



The UKZN Griot. Of Rugby and Protesting

BY:

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It's really fascinating observing UKZN from afar. Here in Gauteng students make little distinction between UKZN, DUT and UNIZULU. Mangosuthu ain't even on the dial, no matter what its Rector earns. They all blur into one another. But reading the LAN notices, UKZNDABA Online and other postings is itself a useful study in representation. On the one hand we have for the first time a proactive risk management strategy on anticipating the annual student-led ritualised mayhem. On the other, when last did we see a Vice-Chancellor playing rugby with the rank and file. Was it Pieter Booyesen? Must be, the PMB stadium is named after him.

An institution's identity is often linked to extra-curricular activities, sport being one of them. When Ahmed Bawa was recruiting students in India a decade ago, the Indians reacted positively to the fact that Jonty Rhodes and Shaun Pollock were UKZN graduates. No other validation was required. So, it's good that the UKZN Impi / boytjies is/are getting promoted on the LAN. Playing sport also keeps the students out of mischief, engaging in regulated as opposed to unregulated violence. No property is smashed in the process, though some limbs might be; no classes are disrupted and no-one has to lock their doors.

A recent column's footnote generated many positive responses to the fact that when we analogue era anti-apartheid academics were protesting we never destroyed anything. Neither did we physically threaten anyone. We kept our classes going. We articulated our ideals and secured the support of the wider community – both within and beyond the university. We did however threaten an entire political system and by developing alliances we succeeded in replacing apartheid which was the violent, destructive force. On Robben Island – that also housed vicious criminals – the politcos were respected by them for their ideals in opposing the system. Intimidating someone is easy. Replacing a system takes intelligence and requires popular support across all constituencies.

Overseas visitors to UKZN are astounded at the extreme level of aggression that they sometimes encounter from protestors when they are trying to lecture. It's a frightening experience for them, and also for our students, even if the singing is in tune and the toyi-toying impressive. On repeated

visits they begin to take this behaviour in their stride, and respond to it as a curious manifestation of an idiosyncratic and immature popular culture.

South Africans now routinely destroy that infrastructure that should be taking us into a peaceful developmental future. Service delivery cannot occur when civic amenities are burning. 'Foreign' shop keepers in Soweto are attacked and looted because they provide a better service than do inefficient homegrown shops. The 'foreigners' who do pay tax sell their goods at lower prices, have longer opening times, offering credit, and they respect their customers. They apply purchasing and marketing principals that are taught at universities. The violent response is rather like Durbanites looting Checkers and chasing their managers away because a competitor charges higher prices, operates for fewer hours, and disrespects their customers. When a cabinet minister says the 'foreigners' must share with their South African competition their trade secrets, this is akin to demanding that Walmart tell Pick 'n Pay how to compete with them. Where's the commercial or legal logic? A book was once written about apartheid titled, 'A Very Strange Society'. Have we become even stranger now that we have a semblance of democracy?

The roots of this destructive behaviour are to be found in the 'Freedom now, education later' slogan that so successfully mobilised dissident communities in the late 1980s. This now unnecessary practice and empty rhetoric continues in a destructive cycle that achieves nothing. The cost to the institution is immeasurable – as a previous Vice-Chancellor, Brenda Gourley, observed, bad publicity affects the institution of academia as a whole, not just where chaos is unleashed on a single campus. The noise in KZN is heard in Gauteng and vice-versa.

So, it's good to see the new VC getting onto the sports field, getting dirty and sweaty and talking to, and interacting with, ordinary students. That's how support, co-operation and constituencies are built. That's what the United Democratic Front (UDF) did in the 1980s. That's why apartheid was defeated. The UDF built alliances across races, classes and spaces. Its members sometimes got out of hand but firm discipline emphasised construction over destruction, peace over violence and working for the common good. When the UDF was disbanded, that's when law and order and discipline dissipated. The consequences are now visible from the lawlessness on our roads, the pandemic of crime and the destruction of property on campuses across the country and with regard to plagiarism.

If UKZN wants to retain its top ranked status, it also needs to re-invigorate its identity. This starts on the playing fields, in the classroom, observing the no-smoking signs and with its public image. Alumni like the two famous cricketers and, indeed, ordinary people, are key to the institution's success. The Centre that I managed for 29 years was, and continues, to be invested in by its alumni for decades. We did not play organized sport but we opposed violence even when we were directly subjected to violent threats and action from the state.

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