

## **Lesetja Kganyago: Honouring the life and legacy of a doyen of black business**

Address by Mr Lesetja Kganyago, Governor of the South African Reserve Bank, at the memorial service for the late Dr Sam Motsuenyane, Sandton, Johannesburg, 7 May 2024.

\* \* \*

Good afternoon, and let me once again share my deepest condolences to Mme Motsuenyane and the family, the Bakwena-ba-Modimosana farming clan and Dr Motsuenyane's many near and dear friends.

There are so many black men and women in South Africa who can relay a story of when they first heard about the legendary Sam Motsuenyane – starting as far back as the 60s, 70s, 80s and, of course, the decades that followed. I mentioned those three decades specifically because, as a black person, and an African in particular, it was painfully difficult to start a business, to operate in a politically volatile and economically hostile environment. But Dr Motsuenyane took the courageous decision to defy the apartheid policies aimed at excluding him from the formal economy. And defy the odds, he surely did.

I was a youngster when the tales of him and other doyens of black business were shared with me by our elders. There was such respect and pride when these stories were told of a man who was relentless in his drive for excellence, for success, for growth, for wealth creation, for economic development, and most importantly, for uplifting communities. For nearly eight decades, he worked tirelessly across so many areas – starting with the founding of Nafcoc in 1964, followed by a dream to establish a bank that would serve the unbanked and underserved African community. That perseverance and determination paid off. When I visited him in Winterveldt, he lamented the many members of his family and friends who told him to throw in the towel when it seemed they were not going to raise the capital needed to get a banking licence. But true entrepreneurs do not give up. Inspired by black business owners in the United States who had established their own bank, he and others set out to convince people from across the country to invest. Any amount, big or small, was welcomed as they moved one step closer to realising this dream. A genius strategic move sealed the deal.

In 1972, he, together with a group of businesspeople, set out to meet Anthony Keith, the Chairperson of Barclays Bank in London. Their clarity of vision and commercially driven strategy led Barclays to not only invest in the bank, but also provide training to its executive and staff. With such a powerful endorsement, they were able to raise the rest of the money from individuals and businesses from across the black community. They secured the R1 million needed to apply for a banking licence. But the officials at the SARB did not make it easy for the first black-only consortium seeking to open a bank. Even with the backing from Barclays, they were sent from pillar to post in what can only be described as efforts to block this application. Again, there was no giving up on their part. And so, whatever the SARB requested, they provided, until finally, and after the requirements were met, the banking licence was issued in 1975.

The story of African Bank has been one of highs and lows. He told me about their daily battles to manage customers, creditors, the regulator, suppliers, and their investors. He was at pains sharing the story about when the bank was placed into custodianship of then Trust Bank because they had broken exchange control rules. The bank had new shareholders and Nafcoc's influence had diminished significantly. Towards the end of his tenure as chairperson of the bank, he was no longer happy with the direction the institution was heading into, moving away from savings and focusing mostly on lending. It was his wish to claim the bank back and move it back towards its founding vision – to serve and provide financial services to the marginalised and underserved. It was for this reason that I opened a bank account with African Bank in Plein Street, Johannesburg, in the early 80s. It was an institution that I could relate to as a black South African, an institution that spoke to me in a manner that was respectful – it spoke to me, not about me. It was an institution I was proud to keep my savings at. Knowing what I know now about banking, especially if you have a savings account, I would not have opened that account. They were distributing marketing pamphlets in Hoek Street, incentivising customers to keep a minimum of R250 in their savings book for 12 months. At the end of 12 months they would add, I think, R50 to your balance. I took the bait, and it paid off. So there I was 12 months later with R300 in my savings account. The problem was that my father discovered that I had that amount in my account and decided to cut my weekly allowance. So much for creating a culture of savings.

Dr Motsuenyane was a man who led from the front. After the 1994 elections, he served as Leader of the House in the Senate, now known as the Council of Provinces. He put black economic empowerment firmly on Parliament's agenda. This led to various pieces of legislation. His talents in public service, together with a penchant for diplomacy and patience, led to the next move. After two years as a senator, Tata Nelson Mandela asked him to serve as Ambassador to the Gulf States – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen - a post he held until 2000.

Farming and agriculture – an equally deep passion of his, led to the Winterveldt Citrus Project, which brought together farmers to provide fruit to retailers across the country. He spoke to me about farming in the same way he did about starting Nafcoc and African Bank - with passion and pride.

When we met virtually during COVID-19, I was struck by his energy, and despite his age, he did not seem to be slowing down. Later, he wanted us to meet in person and wanted to come to the Reserve Bank offices. You can imagine my response – I told him that it was my duty to pay homage to him. That led to one of my most memorable experiences – spending time with Dr Sam Motsuenyane on his farm in Winterveldt. We spent the day talking about his love for agriculture, from cattle farming to his citrus farm, and his nursery that provided seedlings to other farms. But our conversation somehow kept circling back to African Bank. He told me that he had set aside his family money to buy shares in African Bank when it lists or sells shares. At some point, he asked me what my home totem was, and I told him, "Ke Mokwena wa meetse a pula". He stood up, shook my hand and said, "Le nna ke Mokwena". I knew the crocodiles had connected.

Reflecting on such a wonderful human being, it was fitting that he was honoured with the National Order of the Baobab (Gold) in recognition of his role in fostering the development of black-owned businesses and economic liberation. He lived an exemplary life, one that was in true service of humankind. Robala ka khotso Mokwena!