



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
MAKGOMO CHARLOTTE MANNYA-MAXEKE MEMORIAL LECTURE
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Programme Director, let me from the onset express my absolute gratitude to the Charlotte Mannya Maxeke Institute for choosing UNISA as a partner for this august occasion – the Memorial Lecture in honour of Mme Maxeke. In choosing Dr Mokgokong as the keynote speaker you have chosen one whose life is itself an inspiration to many other women, especially young women.

It is also fitting that attending today is an array of inspirational women whose collective presence and dedication to women's

empowerment can only serve as further inspiration to our young women.

This being a Memorial Lecture held in an institution of higher learning, whose head I am privileged to be, I have chosen to focus on the meaning of Mme Maxeke for us as academics and for this institution in particular.

What struck me immediately when going through the biography of Mme Maxeke was the fact that she was both an intellectual and political colossal. In trying to unpack on these two features I realised that Mme Maxeke is recognised mainly within the political sphere. Her contribution is however inadequately memorialised within the intellectuals realm.

It is critical to point out though that it is not just memorialisation that we should be interested in. It is her intellectual contributions and how she weaved that with practical interventions that we should mainly focus on.

My intention therefore, in this short contribution which is but a preface to the keynote address, is to examine what I would term *The Meaning and Contribution of Charlotte Maxeke to Black Women's Expression and Struggle for Freedom*.

There you go, someone in the audience might want to pick that up as a PhD thesis! You must acknowledge me. I may even serve as your supervisor.

First, Mme Maxeke expressly defied normative responses and relations that black women were forced into at the time. On the one hand her defiance was against a macro-political and economic system that was framed against black people in general and the black working class in particular. On the other was a feudal traditional system that worked against black women.

Let me proceed to state that Mme Maxeke was in fact a pioneer in the study of the sciences in particular, and higher education study in general. She defied the odds and obtained a Bachelor of Science in 1901, at a time when even black men were not allowed to study for the sciences.

We will note that after UNISA' establishment in 1873¹ as the first university in the country, science education study at post-matric level really 'picked up' largely after the 1870 Second Diamond Rush in

¹See Manson, Andrew (2018) UNISA: The Making of a Distance Learning University, 1873-2018. Pretoria, Unisa Press

Kimberley² and the 1886 Gold Rush in the Witwatersrand³ when there was a need for local engineers.⁴

It was after these two episodes that the study of the sciences, in particular engineering, became established. Thus, Mme Maxeke should be seen as one of the pioneers of higher learning in South Africa, across all races.

The second area that I wish to highlight about Mme Maxeke was her pioneering role in establishing what we may term as the first seeds of Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness thought in South Africa, working as she did within the nationalist tradition of the African National Congress. By helping to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church upon her return from the USA she was expressing a need for black people to reclaim their voices and organise themselves.

This resolve to see black people asserting their God-given right to freedom would later find expression in the founding of the Black Women's League, the forerunner to the ANC Women's League.

²See Turrel, Robert V (1987) *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871-1890*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

³Mountford, Benjamin & Tuffnell, Stephen, eds (2018) *A Global History of Gold Rushes*. Oakland, University of California Press

⁴See particularly the growth in what were to become the University of Cape Town and University of the Witwatersrand in particular, at <https://www.wits.ac.za/about-wits/history-and-heritage/> and <http://www.uct.ac.za/main/about/history>. Accessed on 02 April 2019

Through these initiatives Mme Maxeke was challenging what Deborah Gaitkell identifies as “domesticity for African women” which was promoted by early missionaries.⁵

The third area that I wish to briefly examine, and indeed one that is naturally close to my heart, is the intellectual legacy of Mme Maxeke. It is sad to note that this area is yet to receive focused attention. By this I do not mean popular allusions such as the one we are having today. My concern is in not finding enough about Mme Maxeke in academic research outputs.

It is against this disturbing backdrop that it was pleasing to come across Thozama April’s PhD study on Mme Maxeke titled *Theorising Women: The Intellectual Contributions of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*.⁶

In her study, April places Maxeke alongside prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century. In agreeing with April let me state without any fear of contradiction that, understood within a context of defying stereotypes against women, and showing deep love for the poor and marginalised, Mme Maxeke stands on an international pedestal

⁵Gaitkell, Deborah (1983) Housewives, maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-39, *The Journal of Africa History*, Volume 24, Issue 2, pp. 241-256

⁶April, Thozama (2012) *Theorising Women: The Intellectual Contributions of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape

alongside her contemporaries, Ida Wells⁷ in the USA and Rosa Luxemburg⁸ in Germany.

Through her life Mme Maxeke left us a legacy of using one's education to examine the existential conditions under which the poor and the marginalised live, shown in her writings as illuminated by April. Importantly, she demonstrated that the role of intellectuals is to realise, as the quote provided by the Institute in her profile points out, that, "This work is not for yourselves. Kill that spirit of self and do not live above your people but live with them and if you can rise bring someone with you".⁹

Programme Director, in the era of rampant consumptionism and selfishness, all direct results of greed that is associated with capitalism, as a people who have seen our country being in the clutches of corruption, these words by Mme Maxeke are a poignant reminder for us to return to the vocation of a dedicated public service. We must therefore concern ourselves with the study of the life and ideas of Mme Maxeke, in order to learn and be inspired by her life.

⁷For more on Ida Wells see West, Cornel, with Buschendorf, Christa (2015) *Black Prophetic Fire*. Boston, Beacon Press

⁸There are a number of books written on Luxemburg, in addition to her own voluminous collection. One of the best though is Ettinger, Elzbieta (1988) *Rosa Luxemburg: A Life*. London, Rivers Oram

⁹Unpublished profile of Charlotte Maxeke, by the Charlotte Manny Maxeke Institute

For my colleagues here at UNISA, the challenge is for us to study this life, and the ideas that Mme Maxeke expounded. I have no doubt that out of that will emerge rich findings that will inspire generations to come.

To the Institute, I wish to say UNISA is keen to explore possible collaborations, so that we may take the legacy of Mme Charlotte Maxeke to greater heights.

I thank you all!