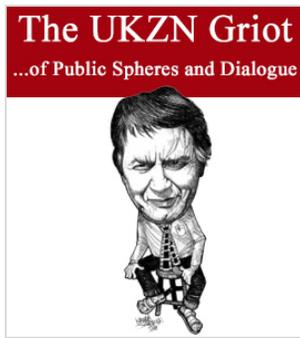


THE UKZN GRIOT: OF PUBLIC SPHERES AND DIALOGUE

Keyan G Tomaselli*



‘Wow, this is absolutely brilliant! I wish you were on our campus. I’ve never seen writing remotely like this here and our staff/campus publications don’t seem to publish stuff like this ... just how great we are at research. It would be such a breath of fresh air if we could inject some humour here. I get the impression staff are way too serious and angry here!’

This was just one of many responses I received on my February Column, *Of Wheat and PUs*, from a staffer at another institution. Life at UKZN is obviously not that bad comparatively. Or, maybe, humour seems to be the best way nowadays to bring otherwise taboo issues to the institutional surface in relatively unthreatening and even entertaining ways.

When thinking about what to write I mull over small and big issues that bother me. I try to find angles, small things that I notice or hear when interacting with colleagues, walking corridors, attending meetings, and so on. Sometimes I respond to suggestions sent me by colleagues and often, an entire column quickly materialises from an off-the-cuff remark.

I then identify a single likely reader – a real person – for each column. I speak directly to that person – who is never identified - as an exemplar perhaps of wider groups of readers who are grappling with similar issues or who take similar or counter positions. This has worked well in the sense that, as I explained in one column, Corporate Relations has received the odd complaint from individuals I did not name and perhaps do not even know, about my supposed criticism of them personally. That tells me that my readership is reading my column, they’re reacting to it, and I am connected to my readers – whether or not they agree with me. I am not writing in the abstract for unknown readers. I never mention names negatively, but I tilt my lance at collectively constructed hybrid personalities, who are exemplars of particular ways of thinking and doing things.

Like *griots* in West African story-telling, in their representations in African film my bardic role is to work within-the-possible to achieve the not-yet-possible. We are all implicated in relations of power and exploitation. In fact, few can escape these relations. Even our Vice-Chancellor is embedded in policies and demands of state on which he is required to deliver. He is not entirely a free agent. If we recognise our respective locations, and how we

can manoeuvre through the contradictions that confront us, then we might be able to make a little difference, to re-open small but systematic spaces for broader dialogue, a micro public sphere if you will.

As an authorised columnist, writing in an authorised institutional publication, my contribution possibly functions as a safety valve as far as management is concerned. If an authorised staffer is able to let off steam and draw the attention of the Executive to pressing issues (reflecting the general experiences of the subaltern collectives), then such communication is placed on the public record. I am aware, for example, that some of my columns are debated by students in seminars, and one column on international relations was revised from an address I offered at an official university conference. The column, I am told, has on occasion popped up in Senate dispatches. However, I have few illusions that my column will change policy or shift the University into more humanistic *Ubuntu*-led directions. Some academics are just as much responsible for the conditions under which we find ourselves as is any overarching management structure. **A recurring theme in my column is the need for mutual respect and for us each to treat each other better.** But, also, we all need to take our opportunities with regard to the many incentives offered by the institution. Few do, though this is changing slowly.

I am an equal opportunity dispenser of critique, advice and praise. That's the *griot* way. As my Rhodes colleague, journalism Professor Gavin Stewart, used to say: 'I'm attacked by the right wing, I'm pilloried by the left wing, but I feel just the same. I must be doing something right.' I have been at UKZN now for 28 years and I can get inside the institution's foibles and discern patterns and nuances and illustrate these for my readers. I am available, as I stated in my column on Soaps and Hoaxes, to engage in the dialectic by debating counter arguments, but one reader at least I think wanted censorship when he recognised in himself the hybrid personality I had constructed. That attitude kills the dialectic, it kills democracy, it kills debate.

We are living through a kind of IMF-like structural adjustment programme applied to the educational sector globally. Pressing issues need to be addressed. It's the task of columnists (and cartoonists, satirists, comedians) to fasten on foibles, to mock and pillory seeming official stupidity. However, unlike early *griots* and *imbongis*, no-one is going chop off my head or banish me to the wilderness. I am a subject of Authority (the system) even though I may question its procedures, values and intentions, and indeed, Authority itself. We are all subjects of Authority. We need to find ways of negotiating Authority. My column offers one platform for effecting discussion of, and with Authority, and responses to it in

ways that are entertaining and simultaneously engaging. Intelligent outcomes are the real issue.

*Keyan G Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. For this column he is indebted to Phebbie Sakarombe who studied The UKZN Griot columns last year for an Honours project. Much of the above comes from his responses to an interview she conducted with him.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.