

VC's tapestry unveiling address

VC's tapestry unveiling address

Date: 01 December 2011 13:00 - 01 December 2011 14:00

Location: Rhodes University Senate Chambers

Organiser: [Vice-Chancellor's office](#) (Phone (046)6228444)

Event Type: Alumni

ADDRESS OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR AT THE UNVEILING OF THE TAPESTRY

IN THE RHODES UNIVERSITY COUNCIL AND SENATE CHAMBER

1 December 2011

The Chairperson of the University Council, Judge Jos Jones

The Deputy Chairperson, Mr. Neville Woolgar

Other members of the Council

The MC, Prof. Paul Maylam

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

Members of the Keiskamma Arts Project and Keiskamma Music Academy

Members of the Students Representative Council

Distinguished guests

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, good afternoon, dumelang, goeie dag

This afternoon we publicly launch an exquisite tapestry commissioned from the Keiskamma Arts Project based in Hamburg on the coast.

We also launch a fabulous brochure developed by Prof. Brenda Schmahmann our Communication and Marketing Division led by Mr Lebogang Hashatse.

It is a privilege to have a tapestry of such beauty, born of the expertise, skill and toil of the women of the Keiskamma Arts Project, adorn the Council chamber; and to have a brochure of the kind produced for this occasion.

All too frequently the written words, art work and the like that an institution produces about itself lapses into a hagiography that is discomfiting because of the way it does violence to memories and historical facts and realities.

When universities engage in such self-deception they regrettably corrode the very things that a university is meant to jealously and passionately guard and foster: knowledge and truth.

Our tapestry, quite deliberately, is different.

It is intended to express the social purposes that are the rationale for our existence; the geography and environment of Rhodes University; the economic, political, historical and social forces that have shaped it over 107 years and the complexity, antinomies, paradoxes and ambiguities of Rhodes' history.

It is also intended to express our origins, where we have come from the road we have travelled and where we are today; the continuities and discontinuities that characterise Rhodes; the inexcusable and shameful actions of our past in which we can take no pride, as well as the courageous actions, successes and achievements in which we can take pride, and that we can and must celebrate.

James Baldwin had observed that 'not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.'¹

And Neville Alexander notes that the moral-historical question is how to move towards understanding without ever forgetting, but to remember without constantly rekindling the divisive passions of the past. Such an approach is the only one which would allow us to look down into the darkness of the well of the atrocities of the past and to speculate on their causes at the same time as we haul up the waters of hope for a future of dignity and equality.²

The launch of the tapestry is an important moment in our continuing journey as Rhodes University of critical reflection, 'critical appreciation of where we come from,' and 'dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now' and where we seek to be in future.³

Three years ago, on 17 September 2008, we began a journey, by no means ended, when as Rhodes University we openly and publicly acknowledged various shameful and regrettable institutional actions on our part during the apartheid period.

We also unreservedly apologised to all those who were wronged, harmed and hurt by our past failings and shameful actions.

We did this not as acts of vengeful condemnation or self-flagellation, but to bring uncomfortable truths into the open, begin to clean the slate, and draw a line on a particular past.

We did so as an act of 'the struggle of memory against forgetting,'⁴ as an expression of our preparedness to engage with our history and present, and of our determination to continue shaping, with confidence, a new future.

The critique of past injustices was intended to simultaneously free us to conceive how we may avoid repeating such tragedies. It demonstrated our desire to promote reconciliation and healing within ourselves, our institution and society, to embrace new values and ways of being and acting, and to reinvent, remake and renew our University.

In doing so, we did not negate the many splendid achievements of Rhodes University. Instead, we drew inspiration and took guidance from our motto, 'Truth, Virtue and Strength'.

We dedicated ourselves to resolutely pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding, critique and reason.

We committed ourselves to steadfastly continue on the path of practising and cultivating the Virtues of human dignity, equality, non-sexism and non-racialism, critical citizenship and all the human rights and freedoms that our Constitution proclaims.

We pledged to possess the Strength of courage and boldness to protect, promote and assert the core purposes and values of a university: the production and dissemination of knowledge, including advancing the public good, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability.

We pledged, also, to institute other activities to signal our unequivocal determination to settle with our past and to continue with our remaking and renewal as a small but outstanding African university.

Through imbizo's on the general conditions and challenges of Rhodes, on equity and institutional culture, and through the work of the Equity and Institutional Culture Committee and other University committees and fora we have sought to critically appreciate 'where we come from,' interrogate where we are now, and to map where we seek to be in future.

We must give credit to the pioneers who 104 years ago created Rhodes; to those who, under difficult and financially trying conditions, steered its subsequent development; to those who oversaw its maturation from a University College under the auspices of the University of South Africa to a fully-fledged University in 1951, and to the generations of academics, administrators and support staff that have energetically toiled to produce the Rhodes University of today's enviable national and international reputation: a deserved reputation grounded in commitment to core academic values and outstanding learning-teaching, research and community engagement.

Constitutional democracy in 1994 ushered in new imperatives and priorities, obligations and responsibilities, and new challenges as well as opportunities for Rhodes. It has necessitated us to reflect openly and critically on our past and where necessary to forge new ways of being and acting, and to develop appropriate ways of contributing to the economic, social, cultural, intellectual and political development of our country and continent in accordance with the core social purposes of a university.

The trigger for the tapestry that now adorns the Council chamber was the process of critical reflection on our institutional culture undertaken in the Gender Action Forum of the University.

The Gender Action Forum reasoned that while the paintings of previous University officials, who because of our history were all white and men, were an undeniable part of our history, they stood in the way of a the Council chamber being a more inclusive and embracing space animated by the spirit of Rhodes being a home for all. It motivated that the paintings should be located elsewhere in the University and that the Council chamber should feature more appropriate representations.

This reasoning and motivation was ultimately accepted by the Senate and the Council.

For many months, while the tapestry was being developed for us in Hamburg, the walls of the Council chamber stood bare, in itself a bold statement on a process of transition and our intent.

An inspired idea and proposal was now required on how to fill the spaces left by the paintings and this was ably provided by Prof. Brenda Schmahmann, senior professor of Fine Arts, and an accomplished working group convened by her.

In closing, I wish to bring together three propositions that I have advanced in this address.

I have indicated that the launch of the tapestry is a moment in our continuing journey – a journey of the remaking, renewal, modernisation, transformation and further development of Rhodes University.

It is, as befitting a university, a journey that has to be undertaken with critical reflection, open and inclusive dialogue, sensitivity, reason and good judgement.

I have also indicated that this journey is by no means ended; indeed, it is far from ended, and in some respects only beginning.

i Cited in Bell, T. with Ntsebeza B.H. (2001) *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid and Truth*, page 288

2 Alexander, N. (2002) *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa*

3 Mati, S. (2005)

4 Kundera, M. (1985) *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, page 5; cited in Alexander, N. (2002) *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa*, page 114

Finally, I have reminded us that three years ago we pledged to institute various activities to signal our unequivocal determination to settle with our past and to pursue our quest to be a small but outstanding African university; a university that is renowned not only for its commitment to knowledge and the pursuit of excellence, but also for its dedication to equity, diversity, social justice, non-racialism and non-sexism, humane values and ethical leadership.

Today's launch of the tapestry is one more of the various actions that we as Rhodes University have undertaken in recent years in our pursuit of becoming an international African university that is for all and embraced by all.

There are other actions that we must still, and I am confident that we will, undertake - hopefully with the same kind of sensitivity and inspired thinking and creativity that has given birth to this magnificent tapestry.

25 years from now, 50 years into the future, through ongoing critical reflection, and 'dialogical and analytic engagement,' we must hope that another tapestry will celebrate how we conquered that which has no place in a university, how we creatively and energetically

built on our many positive features, and how we achieved the ideals and goals that that we set for ourselves.