

FIRST SEK MQHAYI LANGUAGE CONFERENCE HOSTED BY AMATHOLE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY AND THE UNIVERSITY OF FORT HARE

By Judy Ngoloyi

(PICTURE TAKEN BY DIMAKATSO PHOLO)

EAST LONDON: Respecting and honouring authors who had made a positive impact on African languages came under scrutiny at the first Samuel Edward Krune (SEK) Mqhayi Language Conference held in East London on 26 to 27th November 2009, in a conference organized by Amathole District Municipality in partnership with the University of Fort Hare. “Isixhosa Literature” was the name of the game.

The aim of the conference was to commemorate Mqhayi’s life and those of other early African intellectuals whose writings are reflected all over the world. SEK Mqhayi is considered by many to be the father of IsiXhosa poetry. His contribution to print media was enormous. Newspapers such as *Izwi labantu*, *Imvo and Umteteleli wabantu* earned him the title of “Imbongi yesizwe jikelele” or The Poet of the Nation. Mqhayi’s writings include the classic, *Ityala lamawele*, *Law Suit of the Twins* and his autobiography *Umqhayi wase Ntabozuko*, amongst others.

Welcoming the guests who hailed from various corners of South Africa, the Executive Mayor of ADM, Alderman Sakhumzi Somyo, said intellectuals which include SEK Mqhayi distinguished themselves in different fields.

Somyo said Mqhayi was proud of his language, heritage and furthermore of being Umxhosa. “As a journalist he was always called to comment on political issues as he was also instrumental in the formation of the ANC by using his pen. Through his writings he managed to unite different tribes,” he said. Somyo said first SEK

Mqhayi's language conference is a continuation of a programme which seeks to celebrate our heritage in different ways.

In his opening remarks the Vice Chancellor of Unisa Professor Barney Pityana, who is the grandson of Mqhayi, said there was a time when one could hardly go to school without being fed on the staple food of SEK Mqhayi. He said during those days from the earliest hours children had to recite Mqhayi's nursery rhymes like, *Ngubani na lo? Nguyeye. Uhamba nabani? Noyise* but by the same token they appreciated the beauty and the richness of the Xhosa words. Pityana said as Mqhayi's grandson he prefers to remember him as a giant of an intellectual ahead of his time. Pityana said Mqhayi was a unifier as his concerns did not only represent those of black people but he was also concerned about white people.

The conference was attended by Mqhayi's family members who were thrilled to be part of this historic event. Family spokesperson Luvuyo Mqhayi took the opportunity to make a special plea to government. He appealed to government to give them the title the deed of *Ntabozuko*, the place where this great author was buried.

Mqhayi said institutions of higher learning such as the University of South Africa are intending to assist in building a museum at *Ntabozuko*. "The museum will be of benefit to the people of Berlin and the surrounding areas. Even with assistance from government as a family, we are ready to turn around *Ntabozuko* to a place of hope," said Mqhayi.

Delivering a message of support, Chairperson of Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders, Chief Ngangomhlaba Matanzima, encouraged young people and academics to remember the giant steps of a national poet by writing until the ink runs dry. He posed a challenge to ADM, Department of Traditional Affairs, and the House of

Traditional Affairs to study Mqhayi's book one by one. Mantanzima said by doing that they should be in a position to deal with the challenges that are confronting various communities today. "It would be important for us to make use of them as a tool that will act as a solution to our daily lives," said Matanzima.