VC's Welcome at the *Legacies of Apartheid Wars* Project and Conference Dinner

4 July 2013

Molweni, good evening, goeie naand

It's a great pleasure to welcome you, the members of the *Legacies of Apartheid Wars Project*, and the participants in the LAWs conference to Rhodes University, to iRhini/Grahamstown and the Makana region.

Rhodes is very pleased to host and to be associated the LAWs project. We consider the project to be imaginative, pioneering and important in helping us as a society and as people to confront certain issues that have been given inadequate attention.

It is the kind of project that we welcome at Rhodes, both for its social and political salience but also because it fits in well with our institutional trajectory of becoming a more postgraduate and research-focused university in the years ahead. We see in LAWS the prospects for interesting and important research and publishing as well as for interesting students to undertake postgraduate education and training on issues related to the concerns of LAWS.

With the necessary promotion by academic champions – such as is the case with Theresa Edelman and Gary Baines – Projects like LAWs have good prospects of success at Rhodes: we have a well-established research and postgraduate culture; 30% of our students are postgraduates; we boast one of the best research outputs per academic staff member; we have a good understanding of what it means to be a university; we take knowledge, scholarship and learning very seriously, and we work hard to ensure that there is an institutional culture that embraces academic freedom and intellectual autonomy and debate, and values creativity, knowledge and scholarship.

In relation to the conference theme, "Addressing, Archiving and Accounting for Legacies of the Apartheid Wars in Southern Africa", it is pertinent to note that the town 'Grahamstown' is a legacy of earlier wars of colonial conquest and dispossession, which continue to impact on issues of land, livelihoods, settlement, politics and more generally social relations in contemporary South Africa.

We can also note that the soldier after whom this town takes its name, Colonel Graham, was infamous for introducing particularly brutal methods of force that considered women and children fair game in warfare. It should not be surprising that the name 'Grahamstown' is a matter of controversy and that there have been intermittent attempts to change the name of the town. As Marx observed, 'the tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'.

The region to which I welcome you takes its name from the prophet and warrior Makhanda, who attacked the Grahamstown Military Base in 1819 and was subsequently banished by the British to Robben Island. Makhanda, of course, drowned in 1820 trying to escape from Robben Island.

It is not just the legacies of the apartheid wars, but also the colonial wars of conquest and dispossession that continue to shape economics, politics and the human condition more generally in South Africa almost 20 years into our democracy.

Here is Shepard Mati, a graduate of Rhodes University, speaking on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Rhodes University in 2004.

> My family roots lie deep into the soil of this region. I was born just a stone's throw away from here…The disintegration of the African communal subsistence life brought about by colonial conquest and dispossession scattered my family all over this region…One hundred years earlier African people from this region …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.
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> 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….(I)n 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.[i]
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> My family lived in this region for three hundred years or more. In these open fields and built-up area 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.[ii]

Mati spoke about the 'multiple meanings that Rhodes University and centenary celebrations' held for him, and about how during one of the wars of conquest and dispossession his 'great-grandfather almost paid with his infant life to realize the colonial dream which also gave birth to Rhodes. But it took a woman, my great-great grandmother, to defy her own people'.[iii] On the run from colonial soldiers, they had wanted her to abandon the infant for fear that if he cried it may lead to their location and them all being killed.

Mati wrote that 'when I left Rhodes University in November 1987, I vowed never to come back to this institution, to this town'.[iv]

There can be no doubt that, at least in the case of Mati, wars waged over 200 years ago and their effects profoundly shaped him, and continued to deeply anguish him and fill him with ambivalence about processes and events since then - I use the terms 'processes' and 'events' consciously rather than terms such as, say, 'developments' or 'progress'.

As he wrote:

> 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 for me to enjoy this "privilege".[v]

Mati concludes with a powerful challenge: to

> build new institutions (and we can add sensibilities) committed to a critical appreciation of where we come from, a dialogical and analytic engagement of where we are now, and placing before all of us a compelling vision of a future based on solidarity and caring'.[vi]

The *Legacies of Apartheid Wars Project* is to be congratulated on fostering dialogue, research, scholarly and practical engagement on the legacies bequeathed by the wars of the apartheid era, including the issues of historical dialogue and dialogue as archive; memory and violence and work related to trauma, resilience healing; research and biographies on apartheid wars; conscription and its legacies; gender and militarism and the question of accountability for the past.

Seeking to bring together people that could have stood on opposite sides of the ideological, political and military clashes of the apartheid period, the dialogues may not be easy. Antjie Krog reminded us recently when she spoke at the Franschoek Festival that we may not even have a common language and vocabulary with which to speak our thoughts and express ourselves and communicate with each other.[vii]

I note that LAWS seeks to 'enable research-based engagements between people who would have been enemies or at the very least constructed as "other" to each other during the apartheid era.' The notion of "research-based" engagements interests me.

I argue in a forthcoming article that perhaps the fashionable notions of 'evidence-based' policy- and decision-making and practices need to be interrogated.[viii] The phrase 'evidence-based' policy evokes the idea that the 'evidence' will tell us what is right and correct and we should do. This may be an attractive proposition to researchers and experts (and especially technocrats) - but it is one that democrats should treat with some scepticism and concern.

I can appreciate the idea of "research-based engagements", and why this may be a conscious option - but might this not be an erasure and closure of engagements – perhaps important engagements - that are not necessarily "research-based" but can nonetheless illuminate powerfully the past and present.

Shepard Mati is again illuminating here. Recall that he spoke about the incident with his great-grandfather. He writes in this regard:

> There is no way of verifying the authenticity (where is the evidence? a Rhodes scholar may 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' (emphasis added).[ix]

I suppose I am asking what space is there, is it possible through the LAWs project, to open up spaces for epistemologies, ontologies, theories, paradigms and methodologies other than those that are hegemonic, and that have dominated (perhaps have even suffocated) intellectual thought, writing and engagement.

It seems to me that LAWs can make an important contribution to the task of helping to cultivate what the historian Harvey Kaye calls a 'prophetic memory.'[x] Such a 'prophetic memory' encompasses *remembrance* of our traumatic colonial and apartheid past; *critique* of their injustices and those that continue to blight our society; c*onsciousness* that we as people make and remake, reproduce and transform in our societies; *imagination* to conceive of new kinds of cognitive praxis, and of being and acting; and the *desire* to remake our society and ourselves.

I wish you a stimulating and productive conference in this lovely Eastern Cape location, and hope that that there will be engagement, insights and ideas that will help advance discovery, knowledge and understanding.

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

They are certainly smart hosts, for organizing this conference during the Festival so that connections can be made to other Festival events and you could also have the opportunity to take in some of the offerings of the Festival.

Finally, it is often the case that somebody needs to facilitate new and good initiatives. I wish to thank the Atlantic Philanthropies for its support of the LAWs project.

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[i] Mati, S. (2005) 'Who was Alfred? A native gazing at Rhodes University from Makana's Kop'. *African Sociological Review*, 9, 1, pp. 196-210; pp. 196-97
[ii] Ibid., p. 198
[iii] Ibid., p. 197
[iv] Ibid., p. 199
[v] Ibid., p. 198
[vi] Ibid., p. 208
[vii] *Mail & Guardian*, May 2013
[viii] Badat, S. (2013) 'Theses on institutional planning and research at universities'. *South African Journal on Higher Education*, forthcoming
[ix] Mati, p. 197-98
[x] Kaye, H. J. (1996) *Why do Ruling Classes Fear History and Other Questions*. New York: St Martin's Press