

The UKZN Griot Of Rituals and Inaugurals



Inaugurals. Rituals, Rites. Tenure and Inaugurals are rites of passage. They mark key moments in any academic's life. At UKZN tenure has always been a fairly low key affair.

WORDS: KEYAN TOMASELLI

In the US, tenure is an exceedingly unpleasant and extremely stressful exercise. Getting tenure is so exhausting that by the time it is awarded, the applicant is often burned out. At UKZN, all academics have to do is 'time'; they do not have to accumulate vast volumes of hard evidence of University service, research or teaching portfolios to prove that they were worthy of the post they were holding.

Inaugurals are a little different. Here, the new professor is expected to address his/her peers, offering an august statement about the discipline s/he represents. This is indeed a ritual, or it is supposed to be. When I offered my Inaugural in 1986 it was in Shepstone 1, seating in excess of 300. These were the numbers that Inaugurals used to attract. The inter-Faculty procession would occupy the first two to three rows. The gardening department would decorate the front of the theatre with plants, usually populated by noisy varmints of all kinds. Now, lonely banners are plonked on the stage. The procession exits after the lecture to the musical sounds of *Gaudeamus igitur*, once a bawdy Italian drinking song. The audience would debate the lecturer for hours on end over a finger supper. Then something happened. Audiences tailored off. Smaller theatres were used. The procession contracted. The food was cut down. Eventually, even the alcohol was discontinued.

A few months ago I participated in the embarrassingly small procession celebrating the rites of passage of a proud new professor. His lecture truly was a compelling statement on the status and contemporary relevancy of his embattled discipline. Yet, few joined the procession, though the small Howard College Theatre was about a third full. Where were my robed School colleagues? The location of one unrobed was known because he was snoring loudly somewhere behind the front row.

At an Inaugural offered at the Innovation Centre some years ago the theatre was half full at the start, but packed to capacity by the end. The Inaugurand received a standing ovation. Amongst these were the many residence students who wondered in

throughout the lecture so that they could get at the nosh and the beer served afterwards. The drinking song had worked its magic. I hoped that the students actually learned something while patiently listening to the speaker. Two of the professor's students wrote letters of complaint to Corporate Relations about the constant interruptions. As was the case with the Division then, they did not get the courtesy of a reply.

In Medieval times, reports Senior Research Associate Franco Frescura, Doctors of Philosophy followed directly behind Knights of the Realm in processions, seating hierarchies and formal state occasions. These folks were held in high regard and were accorded due social status. That's why the gowned sit in the front row at Inaugurals. And, any academic can join the procession and become part of the realm, but few do. At one lecture, the Inaugurand engaged in a battle of wills with the DVC. Though persuaded to wear her gown for the procession, she defiantly shed it when moving to the podium in a visible show of anti-elitist resistance. Yet, graduands will travel from across the world and Africa to participate in UKZN ceremonies. Parents from desperately poor communities will save for years to see their children graduate. They ululate and dance in the auditorium in sheer delight at their children and family's success. Parents will drive or fly hundreds of kilometres to support their kids at Inaugurals now that they have proper jobs like that of professor. Graduands and Inaugurands are always disappointed when their lecturers fail to join the procession.

Complaints about the lack of collegiality at UKZN are legion. The lack of ritual – apart from the inevitable student *toyi toying* – is indicative of a loss of common purpose. The same faces go to Inaugurals, graduations, Faculty Boards, and serve on the unions and pension funds. Where are the rest? Even the employer-owned organisations fail to attract adequate participation. Of the 3 331 members of the University Medical Scheme, the 2010 AGM was barely quorate. Perhaps if the lunch had been advertised more effectively the numbers may have swelled somewhat. Of the total membership, only 6 percent voted in the trustee

elections. The trustees are entrusted with managing the Scheme and our health care. Yet, the commitment of the membership is always found wanting except when they feel that the Scheme has failed them.

The same faces do the same community work with no recompense while the rest can't find their ways to the front rows of occasional Inaugural lectures. There's no point about complaining about the perceived lack of democracy or collegiality at UKZN if employees don't get involved. Remember *ubuntu* – we are people through other people.

But only some people are people in this sense, the rest are seemingly unengaged. At UKZN, it's always somebody else's job to do the dirty work. Those who do it – mainly behind the scenes – are the unsung heroes of the Institution. The claim that "It's not in my job description" is the last refuge of a scoundrel, and of some staff also.

Keyan Tomaselli is Director of The Centre for Communication, Media and Society. He writes this column in his capacity as general administrator, bottle washer and form-filler whose job description has been long forgotten except in his KPA form.

Sudoku

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