

SPEECH BY REUBEN SIVE ON THE OPENING OF AN EXHIBITION OF THE
WORKS OF LUCAS SITHOLE AT THE RAND AFRIKAANS UNIVERSITY IN
JOHANNESBURG ON AUGUST 15, 1979.

MR. VICE CHANCELLOR,
LUCAS SITHOLE, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

WHEN, IN THAT GREAT AND ANCIENT CITY-STATE OF ATHENS,
PERICLES MADE HIS IMMORTAL FUNERAL ORATION UPON THE BATTLEFIELD
OF A GREEK VICTORY, HIS OPENING REMARKS ON THAT DOLEFUL OCCASION
WERE:-

"MY FIRST WORDS SHALL BE FOR OUR ANCESTORS, FOR IT IS BOTH JUST
TO THEM AND SEEMLY THAT ON AN OCCASION SUCH AS THIS, OUR TRIBUTE
OF MEMORY SHALL BE PAID TO THEM."

CENTURIES LATER,

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE ACCUMULATED VAST STORES OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE ARTS
AND THE SCIENCES IN A HOST OF COMMUNICABLE LANGUAGES, IN INSTITUTIONS
SUCH AS THIS RAND AFRIKAANS UNIVERSITY,

ALTHOUGH WE HAVE HAD THE BENEFIT OF NEW MAN-CREATED ENVIRONMENTS
AND ACCUMULATED IMPROVED TECHNICAL SKILLS AND MATERIALS,
WE REMAIN, BY THE IRREVOCABLE FACT OF OUR BIRTH, PART OF OUR ANCESTORS,
CONSTRAINED BY THE GENETIC MATERIAL INHERITED BY US FROM THEM,
UTILISED AND TO BE UTILISED, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE.

LUCAS SITHOLE, BY THE GRACE OF GOD IS OF ZULU/SWAZI ANCESTRAL ORIGIN, AND WAS BORN NO MORE THAN FIFTY KILOMETERS FROM WHERE HE NOW STANDS.

HIS FATHER WAS A BIG STRONG MAN, WHO WORKED FOR THE LOCAL MILLER, STACKING AT HARVEST TIME, THE BAGS OF INCOMING MEALIES, AND THEN THE OUTGOING BAGS OF MEALIE MEAL, UNTIL BUSINESS MERGERS, MECHANISATION AND AGE DEPOSED HIM. HIS MOTHER WAS AN EAST RAND WASHERWOMAN WHO OFTEN DEPUTED THE ADOLESCENT LUCAS TO FETCH THE DIRTY LINEN IN THE NEARBY TOWN AND TO RETURN THE CLEAN.

THE ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INTRICACIES THAT PERMEATED LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA SOME FORTY YEARS AGO, CAUSED HIS FATHER, AN INDVODZA AND HIS MOTHER, AN UMFANTANA TO SEND LITTLE LUCAS, THEIR UMFANA TO LIVE WITH HIS GRANDMOTHER, HIS UMGOGO IN FAR AWAY SWAZILAND.

LITTLE DID THEY KNOW WHAT GOOD FORTUNE IT WOULD BRING TO THOSE OF US ASSEMBLED HERE TODAY. HIS UMGOGO WAS A POTTER OF REPUTE IN HER REGION AND EVEN MADE EXTREMELY LARGE DRINKING POTS FOR THE KING'S FAMILY. WHILE SHE WORKED, THE UMFAAN LUCAS FELT WITHIN HIS FINGERS, THE WISH WITHIN THE CLAY TO BE SCULPTED INTO FORM.

LUCAS TELLS HOW HE SAW HIS UMGOGO, WHILE MAKING A POT SO BIG, SHE HAD NEED TO PUT HER HEAD AND HANDS INSIDE THE POT TO MOULD IT PROPERLY. WHEN HIS GRANDMOTHER SAW THE SCULPTURE THAT LUCAS HAD MADE OF THIS SCENE, HE RECEIVED A SPANKING FOR SHE THOUGHT HE HAD MADE FUN OF HER.

BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT WAS HER STORY TELLING, AND SHE WAS AN OUTSTANDING STORY TELLER, WHICH HAS HAD THE PROFOUNDEST INFLUENCE UPON LUCAS SITHOLE.

IN SWAZI CULTURE, THE EMADLOTI (THE ANCESTRAL SPIRITS) DO NOT MANIFEST EXCEPT IN THE FORM OF SNAKES. AND SO HIS UMGOGO TOLD TALES OF THE SNAKE IN THE LAKE, ALWAYS THERE BUT NEVER SEEN; OF HOW THE SNAKE OF THE LAKE MATES WITH THE SNAKE OF THE HEAVEN, BRINGING JOY TO THE ANCESTRAL SPIRITS WHICH MANIFESTED IN THE RAINS COMING DOWN TO PROVIDE THE CROPS FOR THE NEXT YEAR.

LUCAS, NOW A LIZELE RETURNED TO SCHOOL IN SPRINGS, WON AN ART BURSARY GIVEN BY ROTARY WHICH ALLOWED HIM TO STUDY AT INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS AT VLAKFONTEIN AND PRETORIA.

IT WAS HERE THAT THE UNKNOWN INSTRUCTOR, MR. KUX, TAUGHT HIM VARIOUS ASPECTS OF CRAFTMANSHIP IN WOOD, CEMENT AND METAL. LATER IN THE EARLY 1950'S, HE WAS ABLE TO ATTEND THE POLLY STREET ART CENTRE, IN A MOST UNPRETENTIOUS HALL, FINANCED BY THE JOHANNESBURG

CITY COUNCIL. POLLY STREET HAS PROVED TO HAVE BEEN THE LAUNCHING PAD FOR THE FIRST LARGE SCALE VENTURE OF URBAN BLACK SOUTH AFRICANS INTO THE ARTS. AS IN THE WORKSHOPS OF BYGONE FLORENCE, THE MASTERS IN CECIL SKOTNES AND SIDNEY KHUMALO, THEMSELVES UNKNOWN AT THE TIME, TAUGHT THE YOUNG BLACKS THE WAYS AND MEANS TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.

NOW LUCAS WAS A YOUNG MAN. WHAT A DIFFICULT PERIOD IT WAS FOR HIM TO LIVE IN A HOUSEHOLD PRODUCING LITTLE OR NO INCOME, UTILISING HIS MEAGRE EARNINGS FROM HIS SALES, TO BUY THE IMPLEMENTS THAT HIS ART REQUIRED, SUCH AS THE CRAYONS, THE KNIVES, THE WOOD. YET ALTHOUGH NEITHER HIS FATHER NOR HIS MOTHER QUITE UNDERSTOOD WHERE LUCAS WAS GOING, THEY TACITLY SUPPORTED HIM AND ALLOWED HIM TO PURSUE HIS ART.

THE YEARS, LIKE BLACK OXEN, HAVE PASSED ON THEIR WAY. MANY OF LUCAS' FAMILY HAVE JOINED THEIR ANCESTORS, BUT THEIR INFLUENCE REMAINS. AS LUCAS DOES HIS SCULPTURING IN THE FORESTS, LISTENING TO THE WIND AS IT SINGS TO THE LEAVES IN THE TREES, HE DRAWS HIS INSPIRATION BOTH FROM THE EMLOTI (THE ANCESTRAL SPIRITS) AND MANIFESTS THEM IN SNAKE LIKE FORM AND FROM MKHULUMNGANDE (THE MYSTERIOUS CREATOR) WHO PROVIDES ALL THE OTHER FORMS OF EXPRESSION. YET, SO MUCH DOES HE STRIVE FOR PERFECTION AS HE SEES IT, THAT HE IS KNOWN TO HAVE DESTROYED COMPLETED WORKS IN DISGUST WHICH HE BELIEVES DO NOT ACCORD WITH HIS HIGH SET STANDARD.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, HOW DOES THIS GENTLE MAN CREATE WITH HUMAN HANDS SUCH BEAUTIFUL OBJECTS. LET OUR OWN POETESS, ELISABETH EYBERS, WHOSE ANCESTORS TOO HAVE RANGED THIS LAND, EXPRESS, IN FAR BETTER TERMS THAN I, OUR APPRECIATION TO THE SCULPTOR, LUCAS SITHOLE.

"GEEN VAKMAN KON OOIT KUNDIGER DAN HY
DIE BEITELLEM AANHITS MET HAMERKLOTS
OM BLOOT TE LE, TE SUIWER, TE BEVRY
WAT GOD GEKERKER HOU IN BRUTE ROTS
TOT DIT EENDAG GEDAAG WORD EN ONTGLIP.
HY TAS BEGEERLIK NA DIE SKU KONTOER
BINNE DIE ONVERBIDDELIKE KLIP
EN RUS NIE VOOR 'N MARMER DOGLID ROER."

LUCAS HAS TOLD ME OF HIS DREAM OF THE LAND IN WHICH WE ALL LIVE, THAT PERHAPS THROUGH ART, WE MAY ALL OBTAIN A UNITY IN LIFE OUT OF THE DIVERSITY OF OUR ANCESTORS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

IT IS ONLY THROUGH THEIR CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT THAT ARTISTS OF ALL AGES OBTAIN THEIR SPIRITUAL INSPIRATION. - HOW DIFFERENTLY DO LEONARDO DA VINCI AND MARC CHAGALL INTERPRET THEIR VISIONS OF THE BIBLE AS THEY HAVE COME TO KNOW IT. THE GENIUS OF PICASSO IS SEEN IN HIS ABILITY TO INTERPRET THE SIMPLE FORMS OF THE PLAIN LIVING BUT COMPLEX WORKING PEOPLE WHO LIVED AROUND HIM.

AND SO WITH LUCAS SITHOLE. CAN WE AS WE LOOK AROUND, GIVE A LABEL, A CAPTION TO HIS FORM OF ART - AFRICAN ART, TRIBAL ART, FOLK ART, WESTERN ART. WHAT USE IS SUCH SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIATION? ART IS THE EXPRESSION OF THE MAN HIMSELF WITH HIS ANCESTRAL INSPIRATION, RETAINING HIS OWN SIMPLICITY AND ORIGINALITY. WANDER AROUND THEN, SEE THEM, EXAMINE THEM, INSPECT THEM, IF YOU WISH TO UNDERSTAND YOUR AFRICA.

LUCAS SITHOLE HAS NEVER READ THE ENGLISH POET BURKE, BUT HE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT BURKE MEANT WHEN HE SAID:-

"PEOPLE WILL NOT LOOK FORWARD TO POSTERITY WHO NEVER LOOK BACKWARD TO THEIR ANCESTORS."

HERE IS THE MAN, LUCAS SITHOLE.

IT IS FOR YOU TO JUDGE HIS REAL WORTH. TO GIVE YOU THIS OPPORTUNITY, IT GIVES ME GREAT PLEASURE TO DECLARE THIS EXHIBITION OPEN.