

## **Address of The President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, on the occasion of the ceremony to hand over to the nation, Isikhumbuto: Freedom Park – Salvokop, Tshwane**

16 December 2006

Programme Director, Vuyo Mbuli,  
Minister of Arts and Culture, Pallo Jordan, other Ministers and Deputy Ministers,  
Chairperson of the Freedom Park Trust Board, Gertrude Shope,  
Chief Executive Office of the Freedom Park Trust, Mongane Wally Serote,  
Leaders of the organs of state,  
Executive Mayor of Tshwane, Gwen Ramokgopa,  
Members of the Freedom Park Board of Trustees and Staff,  
Our distinguished guests, Dr May Nagu, Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs of the Republic of Tanzania, and Mr Joao Alvez-Monteiro, Deputy Minister of justice of the Republic of Angola,  
Your Excellencies, Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Distinguished guests,  
Comrades,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Fellow South Africans:

Once more, I am deeply honoured to address you on the occasion of our National Day of Reconciliation, and the handing over to the nation of the structures created as part of the Intermediary Phase of the Freedom Park.

It is fitting that we have again gathered at Salvokop, on the national holiday of the Day of Reconciliation, to display to the public the outstanding work-in-progress of the Freedom Park, the fulcrum of our vision to heal and reconcile our nation as we work together to redefine a common and shared identity based on the ideals of freedom, equality and justice.

We undertake our annual pilgrimage to this shrine of the people that tells us of where we come from, why we are where we are today, and how we will continue to strive for a South Africa that truly represents the vision for which many of our heroes and heroines sacrificed their lives, because we recognise the fact that it would be impossible to build a non-racial and non-sexist nation if we were to become indifferent to our past.

We are indeed very happy that the Intermediary Phase of the Park is progressing well with the completion of Isikhumbuto. As the Freedom Park Trust observes, Isikhumbuto represents “a mirror image of the nation’s historical consciousness.” As the Trust states:

“In order to celebrate and commemorate, we have to remember. In order to remember, we have to reflect and contemplate. In order to reflect and contemplate, we need peace and tranquillity. Designed around our desire to celebrate and commemorate, Sikhumbuto integrates five features where the nation can rejoice and honour the lives of those who contributed to the struggle for humanity and freedom.”

Freedom Park is a place of memory, a place that allows us to remember without rancour, and quietly to celebrate the noble achievements of the human spirit. It is an island of peace that invites us to reflect and contemplate, allowing us to descend this hill refreshed, ready further to contribute to a future whose humanism is the very core of the abiding prayer of all South Africans and Africans.

Freedom Park will be a place of hope in which will be embedded the rich history of our country and all humanity. It will represent both a transformed landscape and historical memory intertwined. It will be a place which will hold our memories in incubation, allowing them to nurture a future free of bitterness, free of hatred, free of stereotypes, free of racism, and free of the destructive fury of war.

Today, we honour, on the walls of Sikhumbuto, South Africans, including Charlotte Maxeke, Lilian Ngoyi and Oliver Tambo, as well as Mahatma Gandhi, whose vision and practice satyagraha, launched in our country a century ago, we saluted earlier this year, together with the contributions of many other heroes and heroines, including those of the Bambata Rebellion, the Women’s March, and the Soweto Uprising, whose sacrifices made it possible for us today to enjoy freedom and democracy.

And beyond our own borders, on our mother continent, we salute and remember among others, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Angola's Agostinho Neto, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and further afield, the outstanding African-American scholar and activist for the liberation of Africans everywhere, Dr W.E.B. du Bois, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the hero of the Cuban revolution and Toussaint Louverture who led the heroic revolutionary struggle of African slaves that resulted in the birth of the first Black Republic in Haiti, in 1804.

These extraordinary human beings are among the many acclaimed leaders, as well as the unsung heroes and heroines to whom we owe our gratitude for the gift of freedom – freedom to eradicate the humiliation and anguish of being human cargo treated disdainfully as commodities on the iniquitous global stock exchange of times past, as slaves on plantations or in reservoirs of labour or as the battered footballs of the 20th century Cold War.

Indeed, Freedom Park is not an epitaph. It is a place that resonates with the joy of a celebration of freedom and equality for all people, and a spirit that speaks of a future of ever-growing human fulfillment.

As we gather here on Salvokop to celebrate the development of the Sikhumbuto site and its handover to the nation, we must also remind ourselves of our journey forward, from the wars and conflicts of repression towards the ascension of democracy and the concomitant duty to ensure development, a better life for all our people, and the restoration of the dignity of all our people.

We have come here today to restate our common resolve to continue along the journey towards a truly non-racial and non-sexist future; we have come here, once again, to commit ourselves to our freely chosen path of reconciliation, of healing the wounds of the past and drawing strength from our diversity.

Isikhumbuto constitutes a memorial landscape of social memory, designed with a series of interconnecting walls which give expression to our memory of those who perished in past conflicts and wars, and those who made a contribution to the human renaissance, in our country, our continent and internationally.

Salvokop, this place where successive salvos were fired during the South African War of 1899-1902, now speaks not only this turbulent history, but also other South African history, through the stories of our heroines and heroes that we honour today at the Isikhumbuto.

About some of those who contributed to our freedom, Chinua Achebe wrote:

"Agostinho, were you no more  
Than the middle one favoured by fortune  
In children's riddle; Kwame  
Striding ahead to accost  
Demons; behind you a laggard third  
As yet unnamed, of twisted fingers?  
No! Your secure strides  
Were hard earned. Your feet  
Learned their fierce balance  
In violent slopes of humiliation;  
Your delicate hands, patiently  
Groomed for finest incisions,  
Were commandeered brusquely to kill,  
Your gentle voice to battle-cry."

In these words we find an evocative place of memory – reminding us of the burden of the contradictions imposed by colonialism and apartheid, such that delicate hands trained to save life were forced to take up the weapons of war to create the conditions when those hands could do what they were trained to do.

The construction of Freedom Park constantly poses the question - how do we represent our history in a physical space? Museology is moving towards not only a post-modern interpretation of its mandate, but also the obligation to be critical of the absolutist approach to telling of a single story in the formation or indeed portrayal of nationhood. Necessarily, Freedom Park must and will reflect the richness and complexity of the human condition and human evolution.

Indeed, Freedom Park cannot be uni-dimensional singular in its portrayal of the South African history, and yet convey a critical balance that tell the story from the side both of perpetrator of injustice and the victim, or both the settler and the indigenous peoples, both apartheid South Africa and the victims of apartheid aggression on our continent.

We are of course referring here to the full understanding of reconciliation, not the forgetting, but reconciliation with a past of conflict among opposing forces. Without this understanding, the special piece of land on which we stand cannot become Freedom Park, a place that celebrates the victorious march of all humanity away from everything that denies all humans the right fully to be free.

As the sun rays form a halo on the names inscribed on the walls of Isikhumbuto, and as we continue to be inspired by the heroines and heroes those walls celebrate, let us also do everything we can and must do to respond to the appeal of the African American poet, Maya Angelou, to triumph over all hatred, conflict and war. In her poem, 'A Brave and Startling Truth', she says:

We, this people on a small and lonely planet  
Travelling through causal space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we discover  
A brave and startling truth  
And when we come to it  
To the day of peacemaking...

When we come to it  
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders  
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce  
When land mines of death have been removed  
And the aged may walk into evenings of peace  
When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake  
By nightmares of abuse  
When we come of it  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids  
With their stones set in mysterious perfection  
Not the Garden of Babylon  
Hanging as eternal beauty  
In our collective memory

Not in the Grand Canyon  
Kindled in delicious colour  
By Western sunsets  
Not the Danube flowing in its blue soul into Europe  
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji  
Stretching to the rising sun  
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favour  
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores  
These are not the only wonders of the world...

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines  
When we come of it  
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body

Created on this earth, of this earth  
Have the power to fashion for this earth  
A climate where every man and every woman  
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety  
And without crippling fear  
When we come to it  
We must confess that we are the possible  
We are the miraculous, the true wonders of the world  
That is when, and only when  
We come to it.

This marvellous composition by an African American poet must remind us that we meet at this particular place on this day, because today is our National Day of Reconciliation. Today, in our collective interest, we renew the pledge we made in our Constitution:

- to recognise the injustices of our past;
- to honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
- to respect those who have worked to build and develop our country;
- to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; -
- believing that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

In this regard, Maya Angelou has presented us with an important challenge. She has challenged us to discover what she describes as “the brave and startling truth” that as human beings, we are more wonderful than the Seven Wonders of the World and the gifts of the world of nature: in her words, as human beings, “we are the possible; we are the miraculous, the true wonders of the world.”

She has challenged us to understand that being more wonderful than all other Wonders, we have the task to “fashion for this earth a climate where every man and every woman can live freely without sanctimonious piety and without crippling fear.”

She has said that “in (our) mouths abide cantankerous words, which challenge our existence (by leading to conflicts that consume millions of innocent lives.) Yet out of those same mouths, can come songs of such exquisite sweetness, (such) that the heart falters in its labour, and the body is quieted into awe” at the nobility of the human soul.

She has told us that we have the responsibility to give free reign to our hands that “can touch with such healing, (and) irresistible tenderness that the haughty neck (of the professional soldier) is happy to bow, and the proud back (of the war general) is glad to bend” persuaded by us, “the true wonders of the world”, to repudiate the chaos of destructive antagonisms and hatred, conflict and war.

Our national reality demands that we continue to pay the closest attention to our strategic task of national reconciliation. We must continue to place at the centre of everything we do the objectives fundamental to our future as a truly non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous democracy, of achieving genuine national and social cohesion.

Among other things, this means that our government must faithfully implement all our programmes focused on the strategic task to achieve a better life for all our people, progressively to end poverty, underdevelopment and the racial, gender and geographic inequalities we inherited from our colonial and apartheid past.

It also means that our government must stand very firm and absolutely uncompromising in its determination to defend our Constitution, our statutory framework, and the integrity of all our organs of state, ensuring that they carry out their work, as mandated by the Constitution and the law, without let or hindrance.

It is precisely because of our loyalty to our Constitution and the laws approved by our legislatures, the implementation of transformation programmes to address the legacy of the past, consistent respect for the views of all the people of our country, and our sustained pursuit of the objective of national reconciliation,

that these masses have such high confidence in our government and share great certainty that, whatever our problems, they are guaranteed a bright future within a winning nation.

On this important occasion on our national calendar, our Day of National Reconciliation, I would like to assure the nation in its entirety that we will continue to do what we have done in the past 12½ years – to defend our Constitution, our laws and our organs of state, to implement our transformation and national reconciliation programmes, and constantly listen and respond to the voice of the people.

With regard to all this, I have absolutely no doubt that the masses of our people are ever ready to act in their millions to support the government they have freely elected, to implement the programme I have mentioned.

These masses acted in unity in their millions to bring about the victory of the democratic revolution which has, today, given them the certainty that as long as we remain loyal to the mandate they gave us to govern our country, so long will they be guaranteed the better life of dignity for which they engaged in an heroic struggle for many centuries.

The masses, acting together with the government they elected, as well as our government, will not allow that the fundamental purposes of our democracy are undermined or compromised in any way by some within our nation who believe that their particular interests take precedence over and override the cause for which so many of our people sacrificed their lives.

Fellow South Africans:

I am privileged, once again, to wish you success as you pursue the noble goal of national reconciliation, and to commend to our nation, to future generations and to all humankind the Sikhumbuto which the leadership of Freedom Park handed over to the nation today.

May you all enjoy a safe and enjoyable Festive Season. Drive safely and Arrive Alive! I wish you all a very merry Christmas, happy Hannukah, happy holidays, and a prosperous and healthy New Year for all of us.

Thank you.