

# ***Who Was Alfred? A native gazing at Rhodes University from Makana's Kop***

Shepi Mati  
*Democracy Radio*  
*Cape Town*

(In memory of Makana ka Nxele, Steve Biko, Siphiso Mthimkhulu, Mthetheleli Gcina, Coletane Markam and all other men and women from this region and beyond who gave their lives resisting colonisation, conquest, settlement and the colonial violence that destroyed one way of life and also gave birth to Rhodes University.)

## **Colonial conquest, dispossession and the establishment of Rhodes University**

Wars, conquest and annexations provided one of the primary requisites of industrialism – an uprooted peasantry available at low cost for rough manual work. Peasant communities lost their self-sufficiency under the pressures resulting from the confiscation of their land and cattle, the imposition of taxes, the substitution of traders' merchandise for domestic products, the spread of education and Christianity. Wage earning became unavoidable for increasing numbers of men and women. Members of small agrarian societies had to acquire the discipline and skills of the industrial worker, accustom themselves to urban society, learn the laws and language of the conqueror. They learned the hard way: on the job, without formal instructions, by working under employers, supervisors and technicians who neither understood nor respected their language and customs. – Simons and Simons, 1983, pp.31-32.<sup>1</sup>

## **My Roots Go Deep into this Soil Yet...**

My family roots lie deep into the soil of this region. I was born just a stone's throw away from here in eBhayi. One hundred years before my eyes saw the sun for the first time, my great grandfather was born in KwaMankazana, not far from here. The disintegration of the African communal subsistence life brought about by colonial conquest and dispossession scattered my family all over this region. Growing up in a small town called Adelaide, and in the farms bearing such names as Millness, Pearson, Pringle, Painter, and Moorcroft, I still carry childhood impressions and vivid memories chasing baboons away from the maize-fields, enjoying *umthubi*, the first milk of the cows that had just given birth and feasting on the tails of newborn lambs. One hundred years earlier African people from this region – the amaXhosa and the KhoiKhoi – were fighting to protect whatever little was left of their land and livelihood. They, are the ones that gave birth to me and shaped me long before I came to Rhodes. They, are my alma mater.

Here I experienced the disruption brought about by the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction under Bantu Education. Here I threw my

first stones at the symbols of apartheid. Here I graduated from the university of political resistance. Between 1980 when I began my matric and 1985 when I arrived here as a first year journalism and media studies student, I had worked as an activist in the Young Christian Movement, the Congress of South African Students, and as a wine steward and switchboard operator. This was my university. I spent three full months undergoing my graduation into manhood in a dormitory township called Mdantsane not far from here. There in the seventies my uncle had already been banished for picking up the spear against colonisation and oppression. The very colonisation and oppression that gave birth to Rhodes University.

My foreskin lies buried there. The university of initiation into manhood was an opportunity to reflect on my life, and to refine my sense of what is right and what is wrong, and my basic values and perspectives on life. My *incibi* was an ex-political prisoner called Mgabelo, a man who circumcised many young activists on Robben Island. Halfway through our initiation period, Mgabelo skipped the country only to emerge as a political commissar in Angola. A professor of sociology in this university by the name of Jan Coetzee was to later capture the story of Mgabelo in a little booklet called *Plain Tales from Robben Island*.

To place in context the multiple meaning that Rhodes University and the centenary celebrations hold for me, I will share some of my family history and other anecdotes with you. I'd like to tell you a family legend of how my great grandfather was nearly cast away by his mother during one of the wars of dispossession. The legend goes that when my great-grandfather, Daniso Daniel Mati, was still a tiny baby his mother was hiding with him in the caves. While hiding, others in the group urged her to 'throw away this thing, it's not even human yet and if it screams we'll all be located by the whites and be killed'. It is said that my great-grandfather's mother swung her arms with baby in hands three times about to throw him away when finally her motherly instinct took over and she ran away to hide elsewhere with her child. My great-grandfather almost paid with his infant life to realise the colonial dream which also gave birth to Rhodes. But, it took a woman, my great-great-grandmother, to defy her own people and at a certain level against the colonists' dreams. And from this lineage in the family, like that great-great-grandmother, numerous rebels, resisters and freedom fighters were born to sacrifice and contribute to the struggle for our liberation from apartheid. This, incidentally, also made it possible for one member of my family, me, to enter this institution. Thanks to the motherly instinct and the will to rebel, my great-grandfather lived and when his mother died in one of these wars, was raised by his brothers, to tell this tale to his children, grand-children and great grand-children. There is no way of verifying the authenticity ('where is the evidence?' a Rhodes Scholar might ask) of this legend but it represents the actual experience of my people under

British colonialism and will remain an integral part of my family history as I will pass it on to my children and children's children.

My family has lived in this region for three hundred years or more. In these open fields and built-up areas they undertook their initiation rituals, they fell in love here, exchanged lobola and were married here. Today many of their children wander the streets looking for work to feed their families. The graveyards of relatives are scattered throughout this region. They lived and died in this part of the world, the world of Rhodes, and yet I was the first generation of this old family from this region to have had an opportunity to enter this hallowed institution. And this, only in 1985, eighty years after this institution was established. Today I'm asked to join in the centenary celebration of Rhodes. I can only do it with an acute sense of conflict and ambiguity. I am a graduate of Rhodes, but my family over generations had to pay an enormous social price of me to enjoy this 'privilege'.

And yes, I am firstly a graduate of my people, who are known to generations of Rhodes scholars only as Alfred, Maria, Jane or John, names that are not theirs, but imposed upon them for the convenience of whites who refused to and fail to pronounce our names. Of course they were only concerned not with who we really were but with giving instructions to us as we slaved away building institutions like these. And later, much later, they granted us a qualified privilege allowing a select few into these hallowed corridors of knowledge. Indeed that privilege was nothing more than civilising the noble savage, and in my time attempting to create a middle class to serve as a buffer against an increasingly 'restless native'.

In Adelaide, the only form of employment was in seasonal labour, the railways, domestic service or contract labour.

While white babies received the best care black mothers could give, black babies were nurtured on lullabies – *Thula Thul' Thula Bhabha! Thula Thula! Thul'umam' uzaw'fika ekuseni!* – by their grandmothers. While young white women took their university studies here, young black women were learning to harvest oranges as seasonal labourers. While young white men responded to their army call-ups before coming here, young black men went underground for their university studies into the depths of the gold and coal mines of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. There is a song of lament by Stompie Mavi 'Lomlung': *uTeba ngokwenene ndiyamzonda ngokuthath' isithandwa sam. Andisoze ndiy' eGoli. Uzubathuthe loliwe! Uzubathuthe loliwe! Andisoze ndiy' eGoli'.*

The song says 'uzubathuthe loliwe!'. The steam train took them away from their loved ones. The steam train brought them back home, often penniless. Sometimes the mines swallowed them forever. Hugh Masekela captures the sorrow of these miners faraway from their families and loved ones. While the magnates of the Rand lived in glory and splendour, contributing to the coffers of Rhodes University year after year, young men from this region were either

deep underground creating wealth for this country or as old men busy dying from silicosis and black lung disease.

So when I left Rhodes University in November 1987, I vowed never to come back to this institution, to this town. A few years later I wrote this poem.

Graham's Town! Ghost town!  
 I thought I'd left you  
 But you haven't left my heart  
 Those wild jols  
 The noise of your student evenings  
 Those tormented beggars  
 The Church bells on solitary Sunday evenings  
 The spies we drank with in the pub  
 Hidden among the saints  
 Such loneliness  
 Such sadness.

Thus when I got here eighty four years after this institution was established I was still an *ikrwala*, newly graduated into manhood. The proud bare chest and headdress of a hundred years earlier was replaced by a London Fog jacket and a Scottish cap. The barefeet and armbands had given way to a pair of Crocket & Jones shoes and a Viella shirt. But the ochre on my face was still visible.

About six months earlier I had applied to study Journalism and Media Studies here, and to study Law at Wits University. For me my studies were linked to the long-term political choice I had made, the fight for social and self-emancipation. Journalism would provide me with tools always to seek the truth. Law would provide me with tools to fight for justice against unjust laws. Both these professions would enable me to continue, in everything I did, in the Harry Gwala sense giving expression to my gut instinct of fighting alongside the marginalised in their quest to make the world a better place for themselves and for their children. I still believe it is necessary and possible and believe this perspective still guides me in the choices I make in life today.

My first political responsibility on campus was to oversee a Black Students Movement (BSM) table just outside the student centre, enlisting new members. About sixteen years earlier, a group of black students had staged a walkout from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). And this happened on this very campus. Their grievance – white students in NUSAS unable to relate to the experience and challenges of black students. This walk-out was to be the prelude to the birth of SASO which produced the next generation of militants – Steve Biko, Mapetla Mohapi, (both died in detention), Terror Lekota, Saths Cooper, Strini Moodley, Johnny Issel, Barney Pityana and many others.

Under the slogan 'Black man you're on your own!', they were mobilised as a generation of young militants trying to reverse and undo the historical processes of conquest and settlement. The process of conquest for this region

has 1820 as the decisive moment with the arrival of the British settlers. And 1904 the establishment of Rhodes University as a centre of higher learning that we could only gaze at from Makana's Kop. So the Black Student Movement of 1985, while having shifted from BCM, were in a certain sense still trapped by many of the same constraints faced by our predecessors, and was still guided by the strategic perspective of the 1968 black student activists – that of mobilising the oppressed, most of whom have yet to enter this institution even today, ten years after democracy.

As black students in this institution mobilised into the BSM, we had to contest on a daily basis for our right to higher education. I remember very well a meeting we had to claim our share of the sports levy. We argued that since we refused to participate in official sports codes and had established a non-racial sports body, we had a right to our fair share of the sports levy all students are required to pay on registration.

Then there was something that none of us could verify but was generally consistent with apartheid. You see we had come here under a permit. And the Separate Amenities Act ensured that we could not go to the same entertainment facilities with our fellow white students. So we understood that a waiver had been given under the law to allow blacks to go to the same cinemas as whites but only on condition that they are accompanied by whites who must outnumber them two to one. As a result most of us ended up spending many precious hours in the pub here on campus as no special permission was required among drunkards.

In my time here a serious attempt at co-option of an educated black middle-class element was central to the apartheid regime's strategy. This system then also produced a new breed of black student – 'the private school graduate' – who spoke English in a very strange way that if you'd turn your back for a moment you'd be forgiven to think you were hearing a white English-speaking youngster. So much had changed since 1968 yet so little too. This was a new challenge for the BSM – how to organise this new type of black student and get them actively involved in the cause of freedom and in identifying with the community from where they came. You see the political consciousness of the black middle class those days began and ended mostly with colour frustrations. Today in many respects, it is this social stratum which has benefited the most from political freedom.

### **'Fascist' Raids**

I had hardly been in Grahamstown for a few days when a national raid of UDF activists took place. It was this raid that led to the treason trial of Terror Lekota and other comrades in Delmas. These raids represented an unbroken tradition of conquest and contesting struggles for liberation.

As usual the 'fascists' arrived in great numbers and I was woken by loud bangs on the doors and windows. In an instant, I had dashed to my luggage and

grabbed some of the politically explosive books and hidden them inside pots and pans in one of the kitchen cupboards. Once inside, the fascists combed every little corner of the house. Meticulously they went through each item of my luggage and took away everything that contained words on paper. Such was their fear of the word.

Now among my items was a singular article. It was photocopied from the *African Communist*, a banned journal of the then-banned South African Community Party. In order to hide what I was photocopying, I had placed a newspaper on top of it. It so happened that the photocopy came out surrounded by the words ‘Omo Washes Brightest’ in big and bold font. Beneath this, and in small font characteristic of the *African Communist* in those days, was the title of the article by Joe Slovo, ‘J. B. Marks: A Communist, Freedom Fighter and Man of the People’. Can you believe it that the cop who was making an entry of all my items entered ‘Omo Washes Brightest’ as one of the articles taken from my possession? Such is the consequence of the fear of ideas. And Rhodes University usually took a ‘don’t get yourselves in trouble’ attitude to developments like this. And if *in loco parentis* meant acting like and in the interest of parents, then this institution failed many young men and women who just could not understand the meaning of academic freedom outside freedom of the individual and for society.

A few days after this incident I penned the following poem:

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February<sup>2</sup>  
 That morning in Grahamstown  
 I crossed paths with  
 – strange armed men  
 hunting for my comrades  
 searching for banned literature  
 looking for bloody communists  
 inside the torn  
 pockets of my shirt  
 and trousers.

As you can hear by now, I’m not a poet. But the situation those days transformed many of us to perform extraordinary things we ordinarily thought incapable of. I am glad that the veteran writer and poet James Mathews, once remarked ‘when Apartheid is gone, we’ll see who is the real poet! We will then separate poetry from stringing a series of Amandlas and Vivas and declare this protest poetry’.

### Among the NOBODIES

Then there were days and nights of booze and philosophising. We would stretch the lazy afternoons into evenings and beyond drinking beer – if we were well off financially, otherwise it was cheap wine as usual, punch and anything

goes. My favourite spot was the beer hall in the coloured township. Here, I always became aware of my privilege as the university student among the salt of the earth – men and women shorn of all but the bare minimum of honour and dignity. I remember once I wrote a poem about how these wretched of the earth looked as if they'd been resuscitated against their will to endure another painful term of life. These were descendents of the KhoiKhoi and amaXhosa. And in their veins ran the blood the Scottish, Dutch and other European working men.

But amongst them were Latin graduates, flower arrangers, shepherds without sheep, and men of the cloth. I do not forget the pickpockets, the tongue-twisters, the spies and ex-convicts who could slit a throat at a drop of a hat and smile while closing an Okapi. To all who dared to tread its hallowed entrance the beer hall bared the arsehole of apartheid.

Among the friends I acquired in Grahamstown, one stands out – tall and poetic. We simply knew him as Madala. Today he is known as Eddie Maloka and is the Director of the Africa Institute of South Africa based in Tshwane. I remember once at the height of the state of emergency, anyone wondering around the streets of this town at night, including students, had to carry a special permit from the police. You can imagine how valuable this permit was for those of us in search of drinking holes after dark. So this one evening myself and Madala were casually walking and deep in discussion about the challenges facing the South African revolution. Suddenly a white combi slowly drove past us. Instantly, and with a quick glance between us, we recognised it as a police van. We knew it would make a U-turn somewhere in front, but we were still a few blocks away from the house we were going to sit for that evening. But if we walked at our current pace, we could make the house before they reached us and we'd lock ourselves in. This was the most realistic course of action. But alas, the next minute I turned to look around, there goes Madala striding away like a giraffe running from a hound of hyenas. Suddenly there I was, in complete solitude, and in front of me a police van surely making a U-turn. Hey, I picked up my pace straight into the house and locked myself in. Then my worries turned to my comrade. After an hour I received a call that he had arrived safe and sound back on campus. This was the life we lived here, always on the edge, sometimes by design but most times determined by the powers that be. And this was captured in a poem by Madala which became a signature tune for all our cultural activities on campus: 'If I die!'.

The hands of the apartheid spies we rubbed shoulders with here on campus are equally stained with the blood of Mathew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkonto, Sicelo Mhlawuli and Fort Calata as their actual murderers. They died not far from here, and here we refused to let them die.

Although the institution tended towards complacency and an attitude of 'let's not cause trouble' towards apartheid, among the lecturers and professors were outstanding individuals distinguished by their courage and commitment. I will just mention a few.

## Tools of Analysis

Fred Hendricks was my first year sociology lecturer. I had a problem of short-sightedness which I only discovered once back inside a lecture theatre. Thank God this was only a physical short-sightedness, and not a political issue. Anyway as a result of this defect, I sat right in the first front row. Now I could hear behind me whispers of my fellow classmates doing guesswork about the identity of our lecturer. ‘He looks Portuguese to me!’, one would say with steadfast conviction. ‘No I think he’s Lebanese!’, another would chip in another. ‘Hay kona, he looks white to me!’. All along Fred the ‘Greek’ was pacing up and down getting us to grasp the basic tools of sociological analysis.

I don’t know if any of those classmates of mine ever grasped the essence of this discipline called sociology. But they certainly were occupied with the spirit of higher learning and the quest for truth in their own tutorial on the politics of the identity of our lecturer. Such is what our system produced that first year students were more occupied with their lecturer’s identity instead of the basic tools of sociological analysis. Fred was later to distinguish himself as, to borrow the words of Che Guevara, ‘someone who risked his skin to prove his platitudes’ when he spirited Lulu Johnson, an escaped detainee, out of Grahamstown into the Transkei. At the time of the state of emergency, and without a passport, very few people would have taken the risks.

## A Global Perspective

Then there was African Political Studies. Marian Lacey was a committed political activist and academic. With her trademark hoarse voice, she pushed us as far as we could go in understanding political and comparative developments in Latin America and Southern Africa. I remember one lecture we had in which she played the tape of the last time the President of the People’s Republic of Mozambique, Samora Machel, sang and chatted to the people of Zambia in Lusaka International Airport on his way home to Mozambique. He was not to arrive home. Lured onto a hill in Mbunzini on the border between South Africa, Swaziland and Mozambique, President Machel together with his entire entourage save one bodyguard died in a tragic plane crash.

This was to us a singular blow sustained by all freedom fighters in southern Africa and throughout the world. And most of us became ardent scholars of the writings of Samora Machel.

## Whose History?

Perhaps one of the most critical moments for Rhodes University was the case of African History. Julian Cobbing was one of the most progressive historians this institution has ever had. I can still see him pacing up and down in our African History seminar, only to lash out at a poorly formulated response to a challenge he’d issued earlier. ‘You’re all products of Bantu Education!. Look at this insti-



tution – directly opposite us is the Anglican Cathedral, where they instill the fear of the Almighty. If you slip out of that religious indoctrination, then over here Rhodes University awaits you to take off where the Church failed. If this ideological indoctrination fails and you come out a rebel, to our left just a few metres from here are the headquarters of the Special Branch. They'll deal with you, they'll panel-beat you to conformity. Now if they also fail, directly opposite them is the Supreme Court. There they'll finally deal with you by removing you from society'. This, he called the quadrangle of Fascism. But some of us believed in the truth and justice of our quest for freedom and believed this 'quadrangle of Fascism' would perish at the hands of our efforts and that of thousands of others throughout the country. And I believe that also Julian knew this as he alerted us to the institutions of consent and coercion that we were up against.

F.W. de Klerk was Minister of Education. His cabinet engineered a political decision to cut back on funding to institutions of higher learning, especially because these funds tended to prop up causes and programmes regarded as 'hot beds of radicalism'. I remember the battles we waged to retain the African History course under the onslaught of conservative liberals who included the Head of Department, Prof Rodney Davenport. Their contention was to effectively drop African History under the pretext that it was undersubscribed, while retaining a British History component at Honours level. This was how power defined Rhodes. Naturally we felt insulted and ridiculed. It was like rubbing salt on a fresh wound of colonial occupation. They had financial resources and power, we had ideas, songs, history, a vision and the will to struggle. And of course we had on our side Julian Cobbing.

The victors, who invoke the right of inheritance to justify their privilege, impose their own memory as the only memory allowed. Official history, the wardrobe where the system keeps its old costumes, deceives by what it says and even more by what it keeps silent. This parade of masked heroes reduces our dazzling reality to a small, ridiculous show: the victory of the rich, the white, the male and the military. – Eduardo Galiano.

### Clandestine Political Classes

One of the things we did here to arm ourselves with ideas and to build a cadre for the movement for liberation was to set up clandestine political study groups. We had sessions here on campus and in the township. Out of these sessions, emerged such leaders as Langa Zitha, a trade unionist and communist and now MP, a *pantsula* called Mtswala who I last heard went to organise underground for the Mineworkers Union, Nothemba Kulati who today takes care of the wounded in spirit and flesh and is active in the trade union movement. And of course other young township activists who were to play a leading role in the struggle for liberation. While most other students were taking a Sunday afternoon nap, or busy drinking away their frustrations at the pub, we'd be buried in a room somewhere at a hostel or in a backyard room in the township

discussing and analysing *The Communist Manifesto*, 'The Road to South African Freedom', 'The Strategy and Tactics of the ANC', the Freedom Charter, 'The Preface and Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', Gramsci and many others. We drew inspiration from the analytical mind of Govan Mbeki, and the organisational abilities of Wilton Mkwayi. We were inspired by our forebears who had already taken up the spear in defence of personal and social liberation.

## **Makana's School**

Just over two hundred years before I arrived here for my journalism studies, a left-handed child was born somewhere in this region. His people named him Nxele, the left-handed. To the Boers he was known as 'Links'. And the British corrupted this to 'Lynx'. To me, Makana ka Nxele defines the history of this region more profoundly than one hundred years of Rhodes University.

He grew up roaming these hills. Makana was to become one of the greatest guerilla strategists of the anti-colonial wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in this region. He was a leading general of the War of Resistance of 1818-1819 under Chief Ndlambe. The colonial historians call this the Fifth Kafir War. There's an African saying, which goes 'Until the lions have their own historians, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter'. Ten years before this university was established, one of the arch-colonialists of the time and a man after whom this institution became known, led the annexation of the last independent African territory, Pondoland.

Thomas Pringle, a man who was far ahead of his times, writes of the visits Makana would pay Van Der Lingen, the settler army chaplain in this very town to engage him in polemics on *their* God versus *our* Dalidiphu. This represented the battle of ideas between the worldview of the indigenous people and that of the colonialists. But thanks to the cannon, this battle was decided in favour of British colonialism. And today thanks to Rhodes University, the WCMC (white middle-class male) paradigm keeps mutating. Otherwise how are we to explain the Rhodes-Mandela Scholarship? Someone once said 'the more things change, the more they remain the same.' How true, it would appear, of this institution.

The visits of Makana took place before 1818. Seven years prior, the colonial administration had driven the Africans beyond the Great Fish River. The military campaign was led by none other than Colonel John Graham, a man after whom this very town is named. This is how Thomas Pringle captures this campaign of plunder and subjugation:

A large force of military and of Burgher militia was assembled for that purpose under the command of Colonel Graham... Mr Brownlee mentions that the Caffers evinced extreme reluctance to leave a country which they had occupied the greater part of the century, and which they considered as by right their own... The hardships, also, of abandoning their crops of maize and millet, which were at the time nearly ripe, and the loss of which will

subject them to a whole year of famine, was urgently pleaded. But all remonstrance was vain: not a day's delay was allowed them. They were driven out with considerable slaughter, and in a spirit of stern severity, which, although partly attributable to the provocation given by the treacherous slaughter of Stockenstrom and his followers, admits but of partial palliation... I have now lying before me a journal, kept during that campaign by my friend Mr Hart, who was then a lieutenant in the Cape Regiment. From this it appears that the Caffers were shot indiscriminately, women as well as men, wherever found, and even though they offered no resistance.

This is the context in which the War of Resistance of 1819 under the command of Makana ka Nxele is to be understood. Pringle again:

In the early morning of April 23, 1819, 10 000 warriors, led by Makana, made an attack on Grahamstown. But the white troops were in a camp surrounded by a stockade, and cannon were mounted at the corners. Makana's spearmen were mown down by grapeshot and finally driven back. Thus Makana failed to take Grahamstown.

About two months ago in June of 2004, justice was restored to the memory of this war with the naming of the planes of eGazini where these brave soldiers of resistance fell as a National Heritage Site. These men were prepared to risk their skins for others. Their spirit of selflessness inspired many generations of freedom fighters including those who emerged from within the belly of this institution – Guy Berger, Devan Pillay, Ian Mgijima and many others. As for Makana, his own spirit of self sacrifice was to be demonstrated in the days and nights following the counter-attack of the settler army.

Three months later a white army crossed the Fish River and drove the Xhosa back as far as the Kei River. Many of the Africans were killed, and all their remaining cattle were captured and their homes burned. But one day Makana suddenly appeared in the English camp and gave himself up. 'People say I have occasioned this war', he said. 'Let me see whether delivering myself up to the conquerors will restore peace to my country.'

And so Makana was sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island. The historians have recorded that some days after his surrender, a delegation of his *amaphakati* came to the camp of the English commander, Colonel Willshire. They came to ask that Makana should be set free and they offered themselves and other leading men as prisoners in exchange. According to Thomas Pringle, the words of their spokesman were taken down by Captain Stockenstrom, who was present. The words spoken by these men are immortalised as the clearest and most eloquent explanation of the causes of the war and the feelings of Makana's followers. Here they are:

Speaking with dignity and with great feeling, the black man said: 'The war, British chiefs, is an unjust one. You are striving to extirpate a people whom you forced to take up arms. When our fathers and the fathers of the Boers first settled in the Suurveld [that is, west of the Fish River] they dwelt together in peace. Their flocks grazed on the same hills; their herdsman smoked together out of the same pipes; they were brothers... until the herds of the Xhosas increased so as to make the hearts of the Boers sore. What those covetous men could not get from our fathers for old buttons, they took by force. Our fathers were men; they loved their cattle; their wives and the children lived upon milk; they fought for their

property. They began to hate the colonists who coveted their all, and aimed at their destruction. Now, their kraals and our fathers' kraals were separate. The Boers made commandos on our fathers. Our fathers drove them out of the Suurveld; and we dwelt there because we had conquered it. There we were circumcised; there we married wives; and there our children were born. The white man hated us, but could not drive us away. When there was war we plundered you. When there was peace some of our bad people stole; but our chiefs forbade it. Your treacherous friend, Ngqika, always had peace with you; yet when his people stole, he shared in the plunder. Have your patrols ever found cattle taken in times of peace, runaways slaves or deserters, in the kraals of our chiefs? Have they ever gone into Ngqika's country without finding such cattle, such slaves, such deserters, in Ngqika's kraals. But he was your friend and you wished to possess the Suurveld. You came at last like locusts [referring to the attack in 1818]. We stood, we could do no more. You said, 'Go over the Fish River... this is all we want.' We yielded and came here... We lived in peace. Some of our bad people stole, perhaps; but the nation was quiet... the chiefs were quiet. Ngqika stole... his chiefs stole... his people stole. You sent him copper; you sent him beads; you sent him horses, on which he rode to steal more. To us you sent only commandos.

We quarreled with Ngqika about grass... no business of yours. You sent a commando. You took our last cow... you left only a few calves, which died for want, along with our children. You gave half of what you took to Ngqika; half you kept to yourselves. Without milk... our corn destroyed... we saw our wives and children perish... we saw that we must ourselves perish, we followed therefore, the tracks of our cattle into the Colony. We plundered and we fought for our lives. We found you weak; we destroyed your soldiers. We saw that we were strong; we attacked your headquarters, Grahamstown... and if we had succeeded, our right was good, for you began the war. We failed... and you are here.

We wish for peace; we wish to rest in our huts; we wish to get milk for our children; our wives wish to till the land. But your troops cover the plains, and swarm in the thickets, where they cannot distinguish the man from the woman and shoot all.

You want us to submit to Ngqika. That man's face is fair to you, but his heart is false. Leave him to himself. Make peace with us. Let him fight for himself... and we shall not call on you for help. Set Makana at liberty; and Islambi, Dushani, Kongo and the rest will come to make peace with you at any time we fix. But if you will still make war, you may indeed kill the last man of us... Ngqika shall not rule over the followers of those who think him a woman.<sup>3</sup>

In Makana's attempt to escape from Robben Island he drowned on the rocks of Bloubergstrand. Since then there has been a saying in the Eastern Cape, 'Ukuza kuka Nxele'. Hope deferred, dreams deferred, and with it, liberation. That was the time of my great-great-grandmother. This is the mortar with which this institution was built!

This institution could have chosen to take sides with those in bondage, as a gesture of true pursuit of freedom. But it chose to defer this role.

Now that the majority of the citizens of this country have political power, what is Rhodes University doing to study the wars of dispossession of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Now that the academic community is free to rethink, what is Rhodes University doing to study the legacy of Makana ka Nxele and others?

Where are the chronicles of the black men who built this university, brick by brick? Where are the records of the women who cleaned these hostels and

cooked the food in these dining halls? Where are the stories of those who maintained these landscapes and gardens? Where is the story of Alfred?

For every geologist who graduated in this institution, black men and women had to make sure he had his breakfast at 7 o'clock every morning before lectures while other black women and men carried sealed correspondence on the age, aesthetics and social meaning of rock art between offices.

For every lawyer, black men and women had to ensure the cutlery and dishes in which she ate her breakfast were washed and her lunch meal was cooked and ready in time.

For every linguist black men and women had to ensure his lecture theatre was spotless by the time he arrived for his first lecture of the day.

For every pharmacist black men and women had to make sure her laundry was done and pressed every week.

For every sociologist black men and women had to ensure his bed was made every morning.

And yes as our anthropologists were sitting in the shade of trees pruned and on lawns trimmed by black men and women, discussing theories of gazing at the native, they hardly pondered who Alfred was.

While Rhodes produced these scholars, those who laboured for Rhodes were earning peanuts. While Rhodes graduates led expensive lifestyles and drew five digit cheques, the life and labour of Rhodes workers were forever cheap. This is the social cost of Rhodes University. This is the price paid by black men and women for Rhodes University to celebrate its centenary today. It is on the backs of these nobodies, these nameless men and women that every young man and woman graduated in this institution from 1904 to the present. The greatest tribute is truly and honestly due to these men and women who laboured to make Rhodes University complete each day of its life looking neat and well-fed. They bore the greatest social cost for the survival of this institution, yet for more than half of its 100 years, this institution could not even allow their children to set foot in its hallowed lecture theatres as students. And when it did, for most of that time they had to attend on a special permit issued only if their so-called homeland universities did not offer the particular course they intended studying.

Before you say I must stop politicking, Istvan Meszaros has something to say to you: Politics affects the life of everybody... politics is far too important to be left to the politicians, even the most far-sighted of them.<sup>4</sup>

## **A Luta Continua!?**

What is the challenge facing all of us today, especially those of us who are associated with this institution? This for me is to build new institutions committed to a critical appreciation of the where we come from, a dialogical and analytic engagement with where we are now, and placing before all of us a compelling vision of a future based on solidarity and caring. And to build this

new institution requires a courageous leadership with a bold political will and a commitment to transparency and tolerance of difference. There are no holy cows in this battle for reconstruction and redefinition.

Let us use this occasion to reflect honestly and critically. What does this institution mean for ordinary men and women? What do we leave behind these hills when it's time for us to graduate and go away to join the wabenzi or to run our family factories? What scars does Rhodes inflict on me that I will carry for much of my life?

Knowledge institutions are powerful institutions. And just as we need to redefine power elsewhere, within universities also, we need to redefine power and knowledge. Or as Edward Said says about the role of the intellectual in society 'Always Speak Truth to Power!'. Only once this begins to happen will we take pride in this institution.

## A New Beginning

I began by locating myself in this region. What does this institution, this place mean to me today? For this region, this institution could choose to walk alongside the marginalised as they struggle to contest the terms of political power and search for substance in democracy. Or it could choose to serve the interests of those who see institutional democracy as an end in itself. While I was a student here, we were very suspicious of the market and of consumerism. Today there are some among us who want us to believe that the market is a new God and consumerism is something honorable to aspire to. Just as this region became a hotbed of resistance to colonial conquest and apartheid, it could become a seedbed for a more just and humane Africa based on caring and solidarity.

It is my sincere hope that this presentation contributes to the critical tradition of those who experienced Rhodes and its predecessors.

How critical is your tradition? What is there to celebrate?

What is the present generation of students doing in relation to the communities around this area?

So why not Makana University? And who was Alfred? I remember in one of my years as a student here at Rhodes picking up a copy of a Jubilee Edition of the *Rhodean* around campus. I still have the publication somewhere. Though I cannot remember all the detail of that publication, one thing stuck with me. Among all the pictures of the white people, there was a solitary picture of a black worker with a caption that went something like this: 'Alfred. He started as a labourer in 1915 and is a headwaiter at Jan Smuts Hall'. That was about all, no other name, no family name, let alone a clan name. I thought of those photographs I still see in coffee-table books, 'Anonymous Xhosa male in the late nineteenth century', or 'Xhosa tribesman on his way home to die, he served us well'.

**Notes**

1. Simons, J. and Simons, R. *Class and Colour in South Africa: 1850-1950*. London, IDAF, 1983. pp. 31-32.
2. 1985. And the house I was temporarily staying in was shared by a group of white activists, including the notorious apartheid spy Olivia Forsyth. And the occasion was a national raid on UDF activists which led to the Delmas Treason Trial.
3. Roux, E. *Time Longer Than Rope: A History of the Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa*, pp.14-16.
4. 'The Need for a Radical Alternative: Interview with Istvan Meszaros', by Elias Kanellis in *Monthly Review*, Volume 51 No 8, page 4. <http://www.monthlyreview.org/100kanel.htm>