

## CITATION FOR PIUS LANGA

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By Professor Paul Maylam

From court messenger to Chief Justice of South Africa. That has been the journey of Pius Langa – a remarkable, perhaps incomparable, rise up through the judicial ranks. Pius Langa's life and career can be an inspiration to any young South African, showing how it is possible, through self-reliance, dedication and resilience, to make one's way up from a humble background to the very pinnacle of a profession.

The second of seven children, he grew up in what was then the Eastern Transvaal. In childhood experiencing material poverty – his father's meagre earnings as a Protestant pastor insufficient to keep his son in school beyond the age of fourteen. Pius then resorting to private study, taking on a part-time job in a shirt factory in order to pay his own way through matric. This same resilient spirit later earning him an LL.B. through UNISA – for which he studied night after night for years in a dingy backyard room in Stanger.

His entry into the judicial world was first as a court messenger and then an interpreter in the Department of Justice – experience that opened his eyes to the deep flaws in the apartheid legal system. He saw magistrates failing to give the accused a fair hearing, and witnessed clear miscarriages of justice. Now came the realisation that he had to qualify as a lawyer so as to be equipped to fight for those who could not defend themselves. This realisation, together with his own early-life exposure to poverty, racism, and oppression, made him determined to achieve this goal – hence the years of study.

From interpreter he rose to become a prosecutor and magistrate; then, in 1977, an advocate of the Natal Supreme Court. Now

Pius Langa was in a position to act for the oppressed and voiceless. This inevitably meant a heavy involvement in political trials, his clients including civic bodies, trade unions, and individuals facing political charges.

In the climate of the 1980s and early 1990s, apartheid's dying years, the law and politics became ever more intertwined. And so it proved for Pius Langa – becoming a founder member of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers, serving as its president from 1988 to 1994; also a founder member of the Release Mandela Committee; and deeply involved in the structures of the United Democratic Front.

With this legal and political experience he was, not surprisingly, in the early 1990s drawn into the negotiating process prior to South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, serving as a member of the ANC's constitutional committee and helping to draft the party's proposals for a new constitution.

This involvement made him an obvious appointee as a judge of the Constitutional Court in 1994. He recalls the Court's first judgement, leading to the abolition of the death penalty, and the excitement this judgement brought to the members of the Court. Three years later he became Deputy President of the Court, and then Deputy Chief Justice in 2001 – the prelude to his elevation in 2005 to the position of Chief Justice.

During this rise to the pinnacle of the judiciary, other demands have been made on Pius Langa's services: member of the Human Rights Commission for several years; chairperson of a commission investigating the 1998 Lesotho election; sitting on a board mandated to help transform the police services; chairing a technical committee to examine health legislation; chairing the Southern African Judges Commission. Add to this commitments beyond southern Africa: sent to Fiji in 2000 as a special Commonwealth envoy to assist the country's transition to

democracy; member of constitutional review commissions in Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Tanzania.

Formerly Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, currently Chancellor of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Pius Langa is more used to doing the capping. Today he is the one being capped – and not for the first time – he is becoming a collector of honorary doctorates.

One can see why he has been so honoured. According to one of South Africa's top advocates the Chief Justice has made the judiciary a more transformed and humane institution. His commitment to the due process of the law, his firm support for freedom of speech, and his determined defence of an independent judiciary have been unwavering. A visionary who goes beyond these fundamental values of his profession and sees that the law has a crucial part to play in meeting development challenges: "The Constitution and the legal system", he himself has stated, "form the philosophic and institutional basis on which the developmental effort will have to build". A firm believer, too, in "equality jurisprudence", committed to correcting past wrongs by ensuring that fundamental human values underpin legal judgements.

An unassuming family man – married to Thandekile and father of six children – Chief Justice Pius Langa has lived out these values. There has been his long-standing involvement in community projects, assisting civic organisations and residents associations – work facilitated by his remarkable linguistic versatility – an ability to converse in six languages – and by an intuitive understanding of the hopes and fears, grievances and needs of others. Rhodes University is proud to honour an acute thinker, man of wisdom, linguist, constitutionalist, and ardent defender of human rights.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to ask you to confer on Pius Nkonzo Langa the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.