



## OPINION PIECE

### **Tambo will be smiling in his grave**

5 November 2017

Months after the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre in which 69 protesters perished, white South Africa was smug and felt assured with a false sense of security. This prompted a white man to spit in Oliver Tambo's face as he walked down Commissioner Street in Johannesburg. He could not fight back and all he did was to wipe off the spittle with a handkerchief which he tucked back into his pocket and kept it for historical reasons.

Subsequently, the handkerchief became part of his most treasured paraphernalia during his years in exile. It became a symbol of racism and an epitome of white supremacy in South Africa. Yet he did not hate whites; he merely resented what they stood for. The system had deprived many black people of their basic human rights, including the right to be treated with respect wherever they went. Born to peasant parents, Mzimeni and Julia in Nkantolo village, Tambo defied all odds and graduated in Maths and Physics at Fort Hare University in 1942.

During this period he led an initiative for students to rebuild a disused tennis court on the campus in order to pass the time on Sundays. When the tennis court was completed, the students scheduled an opening ceremony, which Tambo reported to the warden. The authorities declined permission for the students to play tennis on Sundays, as they believed it was a breach of the faith.

The students then embarked on a policy of non-cooperation with the university authorities. As a consequence, Tambo, who at the time was secretary of the Students Representative Council, together with 45 other students, was expelled. All but 10 of them were readmitted after two or three weeks.

After his expulsion, Tambo went back to his home in Nkantolo. He then applied for teaching jobs but was turned down when prospective employers learnt that he was expelled from university. Fortunately, he was offered a position as a teacher in physics and mathematics at his alma mater, St Peter's, where he spent five years. Former students taught by him recalled his engaging style of teaching and consider him an outstanding teacher. During this period Tambo became part of a small network of the young African elite in Johannesburg in the likes of Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, Duma Nokwe and others.



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He quickly adjusted to the bright life of Johannesburg and almost everything was within reach. Yet it worried him that back home women and children still walked long distances to fetch water from the wells and rivers. This concern followed him as he left the country to rebuild the ANC External Mission beyond the borders of South Africa.

Nkantolo was among the 14 000 villages that did not have access to potable water when the democratic government came into office 23 years ago. Perched on a vast land that stretches from the borders of KwaZulu-Natal to the wild coast of Transkei, Nkantolo is a beehive of rural activity that encapsulates the spirit of ubuntu. Tambo witnessed his mother and siblings as they struggled to fetch water from afar. Former exiles will tell you how he treasured a glass of water. Even though he had access to tap water at Green House, his official residence in Zambia, no one was allowed to waste water. Waste water was connected to his garden to keep the vegetation green

His passion for the colourless resource is a result of its scarcity back home. In apartheid South Africa water for black communities was a pipe dream. The government gave preference for the reticulation of water to white farmers to encourage them to produce more crops. Nkantolo village was no exception to the rule.

However, during last week's posthumous centenary celebrations for the late ANC leader, the people from his village had something to smile about. The Minister of Water and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane, was joined by the Executive Mayor of Alfred Nzo, Cllr Sixolile Mehlomakhulu, to launch the R1,7-billion Greater Mbizana Regional Bulk Water Supply Scheme that will feed Ludeke Dam. The dam will supply potable water to more than 800 000 villagers of Matatiele, Mbizana, Ntabankulu and Umzimvubu, residing in about 178 347 houses. Ludeke Dam is the main storage for the 266 000 villagers of Nkantolo. Furthermore, the scheme will address water challenges that are faced by at Nkantolo and other villages by increasing the capacity of the water treatment works and improving the bulk water distribution in the area.

A pump station was also built to pump water from the Ludeke Dam through the existing main pump to Nomlacu Water Treatment Works for the benefit of the villagers. Implemented by Umgeni Water, the project is aimed at developing a new water resource and to improve the bulk water distribution to the Mbizana municipality. Phase Two of the scheme will entail further bulk infrastructure to serve the remainder of the supply area. This phase will start once the reticulation for first phase has progressed. Phase Two will ensure the upgrading of Nomlacu water treatment works to 20ml a day to cover 100% of Mbizana. The scheme has created a total of 358 skilled and unskilled jobs and 59 direct project construction jobs.



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In addition, a construction team from the Department of Water and Sanitation is currently in Nkantolo to refurbish and extend the existing non-functional infrastructure. The intention is to stretch the line and install up to 20 taps in the next two weeks. Embassy of the United Arab Emirates has donated 100 hippo-rollers stores 90 litres of water and will be distributed across the area, targeting the indigent households.

The water scheme is one of the many government projects that were launched in Bizana in the build-up to Tambo's centenary celebrations. For instance, the Minister of Safety and Security opened a state-of-the-art police station that will handle crime that is reportedly on the rise in Bizana.

There can be no doubt that once the water and other government projects have been completed, Tambo will smile in his grave in appreciation of the efforts behind improving his impoverished village.

**Themba Khumalo**