

FLORENCE VUYISWA MASILELA: A MEMORIALIZATION

by

Ntongela Masilela

Florence Vuyiswa Masilela (née Mtshaba) was a woman of extraordinary capabilities: of resolute determination, an unending patience, a fierce intelligence, an unmatched love for her immediate family consisting of her late husband, Albert Mahlathini Masilela who passed away in Nairobi, Kenya in 1968, and her four sons (Ntongela, Monde, Basuke and Siphon). All five of them reciprocated her love because they recognized in her a unique human being as well as a remarkable woman. Her uniqueness showed itself in her ability under adverse and challenging circumstances, when she became a widow in exile in Kenya at a relatively young age of 46, to give her sons the best education that was available in the world, whether be it in Africa or in United States or for that matter, in Europe.

What her four sons are today is a clear indication of the grit of steel that this woman was made of. She did not confine her capacity for love to her immediate family only, but also widened it to her extended family, the Mtshaba family in Umtata and the Masilela family in Tshwane. Unquestionably, her love was also extended to her six grandchildren, Vuyiswa, Nomaduma, Tomchai, Lemwell, Donimita, Samuel and her two daughter(s)-in-law Renu (from Thailand) and Judy (from Kenya). All of her children and grandchildren are here today to acclaim her great life on this very sad occasion.

Florence Vuyiswa Masilela was born in 1921 in Umtata at very turbulent times for the Xhosa Nation. The Frontier Wars, between the Xhosa Nation and the Europeans (the British and the Afrikaners) had come to an end approximately forty years before her birth with the defeat of the African people. The great Chief Sandile was the last African leader among the Xhosa people to fight the last battle of the Frontier Wars on the terms of Xhosa tradition against Europe modernity. Tiyo Soga, the first modern African intellectual who was also a reverend of the Church, and the first African to be given European education in Europe no less, specifically in Scotland, recognized that European oppression and subjugation of Africans, be it the Zulu Nation, or the Sotho Nation or the Ndebele Nation and so on, could only be ended and defeated only on the terms of modernity, the new things of life, be it industrialization, nationalism, modern education, and not by means of tradition, the old ways of life.

Before his death in 1871 Tiyo Soga convinced Chief Sandile to negotiate with the new ways of life that had arrived in Africa from Europe. Chief Sandile did this

by giving his four daughters to Tiyo Soga to educate them in the new Christian ways on the condition that Tiyo Soga did not touch his three sons with whom Chief Sandile wanted to remain with him to bitter end in the old ways of African life. What happened between Tiyo Soga and Chief Sandile happened in similar form among the African Nations in South Africa. It was this taking of modernity and making it to fit and suit African ways of life that assured the historic victory of 1994. Our great political leaders and intellectuals, Steve Biko, Lillian Ngoyi, Fatima Meer, Jane Gool, Albert Luthuli, Robert Resha, Robert Sobukwe, Oliver Tambo were products of the new modern ways in South Africa.

Since Florence Vuyiswa Masilela was quintessentially a modern woman, she like other South African women inherited this enormous legacy of the history of the making of modern South Africa. Arguably the most conscious people of the necessity for the new ways of life were South African women, not South African men, as is falsely presumed in our written history. Arguably the first great modern Xhosa poet and truly outstanding intellectual was Nontsizi Mgqwetho, about whom we practically know nothing except her hundred and one magnificent poems, not S. E. K. Mqhayi who was outstanding in his own particular ways. This Xhosa woman of the early years of the twentieth century needs to be fully rediscovered and fully explored in order to have a wider dimension of our South African intellectual and cultural history.

Equally so in the Zulu Nation, the first outstanding modern writer was Lydia Umkasetemba who wrote remarkable fables, tales and parables in the late nineteenth century, about whom we know even less than we know about Nontsizi Mgqwetho, not John Langalibalele Dube, the first president of the African National Congress when it was founded in 1912, who founded the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in 1903 and established the Ohlange Institute in 1901. Dube too was extraordinary like Mqhayi in his singular ways. The third woman to recall here is Charlotte Manye Maxeke, who was among the first students that the great African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois taught at Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1896. When she returned home in 1901 with her husband Marshall Maxeke, who was later was to become editor of *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper in the 1920s in Johannesburg, she arguably became the most unrelenting modernizer in our country. Charlotte Manye Maxeke was the founder of the African National Congress Women's League.

Practically all the politically and intellectual conscious contemporary South African women from Frene Noshir Ginwala to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela have inherited this enormous heritage from Lydia Umkasetemba, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Charlotte Manye Maxeke and other outstanding women of the past. Many South African women who were in exile in Nairobi, Kenya in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with Florence Vuyiswa Masilela, Mrs. Nisa Mvusi, Mrs. Anne Abutti, Mrs.

Nosipo Molomo, who are all present at this memorial service, are the inheritors of this legacy. Some of the women who were in exile at this time in East Africa like Mrs. Jessie Okondo, Mrs. Sewenyana, Mrs. Rebecca Mphahlele are sadly no longer with us.

Although we are here today to mourn the passing away of Mrs. Masilela, we are equally here to celebrate a great Mother and an outstanding woman who exemplified the extraordinariness of our country.