

**Southern African Folklore Society: welcome
address**

**Dr. Saleem Badat
Vice-Chancellor, Rhodes University**

**Zoo Minor, Rhodes University
iRhini/Grahamstown**

10 September 2009

INTRODUCTION

The Chairperson of the Southern African Folklore Society, Prof. Mokgale Makgopa, other SAFOS officials, Mr. Mfenyana of the Eastern Cape Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, Prof. Kaschula, Ms. Nosilela, organizers of the conference, presenters and participants, distinguished guests, molweni, good morning

It is a great privilege to host the SAFOS conference at Rhodes University, and also a great pleasure to welcome you all to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown, Makana, and to the Eastern Cape. To our guests from other parts of Africa, a warm welcome also to South Africa.

Over the next three days an exciting and impressive range of presentations and sessions on a fascinating range of themes and issues will be covered at this conference.

I thank our School of Languages and specifically our African Language Studies colleagues for their efforts in

hosting this conference at Rhodes, and I thank SAFOS and you all for choosing Rhodes as the venue, and for travelling long distances to grace us with your participation.

I am especially pleased by the presence of colleagues from other parts of Africa. The conference's Pan-African nature gels well with our aspiration to be an outstanding African university 'which proudly affirms its African identity', and is rooted in the aspirations, challenges and struggles of the continent.

For transport, logistic and costs reasons, compared to universities in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, Rhodes academics have to work hard to attract and host national and especially international conferences. That we do so with considerable success, I believe, is testimony to the quality of the scholars to be found at Rhodes and the recognition that the University enjoys nationally and internationally.

Indeed, as a University we take pride in having among South African universities among the best pass and

graduation rates and the best research output per academic staff member.

Some like to say that our successes have to do with the fact that there is very little to do in our small town. Hardly! - we like to think that it also has to do with the fact that at Rhodes we take knowledge and scholarship very seriously and work hard to create an institutional culture that values knowledge and scholarship.

Challenges

Currently, we are living through a severe global financial crisis. One reason for the crisis is that despite globalization and greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and negation of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, human rights, difference and diversity, and the oneness of humanity – and the closing of hearts have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of

various kinds, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in economic and social thought and policies that have prevailed during the past twenty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding has been disdained. Instead of the idea of the public good, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed.

The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies that have slowly matured into the grave financial crisis which envelopes the world today.

Under the sway of these orthodoxies a culture of unbridled individualism, greed and crass materialism has taken root, its mantra 'grab what you can and damn the rest'.

Instead of a concern with people, social equity and justice, in the new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit

of power, self-interest, money, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the new gods.

Drawing on Dickens' memorable opening lines in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the global financial crisis is 'the worst of times', an 'age of foolishness', an 'epoch of incredulity', 'the season of Darkness', 'the winter of despair', with 'nothing before us'.

Still, among the dark clouds there could be silver lining, and the global crisis could also become 'the best of times', an 'age of wisdom', an 'epoch of belief', a 'season of Light', 'the spring of hope', a time when we 'ha(ve) 'everything before us'.

The current crisis provides the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies of the past decades.

It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, justice, solidarity, freedom and the oneness of humanity.

It enables us to think about and act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, 'a world where markets are servants, not masters'.

Whether and to what extent this happens, whether amidst these 'worst of times' and 'winter of despair' we move into 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us' depends on us.

It depends on whether, as intellectuals and scholars, as graduates and citizens, and as universities and government's we take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on the basis of other principles and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, justice and human rights at the centre of all our actions.

It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, sexual orientation, language and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength - a vitality that is as much

intellectual, ontological, epistemological and methodological, as it is social and personal.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge.

The new logic must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important and varied social purposes.

The themes being explored at this conference and the research that they represent are an important part of the historical, educational and cultural life of our society and contribute to the recovery and restoration of our common humanity. They are worthy of study as an important part of our common intellectual and cultural inheritance. They also represent a “critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves” (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000:84).

Beyond this, today, for reasons of economic advantage certain kinds of knowledge and research, especially that generated by the natural, medical and business sciences and engineering are privileged, to the detriment of the arts, humanities and social sciences. This is extremely regrettable and a major mistake.

As Thandeka Mkandawire argues, “attempts to improve Africa’s prospects by focusing on scientific advances and the benefits accruing from them have all too often overlooked the important perspectives which the humanities and social sciences afford” and “it is vital that the social sciences and humanities are granted their rightful place...if Africa’s development challenges are to be fully and properly addressed” (2009:vii).

Colleagues, beyond communicating with peer scholarly communities, universities and scholars have the responsibility to also, in the words of Stephen Jay Gould, “convey the power and beauty of (knowledge) to the hearts and minds” of the general public (2006).

The issue of communicating beyond the confines of universities and scholarly communities poses whether our universities and scholars engage sufficiently with the public and serve adequately as catalysts of critical public education and intellectual and cultural debate, as part of higher education's rationale of advancing the public good. I sincerely hope that some of the important and exciting papers being presented here will be turned into newspaper feature articles.

I am most pleased that there are students at this conference. The reproduction of a new generation of scholars, who also more extensively reflect the demographics of our country, is an urgent and pressing challenge. Conferences such as this are important mechanisms for the induction of aspiring and emerging scholars into scholarly networks and for attracting them to an academic career.

In closing, I trust that you will enjoy a stimulating and productive conference in the pretty and friendly environment of our campus and town, and that through vigorous and critical discussion that you will emerge with insights and ideas that will help penetrate and

push further the barriers to discovery, knowledge and understanding.

I also wish you an enjoyable stay at Rhodes and in iRhini/Grahamstown and I am confident that you will find your Rhodes colleagues friendly and hospitable hosts.