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### ***Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu's Black Prophetic Fire for Justice***

Obituary by: Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Professor and Chair in Epistemologies of the Global South University of Bayreuth, Germany.

Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu was never like the Shakespearian poor player thrust upon the world stage only to be heard no more. Archbishop Tutu will never die. His tales and deeds were radically different from those often told and acted by idiots full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Archbishop Tutu was a man of substance. His life and legacy read like an open textbook and indeed drama of commitment to struggles against all forms of oppression, from anti-apartheid to anti-homophobia. His name is indelibly written in annals of history. His voice of freedom is heard even if he is quiet. Like the figure of great generals, Archbishop Tutu's name is etched in the vortex of battlefields of history.

It was inevitable that when Archbishop Tutu retired to a long sleep on 26 December 2021, a plethora of obituaries and critical reflections on his life and legacy, from within South Africa and beyond, flooded the world of letters and cyberspace. Critics, admirers, and even cynics could not keep quiet, as Archbishop Tutu's retirement to a long sleep meant something to all of them. Archbishop Tutu's life of struggle carried the hopes and aspirations of the multitudes. Such a figure, such a life, was bound to inspire some and disappoint others. What is apparent from the flurry of obituaries is that the life and legacy of Archbishop Tutu has indeed become a living archive and a mega-mall of lessons and insights to guide South Africa and the world at large.

### **Archbishop Tutu's new humanism**

Archbishop Tutu was born into a world where the colonizer's model had bequeathed apartheid colonialism to South Africa. The Afrikaner colonialists together with their British accomplices euphemistically called it "separate development." But in the words of Albert Luthuli, another luminary of the liberation struggle in South Africa, apartheid colonialism was nothing other than a tragic failure of imagination. Through racism, genocides, enslavement, colonialism, heteropatriarchal normativity, sexism, and racial capitalism; Europe in the memorable words of Frantz Fanon had proved incapable of "bringing to triumphant birth" "new humanism." Instead, what Europe delivered in Fanon's

words were “only a succession of negations of man and an avalanche of murders.” It is this reality that provoked Archbishop Tutu and others like Martin Luther King jr, Nelson Mandela, and Albert Luthuli to step up on the South African and indeed world stage not only to condemn racism, enslavement, and colonialism but also to dare to invent radical humanism predicated on what Fanon proposed as “collaboration between men in those tasks which increase the sum total of humanity.”

Therefore, what Archbishop Tutu stood for, fought for, and made practical efforts to invent through such mechanism as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), is better rendered as reworlding the world from the underside of Euromodernity. The underside is what Fanon termed “the zone of non-being.” It is a colonially invented existential zone in which the majority of the world designated by apartheid colonialism as “kaffir” were pushed, where “life was brutish, nasty and short” if one invoked the words of Thomas Hobbes. The apartheid colonialism called these overcrowded zones “Bantustans.” What must be noted is that colonialism in general had materialised as a planetary process through which European colonialists had a grand imperial plan to claim the planet earth as theirs. This is why the colonialists evolved the paradigm of “discovery” in its imperial endeavours to render those they designated as “Black’ and “indigenous” into a temporality call “past” so as to deny them a “present” and a “future.” If this colonial and imperial global design is understood, then the efforts of Archbishop Desmond Tutu must also be pitched at the planetary level where the intention was to invent a better world through the deployment of the value of “ubuntu” (compositional/common humanity).

That Archbishop and Mandela’s initiatives and efforts failed cannot be blamed on them as individuals because that gives a wrong impression that there was an expectation that they were saints sent to deliver the multitudes from the evils of racism, genocides, colonialism, heteropatriarchal normativity, and racial capitalism; single-handedly both Archbishop Tutu and Mandela never claimed sainthood. Three main factors accounted to their failure. The first is that they dared to invent a new humanity within a modern world that has consistently remained impervious to deimperialization, decolonization and depatriarchization. The second is that the new humanism that they envisioned became predicated on the good will of men and women who had other agendas including maintaining the colonizer’s vision of the world by other means.

The third is that the ANC government, because of not being born out of outright victory and its own ineptitude, could not implement some of the radical aspects of the TRC to do with reparations, closing the poverty gap, and socio-

economic rights. But there is no doubt that the overarching spirit that kept Archbishop Tutu fighting for liberation of the oppressed and for a better world, is better termed the “black prophetic fire,” to borrow a concept from the leading African American intellectual and humanist Cornel West. Such a fire cannot be reduced to bean counting, displayed by those who end up criticising Archbishop Tutu and Mandela as sell-outs.

### **Archbishop Tutu’s Black prophetic fire**

Five features define Black prophetic fire. The first is to be on fire for justice. Archbishop Tutu embodied this spirit. The second is the cultivation of a “We-consciousness” akin to “ubuntu” as opposed to an “I-consciousness” which is predicated on individualism and present-day consumerism. The third element is to put “premium on serving the community, lifting others, and finding joy in empowering others” to quote Cornel West. The fourth is to relentlessly raise one’s voice in pursuit of liberation and freedom of the oppressed. Archbishop Tutu’s life and legacy was that of a vociferous freedom fighter, always speaking truth to power during the anti-apartheid period and after. Archbishop Tutu himself had this to say: “I wish I could shut up, but I can’t, and I won’t.” This is how the Black prophetic fire manifest itself. The fifth element is that the Black prophetic fire is local in content and international in character. This is why one found Archbishop Tutu speaking against oppression of Palestinians by Israel and calling for the prosecution of former British prime minister Tony Blair and former US president George Bush for crimes against humanity linked to their military invasion of Iraq.

### **Archbishop Tutu’s ecclesiastical nationalism and nation-building**

Nobody can forget how Archbishop Tutu worked tirelessly to make the transition of South Africa from apartheid colonialism to democracy, particularly how he boldly brought the ecclesiastical resources to the project of nation-building. While many theologians prefer to issue sermons from the comforts of their temples, synagogues, and churches—thus remaining theoretical; Archbishop Tutu demonstrated that what he preached from the pulpit could be practically usable in re-building fragmented societies emerging from protracted wars. It is from this perspective that his Chairing of the TRC must be appreciated as a daring to invent the future. While Thomas Sankara posited that inventing a future requires some element of madness, Archbishop Tutu demonstrated that nation-building also requires spirituality and mobilization of African positive values of ubuntu.

Thus, in his long sleep, Archbishop Tutu continues to speak to the world. His words continue to minister to us. Archbishop Tutu's life and legacy captured the world's imagination, and once it is etched in people's imagination, he lives forever as a combatant for justice and an embodiment of Black prophetic fire.

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