

# Extracts from one of South African President Thabo Mbeki's most stirring speeches



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"I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land. I am an African! I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape, they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result. Today, as a country, we keep an audible silence about these ancestors of the generations that live, fearful to admit the horror of a former deed, seeking to obliterate from our memories a cruel occurrence which, in its remembering, should teach us not and never to be inhuman again. I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is a part of my essence. The stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slave master are a reminder embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done. I am a grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself are formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eye and suffers

the suffering of a simple peasant folk, death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, a dream in ruins. I am the child of Nongqause. I am he who made it possible to trade in the world markets in diamonds, gold, in the same food for which my stomach yearns. I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence. Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that: I am an African. I have seen our country torn asunder as these, all of whom are my people, engaged one another in a titanic battle; the one to redress a wrong that had been caused by one to another and the other, to defend the indefensible. I have seen what happens when one person has superiority of force over another, when the stronger appropriate to themselves the prerogative even to annul the injunction that God created all men and women in His image. I know what it signifies when race and colour are used to determine who is human and who subhuman ... I have experience of the situation in which race and colour is used to enrich some and impoverish the rest... I have seen concrete expression of the denial of the dignity of a human being emanating from the conscious, systemic and systematic oppressive and repressive activities of other human beings. There the victims parade with no mask to hide the brutish reality, the beggars, the prostitutes, the street children, those who seek solace in substance abuse, those who have to lose their sanity because to be sane is to invite pain. Perhaps the worst among these, who are my people, are those who have learnt to kill for a wage ... Among us prowl the products of our immoral and amoral past, killers who have no sense of the worth of human life, rapists who have disdain for the women of our country, animals who would seek to benefit from the vulnerability of the children, the disabled and the old, the rapacious who brook no obstacle in their quest for self enrichment. All this I know and know to be true because I am an African! Because of that, I am also able to state this fundamental truth that I am born of a people who are heroes and heroines, of a people who would not tolerate oppression. I am of a nation that would not allow that fear of death, torture, imprisonment, exile or persecution should result in the perpetuation of injustice. I am an African. I am born of the peoples of the continent of Africa ... The dismal shame of poverty, suffering and human degradation of my continent is a blight that we share. The blight on our happiness that derives from this and from our drift to the periphery of the ordering of human affairs leaves us in a persistent shadow of despair. Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now! Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace! However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!" Source: Mbeki, T. in (2003). Sowetan, 18 June, p.17.