



The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor

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SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRACY EDUCATION TRUST (SADET)

ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF BOOKS 5&6: THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

SERIES

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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

‘Until lions have their own historians, tales about hunting will glorify the hunter’, goes an old African proverb. Contemporary African scholarship and African history instructs us to learn from the age-old teachings from, by and about Africa through the succinct yet poignant proverbial dictates. I start this well-known but not yet well heeded precept which principally reminds us that most of what we know and indeed have internalized about who we are, where we come from and arguably where we are going is a consequence of other people’s opinions and judgments.

Volumes 5 and 6 of The Road to Democracy are a sequel to the earlier volumes 1, 2, 3 and 4, most of which were published by Unisa press. Mindful of the original purpose of the South African Democracy

Educational Trust (SADET) namely to retell and recast the history of the liberation struggle, Unisa presented itself to be part of this important project for reasons that are enveloped in the University's forward-looking strategy in to become *the* African University in the service of Humanity.

The history of the struggle has been told in different ways and at different times and often for different motives. The synergy between SADET and UNISA is predicated on the common understanding that without a true and intellectual account of the struggle and its contractions, captured by the people who were prepared to give their life and limb for its ultimate outcome, freedom from oppression and freedom from want and hunger, the story remains patchy and organically incomplete. To all intents and purposes the project under the rubric *The Road to democracy* is a call to all who care to know more and repose the history of the liberation movement in particular and the story of the cry for freedom in general to bring their pieces such that when it is done, the quilt in its diversity, is complete and as accurate as possible.

You all know that as a University we collaborated with the Thabo Mbeki Foundation and established the Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute. This is an exciting initiative and there is a sense in which people perceive this Institute as offering alternative curriculum from the routine courses that we offer on African history, and the African story in Africa for that matter. People are searching for an alternative narrative, the values without which the South Africa liberation struggle could not have harnessed the biggest solidarity movement across the globe. People want to learn not only about how they were oppressed and emasculated by others, but what it is that fueled their resistance and powered them to move not backwards, not wayward but forward, united in spirit and in the face of danger, pain and even death. People want to learn about the past in order to discover and unleash their own passions and power.

We are grateful that SADET departed from the commercial press to join hands with our own Unisa press to produce these trellises that will undoubtedly be foundational canons for many years to come. In this joint venture the University and SADET want to repose the history contextually, critically and dialogically. The subject matter in question is bigger than our individual preference, for 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it'.

History must be recorded – be it orally or in writing – and equally importantly, preserved. And this is where the role of the university is so important.

The core function of a university is the generation of new knowledge, but inevitably that process relies on a thorough interrogation and evaluation of existing knowledge, which not only offers context, but also the opportunity to prove or disprove, accept or reject, or compromise. It is a process of accretion that contributes to the richness of the national and global dialogue and canon.

The widely divergent and conflicting views on the precise nature of history serve to underscore the fragmented genesis of, and contributions to its recording. As we all know, history in South Africa was informed and influenced predominantly by a western paradigm that reflects the hegemonic power relations that shaped our past. We cannot allow them to similarly inform our future, especially since history can become revered and followed dogmatically, irrespective of its genuine merit, and often with serious and far-reaching consequences. Equally, the hegemonic dynamics that characterize the “victor/vanquished” scenario tend to inform and influence the recording of history at any given time. History, like theory holds dangers which are often overlooked. Thomas (1997:89) asserts:

We should be concerned about the methods and consequences of theory since those consequences are in the real world of classrooms and the real lives of teachers and children. Theories are not simply playthings of bored academics.

History, ladies and gentlemen, is not simply the plaything of bored academics. The consequences of its unquestioned inculcation are in the real world of classrooms and the real lives of teachers and children. We know this all too well. And knowing that, we are obliged to ensure that our history is told first-hand, by those Africans who made and lived it.

It is therefore eminently appropriate that this very large and significant undertaking – this recording of our history, should reside at the University of South Africa, that it should be recorded by (South) Africans, and that it should have as its patrons and supporters, such eminent persons as former President of the Republic of South Africa and avid scholar, Mr Thabo Mbeki (whose passion for historical recording and safekeeping is evidenced in the Timbuktu project and affirmed by the global acknowledgement of the role that he has played in that regard); the honourable Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Kgalema Motlanthe; Dr Essop Pahad, Chairperson of the SADET Board; Mr Robert Madzonga, from MTN; Mr Thulani Sibeko from Nedbank and many others.

It would be remiss of me distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen, if I did not also mention and pay tribute to the late Professor Bernard Makhosonke Magubane, who was initially given the herculean task

of managing this project and producing these volumes - in my view, the first truly African articulation of our own history. And I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank and acknowledge Professor Magubane's seminal contribution to this undertaking. As shocked and saddened as we are by his untimely passing, we are comforted by the fact that Professor Magubane has left a legacy of incalculable value for those generations who will be building upon the genuinely African knowledge foundations that have been laid in the production of these volumes. We are truly grateful for his life and his contribution.

Let me conclude, with the African Union as the successor to the OAU, the latter having accomplished its fundamental objective of political liberation, the fundamental task ahead of us is to name the new enemy and have a measure of a division of labour amongst ourselves and carefully attune our competencies collectively and severally as we put shoulder to the wheel to tackle our new challenges.

Tonight we are not launching just another publication. We are dedicating ourselves to a new way of accounting for our own history in all of its parts – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. We have turned the corner and we are determining ourselves who tells our story. As a University, we are at a point where we say that we can no longer afford to be mere interpreters of what others said and did not say about us. It is our time to place on record for all to see what we say about our past and how that past influence what we are doing on our way forward.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, at this very important juncture in the history of Unisa, that is of course, the celebration of 140 years of shaping futures, we take pleasure in the fact that perhaps for the first time in that 140 years, the futures that we will be shaping, will be informed by knowledge which we have generated and recorded – it is a matter of great pride.

To those who have contributed to the production of volumes 5 and 6 of The Road to Democracy in South Africa, we say a heartfelt “thank you”. We are honoured to be playing our role in this project, and we look forward with anticipation to the next volumes.

I thank you.