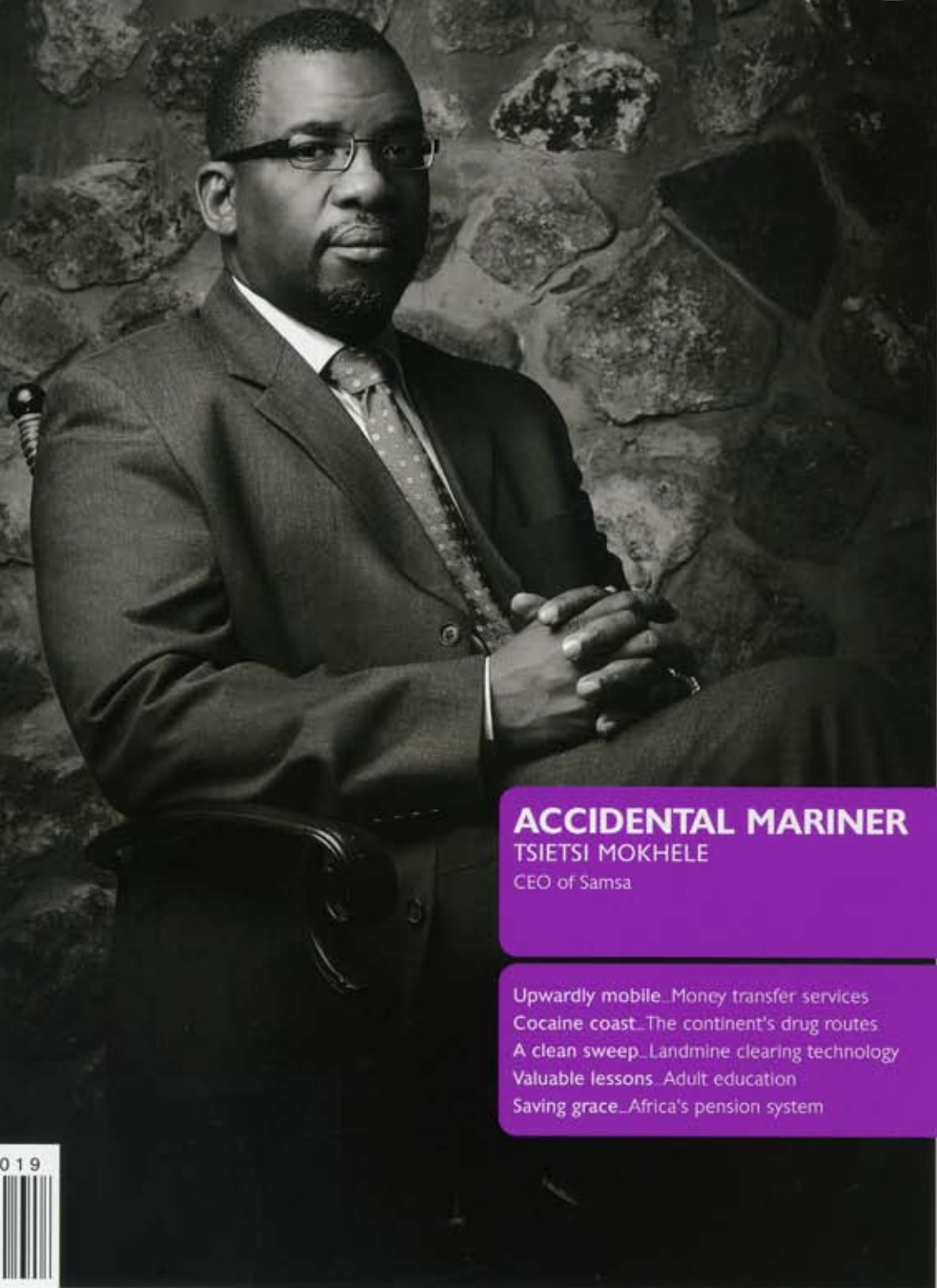


AFRICAN DECISIONS



ACCIDENTAL MARINER

TSIETSI MOKHELE

CEO of Samsa

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the accidental mariner

South African Commander Tsietsi Mokhele's life has been one of extremes. But the challenges he faced prepared him for his latest tour de force, the revival of Samsa.
By KERRY DIMMER

Amid the noisy chatter of the function

he recently attended on the Vaal River, Commander Tsietsi Mokhele had a moment of intense reflection.

'The dots connected for the first time about my relationship with water and sailing,' he says.

'I was propelled into the past, where as a teenager I sat along this very river's banks, watching leisure boats while studying for exams. It was a seemingly impossible dream to hope that I, as a black South African, would one day be able to enjoy the river in a similar fashion. I felt very humbled by the memory.'

It's not surprising that the Commander may have stored such memories at the back of his mind, given the life that was to follow – one of torture and pain, abandonment and loneliness.

His future seemed assured when, as one of only 14 AECI bursary awardees, Mokhele proudly embarked on his studies at the Technikon Northern Gauteng with dreams of becoming one of the first black chemical engineers.

But this was a time of unrest and political instability, as students rebelled against the apartheid government. Mokhele found himself caught up in actions that earned him the attention of the police and on returning to his village, after abandoning what seemed to him his fruitless studies, he was soon arrested, jailed and charged with high treason.

During the years that Mokhele was imprisoned he endured torture so extreme it would take him many years to recover, both psychologically and physically.

On his release in 1986, by then a full and recognised member of the still-banned ANC and no longer safe nor welcome in South Africa, Mokhele was offered the chance to study either aviation or shipping in Europe.

Knowing little to nothing about aviation, and perhaps driven by a subconscious spark of nostalgia for those peaceful days on the river, he opted for sea study. From the extreme heat of Africa to the darkest cold of the snowy seas at the Caspian Higher Naval College in the Soviet Union, and perhaps

thinking his days of death and despair were finally behind him, Mokhele then witnessed the worst kind of human slaughter as Muslims and Christians took to arms in what is now the Republic of Azerbaijan.

'The effect that conflict had on me renewed my commitment to my country and I vowed that I would not allow myself to witness this kind of behaviour ever again.'

Alas, Mokhele's trials were not yet over.

He couldn't return to South Africa and in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mokhele was homeless and stranded. With Nelson Mandela's help, the Tanzanian government offered Mokhele refuge, but his maritime skills were wasted there.

Instead, and with news of the release of Mandela and the unbanning of the ANC, he dedicated himself to the process of rehabilitating returning South African exiles including Umkhonto we Sizwe fighters.

Finally, in a bittersweet twist of fate for Mokhele, he was able to return to South Africa, but only for seven days, to attend the funeral of Chris Hani who had been instrumental in Mokhele's leaving South Africa in

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the first place. It was at that funeral, attended by thousands, that he was reunited with his mother of whom he had had no news since leaving South Africa.

'Up to then I had no idea where my family was or even if they were alive. Our happy reunion was only marred by thoughts that I could not stay. Of course my relatives would not let me leave but the government still didn't want me in the country,' Mokhele says.

'But circumstances and an unrelenting determination to stay put, led to extended visa renewals and finally acceptance, allowing me to remain in my homeland.'

The Commander has held a number of South African executive maritime positions, including stints at the South African Navy and the National Ports Authority. But it is in his current role as CEO of the South African Maritime Safety Authority (Samsa) that he's managed to fulfil his commitment to serving his country – as guardian of its waters.

'When I joined Samsa in 2008 it was a moribund organisation with serious fundamental problems. If it had been privately owned it would have closed down.

'It had had no official CEO for almost five years. It had a history of instability with successive boards of directors with hardly a single board member having served a full term. It had no credible expertise or technology, systems were archaic, service was below par and there was no genuine participation by women.

'It was also running at a huge financial loss with the accounting books in such disarray that by the end of 2007 the Auditor General had issued a disclaimer audit.'

Under Mokhele's leadership the negative audit was reversed within three months by working 18-hour days. Within six months, despite those who said he was setting himself up for failure, he had positioned Samsa as the proud and able maritime authority of South Africa. Samsa could finally be presented as the face of South Africa's global maritime ambitions and as a valuable strategic maritime centre for the continent as a whole.

Mokhele's Samsa has numerous roles without which the country would be unable to function economically or safely.

Its services include: the development and implementation of national and international safety and marine environment standards; enforcement of technical and operational standards for shipping operations in South African waters and for South African ships worldwide; monitoring seaworthiness, safety and pollution preventions; ensuring training standards for the competency of seafarers; responding to marine pollution and maritime emergencies; and is a stalwart in ensuring the safety of the shores.

It is obvious that the value of Samsa cannot be underscored enough. Mokhele points out that South Africa is a trade-dependent economy with 98% total trade transported by ship, equating to some 430 million tons of cargo.

How Samsa impacts on the rest of Africa and the world is therefore integral to economic relations.

'If you look at any organisation assigned to protect national interests within a global or continental sphere, the goal must be to become a custodian of your country,' he says.

'South Africa's seaborne trade accounts for 3–5% of total sea trade so it is our duty and strategic intent as an African leader to position the country as an international maritime and shipping centre. In this way we will create space for the acquisition of a better share of world markets that will benefit the entire continent.'

But for the Commander, Samsa is a lot more than just maritime capability, growth, stability and competence. 'I believe that if something needs to be done to benefit our country and future generations, I am willing to put all I have into it. This is not just a vision, it is a commitment. We are actively proving that leadership needs to be sustained as a legacy for future generations.

'Leadership fails when it becomes focused on the individual or institution and not on the country. The Samsa we present is about healthy strategic interventions, touching lives and creating opportunities with quality jobs.

'Samsa is not just about ships but about using shipping to raise awareness of the greater population of Africa and demonstrating that maritime is a pivotal part of their national lives. If I succeed at this, then my job is done.' **AD**

Samsa: Guardians of South Africa's coastal waters

Commander Tsietsi Mokhele has positioned the South African Maritime Safety Authority as the champion for the African agenda in becoming a global trade partner

No African country has the unique geostrategic position that South Africa occupies, surrounded as it is on the west, south and east by sea.

Its 3 000-plus km of coastline is an imperative sea route, often referred to as the maritime choke point of the southern hemisphere, which links the south Atlantic and Indian oceans.

The economy of the country, along with those of its landlocked neighbours and sub-Saharan nations are enormously dependent upon the use of its ports as a gateway for trade and commerce.

In total, South Africa has a territorial maritime zone of some 4.34 million square kilometres, a vast estate that needs protection, not just from an ecological aspect but also to monitor the 430 million tons of cargo transported to and from its ports.

Guardianship of the waters is a national imperative and is undertaken by the South African Maritime Safety Authority (Samsa) under the capable leadership of Commander Tsietsi Mokhele.

He regards Samsa as a champion for Africa as a whole and as a new face to drive the African agenda in becoming a global trade partner.

'South Africa is to Africa what India is to Asia and what Brazil is to South America in

terms of maritime importance. This means that our shipping patterns have an impact on the amount of trade between countries, which in turn dictates production volumes, the structure of industry as well as costs and ultimately individual income.'

While Samsa's main mission is to promote the country's maritime interests, it has a number of broader objectives outside of economic and trade activities.

Essentially it has three arms: providing services on behalf of the government; technical services to the local and international maritime industry; and ministrations to its stakeholders.

On behalf of government, Samsa maintains and proposes legislation policies relating to all maritime issues. It has the authority to liaise with other governments and institutions on behalf of the minister of Transport.

It has control of the ports and provides accident investigations; administers government maritime contracts; manages pollution prevention and response capability; and stands as a representative at international forums. Samsa's technical capability includes the following:

- Ensuring safety certification through statutory surveys of SA and foreign vessels
- Providing assistance and advice on maritime legislation

- Approving construction and refitting of vessels and the parts and equipment used
- Acting as a consultancy on technical matters, safety and qualifications.

The service Samsa provides to stakeholders covers, among other things:

- Safety equipment approval
- Ship investigations and inspections of cargo
- Approval and moderation of marine training and the standards thereof
- Registration of ships
- Casualty investigation and management
- Pollution and environmental concerns
- The promotion of seafarer training
- The collection and maintenance of shipping information and statistics.

Yet another role that Samsa undertakes is that of marine watchdog. Security of the waters is essential for ensuring that sea lanes of communication are not breached and that ports and harbours remained protected, particularly given the spate of piracy activities off the North African coastline.

It is Samsa, along with the SA Navy, that helps to minimise the threat of pirates moving southwards. But the true value of Samsa, says Mokhele, lies in touching lives, be that through education, career guidance and job opportunities, or simply by continuing to play its role as the quiet, but competent, navigator and custodian of our seas. **AD**



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