

Keynote address by the Patron of the TMF, Thabo Mbeki, at the BMF corporate dinner, delivered on his behalf by Professor Barney Pityana, June 11, 2015

Programme Director,
The President of the BMF, Mr Bonang Mohale (in absentia);
Ms Koko Khumalo, Deputy President of the BMF and our host tonight,
Former Presidents of the BMF present, especially the doyen and one of the founders of the BMF, Prof Lumkile Nkuhlu;
Board members of the BMF; The Managing Director and executive Staff;
Provincial Chairpersons present and provincial executives of BMF;
The youth and student sections of the BMF;
Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to thank the leadership of the Black Management Forum (BMF) for inviting me to speak at this corporate dinner.

I must apologise most sincerely for my inability to be present and thank Professor Barney Pityana for agreeing to present these remarks on my behalf and thus become, so to speak, my mouthpiece, even though, as one of our country's eminent academics, I should have deferred to his wisdom on the matters you have sought my views.

I should have deferred to Prof Pityana in part because, as the late President Julius Nyerere said when he addressed our National Assembly on October 16, 1997: "my thoughts, unfortunately, don't change, so a lot of what I am going to say, some of you will have heard before, but some of you have not."

I propose then, to return to a subject I have discussed with the BMF and our country before, this being the role of the managerial echelons of our society, the *mandarins* who constitute your membership.

In this regard, nine years ago on the 30th anniversary of the BMF, the 30 June - 6 July 2006 edition of ANC Today carried a Letter from the President entitled: "The revolutionary tasks of the *Mandarins*".

The letter argued the need further to develop the managerial echelon of our national leadership, the better for this important section of our society to play the critical role it must in the fundamental social transformation of our country, in accordance with the principles stipulated by our Constitution for managing our system of Public Administration.

These principles include such important elements and values as:

- **a high standard of professional ethics;**
- **efficient, economic and effective use of resources;**
- **orientation to development;**
- **responsiveness to the needs of the people;**

- **encouragement of public participation in policy-making;**
- **development of the potential of all public servants, through good human resource management and career development; and,**
- **proper accountability of the public servants.**

The letter cited comments by the founding President of the BMF, Eric Mafuna, who said, at the time that: "I look back in disappointment that we have not produced our own black managers from this Forum...Where are the institutions that train young black managers? BMF hasn't even produced a single admin clerk, yet we're 30 years down the line... We are reaping the benefits of democracy, but we have stopped planting."

Another founder member of the BMF, Reuel Khoza, had also said: "I submit that the challenge facing BMF, 30 years after its inception, is how to effectively combat the forces of institutional entropy that, seemingly inevitably, undermine organisational effectiveness and sap institutional vitality. We dare not allow BMF to atrophy."

Accordingly, the letter challenged the BMF to respond practically to the challenges posed by the two eminent leaders of the BMF.

Addressing the BMF Southern Africa Young Professionals Development Summit in Cape Town on August 19, 2010, I reiterated what I said four years earlier in 2006 and said: "we [must] recognise the reality that Africa will not achieve her renaissance if she does not develop and retain this cadre of leaders", the *mandarins*.

In this context, I suggested that, among other things, "our societies must put in place ways and means to ensure the accountability of the *mandarins* to society as a whole, to ensure that they act not in their selfish professional and personal interest, but to meet the objectives of the sector and society they serve."

I drew attention to the socio-political questions that attach to the achievement of this objective, particularly the question whether the *mandarins* "constitute a social echelon that is distinct and exists ... for itself."

The conscious existential condition implicit in the state of "being for itself" as opposed to "being in itself," the state of mere existence, applies to the managerial echelons of society, who are in any case part of the intelligentsia and for that reason, have an obligation continuously to reflect on the trajectory society negotiates, as it does to all members of society. There is and surely must be a greater purpose to life than mere existence.

Specifically to address the conundrum inherent in the question whether the *mandarins* constitute a conscious social echelon, at the BMF Young Professionals Development Summit, I said that: "The answer to this question will also have to take into account that ... there must surely be a requirement that the managers, the *mandarins*, must work every day to achieve objectives that would ensure the success of the institutions they lead, as what, in the public sector, is characterised as Accounting Officers."

I suggested that "as the African *mandarins*:

- you should continue to combine in your professional organisations to provide the possibility for you to advance your skills as *mandarins*;
- you should combine to assert your unique interests as such *mandarins*, ready to live only on your salaries, which in their quantum must represent your special status as a unique and qualified echelon of the African professionals;
- you must insist that those who employ you must present you with a vision of what needs to be achieved, consistent with the realisation of the goal of the renaissance of Africa;
- you must insist that you must be provided with legally guaranteed performance contracts which would both define your tasks, which you would respect, and would protect you from arbitrary and illegal action; and,
- you should insist that the governments, states, corporations and other entities you serve as managers should provide the necessary legislative and administrative framework which would enable you, the *mandarins*, to perform your tasks without fear or favour, subject to the national legal regime, for the success of the entities you lead.”

Hopefully, the BMF will sooner or later report to its members and our society as a whole, what it has done and will continue to do to address the challenges placed at its feet by Eric Mafuna and Roel Khoza nearly a decade ago.

In doing so, the BMF might specifically inform its members and society about what building materials it has brought and will continuously contribute to the construction site to build a society based on the architectural framework laid down in the constitution.

In keeping with a wise internationally established convention pursued by many former Heads of State and Government, I have for many years avoided commenting on local political events and processes.

At the risk of attracting the accusation of cowardice, I would like to suggest that in addition to what I have already proposed that you reflect upon above, like any social formation, the BMF cannot avoid discussion of some worrying tendencies in our society; and, with respect to each, should attempt to answer the question: “What is to be done?”

These include but are not limited to:

- the tendency of a growing laxity, indeed recklessness, in social and political discourse which manifests in crude rhetoric across the divide; what the Nigerians call “over-heating the polity,” with its negative effect on the promotion of national consensus to the challenges of the day;
- the tendency of conduct in public life which manifests a gaping chasm between word and deed, and its effect on the nation’s psychological well-being;

- a tendency of resort to the comfort of group-rhetoric which bears little if any relationship with actual practice and in turn produces and promotes complacency which impedes the achievement of strategic national goals;
- a tendency for apparent pre-occupation of (some) leaders in the political, business and civil society spheres with sectoral interests, to the detriment of the national interest;
- the tendency by some in our society to re-ignite narrow exclusive colonial and apartheid ethnic identities with the potential for social polarisation;
- the deeply corrosive tendency to reduce, aggregate and seek to organise social relations and orient life itself to material possessions, even if these are acquired by means illegal and unethical;
- the tendency to personalise social and political phenomena for short-term partisan gains, to over-simplify deep-rooted national and global fault lines, to elevate secondary socio-political contradictions over primary ones with the obvious result that solutions elude us, thus inadvertently contributing to social apathy; and, more directly, and not a tendency,

Assuming that you agree that the interests of the country and the Continent come before those of your own, or those that might occupy positions of leadership in various spheres of social life, this will necessarily also mean that you will have to engage in debates about which choices or decisions serve to advance or impede the interests of the country and Continent.

Unavoidably, you will have to answer the question, 'What is to be done?' which might mean, among other things, having to shepherd the 'street-wise,' who are prone to taking the backstreets, back to the main roads where traffic rules apply.

You will all recall Eric Hobsbawm's definition in his dramatically titled lecture, '*Barbarism: A User's Guide*,' – "The term 'street-wise' expresses ... the actual adaptation of people to living in a society without the rules of civilisation."

In addition to shepherding the 'street-wise,' you will also have to contend with articulate and eloquent counsel, which repeatedly advises a de-contextualised universalism which, in reality, does not help to negotiate the specific fault lines imposed by our specific historical circumstances.

At the same time, you will be challenged to develop the necessary self-criticism as would help us to avoid entrenching our historical fault lines and creating new ones.

In this regard, as part of our society's intelligentsia, the BMF's own history, which lingers into the present, forbids it the luxury of neutrality on the trajectory our country and Continent take.

As you respond to each issue in the course of your calling as agents of transformation, you will do well to reflect deeply upon the words of the late Palestinian intellectual and activist, Edward Said, who said this, in his 1993 Reith Lecture: "Every intellectual whose métier is articulating and representing specific views, ideas, ideologies, logically aspires to making them work in a society. The intellectual who claims only to write for him or

herself, or for the sake of pure learning or abstract science, is not to be, and must not be believed.”

To remain relevant to itself and the wider society, the BMF will have to take principled positions on an avalanche of issues precisely to ensure that the goal of freedom is realised.

This will require, first and foremost, **organised** and **bold** leadership and **a conscious membership** that is willing to stand by and be loyal to principle and to defend it even when the consequences are personal vilification, at least, and unemployment and ‘black listing’ in their professions and elsewhere, at worst.

Such a membership and leadership would come to appreciate Frederick Douglass, the African American anti-slavery campaigner, and many other freedom fighters on the Continent and the Diaspora.

In speech delivered on August 3, 1857 at Canandaigua, New York, Douglass said, among other things, that: “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle.

The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all - absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress.

Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men [and women] who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.”

Thank you.

Gallagher Estate, Sandton, 11 June 2015