

# The Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe Permanent Exhibition

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*The aim of the Graaff-Reinet Museum is to collect, conserve, research and display the rich cultural history and heritage of the Camdeboo area for the education, recreation and upliftment of the community whom it serves, as well as visitors. With this in mind, an exhibition depicting the life and times of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe is permanently on display in the Old Library, one of the five museums of the Graaff-Reinet Museum Complex. The aim of the exhibition is also to introduce Sobukwe as one of the leaders in the freedom struggle and to cultivate an appreciation for heritage.*

## Background

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was born on 5 December 1924 in Graaff-Reinet. He started formal schooling at a Methodist mission in Graaff-Reinet and continued secondary schooling at Healdtown. He had just turned twenty-three when he enrolled for a Bachelor of Arts degree at Fort Hare University. At this stage he had no interest beyond school and sport, but although he showed no interest in politics, he had strong views which he expressed at a social function for new students during his first year at university. In his speech, he launched an attack on parochialism and the behaviour of students in the hostel and thus revealed himself as a revolutionary and visionary. During his second year at university Sobukwe's political consciousness came alive and he became politically active. After his marriage to Veronica and already the father of children, Sobukwe joined the Mofolo branch of the African National Congress (ANC) and meetings were regularly held at his home. In 1958 Sobukwe and his peers broke away from the ANC.



They established the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1959 with Sobukwe as its leader.

Sobukwe had ideals of serving his people, to lead and provide them with an organisation, namely the PAC of Azania. He was concerned with race and stated: 'The Africanist takes the view that there is only one race to which all belong and that is the human race, therefore the word "race" as applied to man, (human beings) has no plural!' This statement encapsulates Sobukwe's belief that society should not be divided along racial lines.

## Anti-pass campaign

The PAC chose the rejection of the detested pass system as a platform to raise their concern about an unfair system and at the same time, lobby support for their cause and organisation. In March 1960 the PAC, headed by Sobukwe, embarked on an anti-pass campaign which would eventually culminate into one of the most significant events in South African history. The campaign was to be a non-violent one, held on a national basis, demanding the abolition of the pass laws as well as a minimum wage. PAC members were instructed to leave their passes at home on 21 March 1960 and present themselves at police stations to invite arrest. The principal aim was to get themselves arrested so that nobody would be at work, industries would be paralysed and the government would be forced to accept their terms. Demonstrations in Orlando West, Soweto, led by Sobukwe did not result in any violence, but Sobukwe was arrested because he had no passbook with him. In Sharpeville, a township near Vereeniging, blacks went to the police station to be arrested. The crowds, judged to be in their thousands, pushed against the fence surrounding the police station and one or two policemen opened fire which subsequently led to a full volley from a variety



of firearms. No order to fire was given, but the shooting continued for more than forty seconds. The precise number of deaths is uncertain, but the injured included 40 women and eight children, with more than 70 percent of the victims clearly shot in the back. The anti-pass campaign achieved the suspension of passes on 26 March 1960 and the disruption of commerce and industries for nearly three weeks. The Sharpeville incident became a defining moment in the fight for liberation in South Africa and also a monument in the annals of the struggle of the African people.

On 4 April 1960 Sobukwe was put on trial in Johannesburg for his part in having organised, led and participated in the anti-pass campaign. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment with hard labour and sent to Robben Island. As a result of a special statute that became known as the Sobukwe Clause, he was imprisoned for an indefinite period. Every three years the South African Parliament held a snap debate on whether Sobukwe should be granted his freedom or remain in detention. This process went on for six years as Sobukwe refused to change his way of thinking. During this time he remained a prisoner on Robben Island. Time after time Parliament had to debate the clause which had bearing on a single individual. Sobukwe was released in 1969 and restricted to living in Kimberley. He was not allowed to speak in public and was kept under house arrest and constant surveillance. He completed his law degree and started a law practice in 1975. He practised law until he died from cancer in 1978.

## The Sobukwe Project

The Sobukwe Project came into being to honour one of the greatest sons of Graaff-Reinet. After the establishment of the new South African democracy in 1994 people began to notice the absence of exhibitions portraying the history of the previously marginalised communities. A reporter, Alistair Starke, wanted to know why there was a lack of information on Sobukwe, who was born in Graaff-Reinet and perceived as one of the great heroes of the struggle against apartheid. Starke, well-known in journalistic circles, pinpointed a gap in the museum's interpretation of local history. In 1997 the Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture (DSRAC) introduced a document known as the Indices of Transformation, which provided guidelines for the transformation of museums and the heritage sector in the Eastern Cape. Transformation refers to the changes that occurred in all spheres of the South African society to reflect the ideals of the new democracy. The transformation process touched on all aspects of museums and heritage including exhibition, research, policies and legislation and staff. Thus, museums and heritage had to become totally inclusive and more representative of all the people in South Africa. The proposed Sobukwe Exhibition at the Graaff-Reinet Museum was identified as a way in which aspects of South African history which were previously neglected could be



integrated. DSRAC agreed to fund the Sobukwe Exhibition as part of its legislative mandate to identify, conserve, manage and promote the province's diverse cultural heritage. With the funding and establishment of the exhibition, DSRAC attempted to realise the aim of government to promote national reconciliation, social cohesion, redressing of past imbalances and the restoration of dignity of historically disadvantaged communities. The Sobukwe Project adhered to these requirements and provided an opportunity to create awareness of Sobukwe's contribution to the liberation struggle and the role he played in the democratisation of South Africa.

In 1999 the Graaff-Reinet Museum received a substantial amount from DSRAC to establish the Sobukwe Permanent Exhibition. On 24 September 2001 the exhibition was officially opened at the Old Library Museum by Nosango Veronica Sobukwe, widow of the late Robert Sobukwe. The exhibition, an overview of the life and times of Sobukwe, consisted of pictorial material obtained from the Mayibuye Archives in the Western Cape. The Graaff-Reinet Museum succeeded in adding a unique and personal touch to the exhibition with an almost life-sized painting hanging above the fireplace and a pewter bust made by Mark Wilby, a local sculptor. Sobukwe's desk, family photographs, his pipes and ties are just some of the items on the display.

The Sobukwe Exhibition has received its fair share of publicity and has featured on international and national television, in magazines and newspapers and on national radio. The exhibition is frequented by many international visitors and also those who commemorate Sobukwe's death annually.

## References

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