

# Rhodes University 2011 Graduation Ceremonies Address

Rhodes University 2011 Graduation Ceremonies Address

Date: 07 April 2011 13:00 - 07 April 2011 13:00

Location: Grahamstown

Organiser: [Rhodes University](http://Rhodes University) (Phone +27 46 603 8111)

Event Type: Alumni

## Introduction

The Chancellor, Prof. Jakes Gerwel

Judge Jos Jones and other members of the Rhodes University Council

The Chair of Convocation, Reverend Simon Gqubule

Our honorary graduate/s, ....

New graduates, and families and guardians of graduates

The Public Orator, Prof. Paul Maylam

Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, Heads of Departments and academic and administrative colleagues

Members of the Students Representative Council

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good evening/morning/afternoon, jambo, goeie naand/more/dag, ni hao

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony at which we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the new graduates of Rhodes University.

## Recognition

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you, our new graduates, on your tremendous achievement.

To be awarded a degree, diploma or certificate from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour.

When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

Your graduation this evening/afternoon/morning is testimony that you have fulfilled your side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire knowledge and to develop expertise.

Your accomplishment, the fruits of years of toil, is a fantastic achievement in the face of a higher education system that struggles to realize the talents and potential of all our students.

You will, I trust, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of laboratory and computer technicians, of administrators and wardens, and of cooks, cleaners and

gardeners. All of these people labour to create a special intellectual, social and physical environment at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families and benefactors, all of whom have generously contributed to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this morning/afternoon/evening.

## Citizenship

As is the tradition, I wish on this occasion to share some thoughts with our graduates as they leave us or proceed to higher degrees at Rhodes.

One of the books of the outstanding African and Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani is titled *Citizen and Subject*.<sup>1</sup> Developments since 1994 and events in recent months move me to reflect on this theme and to share some thoughts on this important matter.

My question is: in the context of the past and current fissures of our society, what progress have we made in South Africa since 1994 in terms of forging an inclusive citizenship?

1994 without doubt was, politically, a revolutionary breakthrough.

Centuries of racial oligarchy and brutal repression of black subjects demands for citizenship rights finally gave way in 1994 to a democracy in which, for the first time, all South Africans became citizens and were accorded full citizenship rights.

Critical to this development was the imagination, creativity and courage that we displayed as a people to rid ourselves of tyranny and to fashion our new democracy. We also forged a fabulous Constitution and Bill of Rights which held out the great promise of far-reaching political, economic and social rights that did not exist for all, or at all, prior to 1994.

Having been 'subjects,' millions of us made the significant transition and advance to becoming 'citizens'. We looked forward to the promise of the progressive realization of hard-won citizenship rights so that we could live productive, rich, rewarding and secure lives.

A number of realities, however, seriously compromise, or have the danger to compromise, our constitutional ideal of full citizenship rights for all. Indeed, while formal political rights remain intact, they substantively condemn us or could condemn us and large numbers of our people to conditions that are more akin to being subjects.

In his new book, *South Africa Pushed to the Limit*, the insightful Hein Marais rightly warns of the danger of the 'recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and to populist discourses of 'authenticity' – 'who is a real South African, who is a real African, who is black, what is a man, what is the role of women.' These utterances are accompanied by ever more 'narrow and exacting' interpretations of culture and tradition.

2 Marais' comments help to put into perspective a number of recent events. One is the crass utterances of chief government communicator Jimmy Manyi on 'race'. Another is the repugnant tabloid chatter of Kuli Roberts on so-called Coloureds. A third is Minister Trevor Manuel's amazing outburst that Manyi has 'the same mind that operated under apartheid',

and does not appreciate that his ‘utterances are both unconstitutional and morally reprehensible.’

3 Given the apartheid legacy, there can be no quarrel with redress and social equity for economically and socially disadvantaged poor, black and women South Africans. In this regard, Judge Albie Sachs rightly notes that pervasive inequities ‘cannot be wished away by invoking constitutional idealism.’

4 Still, we find ourselves in the grip of a profound paradox: the use of ‘race’ to promote redress and to advance social equity. In the words of Judge Sachs, we are making ‘conscious use of racial distinctions in order to create a non-racial society.’

5 Such an approach has many dangers. For one, employing solely ‘race’ for redress purposes could benefit only or primarily the black political and economic elites, and so simply reproduce the severe class inequalities that we already have.

The conspicuous consumption of our off-the-body sushi-loving elites and the rapid ascendancy of politically-connected elites into billionaire and millionaire businesspersons make no difference to eliminating the massive inequalities in our society.

For another, using ‘race’ to advance redress and social equity could ossify racial categorisations and ensure that we continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of ‘race’

6 Surely our goal as well as our strategies must be to erode and dissolve racial categorisations and ensure that our identities are instead rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic rather than frozen along ‘race’ lines.

We must, of course, ‘never lose sight of the fact that the goal is to establish a non-racial society in which social and cultural diversity is celebrated and seen as a source of vitality, and in which race as such ultimately has no political or economic significance.’

7 In the fabulous and inspiring track called ‘Say Africa’, Vusi Mahlasela croons:

I may be walking in the streets of London...or Amsterdam...or New York  
But the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa, say Africa  
I walk the streets of London, Amsterdam, New York and other cities annually to popularise Rhodes, meet alumni and donors and raise funds for Rhodes. But, indeed, ‘the dust on my boots and the rhythm of my feet and my heart say Africa.’ I know this is the case for many, nay, most of you.

We must confront the misguided and the charlatans and chauvinists among us who stridently seek to give ever more ‘narrow and exacting’ answers to the questions of ‘who is a real South African, who is a real African, who is black, what is a man, (and) what is the role of women.’ These self-serving answers could reduce millions of us to subjects and lay the basis for the kinds of chauvinist thinking and actions that lead to the killing fields of My Lai, Sabra and Shatila, Srebrenica, Darfur and Rwanda, and fertilise our own disgraceful manifestations of xenophobia.

We must loudly proclaim, as does our Constitution, that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.' We must insist, for all the reasons that were given at the 'I am an African' speech at the launch of our Constitution, that we are all Africans.

At the same time, we have to also jettison glib formulations like 'forget the past and embrace the future,' and also not confuse aspiration with realities, as in simplistic assertions that we are the 'rainbow nation.'

We have a long road still to travel before racism and sexism, prejudice and intolerance are defeated, and unacceptable and alienating institutional cultures are transformed.

As Njabulo Ndebele notes, 'the fact that racism may still exist in the actions of young students ...suggests that racism continues to be fed by institutions such as families, schools and churches' and we need to give attention to how 'we bring up our children.'

8 Issues of race, culture, identity, language and many kinds of hurt remain to be confronted. We will only become truly free and equals when we begin to tackle the issue of 'difference' with sensitivity, honesty and courage, and begin to respect and embrace diversity in all its rich and myriad forms. We shy away from open and honest engagement with these difficult, complex and emotive issues at our own peril.

There is another issue that also needs comment: the growing tendency to seek to silence critics of government and the state by questioning their credentials and especially asking about their 'struggle' credentials.

The view that as we citizens we must satisfy certain conditions before we can express our views, or that we can only critique if we participated in the anti-apartheid struggle, is wrong and dangerous.

It effectively turns millions of citizens, including all those born after 1994, into subjects and makes a mockery of our Constitution.

It is our constitutional right as citizens to freely express our views and to critique. Indeed, it is our obligation to 'speak truth to power.'

Finally, having failed, yet again, to win the cricket world cup we have nonetheless triumphed in the dubious honour of now being the most unequal society on earth.

Already a perversely unequal society in 1994, during the past seventeen years income inequality has increased in general and within so-called 'racial' groups.

The percentage of income of the poorest 20% of our society has fallen since 1994. Conversely, the percentage of income of the richest 20% of our society has risen since 1994.

The poorest 20% earn 1.7% of income; the richest 20% take home 72.5%. 43% of our fellow citizens eke out an existence on an annual income of less than R 3 000 per year – that is R8.22 a day.

If it were not for state social grants, death through hunger and starvation would join HIV-AIDS as a leading cause of mortality in South Africa.

The old divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are still all too evident. Hunger and disease, poverty and unemployment continue to blight our democracy. Impunity and morbid ills such as rape and abuse of children destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our country.

Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, crass materialism, corruption, tenderpreneurship, and unbridled accumulation, often of the most primitive kinds, run rampant.

It makes one recall the lines of the great German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht who in 'Parade of the Old New' writes:

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching but it came as the New. It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before.

What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed, struggle to survive or live in fear of rape, other violence and crime; what does it mean when 'the Old' approaches as 'the New', when there are 'new smells of decay'?

For sure, and to be fair, there have been many social gains and many positive developments since 1994. Our institutions of democracy and justice and our media remain robust and vibrant. There continue to be strong voices defending and promoting constitutional values and ideals and a just and humane society.

On the final page of Long Walk to Freedom, Tatamkulu Nelson Mandela writes:

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others

The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

He adds: 'I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended'.

'The truth is that' in 2011

- We may be citizens, but our citizenship remains to be fully developed. We are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'
- 'Our devotion to freedom' of all from want and to a life of dignity remains to be seen, as does 'our devotion' to an inclusive citizenship
- The idea that 'with freedom comes responsibilities' to advance the common social good seems to be lost on too many in positions of power
- Indeed, the 'long walk' to full citizenship rights for all in a just, non-racial non-sexist, and democratic society 'is not yet ended.'

‘We dare not linger’ too long in in our walk to freedom for all, for there will be grave costs if we do so.

You, our graduates, are mostly a generation that has been, thankfully, largely spared the horrors, brutality and injustices of apartheid.

You are a generation that has the unequalled opportunity and freedom to re-imagine and shape our future, to forge new ways of conducting our affairs and new identities, which are hopefully freed from the obsession with ‘race’ and colour.

Armed with knowledge and expertise, we look to you to exercise, with humility, leadership wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; on the mines, in the factories and shops; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in legal practices, prosecution offices and courts; in research institutions and scientific laboratories; in financial and public services, and in media and universities.

As leaders you are well-aware that your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large.

Above all, you understand that leadership is not a function of material wealth, high office or status, or bestowed by a degree or qualification, but must be earned through ethical conduct, impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour, selfless public service and commitment to people and responsibilities.

Often, poems convey messages more eloquently and more pithily than narratives. Our Professor of Poetry, Chris Man, has penned a special poem for his graduating son, and they have kindly permitted me to adapt and use some sections.

This is the message of your alma mater to you our graduates:

We hope you never sweat your blood  
For no mean corporation,  
We hope you never fire a shot  
For warring faith or nation

We hope you never have to please  
A two-faced politician,  
We pray you never make a god  
Of money and ambition  
We hope you never work so hard  
You lose your sense of fun.  
What’s life without a joke and laugh  
A braai out in the sun?  
So take your learning to the world  
But live to sing a song,  
And may you always be as wise  
and gentle as you’re strong.  
We know you’ll brush aside the hand  
That’s held out for a bribe,  
We know you’ll see the human being

Before the race or tribe  
We know you'll learn to live content  
With what you can afford,  
We trust you'll pass on to your kids  
That virtue's its reward.  
We pray you never cease to hope  
Right through the hardest year  
And walk in awe below the stars  
And scorn a cynic's sneer.  
And may you learn from (our) mistakes  
And where the past went wrong,  
We hope your generation makes  
The fragile planet last  
Yet learn to make as many jobs  
As folk who starve in shacks.  
And may you always be as wise  
And gentle as you're strong.

#### In Closing

As graduates you have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation.

We take pride in the pursuit of equity and excellence, in enjoying among the best pass and graduation rates in South Africa, in being a cosmopolitan institution with students from some 45 countries, and in our striving to ensure that we are an environment in which knowledge, understanding and the intellect can flower.

Over 3 days, 2 045 students will graduate at 5 graduation ceremonies. 1 151 students will receive undergraduate degrees, and 894, or 44%, postgraduate degrees. 1 210 graduates or 59% are women. 456 or 22% are international students from 31 countries in the rest of Africa and around the world.

Among these postgraduates is the first cohort of 19 Honours and 3 Masters graduates in African Languages, including, of course, Afrikaans. Sponsored by the Department of Arts and Culture as part of a R7.5 million grant to Rhodes, we hope to graduate some 100 postgraduates over a three-year period.

Once you receive your degree, diploma or certificate, you become part of the community of Old Rhodians. I welcome you to this community and I invite you to visit the Alumni table in the Monument foyer to receive a special graduation gift.

In the years ahead we look forward to celebrating your successes and achievements as Old Rhodians. We will especially celebrate if as alumni you don't forget your alma mater and contribute generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other fundraising efforts.

In as much as we seek to be an outstanding university and provide our students with a high quality higher education and a special experience we are, alas, a relatively poor university and the support of alumni and donors is vital to enable us to discharge our responsibilities and realize our aspirations.

Today/tonight is your night/day, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night and there will be much merriment. You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night/day of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.

1 Mamdani, M. (2002) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Ibadan: John Archers Limited

2 Marais, H. (2011) *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The Political Economy of Change*. Claremont: UCT Press

3 <http://www.thestar.co.za/trevor-manuel-s-open-letter-to-jimmy-manyi-1.1034606>

4 Sachs, A. (2006) Foreword in Kennedy-Dubourdieu, E (2006) *Race and Inequality: World Perspectives on Affirmative Action*. Hampshire: Ashgate; page x

5 Ibid., page ix

6 Alexander, N. (2007) 'Affirmative Action and the Perpetuation of Racial Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa.' *Transformation*, No. 63

7 Ibid., page xi

8 Sharon Dell, S. (2011) 'South Africa: Njabulo Ndebele on labels and leadership'. *University World News*, Issue: 165, 3 April