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ONKGOPOTSE TIRO MEMORIAL LECTURE BY MEC WM MORWENG

20 JUNE 2025

ONKGOPOTSE TIRO COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

The School Governing Body,
Family of Onkgopotse Tiro here present
School Management and teachers led by Mr Edwin Kgonothi
Learners of Onkgopotse Tiro
Ladies and gentlemen
Good day to you!

"What we fear of doing most is usually what we most need to do," says American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson. What the story of Onkgopotse Tiro is teaching us is that, he did exactly what he feared doing but knew that is what was mostly needed to be done. He had experiences injustices as a young person, lived through it at the university and knew that the time had come to become the voice of the voiceless, be the voice of reason, and try to rationalise with the irrational establishment.

The Greek philosopher, Socrates reminds us that opened quote; "the secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new," close quote. Tiro's generation took it upon themselves to fight to build the new society that that recognises you for what you are and not based on colour.

Often when we reminiscent about our heroes we often forget that their heroics were achieved when they were young people. His life story suggests he would not have been born had it not been for the struggles he had to face and contribute to their ending. It's as if he was born specifically to become a hero we worship today.

"Let's Grow North West Together"



Born just over two months after the end of the Second World War where black soldiers who had bled blood for this country were given a bicycle and a trench coat, whilst their white counterparts were given land to farm. He was two and half years old when the National Party won the elections that kept them in power until the 27th of April in 1994. He was just 26-year-old when he delivered the speech at Turfloop University which in many ways sealed his fate.

"Times are changing and we should change with them. The magic story of human achievement gives irrefutable proof that as soon as nationalism is awakened among the intelligentsia, it becomes the vanguard in the struggle against alien rule", he had impelled to the unsympathetic authorities. These may well be the words that marked him as the enemy of the State.

As where we commemorate him here today, in an area that use to be an army base, it may not be a wild thought that the bomb that took his life may well have been assembled here. He seems to have been a traveller whose spoor is indelible. His life story evokes in us the spirit of selflessness. His inspiration from beyond the grave has an emotional pull that makes us want to be the better version of ourselves.

After his graduation speech that led to the university expelling him, he got a teaching post at Morris Isaacson High School Soweto. It was under his tutelage that his students were imbued with the Black Consciousness philosophy. At his presence Morris Isaacson became known as the "cradle of resistance." Among his learners was a certain Tsietshi Mashinini, a key organiser of the 1976 Soweto uprising. He was forced out of the school and ended up in Botswana where his life ended.

Two years after his passing, the seeds that he had sown bore fruit on the 16th of June 1976. In five months' time he would have turned 80 and I wonder what he would have been saying if he was still alive. He would have wondered what quality of young leaders are we producing today?

Of course, today challenges are different from his era. At the time he was struggling for equality, for fairness, for recognition of content of character rather the colour of the skin. This is the struggle for which, to paraphrase former President Nelson Mandela, "he was prepared to die". He knew the risks and knew price he was eventually going to pay. But he also knew the struggle his people faced was not going to be easy unless everyone played their role.

He came from a long list of the scion of young leaders who were produced by this country that all played a role in ensuring this country was democratised. Oliver Tambo, Solomzi Peter Mda, Anton Lembede, Joe Matlou, Nelson Mandela, Jordan Ngubane, Mxolisi Majombozi, Joe Matthews, Motlalepula Chabaku and later the list was expanded by the likes Steve Biko, Mamphela Ramphele, Richard Barney Lekgotla Molokoane and Thandi Modise amongst many others.

Today young people are faced with dissimilar challenges but of similar magnitude. Young people today are facing joblessness, barrier to entry into available opportunities due to inexperience, alcohol and substance abuse, teenage parenthood and economic exclusion among others. Some young feel ignored hence becoming apathetic to political activities such as election. The question is are they ignorant or simply not interested?

The normal thought process will dictate that after the sacrifices by the likes of Onkgopotse Tiro which culminated in the 1994 political changes, everyone South African who was once marginalised, will become politically active. Juxtaposing the enthusiasm of the 1994 and the turnout of the 2024 elections, clearly raises a lot of questions.

Of the over 35 million people who had registered for the last elections, only a fraction of it participated. Where were almost ten million people who never been bothered to go to the voting stations? Have our elections become uninteresting or have young people become uninterested in participating?

Where have we left our young people? Are our young people desponded due to socioeconomic challenges we are facing? Are we as a society unconnected to the youth or are the young people oblivious of challenges that they deal with? The Fees Must Fall Campaign showed that young people could mobilize and could be mobilised. We must mobilise young people to avoid becoming part of the gangs. We must mobilise young people to become exemplary leaders. To do so, they must refrain from being involved in criminal activities.

May I close by quoting what Dr Reuel Khoza said on the 12th of September 2012 at the University of Limpopo. The date itself is curious as it's the date of the passing of Tiro's peer, Steve Biko.

This is what Dr Khoza said and I quote; "we can only imagine the images and thoughts characterised by expectations, hopes and fears, that must have flashed through Tiro's mind. He had dreamed lofty academic ambitions that could only be realised in a free and freedom loving country. He had waged the liberation struggle waged from within and without this land of ours. He sought a supportive international platform to assist a future democratic South Africa to free itself of ignorance, poverty and racial segregation. He believed fervently in a national leadership beholden to one cardinal interest – the national interest. He identified deeply with the oppressed and felt a deep sense of community with those at the receiving end of injustice", closed quote.

Thank you very much.