



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

In Celebration of 140 years of Shaping Futures: OAU@50 and Beyond

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Principal and Vice Chancellor
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Protocol/ table of precedence

Ladies and gentlemen, students and staff, friends and colleagues,

I am delighted to greet and welcome you all this morning.

It is truly fitting that we are gathered here today to commemorate, celebrate, reflect on and evaluate the past which has shaped us, formed our socio-political lives and moulded our local and regional institutions in South Africa and the African continent.

This auspicious moment gives us a chance not only to reflect on the past and the present, but also to consciously take stock of the present, and to envision Africa's futures in the manifestation, in all facets of our lives, of Africa's development and the flourishing of its peoples.

We have convened our panel discussion today, on the theme “*In Celebration of 140 Years of Shaping Futures and the OAU @50*”, to take place in one of the most renowned halls at the University of South Africa, namely the ZK Matthews Great Hall.

This hall was named after one of South Africa’s leading, most brilliant academics – Dr Zachariah Keodireleng Matthews, an ecumenist, organic intellectual and advocate for social justice during the anti-apartheid struggles in this country and the decolonisation process in the African continent. His life and work in many ways resonate with our theme this morning.

ZK epitomised some of the ideals which the pioneers of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) advocated for.

Like many of the founding forebears of the OAU, he was actively engaged in the African National Congress (ANC), one of the liberation movements in South Africa that sought to set South Africa free from colonialism and apartheid. It is for these and other reasons that Unisa was privileged to name this great hall in his honour, to celebrate education and knowledge, social justice and the agitation for freedom and justice as central rudiments of the quest for freedom from colonialism and apartheid, and for socio-political and economic liberation.

ZK's history and that of many of our liberation struggle forerunners and pioneers is inextricably bound up with and woven into the stories of the leaders and founders of the OAU. Their commitment to the emancipation of Africa and its peoples from colonialism and oppression, and their commitment to education, attest to the conviction that education is essential for the transformation of society.

In particular, ZK's passion and commitment to multidisciplinary approaches to education and knowledge, as epitomised by his studies and attainment of qualifications in law, anthropology and theology, speak to Unisa's contributions to the formation of intellectuals, knowledge construction and constructive utilisation of education in the betterment of life for all. These ideals, I suggest, to a large extent resonate with the role that Unisa has sought to fulfil in the last fourteen decades of shaping knowledge and futures in South Africa, the African continent and the world. They also reverberate in our aspiration to become the *“Leading African University in the service of humanity, in Africa and in the world.”*

At the centre of the anti-colonial movements to which the forebears of the OAU belonged or led, was the quest for freedom, emancipation, justice, liberation and transformation of colonial and apartheid states to post-colonial and democratic dispensations. This search for freedom and liberation undergirded the establishment of the OAU in 1963.

It seems to me particularly important to identify and bring out the linkages between Unisa, our meeting point, our theme and our search for meaning about the role and implications of the OAU and AU for the present and the future. It is imperative for us to discern the meaning and lessons learnt from the OAU at 50, particularly the milestones it achieved, the innovations it instituted and its prospects for the future.

OAU at 50 and AU at 10

The OAU was instituted in 1963. Its successor, the African Union, was founded on 26 May 2001, coinciding with Africa Day. It was formally launched at eThekweni in July 2002.

Many commentators argue that it has been one of Africa's most resilient institutions, in spite of the contradictions it entailed or embodied. The political scientist, Rajen Harshe, for instance, states the following:

“The OAU has displayed remarkable durability and viability. Its expansive activities have steadily permeated into practically all the significant spheres of inter-state relations. Continental in its scope, the OAU has gradually bound as many as 50 states, representing diverse historical and cultural backgrounds through the threads of pan-Africanism.”

The OAU was, in essence, the result of a long advocacy and represented the manifestation of the historical current of pan-Africanism, a philosophy whose perspectives it largely espoused. Pan-Africanism gained currency in the 19th century. It aimed at proclaiming and promoting the dignity and humanity of African peoples, especially in the context of the prevailing discrimination, oppression and exclusion via the politics and economics of colonialism, in Africa and in North America.

Pan-Africanism provided the logic and the basis for resisting the violations of the dignity of all Africans in Africa and in the Diaspora brought about by this context of discrimination and oppression. It also sought to promote the unity and dignity of all Africans.

Prior to the establishment of the OAU, the different intra-state and intra-regional politics were characterised by some tensions and different perspectives on the content, form and mode of liberation of Africa from colonialism, and its organisation post-liberation. These differences were particularly evident in the groupings historically known as the Casablanca and the Monrovia groups of states.

The Casablanca group consisted mainly of pan-Africanist visionaries such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Modibo Keita of Mali and Sékou Touré of Guinea. The Monrovia group consisted mainly of the Brazzaville group which included many of the francophone states

such as Senegal, Upper Volta (now Burkina-Faso), Gabon, Mauritania and Niger as well as some outside the francophone formation, such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Liberia. supported the idea of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of intra-state relations. They also supported cooperation with the former colonising countries.

The Casablanca group was vehemently opposed to colonialism, racism and neo-colonialism. They also expressed their categorical support of South African liberation movements such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and registered their opposition against the apartheid regime. They were also opposed to ongoing French occupation of some countries in Africa, and thus agitated for France's withdrawal, especially from Algeria.

It is clear, from the history underlying its formation in 1963 and its subsequent years, that the OAU had to continually bridge the gaps between the contending positions, values, groups and ideas which I have alluded to. These contestations, on the one hand, allowed for a diversity of ideas and positions to exist in the organisation, but on the other hand disabled it from intervening effectively in some of the most atrocious political and economic problems which Africa faced. The Genocide in Rwanda, the numerous violent conflicts around the continent, the violation of human rights in many countries under the autocratic and despotic leadership of some regimes, under the guise

of territorial integrity, national sovereignty and so on – all these attest to the OAU's limitations and/or failures.

We must not, however, throw out the baby with the bathwater and thereby neglect to learn from some of the successes and innovations that the OAU brought to both the African continent and the global community. I am referring here especially to international human rights conventions and discourses, to multilateralism and diplomacy and international relations, and also to anti-racism and the imperative to respect the dignity of all peoples, in Africa and the world.

Key successes and innovations that should be commemorated in particular have to do with the OAU's recognition of people's rights. In its articulation of human rights, the OAU recognised not only individual rights, but also people's collective rights. This contested the liberal view of an individual as an isolated, autonomous entity and championed, instead, a logic that entails what we here at home refer to as botho or Ubuntu, that idea that human beings are inextricably bound to each other and to creation.

Prior to the formation of the OAU, there had not been a single regional association similar to the European Union or Commission, or the North American Free Trade Association and others. Although its formation was about political unity for the continent and not so much about trade interactions, the OAU demonstrated the feasibility

and viability of a structured approach to regional intra and inter-state relations. These successes are not often celebrated in mainstream discourses, and we, as African universities, intellectuals and scholars, need to hold them up and illuminate them.

Finally, the OAU was also able to read the signs of the times and to restructure itself as an intergovernmental continental organisation attentive to the contextual realities of its times. It still, on occasion, demonstrates some of the weaknesses we have spoken of. The current crises in Libya, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo attest to the areas that require improved management by the African Union. The AU will have to align its present programmes and engender new programmes to promote “Africa’s ownership of its own agenda for the present and futures”. The development of Africa’s own agenda will require the contribution of universities, not only as providers of education and knowledge but also as central players in influencing the developmental processes that empower public institutions, citizens and citizenship.

My responsibility today was just to welcome you all, to frame the context of our 140 years of service at Unisa and our decision to commemorate the 50 years of the OAU.

I can confidently assure you that you will have a fantastic time with our honoured guests – leading scholars, intellectuals and academics who are supremely knowledgeable about these issues. It is thus my

privilege and that of Unisa's community to host this panel discussion today.

I would like to encourage, in particular, Unisa's students, academics and staff to draw constructive lessons from and follow in the footsteps of these esteemed academics and intellectuals, and ensure that their research and work do not remain confined to their departments and colleges but traverse the whole world.

Our guests have demonstrated to us all, in their vocations as leading professors and intellectuals in their fields, that it is imperative for Africa and its people to take centre stage in the global theatre of knowledge construction, production, dissemination and research, and to contribute even more to the global knowledge arena than they are currently doing.

I wish you all success in these deliberations and encourage you to enjoy this intellectual festival provided by Unisa's Research and Innovation Week, which commenced on the 11th of March 2013 and will conclude on the 15th of March.

Thank you.