

CITATION FOR EPAINETTE MBEKI

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By Professor Paul Maylam

On Women's Day in 2000 Tim Modise on his morning radio show conducted an interview with Epainette Mbeki, mother of President Thabo Mbeki. So moved were listeners by the interview that for days after people called in to the SABC to declare MaMbeki the true mother of the nation. I believe that here today this congregation, too, cannot but be moved by this remarkable person and her life story.

A daughter of the Eastern Cape, Epainette Mbeki was born in 1916 – yes, ninety-six years ago – in a Sotho-speaking area of the Mount Fletcher district. She studied at two iconic African schools, Lovedale College in Alice and Adams College in Amanzimtoti, where she graduated as a school teacher, enabling her in the late 1930s to take up a teaching post in Durban at the Taylor Street Secondary School. There she met a fellow teacher, her future husband, Govan Mbeki.

In Durban began her community involvement and activism which would continue unabated for the next seventy-five years: there volunteering for the Child Welfare Organisation, supporting a rent boycott, and running the Communist Party's night school.

It was to be in the Transkei that MaMbeki would really make her mark, moving back there, to Mbewuleni, with Govan Mbeki soon after their marriage in 1940. There, with admirable determination, she would combine the roles of entrepreneur, home-maker and community activist: running a trading store, selling food, medicine and clothing, much of which she herself made; raising her four children – Linda, Thabo, Moeletsi and Jama; making their home a cultural haven where literature and

politics were discussed and classical music was played; and travelling throughout Transkei working for the Zenzele women's self-help movement – all this while Govan Mbeki was increasingly away from home, ever more involved in national political campaigns.

This involvement, of course, eventually led to his arrest and sentence to life imprisonment at the Rivonia trial in 1964. For MaMbeki there followed years of enormous hardship: her husband in jail, and her three sons in exile; numerous police raids on her home, at any time of day – sometimes in the middle of the night – her notes, family pictures seized – the residual fragments of her shattered family life cruelly snatched away. There was, too, great loneliness – feeling abandoned by her husband's friends following his imprisonment; blamed by neighbours for the constant police intrusion into the community. Still having to eke out a living, while meeting various commitments – such as paying her husband's study fees – all without financial support from the liberation movement.

MaMbeki saw all this as a challenge. Far from going under, she drew on her extraordinary resilience and kept going, driven by her resolute belief in community development and her commitment to self-help projects.

In 1974 she moved to Ncgingwane near Dutywa – there not only opening another shop, but also becoming ever more deeply immersed in community work – growing and selling vegetables, and by 1982 serving as secretary and treasurer of the Dutywa agricultural show; helping the community obtain a site for a school which would be built by parents with home-made bricks – the school later named after MaMbeki; in 2000 organising a women's co-operative – known as Khanyisa – bringing together about forty women involved in sewing traditional clothes and school uniforms, doing beadwork and leatherwork, growing vegetables and raising chickens. She has played a major role in running a home for neglected, abused

and orphaned children – opened in 2004; and has been a prominent figure in establishing a hospice at her former village, Mbewuleni, in memory of her daughter, Linda, who died in 2003.

All this work has earned MaMbeki many accolades: the Community Builder of the Year Award; the King Cetshwayo African Image Award; the Eastern Cape Arts and Culture Award for the Khanyisa project; in 2006 the Order of the Baobab in Gold, bestowed on her for her ‘exceptional contribution to the economic upliftment of the underprivileged communities of the Eastern Cape and her commitment to the fight against apartheid’.

This exceptional contribution has been a manifestation of the character and thinking of MaMbeki – her lifelong stress on hard work and self-help, inculcated into her by her parents and then instilled into her own children; an enormous value placed on education; an unwavering belief in community development; a fiercely egalitarian outlook. All of her children believed they acquired their politics more from their mother than from their father. Thabo Mbeki has expressed his admiration for his mother’s deep wisdom. Moeletsi Mbeki has said that his mother was much more radical socially than his father. There has been something of a dissident streak in her – ‘she likes rebels’, says Moeletsi – but at the same time she has openly voiced her disdain for the growing factionalism within the ANC, and for what she calls the ‘anarchic tendencies’ that took root at the ANC’s 2007 Polokwane conference.

There is, too, a disdain for pretence and ostentation – her own lifestyle simple and unpretentious, she preferring to stay in her rural home rather than move into an official residence during her son’s presidency. Many words have been used to characterise MaMbeki – independent-minded, straight-talking; firm, but fair and tolerant; dignified, humble, disciplined. Aged ninety-six, she has been called young at heart. Most striking

has been her remarkable resilience in the face of enormous hardship, and awful family tragedy, losing her son, Jama, murdered in Lesotho in 1982, and her daughter, Linda, in 2003. One colleague who has worked closely with MaMbeki has said of her, 'she is a friend, a mother, a guide, business partner; she is everything to me'.

Today Rhodes University is privileged to honour a most remarkable person – community-builder, supreme care-giver, entrepreneur, educationalist, activist, a woman of indomitable spirit, and a wonderful role model for all the graduands seated on this stage. Small in stature, but a truly immense figure in the history of the Eastern Cape for over seventy years.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Epainette Mamotseki Mbeki the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.