

Remembering Black Consciousness Leader Abram Onkgopotse Tiro

By SA History Online

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1 February 2023 marks the 49th anniversary of the assassination of Abram Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro, one of South Africa's foremost Black Consciousness leaders who was brutally killed by the apartheid government's state security in 1974.

Abram Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro was born on 9 November 1947 in Dinokana, a small village near Zeerust North West Province, South Africa. His parents were Nkokwe Peter and Moleseng Anna Tiro. His uncle (Ned Onkgopotse Tiro, who he was named after) and Bafedile Masoba (his aunt) had a deep influence on his upbringing and sharpened his leadership skills. Tiro spent time with his uncle where he assisted him with the running of a bakery business.

He started his schooling in 1951 at the Ikalafeng Primary School. The school was closed down as a result of strikes against passes for women. During the five months of disruption, he worked on a manganese mine for 75 cents per week as a dishwasher and general hand to raise funds to further his studies. He attended Naledi High School in Soweto, Johannesburg for two months but was arrested for a pass offence. He then went to Barolong High School in Mafikeng, North West Province, where he matriculated.

After completing Standard 10 he enrolled at 'Turfloop' (the University of the North, now called the University of Limpopo) for a degree in the Humanities. Here he was elected president of the Student Representative Council (SRC) in his final year. At a graduation ceremony in 1972, Tiro delivered a speech that sharply criticised the Bantu Education Act of 1953. This later became known as the "Turfloop Testimony". Following the speech Tiro was expelled for his outspokenness and never readmitted.

In 1973, Tiro became involved in the activities of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). He took over as the South African Students Organisation's (SASO) Permanent Organiser after the banning of SASO/Black Peoples Convention (BPC) leaders in the same year (1973) and was elected the President of the Southern African Students' Movement (SASM).

After being expelled, Tiro was offered a post as a history teacher by Lekgau Mathabathe, the Headmaster at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto. It is here that he introduced his pupils to the BCM's philosophy and started a campaign to encourage students to question the validity and content of the history books prescribed by the Department of Bantu Education.

Tiro was instrumental in establishing the South African Students Movement (SASM) in April 1972 in the same year he was elected the Honorary President of the movement at a congress in Lesotho. After six months at Morris Isaacson, the Principal of was put under pressure by the Apartheid government to fire him.

Travelling to all parts of Southern Africa, including Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana, Tiro won more support for the Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy. However, towards the end of 1973 he found out that the police were planning to arrest him, and he fled to Botswana, where he played a leading role in the activities of SASM, SASO and the BPC. While living a simple life at the Roman Catholic Mission at Kgale, a village about 20km from Gaborone, he was instrumental in forging links with militant revolutionary groups such

as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1973.

Tiro believed that “the primary source of income for Blacks is land, and that land had to be restored to the dispossessed”.

On 1 February 1974, while still in Botswana, Tiro was completing an application form to continue his studies through Unisa when a student known only as Lawrence handed him a parcel supposedly forwarded by the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF). As he opened it, a parcel bomb exploded, killing him instantly.

Tiro was buried in Botswana because the then Apartheid regime would not allow his body to be buried at his home in Dinokana Village. The Tiro Family with the support of the Azanian People’s Organisation (AZAPO) requested the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to assist them in bringing his remains back into the country for re-burial.

On the 20 March 1998, the President of AZAPO, Mosibudi Mangena, Tiro’s mother and family members received the remains of Tiro at the border post between South Africa and Botswana. Abram Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro was finally laid to rest at Dinokana Village on 22 March 1998.

Gordon Winter, a spy for the Apartheid Government, revealed in his book, *Inside Boss*, that Tiro was killed by the Z-Squad, a Bureau of State Security (BOSS) covert unit. The TRC failed to investigate Tiro’s death.

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