

-The Inaugural Maxeke-Mgqwetho Annual Lecture by Dr Gcina Mhlophe

Duration: 42min10s

[Start: 12min20s]

Gcina Mhlophe:

Dr Gcina Mhlophe began the evening by singing her unique rendition of Nkosi Sikelel' Afrika inspired by the original Nkosi Sikelel' Afrika written by Enoch Sontonga.

Sanibonani.

When I was invited by Athambile to come and deliver this lecture. Somehow this word 'lecture' fascinating yhe? We come from the Nguni culture and when we look at certain words we kind of bring them into your mother tongue, isiZulu nesiXhosa, uzama ucabanga ukuthi itsh'utini konje mangiyi beka ngolwimi lwakithi? And some things are not say-able or translatable.

Why did I sing Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika at a place where I'm supposed to be delivering a lecture? I sing Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika because I'm grateful that Enoch Sontonga did not say, "God bless South Africa". He said, "God bless Africa, the continent". I'm a daughter of the African continent. I also sing it so differently because I've got a double-bass voice. I'm not there in choir, there in the soprano benz' intozabo like I'm ngiguyena uGcina Mhlophe ngishaya idouble bass one time.

What is this I'm carrying? *Yabona abantu abatsha*, a young lady made my skirt. Another young one made this hat. What is this? *Libhayi eli. Libhayi eli.* I brought this Athambile in order for it to go wherever we go to honour women whose names are not often mentioned. This no longer belongs to me; this will go to wherever we honour women whose names are not often mentioned.

One of my favourite women – maybe you don't even know who she is – is Mama Nokukhanya Luthuli. There's my heavyweight. She was the wife of Chief Albert Luthuli. She was amazing, multitalented like you wont believe and that's why she's my role model. But how many times do you hear that name? How many times?

Before there was another women, this woman was married to Chief Langalibalele Dube, his first wife was Nokutela Ndima and she sang, she played the piano, she could design beautiful clothes, she could cook, she could teach, she could do so much! She travelled all over the world and they fundraised for some of the money that went into building Ohlange High School. She insisted, believed in education, that there should be a school. And because she believed in education and believed that young women must be empowered, she also sang a song that keeps coming – it's like that recurring decimal – I want to know when was the first time this song made it's way into political spaces. I don't know when it was but there are clever people *abahambe bayeyunivesiti nhe bayazaz'ezinto.*

[Sings] *Lizalis'idinga lako, Thixo Nkosi yenyano. Zonk'intlanga zonk'izizwe. Mazizuze usindiso. Amadolo kwelilizwe makagobe phambi kwakho, zide zithi zonk'ilwimi, ziluxel' udumo lwako.*

For those who are currently disadvantaged, I will translate in English. “*Lizalis'idinga lako*”, let your promise be fulfilled. “*Lizalis'idinga lakho, Thixo Nkosi yenyano*”. And our Almighty has made promises to us. And we keep saying, “*Lizalis'idinga lako*”, because the people of the African continent are as worthy as people of any other continent! As worthy as people of any other continent. So time of thinking of ourselves as being in chains, nobody talks about us, nobody honours us; let's go out there and honour ourselves and each other. And if the platform that *umthetheli wabantu* is that world out there in cyberspace let's go in there. Let's go in there. We've got a right to be there.

Umama uCharlotte I didn't know about her for a while. I only found out after I found out about her younger sister *Mam' Katie Makhanya*. *Mam' Katie* I learnt about her, I read her, the book that was by the daughter of Dr McCord. And we were lucky to have this book. We bought many copies and we put them in every box of every high school we visited.

Who was *Nozicwadi*? *Nozicwadi* was was my great-grandmother *uMamChunu*. My great-grandmother couldn't read or write but she collected anything with words on it. She put them in a suitcase and when that suitcase stayed after she died – and just kept on, somehow nobody saw the value of it. I didn't discover about *mama Nozicwadi* until 2000. When I found out I phoned my agent in Europe,

“I'm not available for a year! Leave me alone. I'm not available.”

“Oh you're not available for what?”

“I'm not going on tour. I'm busy. I'm waking up the suitcase.”

I told my husband one Saturday, “*Ngizolivusa*. I'm waking up the suitcase”. I don't know what he thought I was talking about but... We started our literacy campaign, *Nozicwadi Mothering Books* in 2001 and we visited schools in all nine provinces. We performed, we shared poetry, storytelling, we read excerpts from books and we donated books to every single one of the schools we visited. And I thought we could make sure that it is a gift from *Nozicwadi* to the school that we were visiting; she was operating from beyond the grave. She was operating from beyond the grave since I was alive and still am, *Nozicwadi* continues. *Nozicwadi* continues.

Uyishukumisile imamba, uyishukumisile imamba asemgodini wayo. You've shaken the snake in it's big hole, in this place of forgetfulness where we forget powerful women! I don't know if there any powerful women in the house, sometimes they are called “too much”.

Whether they're Black or White or Indian or whatever culture you are, when you speak up, when you know who you are, when you know what you stand for, two words for you: TOO MUCH.

So we're dealing with two women who were "too much". Thank goodness they were too much. Thank goodness because there'd be no reason for us to remember otherwise. I look at a day like this as a day that also reminds us of those women who were just ordinary women like my great-grandmother. Because there are many of them who did something but because they were not close to people who would talk about them, they just ended up in the world where they would be forgotten.

I began to get excited about *uMam' uKatie Makhanya*. I got so excited when I delivered the book, every time making sure that it's there in the box for every high school we visited, because I wanted them to know that she'd lived. And when they hear about McCord Hospital they must know that there was a nurse, there was a nation-builder, there was an amazingly confident and a woman who had a destiny with fate. A destiny, an agenda about sharing knowledge with her people. Turns out she was the younger sister of *Mama Charlotte Maxeke*. When I found out about *Mama Charlotte Maxeke* I thought, "Okay...*ngiyakuzwake manje. Ngiyakuzwake manje*. Birds of a feather from the same nest. From the same nest." I heard their voices in my mind's ear.

I heard their voices and saw their faces, their beautiful faces, in my mind's eye. I listened to all the spiritual voices that were saying to me, "These are powerful daughters of Africa. Daughters of the soil."

Mama Charlotte and Mama Katie let their voices rise up and greet the sun and speak to the world beyond. They sang in South Africa, they sang for different choirs and finally that African Jubilee choir that was invited from Kimberly to go to England to sing for the colonisers or commonwealth. The Queen *une-commonwealth* - what a big word - *i-commonwealth hayi sukanni madoda? Yini i-commonwealth? Yini le? Yinto yakho, mina nge yami*. How I wish, how I wish the commonwealth stood for that.

The cold weather and that incessant rain and grey skies did dampen their spirits. They bought the joy and light from Mother Africa. They travelled in England, they saw how they were treated and they didn't like it. And the Choir Master that went with them, the musicians that came from different parts of the Eastern Cape that came with them on this choir – it was sixteen altogether – they were amazing! Other people were just gob-smacked, "These are Africans, singing like this? *Umhlola yini!*"

They sang songs. I'm told the first part of their renditions were songs from their own culture, *uNqgunqgu wabantu* and then they went to change, and then they dressed up as *amaqgoboka* – those who had converted to the Western religion – and they sang songs in the language that they could understand now (the people of England). When they did that they wanted to prove a point; we know who you are, we know who we are, where we come from but we also know what speaks to you and so they shared.

But something special was that the music was that special key that opens doors. It was that special key. And for us who are in the Creative Arts we know that the Creative Arts, our cultural heritage is able to connect us to people who we could not connect with otherwise. That is the truth. When we connect to these different people we know that we're speaking heart to heart, soul to soul. And so that is what they did.

But let's go back to where they grew up.

Having come from the ancestry of *Ramokgopa*, *ePolokwane* - that was Pietersburg at the time. Their father had to travel to the Eastern Cape for work purposes and he could not read or write much but he had work to do. And he is part of the number of men who laid their lives and their sweat and blood in order for the railway lines to be built that would connect, like, bringing different people from the different parts of South Africa; Cape Town – *baphumaphi?* – *EThekweni* Durban, they came from Port Elizabeth, they came from all over, they kept coming. And when they finally had to move to Kimberly their father continued working and their mother, interesting enough, she came from a place where she was lucky enough to go to school and learn to read and write. To get a formal education in order to look what future this coming together of different cultures from Africa and different parts of the world would mean.

And now there's something that was special about *uMam' uMaxeke*. As a child she was hungry for knowledge still. She learnt to speak isiXhosa, she learnt to speak Dutch, she learnt to speak English and she was one helping other students who had challenges. Then she loved music. And then she loved Mathematics. She was this other teacher before she qualified to become a teacher. Sometimes she was forced to go make a living as well as a domestic worker - and she went and did that work. Sometimes we bite our tongues, sometimes we bow down when we should, when we know we have to, and she did that.

And her sister Katie took over her job when she went to higher learning and she didn't like it one bit. She couldn't understand how anybody could be treated like that. But the three years came and they went and finally they all met in Kimberly together, the whole family, and they say the family would sing together. There's something that speaks to me; I come from the house of song and prayer. When my people come together, *masihlangene kwaMhlophe siyacula*, it doesn't matter what type of voice you have, we have to sing, because it's that song that is the cement that keeps our families together when we sing:

[Sings] *Ngcwele, ngcwele, ngcwele, ngcwele, Somandla ngcwele sibabaza wena.*
Ngcwele, ngcwele, ngcwele, ngcwele, Somandla ngcwele sibabaza wena.

Songs like those. When we sing them we can sing them over and over and over and we know that means family. And this Manye family used to sing together. They say their father had a baritone voice. And when he started singing family everybody knew they were home. It turns out that it is the song that would open the doors and take them all the way to the United Kingdom.

And as they travelled all over the United Kingdom at some point they were invited to go and sing for the Queen. And the little child who was there with the Queen at some point said, "Grandmother let's go, I don't like these darkies.". No matter how well they sang they were still "darkies". The money ran out for the choir and they had to travel back home but Mama Charlotte and her sister Katie stayed behind and they found jobs and they survived for month after month after month in England. I mean how intelligent is that? Huh! In their early twenties? In England all by themselves? That must have said

something. They made sure they stood up for themselves. And when the news came that they could travel to the United States of America *Mama* Charlotte got what she wanted; she wanted to study further. She was thirsty for another type of water, she wanted higher education. She wanted to be at a university. At the time you could not accept a black person in England for university education. So they came back to South Africa for a month and the next thing you know *aphenduka amabombo aqondeMelika*. And the Wilberforce University was that watering hole where she could learn and sharpen her axe that was going to chop down all the things in her way, all the obstacles.

Mama Katie didn't want to stay in England or America she wanted to come back home. Sometimes there's that thing that takes you home. You know this is not my place but *Mama* Charlotte knew she needed to be there and that's where she met her husband, Mr Marshall Maxeke. And they came back.

When they came back there was a promise she had made to herself much earlier when she was a child, when she heard her father recounting stories that made him feel embarrassed because he didn't have much of an education, she promised herself one day I'll go back to *Ramokgopa* and help my people learn to read and write. And so she and her husband went back to *Ramokgopa* and they opened a school there and a mission station there. The AME church had a had a big role in their lives and having bursaries for people to study was something special for them.

This education thing sometimes you want it, sometimes you don't. This formal education because sometimes it takes away the Africaness of a person but when you know who you are in advance you can go and get that Western Education and stay who you are. And stay who you are.

I didn't know when I read a novel at high school – it is some love story some of these trivial little things *bathandana baqabulana laphe-Rome*. I looked for this Rome. It's in Italy, in Europe. I was fascinated. And the fountains and the Vatican – whatever the Vatican was – I was reading and reading so fascinated and I thought, “Amazing! Imagine if I could go to Rome.” Now I hardly had enough money for school fees. My shoes had to be repaired! Huh! I was just *inkinga*. I didn't have much. All I had was books and books and books, that's all I had. I knew how to read, I knew how to work hard for my studies. I had no money! The other children who had extra this and extra that from Port Elizabeth, from Cape Town, from Johannesburg *haw' nobody ofana nam bhekaincwadi wena uthule uthi nyhe*. Now you want to go to Rome *uzofika kanjani e-Rome?*

I wished so much to see that Rome. I had no idea that in 1982 when I left South Africa for the first time and went to England I was going to travel for 34 years. I had no idea that in fact I was going to go to that Rome and see it with my own eyes now and again. So I have got an affinity with someone who dreams like *Mama* Charlotte used to dream. And somebody who takes dream and hardwork and vision and focus and puts them together into a recipe that cannot be shaken. I regard Mrs Maxeke as a pioneer in one of the greatest of human causes, working under extraordinarily difficult circumstances to lead a people in the face of prejudice, not only against her race, but also against her sex.

So a lot of what she dealt with was recognizable much earlier on but she came and stood up for whatever she could find to be fought for when she was back in South Africa. Because she didn't go and study just to be the first black African woman to get a degree B.Sc in 1901. When was that? 1901. *Hayi!* She did not only want for the degree she wanted to come back and make a difference. There's a pioneer, there's a nation-builder and I loved her for that.

So the day has finally come, a day like no other to unveil and honour, from the bottom of our hearts, two women. Women who did not walk on the same path, they were not born on the same day but they were having the same purpose in life. Awareness-raising and nation-building in their chosen professions. She insisted that African people had to stand up for themselves no matter how difficult things were. But especially the women should stand up for themselves because *bayintsika yekhaya*.

These daughters of Africa have somehow been placed in the shadows of history despite their great achievements. That beautiful voice that went to the United Kingdom all those many years ago. I wish they'd been blessed with a recording device so we could listen and learn as we sing along with them. I wish we could just press play and their voices could fill this room. But then again, we only have our imaginations to take us back. Let's see them in our minds' eyes, let's hear them in our minds' ears, let them resound in our spirits; these daughters of Africa.

In those long, long ago times when men were fighting against pass laws they said, "We see how degrading it has been for our men, we don't want the pass laws for the women." They were calling for men, for women to take the lead. They had to fight for their own dignity and honour as well as that of the men folk. As one of the few women who were playing such a pivotal role in the early years of the African National Congress, it is really surprising and annoying and totally degrading to see how we have chosen to mention their names only here and there and there.

Now haven't you been surprised that there was a submarine that was named after *Mam' uCharlotte*? A submarine. *Kutsh'ukuthini lokho?* Do you know why Pregs Govender was fired from parliament? If I'd gone to parliament we would have been fired together. Because I wouldn't have supported that arms deal nonsense, I wouldn't have supported it at all. She was fired because she didn't support the arms deal. There was so much more that needed to be sponsored and paid for in this country including health and education in this nation. *Mama Charlotte* I don't think she gave a hoot about a submarine *marakodwa ke silana lapha sikhona. Silana.*

We, celebrate them with the way we know how to. Today on a time where there is such a demand for strong leadership, for leaders with integrity and unyielding commitment to make a difference in the lives of those who are less fortunate, it is more than apt that we choose to honour these two amazing women. Today's young women may have academic qualifications yes but sometimes there's a lack of real, ready information on the media. The presence of pioneers and role models they can learn from. Role models they can walk around with after they've passed on even after they've passed on.

As a result many times you hear intellectuals quoting only people who come from other cultures. And we are grateful that there are all of these wonderful, wise words. But when we look at the likes of *Mam' uWangari Maathai*. *Mam' uWangari Maathai* from Kenya, Nobel Prize winner.

“African women in general need to know that it’s okay for them to be the way they are. To see the way they are as a strength [thank you] as a strength and to be liberated from fear and from silence.”

That’s *Mam' uWangari Maathai*. That’s right.

Empress of South African song, *Mam' uMiriam Makeba* this is what she said – she said many things, I love her quotations –

“Your knowledge, your education is your husband number one. Your husband may leave you but what you have in your mind will never leave you.” *Mama Miriam*.

Now let’s go find Bessie Head, there’s a women for my part of the world. She was interviewed in 1972, I was still a real *donderkop* back in those days, I’m glad nobody asked me that question. But she was asked how she thought the revolution will come in South Africa one day. This is her response:

“It is impossible to guess how the revolution will come one day in South Africa. But in a world where all ordinary people are fighting for their rights, it is inevitable. It is to be hoped that great leaders will arise there who will remember the many years of human suffering and out of that formulate new laws to treat everybody with common dignity and respect.

[Sings] It is also to be hoped that Southern Africa might one day become the hope of the storyteller and dreamer who did not have others but only introduced new dreams that fill the heart with wonder. New dreams that fill the heart with wonder. New dreams that fill the heart with wonder.”

That’s Bessie Head talking. Bessie Head. We are telling stories today. Stories that fill our heart with wonder. Stories that shine a light on many more that are still to be remembered. *Kukhona omama* Ama Ata Aidoo, oLillian Ngoyi, Miriam Tlali, Laurette Ngcobo, Brigalia Bam, Ruth First, Fatima Meer, Helen Joseph, *Mama Sisulu* they have so much to say. We can spend the whole week here sharing quotes and some of their wisdoms. So since we can’t do that sit here at St Mary’s all night and whole weekend, let’s go out there and find out what they have to say. We have a lot to learn.

Sometimes the kind of women we’re honouring here tonight bring to mind famous sayings like this, “If you educate a man you educate an individual. If you educate a woman you educate a nation.” This is true. But at the same time some of my best friends are male. Many men as well, men who loved and respected women, they did their bit. Am I right? So when we honour women we should not be dishonouring anybody else because we are on a journey together. We are on the journey together.

So I call on each and every one of you here today, let us pull up our socks and be like our foremothers who took education very seriously as a nation-building tool. Zubeida Jaffer wrote a book called 'The Beauty of the Heart'. She was a fighter. She was dedicated. She would leave no stone unturned to make a differ! But she had a beautiful heart; *Mama* Charlotte. So that is the book she wrote. It has made it's way into the list of my cherished books, *Beauty of the Heart*. She has handed her in saluting this powerhouse of a leader extraordinaire. As we too answer the call to salute *Mama* Charlotte let's also honour somebody who was as different as I am. *Mama* Nontsizi Mgqwetho.

We must acknowledge the work she has done. And in the process honour the work done by researchers because those researchers if they hadn't done that work, they would continue staying there in the woods, in that place *kwelokulibala* in the graves that are dug for women who are 'too much'. Because those researchers have done their work here at home and abroad, those efforts will continue to be of great value to us as we gather more firewood to keep the fires burning at the hearth, where these women's contributions will be made to shine brighter than ever before.

Another African saying brings to mind something like this, "The axe may forget but the tree remembers." Yet another crossroads in our history we have to be clear that those who robbed us of our land, mineral wealth, cultural and spiritual identity and heritage, our sense of community and human dignity left deep scars. Hiding under recurring, throbbing, infected wounds.

Sometimes they look like they've healed, you see us in shiny fast cars, fancy Western homes, elegant clothing, European languages that we cherish so much, much more than our own mother tongues, under all those façades, the sunny smiles and joyful dances at Freedom Day celebrations. Freedom Day celebrations then they fool the world. We can even fool one another. But in our heart of hearts we know the truth. The axe may forget but the tree remembers. Now the question is, **"What are we to do with all that remembering?"**

Do we moan and groan? Do we complain and accuse the oppressor every single day and act all defeated unable to face today's struggles, to lift up this awesome continent called Mother Africa? Is that what we're going to do? Moaning and groaning? This is the very cradle of Humankind. So do we add those memories in their millions to the uniquely potent ingredient for future-building antidote. The men may be the head of the family but the woman is the heart of the home. The same applies to our nation, our country in South Africa. This nation. Azania. Our motherland. The country we so love. Yes, the men have been leaders, heads of the state, but we the women have to reclaim our positions as the heart of the nation. Let's do that. Let's reclaim our position.

If the rights of *Mam' uMaxeke* and *Mam' Nontsizi Mgqwetho* achieved what they did, unapologetically a century ago, under the most despicable conditions, what is stopping us? What is stopping us in 2019? Whatever the reason for their names to not be part of today's narrative on a regular basis, we have no right to keep quiet and not pay our tribute. No matter how humble we must promise that the future generations will know

they lived; that they struggled proudly, they help they bright torches up high because of days like these our sons and daughters will be compelled to do the same.

Let the voices of the unstoppable Nontsizi Mgqwetho ring out loud. Let our minds' ears hear her loud and clear. She never allowed those who thought that her gender was a disability to stop the praise poet in her from ringing the amazing eloquence with words simply rain to a thirsty soul. That wisdom and eloquence ran in her veins like the river of life. *Umthetheli wabantu* the newspaper that dared to publish her works must be lauded as well. For without these published works her words would have been buried in the many mass graves where creative spirits are buried today. The unbelievable dedication of writers like Jeff Opland, who has made it his life's journey to celebrate Xhosa poetry, our gratitude to you too.

Those, those who opposed her role as a praise poet...she stood shoulder to shoulder with likes of J.J.R. Jolobe. Great poets S.E.K Mqhayi...they must have sighed a sigh of relief when she died. Those who didn't like her, they didn't know what is the story with this woman who won't keep quiet. They didn't know what is the story with a woman who kept reminding them of things they didn't want to remember. A woman who cherished her mother-tongue and let it be like stars in the night sky to decorate our minds and make sure we remember who we are and what we are called to do. They must have thought, "At long last this nuisance of a woman shall be silent! FINALLY!"

*Abangamthandiyo babebencume ngoncumo olugoso
Wena wabona ikati itshe icala.
Besiva onogqaza benqanqaza emathafeni
bephendulana nenkomo ezazigxwala emsanweni.
Zakuvakala ezondaba zilusizi ulandulele, ulandulele eli akasekho uNontsizi Mqwetho!
Qaba ixhala unoqolomba efile nje.*

*Kodwa thina ke namhla siyavuya sitsho ngazwi linye sithi "Asinakuthula!"
We shall not be quiet.
Asinakuthula.
Siyabonga, siyabulela, siyatyityimba, siyatshuluba.
Sizingomba isifuba qab' ixhala okaMqwetho evukile nje.
Qab' ixhala. Asinakuthula.*

*Iinyaniso owayezithetha ngemini zakudala zisabhentsile nanamhlanje oku kaloku
inyaniso ayiboli. The truth never rots.
Ihlala iyinyani sithanda singathandi.*

*Ababemzonda babesitsho ngolunya nekratshi besithi liyakuthula nini elibhinqa
elinoqhel' oqathu?
Sidiniwe!
Sidikiwe nguNontsizi olilisela ubusuku nemini ngosizi lomntu omnyama.
Sidiniwe!
Kanti ke bangandikwa, bangakruquka, banganyanya, bangacapuka baphike balale
ngomqolo kodwa lona usizi lomntu omnyama lusayifuna ingqwalasela yethu nakaloku
nje.*

Yaye kukude engqinibeni ndiyakuxelela. Kukude engqinibeni.

Mam' uNontsizi and Dr Charlotte Maxeke we salute you from the bottom of our hearts we make the promise to pick up the batons, to step forward and do what we are called to do in our own professions and our own areas of specializations. Our struggle changes faces and character every sing day; that is normal in any nations journey of growth but we have to soldier on. We have to learn from you our great pioneers and adapt to the current times and challenges. It was not easy then. It certainly is far from easy now and it will get even darker and colder before the sun rises again for our little sons and daughters.

Siyabulela sibamba ngazozibini. Eyenu indima niyihambile olwenu ugqatsho nilufezile. Sithi kuni camagwini mavulandlela amahle, Camagwini zithwal'andwe zezwe lakowethu, camagwini.

[Sings] Makubenjalo. Makubenjalo. Makubenjalo kude kube ngunaphakade, kude kube ngunaphakade. Makubenjalo. Makubenjalo kude kube ngunaphakade, kude kube ngunaphakade.

Let it be so.
Ngiyabonga.

[End: 54min32s]