

DEVELOPING A DECOLONIZED CONSCIOUSNESS

(The 8th Unisa Annual Memorial Lecture in Honour of the late Professor Es'kia Mphahlele, by Mosibudi Mangena, Polokwane, 29/09/2017)

The Vice-Chancellor

Judge Bernard Ngoepe

Chair of the Council of Unisa and other members of Council who might be in attendance

The MEC for Education in Limpopo

The Academic and Administrative Staff of Unisa

The Mphahlele Family

Distinguished Guests

Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

There might be some in the room who might be appalled by the fact that a natural scientist like me is invited to deliver a lecture in honour of a colossus in the fields of literature, philosophy, the arts and education. Indeed, Professor Es'kia Mphahlele was not only one of the finest teachers and writers our country has produced, but one that stands shoulder to shoulder with the very best on the African continent. Having someone like me saying something about him might feel like asking a philistine into an art gallery to articulate the finer points of art. But here we are, and under the circumstances, it seems all

we can do is to get on with it and later take our toy-toy to the door of the Vice-Chancellor of Unisa, Professor Mandla Makhanya, who extended the invitation to this philistine.

Our thanks go to Professor Mandla Makhanya and his team at Unisa for the invitation, probably basing themselves on the assumption that a hard-boiled African like me should be able to say something in connection with an even more profoundly hard-boiled African that was the late Professor Es'kia Mphahlele.

It was always a pleasure visiting him at his home in Lebowakgomo after his retirement from active teaching. We would sit in his study, surrounded by rows and rows of books, and just talk. It was mostly him, the older man, picking the brains of the younger man, probably seeking to make out if we saw developments in our society the same way.

However, it was watching him around children during reading campaigns in Gauteng that revealed his love for the written word. He would sit on a chair and listen to primary school children reading to him. That would bring a twinkle in his eye and it was obvious that it did not matter how rudimentary or sophisticated the story was, Es'kia would like to hear it. It seemed that the fanciful stories meant to stimulate the little minds of children were just as enjoyable as the classics he was accustomed to in the vast world of literature.

Presumably, his worry about the content of what the children were reading to him was a subject for another day. We know that he was enormously aggrieved by the absence of African culture in the planning of our education system. He looked askance at an education system that was divorced from society and its culture and problems, focusing mainly on studying in order to pass an examination. He strongly believed that the arts must be nurtured to feed African culture that was traumatized by colonization. In this way, education would promote self-

knowledge and self-emancipation. Presently, education in our country and in most others on the continent, is alienating and seeks to take us further and further away from who we are.

It is not hard to imagine that had he been alive today, he would have been positively intrigued and energized by some of the demands by our youth for a decolonized education, in much the same way that he proclaimed at one point that his stay and work in Ghana and Nigeria gave him back his Africa. It is also not hard to imagine that at every turn in the places he had taught and worked, such as Finland, Germany, Denmark, France, USA or Sweden, the systems in those countries must have reminded him that he was an African.

It is the same here in South Africa. If you don't know you are Black, the school, the campus, the lecture room, the bank, the insurance company and the world of work will remind you of that fact.. Going into most restaurants, airports or bookshops, does not feel like you are in a country where the vast majority in the population are Black. Only the township, village, taxi rank, the bus stop or the train station would tell you that.

Yes, we got a democracy in 1994, but we did not get a decolonized society, and the rate at which we are going does not suggest we are about to get one any time soon.

The thing is, there is something wrong with the wiring in our heads, especially the heads of the Black intelligentsia. The colonially modelled and inspired education we have received has hobbled our minds so much that we cannot do anything that does not answer to that. We seem incapable of imagining and engineering an education system that is substantially different from our own colonially conceived education. This condition is really making things very, very hard for us.

A late friend and comrade, Vuyisa Qunta, once told me in the departure launch of Athens Airport in Greece, during our exile days, that for as long as Africans remain adherents of both Christianity and Islam, they will remain pliable in the hands of their former colonizers or slave takers. Now, religion is a big and complicated subject that is difficult to discuss. Part of the difficulty is that it is based mainly on belief, not reasoning. It's either you believe or you don't. It cannot be a topic for discussion today. But Vuyisa Qunta maintained that those societies that were able to resist the imposition of the religion of their colonizers, were better placed to break free from the ways of their colonizers than Africans have done. He told me that he had instructed his family not to engage in any religious rituals, practices or ceremonies at his funeral.

I went to Qunta's funeral in Kwa-Langa in Cape Town. In the absence of any religious aspect, we didn't know how to mourn him. Similarly, we don't know how to do education that is stripped of the ethos of our colonizers. That's how we are wired.

Despite the fact that whites have been in this country for nearly four hundred years, they just know that when their son is born, he would not be Matome van der Merwe, but Piet van der Merwe. If it is a daughter, they just know that she would be Zelda van der Merwe, not Mokgadi van der Merwe. There is no debate. They just know. That's how they are wired.

They just know that their children will speak their language at home, would recite their rhymes at crèche; would learn in their language at school and read books written by their authors. They just know.

That leads to many other things that they just know. If you are a Black lawyer or doctor or any other professional, and open your practice here in the city, whites would not seek services from you. If you open a

restaurant in the city, they would not patronize it. They don't debate it. They just know.

But with us, the wiring is all wrong. Although most of us have not been to Europe, we would name our son Piet and our daughter Claudia, even if we don't know what the names mean. We would put other people's hair on our heads even if we don't know what diseases they might have suffered from or whether the owners of the hair are dead or alive. As long as the hair is straight and resembles that of the colonialists, it's okay, we love it. That's the way we are wired. On the other hand, whites, who have been here nearly four hundred years, would not be seen dead with an Afro-wig on their heads. That's just how they are wired. They just know that the Afro-wig is not for them.

We are enthusiastic about our little children reciting nursery rhymes in a colonial language, even if the poor kids don't understand what it means. In the process, we are putting formidable barriers in the learning journey of our children.

Why is it necessary for our people to learn a colonial language before they could learn carpentry, plumbing, bricklaying, welding, painting, electricity, motor mechanics, agriculture and similar skills? Imagine how empowering it would be if our people, especially adults, were able to go into the various colleges in their communities, learn these trades, get the required certificates that would enable them to enter the economy in a meaningful way! Imagine what this would mean for development! But no, we are not wired that way. We demand that they should learn a colonial language before they could access these skills.

In my previous life as minister of science and technology I visited many countries, including Japan where technological innovations and applications are ubiquitous. You would encounter hotels where you open the curtains with a remote and toilets that open the lid as you

approach and close as you move away. Let alone the Japanese cars, music systems, televisions, microwaves and cameras that we love so much and buy. The engineers and technicians who design and make these things use their own languages. Most of them can't even speak any other language except Japanese. The same applies for Koreans, Germans or Italians.

We seem to confuse the language of the colonialists with intelligence and skills, whereas the most critical things are the concepts, not the language. For as long as we are wired in the wrong way as we are now, development will continue to elude us. Because development is a function of the energy, genius and culture of the people, it will not happen for us if we continue insisting that education and skills acquisition of any sort should take place through the language and culture of the colonialists.

We should dismantle the wiring in our heads, particularly the heads of our intelligentsia, re-wire ourselves so that we just know that our children would be Thabo or Morongwa; so that we just know that they will speak our languages at home; that they would do nursery rhymes written by us and in their own languages; that we just know that when they go to high school and university they would read Es'kia Mphahlele, Zakes Mda, Mirriam Tlali, Chinua Achebe, Fred Khumalo, Chris van Wyk, Ngugi wa Thiog'o and many other African writers on the continent. Our children should grow up knowing who O. K. Matsepe was and proud of having read *Kgorong Ya Moshate*, or Sibusiso Nyembezi and his *Inkisela YaseMgungundlovu* or SEK Mqhayi and his *Ityala Lamawele*. Most of our children do not know who Es'kia Mphahlele is, let alone having read *Down Second Avenue*. They don't know we have produced a world renowned author and teacher who stayed in their midst.

The new and proper wiring of our heads should be loaded with a software that would drastically diminish our excessive love for our former colonialists, their language, culture and other such attributes. We have the example of Afrikaners within our own borders who were fiercely anti-colonial and did everything to rid themselves of the trappings and attributes of their colonizers. Their biggest blemish was their colonization and racist oppression of the Black majority. In as far as their anti-colonial stance is concerned, Afrikaners need to be admired, not vilified. Is it not rather ironic that our students who demand a decolonized education are simultaneously demanding to be taught in English, the ultimate colonial language? For as long as we love our former colonizers too much and seek their approval of everything we do, including our education system, we would not be able to do much in the direction of building that decolonized consciousness.

It is probably safe to assume that it is the desire, expressed or not, of every academic in our country, to see himself or herself at Cambridge, Oxford, Cornell or Harvard University. Or to see his or her work published in academic magazines recognized in the European or North American environment, and of course to be invited to conferences in those countries.

For that to happen, our academic work must mirror what is happening there or sail very close to the academic work done in Europe and North America. It is not hard to imagine that any suggestion that our academic curriculum and research activities should charter its own path would trigger devastating earthquakes in our heads. It would be traumatic.

This, of course, would have nothing to do with the essence or quality of our education or academic work, but would have everything to do with our desire for approval by, and association with our colonial past. It is

much the same schizophrenia that makes us feel that somehow, our marriages are not complete unless we include the colonial version of matrimony in them. So, we do the same thing twice. We do lobola and then go and buy rings, wear a white veil and a suit, get blessings in church, and only then do we feel properly married. This has nothing to do with the essence of marriage and its validity. It is just that our wiring compels us to do and pay twice for the same thing. We don't feel complete if we have not answered to the colonial way of doing things. It is ridiculous, but that's the way we are wired.

Indonesians hated their Dutch colonizers so much that at independence, they banned Dutch as an official language and adopted a standardized form of Malay as their official language. Despite the fact that Indonesia is a country of over 262 million people scattered in over 17,000 islands and who speak over 300 languages, they were able to replace a colonial language with *Bahasa Indonesia* or Indonesian Language, which is now their language of education, commerce, bureaucracy and law. With only 11 official languages, we cannot even begin to compare their complexity with ours.

But what the Black intelligentsia does is to have long and complicated debates that take us nowhere in a practical way. That could be remedied by proper wiring of our heads. Then we would be saved the embarrassment that comes with our children and grandchildren demanding that we give them decolonized education, which we seemingly can't.

The advanced literary scholars among us might read Shakespeare, Jane Austin, Charles Dickens and others of that sort. These should be exotic material rather than the staple reading for our children.

We focus on the Black intelligentsia because it is the one class that is responsible for the planning, execution and financing of the education

system in the country. It is in charge of education from the political level, to the bureaucracy, right down to the classroom. It is this class that can make the difference we require in as far as decolonized education is concerned.

The day we just know these things is the day we would stop talking too much but doing very little; that's the day we would embark on the real road towards ridding ourselves of our colonial mentality; it is the day our young would start respecting us. As Es'kia Mphahlele had observed, to be truly ourselves, we should actively work against white trusteeship, leadership and ideas.

But for all that to come to pass, we must first re-wire our heads, so that for the most part, we just know.

Mosibudi Mangena

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