (p.151). Why not Sobukwe? Those who knew Sobukwe, including his enemies, say he had charisma and was a spellbinder. Former apartheid prime minister, John Vorster, (1966-1978) said Sobukwe had a magnetic personality. A former exile from Kimberley and a member of the BCM who was represented by

Sobukwe around 1976 told a PAC gathering commemorating the Sobukwe month that he met Mandela in Toronto, Canada. He says Mandela doesn't come close to Sobukwe in stature. Could this be the reason Sobukwe's audio and visual recordings are hidden away from the public?

In the list of leaders who studied at Fort Hare, Sobukwe's name is not mentioned (page 64). Tiro's biographer also writes that after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, struggle icons such as Robert Sobukwe and Nelson Mandela were arrested. What was Mandela arrested for since he and the ANC had nothing to do with the anti-pass campaign which culminated in the shooting of unarmed demonstrators? In fact, the PAC invited the ANC to join the anti-pass campaign but the ANC rejected the invitation. They responded through their secretary general, Duma Nokwe, and refused to join the march. The people who were arrested was the entire PAC National Executive Committee which included Sobukwe, Mothopeng and others. They were locked up at The Fort which was popularly known as Number Four which is today's Constitutional Court. From The Fort they were moved to Blue Sky in the Benoni area, then relocated to New Lock Prison in Pretoria and finally to Stofberg Prison which is now known as Groenpunt Prison. Mandela was not among them. Mandela was arrested in 1962 for leaving the country without a passport after he returned from a trip on the African continent and Europe.

When the struggle against Bantu Education is written about, invariably the name of Zeph Mothopeng is omitted. However, Mothopeng was one of the first leaders to oppose the system of Bantu Education which was introduced in the early 1950s. He also worked closely with SASO which he addressed in 1975. His topic was 'Imperialist Penetration into African Universities'. The biographer, however, dedicated a paragraph to Mothopeng. He writes that Tiro's former colleague Fanyana Mazibuko affirms talk that Morris Isaacson principal, Lekgau Mathabathe, was an underground operative of the then banned PAC. He also says it has been asserted that it was PAC leader Zephania Mothopeng who organised Tiro a job with Mathabathe. He goes on on to write that 'Another PAC stalwart John Ganya made the claim during the Bethal Treason Trial, when he and the struggle great known fondly as "Uncle Zeph", as well as others, were charged with inciting the 16 June 1976 student rebellion' (pp.139-140).

The people of South Africa, Botswana and the rest of Africa should put pressure on their governments to bring to book the people who murdered Tiro. Mike Kuhn and Craig Williamson should be arrested, charged and brought to trial. In his book *Spy: Uncovering Craig Williamson* which I reviewed for the *Sunday Independent* Jonathan Ancer reveals that Craig Williams had a cigarette business in Botswana. He probably went in and out without being arrested for Tiro's murder. Ancer also reveals that In 1998 Williamson was arrested in Angola for diamond smuggling. One wonders why he was not arrested for the murder of the Schoons. I criticised Ancer for not having mentioned Tiro's death. He defended himself by saying he wrote about Williamson's victims. How does Ancer know Tiro is not one of Williamson's victims? However, unlike white writers such as Ancer, Gaongalelwe Tiro has no hidden agenda, as he also mentions all parcel bomb victims including Adolphus Mvemve who was killed in Zambia a few weeks after Tiro was murdered.

The book is well written and interesting despite a few omissions which might be rectified or added during subsequent editions. It should be required reading in schools.

Reviewed by Sam Ditshego

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