

Rhodes University From Apartheid Vastrap to African Swing

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Introduction

I arrived at Rhodes University in Grahamstown at the age of twenty-one to do a Journalism degree. The year was 1976 and I heard for the first time a name that I would never forget – Soweto. By the end of the decade it was a cycle of teargas, gunshots, barricades, riot police and funerals. In Grahamstown funerals became the hub around which the wheel of violence and death continued to spin. The police would shoot a marcher/bystander/householder; it did not really matter, during a funeral procession. The angry residents would erupt in outrage and more people would get killed. The next week, another funeral, more teargas drifting across town. Alfred ‘Blaai’ Soya, Violet Tsili, Boyboy Nombiba, Freddie Tsisli, Tununi Nxawe, Nikele Mjekula, were just some of the people who died in 1980, when I was doing my honours and working as a journalist on the *Herald* newspaper in the Grahamstown office.

Grahamstown did not let you escape into the myopia of the white suburbs distant from the townships as in other parts of the country. The proximity of settler city and township led to a constant awareness of all the manifestations of assault and counter-assault, of the attempts to implement and to resist the apartheid grand plan. For me the most frightening thing at that time was the absolute polarisation between black and white in Grahamstown. The township was barricaded and a no-go area for any white person. The anger was so palpable as to have a physical presence, a kind of static in the air. On the other side the often young white riot police rode around town in their hippos, buffels and vans, their fear as tautly cocked as the shotguns and R1 rifles they brandished. I felt the edge of both. I was arrested and manhandled by a nervy bunch of the cops for singing in the street (disturbing the peace) with a bunch of friends after celebrating the end of exams with a few shots of tequila. Another time I was surrounded and threatened by a group of black youths while trying to hitch-hike out of town.

Mass removals, detentions without trial, torture and deaths in detention. I remember when Steve Biko died we fasted for a week. I was cultural councillor on the SRC and Chair of the NUSAS re-affiliation campaign. At the end of 1980 a number of fellow students and Guy Berger were detained. Guy was sentenced to a few years in Pretoria Central for furthering the aims of the ANC. Jacky Cock had a stick of dynamite thrown through her window in a well

orchestrated attack (the lights for the block were extinguished during the operation). By that stage I had decided not to do any more army camps, after narrowly missing being sent to Namibia for three months during the last three-week camp I attended in 1978 in northern Natal.

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I spent a day reading through old student newspapers to prepare for this paper. Apart from the nostalgia the thing that struck me most forcibly was the abnormality of it all. Only ten years of democracy and the memories have already started to fade. In the 1970/80s Rhodes University was a scary place. The majority of staff (academic and administrative) and students were actively racist. This is not surprising as a large number of predominantly white administrative staff were from the local (white) settler farming, civil service (including the police and military base), and business community. The majority of male students had just come back from two years of military indoctrination and service in Namibia, Angola or Rhodesia. The University had to build ramps for wheelchairs because of the number of ex-combatants that had had their legs blown off by landmines or by their fellow soldiers.

Many of these young men were suffering from post-traumatic stress (the so-called Vietnam syndrome). There was no counselling available for them. My own brother, who was part of the ill-fated Angolan campaign to take Luanda in the early 1970s, suffered from nightmares for years and eventually drank himself to death. Tension ran high on campus; fights in the various bars around town were commonplace, a coloured student friend of mine had a thunder flash thrown through his window, gay students were beaten up, many students worked for the security and military police spying on their fellow students and liberal/left lecturers.

I don't want to exaggerate the situation. There was also a sizeable group of people, lecturers and students, who were committed to non-racialism and a more equitable distribution of wealth. Who were committed to transformation of the university from a Eurocentric little Oxford with all its colonial trappings to an institution that would be part of and reflect its place in Africa. When I talk about colonial trappings I am not bandying about empty slogans – in the 1970s we had to wear academic gowns to our dining halls every night, where we would be served by black waiters in uniform, the warden and his/her acolytes would sit on a raised platform at the high table dispensing discipline and favour, rooms would be cleaned by black servants, drunken beauty queen-bedecked rag processions would raise money for the 'less fortunate' and graduation ceremonies aped those in Britain down to the last detail. I remember being shown around Oxford University by a friend a few years ago and being struck by the uncanny resemblance of the dining halls to Rhodes halls. All that dark wood!

I was involved in a number of initiatives to move the university towards a non-racial African future, and to get young white South Africans to commit themselves to that future. In 1978 I was the cultural councillor on the SRC and the chair of the NUSAS pro-affiliation committee. Rhodes had for a number of years dawdled along in splendid isolation and the left on campus was determined to get the university back into the national student organisation. NUSAS was at that stage running a national campaign, 'Education for an African future'. After a heated campaign that saw the anti-affiliation campaign spearheaded by the SRC president (now Advocate) Izak Smuts, the pro-affiliation faction lost the referendum. There were 984 students against and 849 voted in favour. Rhodesian students played a major role in the anti-affiliation campaign. The poll was a very high: 79 percent.

The Rhodes Journalism Department conducted a survey of students after the referendum. The study was designed to measure the level of information – not opinions – through eleven questions to which there was a right or wrong answer. The questions were based on information that both the pro- and anti-affiliation campaign organisers believed that students needed in order to make a rational decision.

The survey found that:

- 68 percent of respondents were ill-informed (scored five or less out of 11);
- 10 percent were unable to answer any of the questions;
- 79 percent did not know the NUSASs president's name;
- men were more informed than women;
- South Africans were more likely to vote for affiliation than Rhodesians;
- Those voting in favour of affiliation were more informed than those voting against.

Asked to comment on the results of the survey, Journalism lecturer Graham Watts put it succinctly: 'A more homogeneous, educated community with easy access to information would be difficult to come by. I would not hesitate to describe the referendum vote as abominably ignorant. The question remains – what did these people base their decision on?'

A fair question. For me these students, especially those voting against affiliation to NUSAS, were an excellent example of what went on in the broader white community in both South Africa and Rhodesia. They voted as they were told by those in authority, with the pack, against the ungodly, left-wing communist terrorists (that NUSAS was seen to be promoting) to preserve white privilege and the colonial lifestyle and to keep black Africa at bay. Rhodesia is Super! And golly, the last thing you wanted was for facts to get in the way!

Another initiative I was involved with in 1979 became known as the 'Quad Squat'. With a group of likeminded members of the hedonist left (as our particular group was known), we snuck into the main admin quad in the early hours of the morning, through the majestic arches designed by Sir Herbert

himself and erected a squatter camp on the beautiful green lawns. We used old corrugated iron and tents, and also set up numerous carefully prepared notice boards outlining our concern with the Eurocentric and irrelevant content of the university curriculum. We stuck banners and posters around campus advertising our protest squat, and when the university awoke from its slumber, there we were encamped and ready for action. The mode of operation was to hand out pamphlets to passing students and staff and to engage them in debate about the merits of studying romantic English poets while people were being forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to Bantustan resettlement camps such as Glenmore on the Fish River near Grahamstown. In fact the impetus for the Quad Squat was provided by another Journalism Department survey amongst students, where one bright young spark when asked about the Glenmore resettlement camp said he thought that it was a Scottish biscuit!

Response to the Quad Squat was predictable. A few lefty lecturers gave their lectures in solidarity in the quad, while others allowed guerrilla theatre in their lectures ('security police' arresting black students and dragging them forcibly out). The university security officer ripped down posters around campus and Dr Henderson the Vice-Chancellor in his usual fashion didn't take action against us but also didn't support the protest. The more liberal professors while also not actively supporting the protest, expressed their approval in the press afterwards, mainly on the ground of freedom of speech, etc. Those opposed were probably best represented by the sentiments of Professor Edward Higgins of the Sociology Department:

As I see it, Monday and Tuesday's squatting exercise represented some kind of collective ego trip by people who, while they may be genuinely concerned about the injustices in our society, are probably suffering from a colossal guilt complex. In the squatting business I found the means methods unacceptable and unacademic. Such disruptive episodes should not be tolerated by serious academics.

Conservative students variously threatened to attack and destroy the camp (we slept there overnight), water bombs were thrown at us, and a counter-demonstration in support of 'colonialism' (complete with black servants, cigars, bashers, blazers and bowls) was held on the second day. The event culminated with a mass meeting addressed by sympathetic lecturers. Right-wingers heckled with racist interjections such as 'why don't they keep their townships clean', to which Jeff Peires replied with great passion, 'Because they're too busy cleaning your fucking house!'

The last word came from Andre Brink (Head of the Afrikaans/Nederlands Department at Rhodes at that time) who said:

The cause of such a protest is worthy and should be brought to the attention of as many people as possible. An act is something that requires total commitment, and even sacrifice. A gesture is something performed by an actor without the necessity that he should take full responsibility for it. I feel this demonstration was more a gesture than an act.

He was probably right. Many of the participants of both the NUSAS 'Education for an African future' and of the Quad Squat are now living in Sydney, Geneva and London. Not all, mind you. Larry Strelitz, Guy Berger and I are still here, in the same town at the same university. I wonder if that qualifies as an *act* in Andre Brink's eyes, that is, requiring total commitment and sacrifice.

An interesting addendum to the relevance/Africanisation crusade is an experience I underwent a few years later when I was lecturing in the Department of Development Studies at the University of Bophuthatswana. The results of a research project conducted through the Institute of Education in conjunction with some English teachers at local schools came up with some surprising results. Questioning the ability of students in a rural African context to understand the olde English, the historical context and the cultural references that abounded in the classics (Hardy, Shakespeare, etc.) prescribed by the Department of Education, researchers suggested some Af Lit alternatives. The teachers and parents, on the basis that the aforementioned classics constituted 'real education', vociferously rejected these home-baked offerings. As Kurt Vonnegut is fond of saying: *so it goes*.

Back at Rhodes, the real question of course is what has changed since the 1970/80s.

Well, the teargas, buffels, and funerals have gone, along with the morally challenged slime balls like the Edwards brothers and Olivia Forsythe.¹ So too have the waiters in the dining halls, rag and the Athies Auction (an event where female first years students were auctioned to the highest bidder to be their slave for the day). Cliffee Abraham's liver also finally gave up the ghost. The administration, academic staff, students, and university council have transformed and are moving towards an acceptable level of racial equity, more so in some areas than others. Many students are from other parts of Africa. Many academics are doing research in and have connections with other African universities/countries. A small number of academics are working with local NGOs and community groups as well as with local, provincial and national government to implement second-generation socio-economic rights (such as land, governance, poverty alleviation and local economic development). A number of institutes are working on areas such as English in Africa, social development, social and economic research and educational outreach programs in schools. Loosely affiliated institutions such as CADRE and PSAM are playing an important role in HIV/AIDS research and public service monitoring respectively.

But the institution is a long way from being an African university. Role models are still Britain, USA and Australia. The restructuring of the South African tertiary sector and the loss of the East London campus to Fort Hare has contributed further to the isolation of Rhodes Grahamstown from its Eastern Cape environment. In Eastern Cape government circles the focus is very definitely on the new Fort Hare. It is seen as a major opportunity to create a new

vibrant African university with strong research, training and policy-formation links with the provincial and local government. Many regard Rhodes on the other hand as an ‘academic university’ in the somewhat elitist ivory-tower sense. Adding to this perception is that as the crisis in the Eastern Cape Education Department deepens, the university is becoming increasingly inaccessible to the majority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially in the rural hinterland of the province.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves what we mean by ‘Africanisation’, especially within an increasingly globalised world and an international academic context. At a minimum it means that Rhodes should move fairly rapidly towards a situation where its staff and student profile matches the broader demographics of the country. It means that a large part of our educational focus should be to provide educated and skilled people firstly for the Eastern Cape, secondly for the country, and thirdly for the continent. It means that our research should have a similar orientation. All this needs to be done without compromising the ability of staff and students to interact with international universities or the recognition of their degrees in other parts of the world. It will be a long haul that will have to conquer the twin peaks of inertia and vested interest. With others, I have pulled on my boots and packed my pitons.

Notes

1. Some of the more infamous security police spies at Rhodes.

***Comprehensive Listing of Participants in the
Colloquium 'The Critical Tradition at
Rhodes University', August 2004,
Grahamstown***

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