



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

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THE RENAMING OF THREE BUILDINGS
ZK MATTHEWS GREAT HALL
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Programme Director, the modern African nationalist movement finds its roots in the establishment of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later the ANC, in 1912.

I emphasise 'modern' because the nationalist movement on the African continent, for the liberation of Africa and all her peoples, has a long history that saw many perishing during the resistance against colonial conquest.

Starting off first on a national basis, confined to the boundaries crafted at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, the nationalist movement would

soon become Pan-African in nature. It did not only include the development of linkages within and among those on the continent. It also included those in the diaspora.

It was within this context that WEB Du Bois initiated efforts to found the Pan-African Movement. Initially led by African Americans until the 1945 Manchester Conference organised by Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore, there was a shift of the movement into the hands of those on the African continent.

It is instructive that the Manchester Conference took place a year after the 1944 founding of the ANC Youth League by no less figures like Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Ashby Mda and Walter Sisulu.

As lawyers would say, it is trite to emphasise that the formation of the Youth League was a turning point in the overall approach used until then by the ANC – from petitions to protest.

Decolonising Africa

Programme Director, I have deliberately outlined this short history to locate today's ceremony within that historical context. It was within these evolving events in the history of the liberation struggle that the demands for the decolonisation of the African continent was shaped.

What the 1944 turn did, and the direct influence of Lembede had, was to infuse at least two features that might have been weak until then.

The first was to link the struggles here at home with the overall struggle prosecuted by Africans all over the continent, and indeed all over the world. The struggle for freedom. Lembede was therefore not just a Pan-Africanist in the broadest definition of the term. He was also an internationalist.

Second, Lembede emphasised the need for Africans to free themselves from sheepish admiration of Europe and begin having pride in their own history and being, what Ngugi wa Thiongo would later call the decolonisation of the mind.¹

It is in that sense that today's ceremony links with the history of decolonisation on the African continent, a project that we at University of South Africa, and indeed other universities in the country, have taken up in all its manifestations.

Many writers have demonstrated how, long after the new flag marking independence had been raised, most countries on the

¹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London, James Currey

continent remained colonised. The first writer to observe this phenomenon was Kwame Nkrumah himself, who termed this state of affairs neo-colonialism. Other writers and activists have since built on Nkrumah's observations.

One of the current manifestations of the state of neo-colonialism as Nkrumah termed it, or coloniality as modern theorists of the decolonial school advocate, is in the area of the nature of knowledge that is produced by universities.

Not only is the knowledge produced by our universities still steeped in Northern epistemologies, the symbolism accompanying that knowledge production and transmission is also Northern in approach.

In our context as South Africa such knowledge is a relic of colonialism and apartheid. It is therefore logical that as we continue, not just as a university but as a country as a whole, to shed ourselves of the colonial and apartheid legacies, we should address the issue of symbolism. In this case, such symbolism manifests in the form, amongst many others, of the names of buildings, halls and lecture rooms.

Programme Director, we have chosen the path of renaming our buildings knowing very well and having a deep understanding that the

subject invokes animated debates and has deep sensitivities. But such is the nature of the liberation. It is never pleasant.

But what is the conceptual approach that informs our approach to the renaming of buildings?

Monumentalization

For consistency in my messaging allow me to repeat part of what I said a month ago when we renamed our KwaZulu Natal Regional Office in Durban into the Smiso Nkwananya Building.

I referenced Simanga Kumalo, who sees the renaming of places as monumentalization. By that he refers to “the creation of the physical images, symbols and presence, the naming of streets, the creation of figures using the names of outstanding leaders who contributed to the ushering of the democratic dispensation, so that people may preserve the memory of the history of the city and the political trajectories it has experienced.”²

But is that all to monumentalization?

² R Simanga Kumalo (2014) Monumentalization and the renaming of street names in the city of Durban (Ethekwini) as a contested terrain between politics and religion, *New Contree*, No 70, pp. 219-250

I would contend that while Kumalo's conceptualisation is useful, it remains limited. The main weakness in his conceptualisation he reduces the renaming of cities, streets, and buildings to simply 'preserving certain memories'.

For us, the renaming of buildings is about creating a new institution. How, one may ask?

Monumentalization at UNISA: How We Understand and Treat it

In order that we may properly understand why we need to rename some of our buildings let us consider where we come from as a country, but more specifically as a university.

As we celebrate 146 years of the existence of the University of South Africa, we carry with us a mixed legacy of opportunity and exclusion. Ours is a history of making 'equal opportunities' available for the working people who sought to advance their careers and therefore improve their lives.

On the other hand, that very history as a university is not all covered in glory. In fact, many will agree with me that inside the façade of equal opportunity was an institution that was steeped in colonial privilege.

I say this as one of those first black lecturers in this institution, outside the Department of African Languages and to a very less extent the Faculty of Theology, whose memory of being a minority is still fresh.

For us therefore, monumentalisation is about two issues. First, it is about redressing the injustices of the past, and replacing that with a shared commitment to never repeat any form of injustice, in whatever form. Thus, the step of renaming a building, or any part of a building, suggests that its history may have been edged on the practice of injustice against one section of the population, while favouring and upholding the history of another section.

By renaming these buildings after some of the people whose lives symbolised a quest for inclusion, we are declaring that ours will be a university that strives to have its doors open for all, irrespective of their race, class, gender, or creed.

The second reason why we have chosen some of the names that are now coming up at a number of our buildings is so that we may, as the university community, begin to embed ourselves within the history of this country.

It is our firm belief that this latter approach will, in turn, lead to the nation identifying with the university, and not seeing it, and treating it, simply as an inaccessible ivory tower.

In renaming our buildings we do not imply that those whose names have adorned these buildings for many years did not make a contribution to what the University of South Africa has become. Indeed, a reading of Professor Andrew Manson's book, *Unisa 1873 – 2018: The making of a distance learning university*³ suggests that they all contributed to what UNISA came to be.

In the book Manson notes how the previous Vice Chancellors of the university had both strengths and weaknesses. He further notes how the university, like all other institutions in the country at the time, found itself having to implement apartheid policies and practices, even if it may have wanted to do otherwise. Such is the contradictory and painful history of this university.

Anton Lembede

As I indicated earlier, ours is a history of opening doors, while shutting them hard at the same time. It is a history of accepting Lembede to study for his Bachelors degrees, one of which was an LLB, and

³ Manson, A (2018) *Unisa 1873-2018: The making of a distance learning university*. Pretoria, Unisa Press

proceeding to complete his Masters degree in 1945 with a thesis titled '*The Conception of God as Expounded by, or as it Emerges from the Writings of Philosophers- from Descartes to the Present Day*'. That at the time when other universities were admitting only a small number of black students, let alone have them progress to and complete postgraduate studies.

Yet, Lembede would have been confronted by the fact that all his lecturers were all white and mainly male, thus not giving him the space to express himself as fully as he would have liked. He would have surely not written a thesis on Descartes but would have laid the earliest foundations for African Philosophy or Black Theology as we now know them.

The Context, and introducing Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

Programme Director, our resolve to decolonise our universities, including addressing symbolic manifestations such as renaming of buildings, received impetus from the students' *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* movements.

It was through these movements that the students began to invoke the ideas of Lembede, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, Ngugi wa Thiongo and many others; that we need to confront our painful past and begin to have African Universities, not just universities in Africa.

The resolve by the students to advance these struggles invoked the spirit that saw the rise of Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela as a young woman who was denied an opportunity to be an ordinary mother to her children.

Already showing the signs of focus and resilience here was a beacon of hope for black people, the first black social worker at the time when black people, and black women in particular, were condemned to simply be “hewers of wood and drawers of water”.

At the time when black women were confined to only being domestic workers and farm labourers Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela defied the stereotypes to become the first black social worker in the country.

But this was not the first stereotype that Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela defied. She could have chosen the ‘comforts’ of being a member of the nascent black upper working class at the time. I am deliberately avoiding to say middle class because it is a myth to say black people could become members of the middle class in a classical sense under apartheid. Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela refused the trappings of that potentiality.

Instead, she chose the painful path of being, as Walter Rodney would argue years later in a different setting, 'grounded with her people'.⁴ Such was the indomitable spirit of Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela; that she defied banishment in Brandfort when she mobilised the community there, building a creche and clinic for the poor.

The most enduring pain that Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela suffered was when she spent 491 days in prison, most of which were in solitary confinement.⁵ Not even the most hardened heart can stand and not be broken when reading about the harshness that was meted on this noble woman.

Her continued work and commitment during the 1976 uprisings and solidarity with her people until her passing away are documented, and must still receive more academic and journalistic attention.

It is for this reason that as an institution we seek to immortalise and monumentalise her name for generations to come.

But why would we name two of our buildings after Lembede (the library) and Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (the main building housing academic departments)?

⁴ Rodney, W (2019[1969]) *The Groundings with my Brothers*. London, Verso

⁵ Madikizela-Mandela, W (2014) *491 Days: Prisoner Number 1323/69*. Athens (Ohio), Ohio University Press

The meaning of Lembede and Madikizela-Mandela

From the little that I have outlined about these two stalwarts of our struggle, and indeed a little because it is impossible to do justice to their legacies in less than thirty minutes, it should be clear that a number of features stand up.

The first feature about both Lembede and Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is that they loved and cherished education. They defied stereotypes to acquire education at the time when black people were denied and actively discouraged from acquiring education, let alone higher education.

By monumentalising their names we seek to cement that link between these stalwarts and the struggle for the attainment of education by all the young people of this country.

The second feature that emerges, which I have already alluded to, is that Lembede and Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela resisted the seduction of upper working-class status that would have had them ignoring the plight of their people and concentrating only on themselves and their families. Of course, that came at a huge and painful price. We are where we are as a people because of their

selflessness and self-sacrifice. They definitely deserve an honour from us as a nation.

The third element that I wish to highlight that characterise Lembede and Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is they used their education to raise the consciousness of their people. The now famous letter by a holocaust survivor to educationist Haim Ginott sums up the conscientious stance taken by Lembede and Mama Winnie. It reads:

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses, women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is:

*help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.*⁶

⁶ Anonymous holocaust survivor quoted in Ginott, H.G (1972) Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teacher. London, Macmillan

The point about this letter and its relevance for us today is that knowledge and the quest for humanity should never be separated. Knowledge, and therefore education, is only relevant and important only if it makes us human. In the case of our country, given its painful history where a “crime against humanity” was legalised and practiced, education must rehumanise us. As Steve Biko asserted, the struggle against apartheid was ultimately aimed at “bestow(ing) on South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face”.⁷

It is our hope that these two names will help us instil in our students a deeper understanding of education, and how it must be used for the advancement of humanity.

Professor Nkoana Simon Radipere

It was this love for education, defying of stereotypes, and dedication to their people which Lembede and Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela had and displayed that inspired our own Professor Nkoana Simon Radipere. A young and dedicated scholar who, like Lembede, departed mortal life before his time.

⁷ Biko, S (1978) I Write What I Like. Oxford, Heinemann Educational Publishers

A cursory reading of Professor Radipere's scholarly work shows that one of his focus areas was the link between motivation and ultimate performance of a business enterprise, especially small enterprises.

This focus is important as it suggests that hard work is critical if we are to succeed in turning the fortunes of our country around.

What also comes out in the work of Professor Radipere is his deep concern for socio-political and socio-economic conditions of small business owners. The sector, as it were, is the most tenacious and patriotic in the sense that it does not have ambitions to export capital. Yet, it faces many challenges as policy seems to be more sensitive to the needs and fears of giant multinational companies.

The country would do well to heed the work of those like Radipere and attempt to improve the small business sector, and support upcoming entrepreneurs who want to make a genuine contribution to the country's economic growth.

This cursory reflection on the life of Professor Radipere comes at a time when our country is at the crossroads. Young people are called upon to emulate the hard work and dedication that Professor Radipere displayed. He displayed selflessness by mentoring novice

researchers and giving off his time to not only those in his foundational discipline – Entrepreneurship – but across colleges.

We also meet at the time when, as a university, we seek to have more black professors in the college that Radipere was a member of – Economic and Management Sciences. Support for upcoming and committed young academics, and their ultimate promotion, on merit, will assist us to achieve our goals of transforming the university to be a place where all feel welcome and encouraged to work hard.

His was an indomitable passion that saw him coming to work even as he was not feeling well, sadly collapsing and succumbing at the entrance of the building that houses his college.

We hope that his example will serve as an inspiration to many who wish and have the potential to reach and surpass the heights that he achieved.

In conclusion

Programme Director, it is our considered view and hope that the step that we are taking today will add to the many that we must traverse leading to a transformed African university in the service of humanity. Ours will be a multi-pronged approach to transformation that will include:

- Transforming Epistemology, Knowledge and Scholarship.
- Changing Institutional Culture; within which the renaming of buildings falls, as we strive to engender new symbolism.
- Rethinking Systems and Policies.
- Rethinking Governance, Leadership and Management.
- Promoting a Discourse for Change.

We wish to thank the families of Anton Lembede, Mama Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Professor Radipere, for allowing us to monumentalise the names of their loved ones. Thank you for sharing them with us. We will in turn extend the sharing of their names with the nation, the continent and the world.

Thank you!