

Laudation

spoken by the University Orator

Professor YN SELETI BAEd MA(Zambia), PhD(Dalhousie)

in presenting

Miriam Makeba

to the Chancellor at the

Graduation Ceremony

held in Durban

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UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

DURBAN & PIETERMARITZBURG CAMPUSES

Doctor of Music *honoris causa*

Miriam Makeba

Mr Chancellor

Mama Miriam Zenzile Makeba, Mama Africa, the regal songstress, the empress of African song, a tenacious fighter for civil rights for decades, President Mbeki's appointee as South Africa's extra-ordinary Ambassador, United Nations' Food and Agricultural (FAO) Ambassador, a fearless humanitarian, first African recording artist to win the Grammy Award, Mama Africa is a living legend whose music and politics will live forever, "she is music immortality" and a "divine diva".

Born Miriam Zenzile Makeba, the youngest of four children, in Prospect Township, Johannesburg, on 4 March 1932. Brought up by her mother after her father died when she was only six. The music talent was passed on from her mother, a full-time *sangoma* (traditional healer), who "could play the piano and African drums, sing and dance". Like many black legendary singers Miriam sang in her school and church choirs.

Mama Africa has never regarded her singing talent as separate from the anti-apartheid struggle, even as she maintains that she was never involved in politics but in "telling the truth". Her professional career took off when she teamed up with the jazz vocal group, the Manhattan Brothers in 1952. Her outstanding singing talent earned her a starring role in a township musical, *King Kong* in 1959. The play became an icon of anti-apartheid protest: a multiracial initiative that reminded Verwoerdian policy-

makers that black South Africans were richly talented human beings. In the same year she appeared in a documentary, *Come Back Africa* that brought her an invitation to the Venice Film Festival. After attending the screening of the film in Venice she flew to London where she met Harry Belafonte, her gateway to New York. Her performance at the Village Vanguard in New York brought her unparalleled acclaim culminating in singing at the famous birthday bash of President Kennedy when Marilyn Monroe gave her whispery *Happy Birthday Mr President* performance.

When the South African Consulate in New York stamped her passport "invalid", a four-week tour turned into 30 years of exile and struggle against the inhuman practice of apartheid. The darling of New York who had started fashion trends with her Afro hairstyles and traditional African clothes became homeless. Makeba continued to use singing as weapon against apartheid. She became known for her role as an anti-apartheid spokesperson during her years of exile. She addressed the United Nations on apartheid twice in this period. In 1992 she appropriately starred in the anti-apartheid film, *Sarafina*, whose premiere was attended by the then free Nelson Mandela.

Her career highlights include performing before dignitaries including JF Kennedy, Francois Mitterand, and not forgetting our own Nelson Mandela. She also had a private audience with Pope John Paul II. Her performance in the Vatican in 1995 was filmed and televised worldwide. In 1997 she was a special guest at the Harry Belafonte tribute in New York. In 1999 she sold out both the London Royal Festival Hall and the Paris's Olympic Theatre.

Ever since producing Pata Pata in 1956, Mama Africa has lived an extremely productive life. Some of the most celebrated productions include, *An Evening with Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba*, release of Pata Pata in 1967, the famous click song and the Grammy Award nominated Album, *Homeland*.

Mama Africa has a myriad of Awards; She has been honoured with honorary doctorates from Spellman College in Atlanta, the universities of Cape Town and Fort Hare. Other awards include Woman of the century by the Bedford Stuyvesant Community, Granted honorary citizenship of Guinea (1968), Los Angeles Certificate of Recognition in the field of music for her humanity and perseverance against apartheid (1986), Commandeur Des Artes et Lettres De La Republique Francaise, from the French government, Certificate of appreciation from the District of Columbia for her contribution to the quality of life for the oppressed and disadvantaged, Tuscaloosa, Alabama declares March 22 "Miriam Makeba Day", another "Miriam Makeba Day" proclaimed on June 16 by the City of Berkeley, Ca, (1991) Albert Luthuli-Martin Luther King Award (1992), "Miriam Makeba Street" named in Maule, Guadeloupe, Celebration of "Oneness Award" from the Creative Arts Foundation (Chicago), International Music Award from UNESCO, honoured by the stars for Stars Foundation (1993, Johannesburg), Highest Decoration presented by the President of Tunisia for her commitment to the just African cause; the Mgoma Lifetime Award from Zaire (DRC); Lifetime Award from Kora all Africa music Award; Lifetime Achievement Awards in Music and Art from the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation; and the latest, African Renaissance Star Walk in Durban, outside the City Hall.

Mama Africa continues to sing but also continues with her fearless humanitarian work. She devotes much of her time creating a home for destitute girls and raises funds to assist people living with Aids. Mama Africa continues to use music as a means of educating the public about the ravages of Aids. In *Homeland*, one of her latest albums, in the song Masakhane, she shares her vision of Ubuntu as she explains, "You help me and I help you and together we build our country". Mama Africa epitomises the motherly qualities of love, hope, care, patience, empathy, and forbearance of a mother of a nation.

Mpilonde Mama Africa!!! Long Live Mama Africa!!

