Acknowledging the Disavowal of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe

Tshifhiwa Ndou, Class of 2013

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the founder of South Africa’s Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), was once viewed as Nelson Mandela’s greatest political rival; as Mandela gained worldwide fame, however, Sobukwe and the PAC fell into relative obscurity. In his lifetime, Sobukwe subscribed to an Africanist ideology characterized by non-collaboration, nationalism, and the struggle of the black oppressed against their white oppressors. Today, Sobukwe is remembered as Robben Island’s only political prisoner who was jailed in 24-hour solitary confinement. Sobukwe was released from prison in 1969, but he died from lung cancer nine years later at the age of 53. I began my research on Robert Sobukwe in 2011 and it was during that time that I used Sobukwe’s funeral to explore South Africa’s political and ideological tensions of the 1970s. In March of 1978, those who sought to claim his legacy incited violence at Sobukwe’s funeral procession. Some Black Consciousness youth and Pan Africanists have since sidelined his “liberal” ideology to assert their own political visions. With my honors thesis, I now seek to understand how and why Sobukwe’s significant contributions have been denied a prominent place in the annals of South African history.

The Paul Nyhus Travel Grant enabled me to conduct research in South Africa this summer. Before traveling, I recognized that despite the appropriations of Sobukwe’s ideology, very recent efforts to restore his memory have switched to high gear. Commemorative speeches, museum exhibits, and films have been launched over the past few years to celebrate Sobukwe’s contributions. I was fortunate enough to visit commemorative sites and speak with some of those involved in restoring Sobukwe’s legacy. My research began, however, in the Robert Sobukwe Papers archive at the University of Witwatersrand. Here, I accessed original copies of Sobukwe’s writings and newspaper clippings that have enabled me to understand the nuances of the man’s political ideology. Perhaps more valuable to my research than the writings and newspaper clippings were Sobukwe’s letter correspondences from prison. The letters helped shape my understanding of Sobukwe’s warm, confident, and intelligent personality. I continued to piece together memories and characterizations of Sobukwe through my interviews with those who knew and were influenced by the man: by Editor-in-Chief of City Press Newspaper, Mathatha Tsedu; by former Secretary General of the PAC of Azania, Thami Ka Plaatjie; and by former Robben Island prisoner, Jaki Seroke. Each of my interviewees – personally motivated and influenced by Sobukwe – provided stronger insight into the man’s influence.

I completed another large part of my research in Graaff-Reinet – Robert Sobukwe’s birthplace and hometown. There, I was fortunate enough to interview Sobukwe’s son, Dini Sobukwe. I went to the Sobukwe Exhibit at The Old Library Museum in Graaff-Reinet and I paid a visit to Sobukwe’s recently refurbished grave site. I was surprised to find that, in spite of the efforts made to celebrate Sobukwe, many of the townsfolk had never even heard of the man.

As I completed my summer research, I reflected on the common thread between my interviewees’ responses: they all seemed to agree that just about every effort to celebrate Sobukwe represents a positive contribution to South African history. In South Africa, where memories of apartheid loom large, I could not help but agree; recognitions of Sobukwe’s contributions are essential methods of tackling South Africa’s issues of historiography. That being said, celebrations of Sobukwe’s life that neglect the many years of disavowal introduce yet another failing of South African historiography. The work being done to accord Sobukwe a more prominent place in the annals of South African history is ongoing which is why it is important to understand why Sobukwe was forgotten in the first place.
MY BELOVED HUSBAND
MANGALISO ROBERT
SOBUKWE
ADORED FATHER TO MILISWA,
DONELISWA, DEMANIZIZWE
AND DALUNIVERO
BORN: 05 DEC, 1934
DEAD: 27 FEB, 1978
PHUMIA NGONQOHLO
MANGI, TATA, PROF.

"THAT GLORY MAY DWELL IN OUR LAND"
PSALM 83 VERSE 9

"TRUE LEADERSHIP DEMANDS
COMPLETE SUBMISSION OF SELF
ABSOLUTE HONesty, INTEGRITY AND
UPRIGHTNESS OF CHARACTER,
COVIGAGE AND FEARLESSNESS
AND ABOVE ALL, A CONSUMING LOVE
FOR ONE'S PEOPLE"
ROBERT SOBUKWE
Faculty Mentor: David Gordon

Funded by the Paul Nyhus Travel Grant.