



Office of the Principal and Vice Chancellor

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
NAMING CEREMONY OF THE SIMISO NKWANYANA UNISA
BUILDING
UNISA DURBAN REGIONAL HUB
12 JULY 2019**

Programme Director, it is my distinct honour and privilege to stand in front of this august house, on the occasion of our honouring one of the brave young men to have attended this university.

In setting the tone for today's proceedings I wish to focus on three things. First, I want us to reflect on what some scholars call monumentalization of places and spaces. Second, I will address myself to how we as UNISA understand this monumentalization and treat it, weaving that understanding and treatment with the institution's history. Finally, I will locate the place that Smiso Nkwanyana occupies

in that understanding and treatment, and therefore why we have taken the decision to rename this building after him.

Monumentalization of places and spaces

In an article titled *Monumentalization and the renaming of street names in the city of Durban (Ethekwini) as a contested terrain between politics and religion*,¹ Simanga Kumalo examines the process adopted to rename some of the streets in Ethekwini.

It is apt that I start off by citing Kumalo because of the location of the very building that we are renaming today, located on what used to be called Stanger Street, now Stalwart Simelane Street; renamed after a former teacher who established schools but later became a cadre of the liberation movement.²

While Kumalo, like any other academic, critiques the manner in which the process of renaming some of the streets, it is his ability to locate that process within the broad framework of the continuing democratisation of our country that attracted me to his article. Thus, he ultimately agrees that the renaming of street names is a necessary

¹ R Simanga Kumalo (2014) Monumentalization and the renaming of street names in the city of Durban (Ethekwini) as a contested terrain between politics and religion, *New Contree*, No 70, pp. 219-250

² See *Pitness (Stalwart) Simelane*, South African History Online, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/pitness-stalwart-h-simelane>. Accessed on 07 July 2019

step if we are to change the manner in which the history of this country is told.

Kumalo's main criticism centres around his claim that the religious community in eThekweni was not adequately consulted during the renaming process, even though some of the religious figures were included in the list of the new street names. Surely that assertion may be challenged. But that is beyond the focus of today's occasion.

What then do we gain from Kumalo?

For Kumalo, monumentalization refers to "the creation of the physical images, symbols and presence, the naming of streets, the creation of figures using the names of outstanding leaders who contributed to the ushering of the democratic dispensation, so that people may preserve the memory of the history of the city and the political trajectories it has experienced."

But is that all to monumentalization?

I would contend that while Kumalo's conceptualisation is useful, it remains limited. The main weakness in his conceptualisation is that it reduces the renaming of cities, streets, and buildings to simply 'preserving certain memories'.

For us, the renaming of buildings is about creating a new institution. How, one may ask?

Monumentalization at UNISA: How We Understand and Treat it

In order that we may properly understand why we need to rename some of our buildings let us consider where we come from as a country, but more specifically as a university.

As we celebrate 146 years of the existence of the University of South Africa we carry with us a mixed legacy of opportunity and exclusion. Ours is a history of making opportunities available for the working people who sought to advance their careers and therefore improve their lives.

Ours is a history of availing opportunities to those students who were not accepted at some of the historically white universities, simply because they were black. It is a history of making educational opportunities available for young prisoners on Robben Island such as the former Deputy Chief Justice, Judge Dikgang Moseneke, to attain university education and thereafter practice law as a progressive attorney, advocate and eventually a judge, after his release from prison.

On the other hand, that very history as a university is not all covered in glory. In fact, many will agree with me that inside the façade of equal opportunity was an institution that was steeped in colonial privilege. From the very personnel make-up of both the academic and administrative staff, through to the curriculum, and ending with the culture that the institution imbued, black people never felt fully welcome within the university.

I say this as one of those first black lecturers in this institution, outside the Department of African Languages and to a very least extent the Faculty of Theology, whose memory of being a minority is still fresh.

For us therefore, monumentalisation is about two issues. First, it is about redressing the injustices of the past, and replacing that with a shared commitment to never repeat any form of injustice, in whatever form. Thus, the step of renaming a building, or any part of a building, suggests that its history may have been edged on the practice of injustice against a section of the population, while favouring and upholding the history of another section.

In certain instances, it means that some sections of the population were treated as if they did not exist. Hence, in the case of UNISA, it was the names of successive Principals, who unfortunately presided

over an institution that excluded the majority, which were memorialised.

By renaming these buildings after some of the people whose lives symbolised a quest for inclusion we are declaring that ours will be a university that strives to have its doors open for all, irrespective of their race, class, gender or creed.

The second reason why we have chosen some of the names for a number of our buildings is so that we may, as the university community, begin to build concrete links and bridges with other communities, not only the history of the fight for liberation.

It is also so that we begin to build a link with some of the communities served by stalwarts whose names are appearing as part of this process. In that way, the university is moving away from an inward-looking approach of naming its buildings only after former Principals. We are opening ourselves to naming our buildings after community leaders who shared the common struggles with ordinary people on the ground.

It is our firm belief that this latter approach will, in turn, lead to our communities identifying with the university, and not seeing it, and treating it, simply as an inaccessible ivory tower.

This exposition brings me to the name that we will be monumentalizing today – Smiso Nkwanyana.

Monumentalizing the name Smiso Nkwanyana

Some in the audience will remember the days when UNISA was a purely distance education institution that accepted mainly adult learners who wanted to advance their careers. That coupled with the subtle, and not-so-subtle, exclusionary practices that I have already referred to will help you to appreciate what I am now going to be sharing with you.

Starting around the late 1980s, the relative numbers of black students passing matric with university entrance started to increase.³ I say relative because whereas the figures went up numerically, actual percentages relative to the overall numbers were still low, and in fact decreasing. Nonetheless, more black students with university entrance increased. For instance, 23 010 black students obtained university passes in 1990, compared to 9 938 in 1985; 4 714 in 1980; and 3 520 in 1975.⁴

³ Frans Cronje (2010) *Matric: A 50-year Review*, <https://www.ieducation.co.za/matric-a-50-year-review/>. Accessed on 07 July 2019

⁴ Ibid

The result of these statistics was that more young black students qualified to enrol at universities. However, because of the exclusionary practices of the past, with the university system divided into three streams – the white liberal English universities, white conservative Afrikaans universities, and black universities – with white universities not accepting or rather accepting a low numbers of black students, an increasing number of young out-of-school black students started registering with UNISA.

With this influx of young black students, coming mainly from working class backgrounds and communities, where there were no study rooms at their homes, nor adequate community study centres; there emerged demands for study facilities by this new crop of students.

These students started by first demanding to have tutorial services, to take the 'distance out of distance education'. Second, they demanded better and bigger study facilities.

It was largely because of these demands that the university began to consider building regional centres; to accommodate the growing numbers of young black students who would come to the university on a daily basis, as if the UNISA was a contact institution.

As many a sociologist would tell you, once human beings come together and start facing common problems they inevitably form some form of organisation which then takes up their issues; expressing their fears and articulating their aspirations. The emergence of student self-organisation within UNISA followed that simple developmental path.

Out of the anxieties expressed by the young students, the bubbling frustration at the university refusing to recognise them as deserving of support as did their counterparts at contact universities, there emerged efforts to establish the first Student Representative Councils (SRCs) within UNISA.

Coming from the Mass Democratic Movement tradition, Smiso found his home within the South African Student Congress (SASCO) and went on to become the president of the nascent SRC here in eThekweni.

Again, as it would happen organically, these new SRCs from the Main Campus in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Polokwane, Cape Town and eThekweni came together to push for the establishment of the National SRC.

At all times the students' efforts were met with fierce, and sometimes even violent, resistance from the management of the University. Yet, this group of students were determined to make their voices heard.

It was through the efforts of Smiso and his comrades that the following, to name but a few, were achieved by the students at the time:

- The acceptance by the university that the students deserved some form of support. Hence, for the first time in its history the university began to offer tutorial support for those young students;
- Through their direct effort, the students went on to negotiate with the Tertiary Education Student Fund of South Africa (TEFSA), the predecessor to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), to recognise the plight of working-class students from UNISA as equally deserving to receive financial support like their counterparts at contact universities; and,
- Importantly, the recognition of the SRC, and eventually the National SRC, as the legitimate representative and voice of students.

It was against this background that Smiso was elected the Co-Convener in 1995 of what was known as the UNISA National Student

Coordinating Committee (UNSCC), charged with coordinating and preparing all SRCs to formally come together and establish the National SRC.

Today we have fully recognised Regional SRCs and a National SRC, with the latter sitting on the Council of the university just like at any other university, through the direct contribution made by Smiso and many of his comrades.

Programme Director, those of us who knew the passion with which Smiso defended and articulated the plight, the frustrations and the aspirations of working-class students, were not surprised when he became the provincial secretary of the South African Communist Party.

His was a life lived and dedicated to defending the interests of the working class; the interests of those who lacked the voice to defend themselves. Of those who knew that they have nothing to lose but the chains of their exploitation and marginalisation.

Through his participation in the activities of the Mass Democratic Movement – the SACP, the ANC, and the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) – Smiso became the embodiment of what I referred to earlier as a university that is not simply inward-looking, but

one that builds bridges with the communities surrounding it. A university that does not remain disaffected when the poor who live around it cry out for support, guidance and leadership.

Like many of his comrades, family and ordinary people whose lives were touched by the love and dedication shown by Smiso, our hearts were broken when he passed away at a tender age of 31 in 2003.⁵

A life lived to the full; yet a life taken too early.

It is therefore fitting that, as a university, we join hands with the people of eThekweni and the Province of KwaZulu Natal, who have already named a street after this cadre, to also show that his contribution was not just within the communities that he led.

By naming this building after Smiso Nkwanyana we are asserting the correctness of the decision taken by the people of eThekweni to monumentalise the name of Smiso Nkwanyana. The name and life of Smiso meant that ours should be a society, a university, that seeks to champion justice for all. Ours should be a university that seeks to avail opportunities to all, irrespective of race, class, gender or creed.

⁵ Smiso Nkwanyana passed away on the 12 August 2003. See *SACP member killed in crash*, <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/SACP-member-killed-in-crash-20030812>. Accessed on 07 July 2019

But there was another side to Smiso that I hope many will still remember him for.

Smiso was not just a fire-eating radical who defended the poor against exploitation. Beneath that fierce *persona* who hated oppression was a loving and gentle soul. He was a loving and jolly person. Remember his crackling laughter after a tense meeting, making it clear that the intensity of his expression was never personal but a matter of principle.

It is against the background of the history of our university, which must be corrected - from exclusion to inclusion – that we seek to honour those like Smiso who fought for this university to be transformed.

It is against the deliberate effort to build bridges with communities within which we operate, and indeed within the nation as a whole, that we today are renaming this building after one who lived his life building those bridges.

We are therefore proud that today we fulfil the wishes of many of our former students who suggested the name of Smiso Nkwanyana as a fitting tribute for us to rename this building.

By engraving his name on this building, we will remind future generations that, within its corridors walked and worked a giant whose sole aim was for the university to be rehumanised.

On behalf of our University Community that is inclusive of its Council, Management, staff, student leaders including, and especially, past student leaders, as well as all leaders of organised labour (Nehawu and APSA), Black Forum, Women's Forum and all our stakeholders, I wish to thank Smiso Nkwanyana's family for their kindness in agreeing that we monumentalise the name of their son, husband and father.

We promise to honour the legacy of this gentle giant by continuing to open the doors of learning; and making the University of South Africa a university for all in the Land!

Thank you!