

MANDELA RHODES IN THE TIME OF STATUES

By Njabulo S Ndebele, Shaun Johnson, and Judy Sikuza

THIS week in Cape Town an extraordinary group of young African leaders filed into the meeting room of The Mandela Rhodes Foundation and gathered in a conversational circle for a serious discussion. They were Scholars from the various Classes since the inception of the Mandela Rhodes Scholarships programme in 2005. They were responding to an invitation to talk in a safe space to each other, and to the Foundation that awarded them their Scholarships, about the fierce contestation suddenly sparked about the statue of Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town.

Joining the Scholars in the room were ourselves and other colleagues from the MRF. We had also invited and received comment from Scholars who could not be there in person, as well as the Trustees of the Foundation and other interested stakeholders.

What followed were two exhausting, painful, exhilarating hours of conversation among a deeply diverse, exceptionally talented group of young African leaders. After initial guardedness because of the depth of different feelings, they opened up to one another and laid bare the complexity of the wrestling and grappling with the past, present and future that is going on at our campuses right now.

We, the custodians of the Foundation, barely spoke. We listened. And we learned. What do we think we learned? We think we learned that it would be a mistake for people who are not on the ground in the current throes of student ferment (as we are not), to be tempted to dismiss what is playing out as, at best, prankish student hi-jinks, or at worst simply bad behaviour by youngsters who have no real issues. We thought we saw before us a live barometer of deep societal anguish.

By the end of the session we were convinced that the debates about the Rhodes statue are not singularly about Cecil John Rhodes. The statue was a

trigger point for a broader movement that was waiting to happen. So while there is searing dispute about the actual piece of metal (in our own constituencies there are those who think it should go entirely, those who think it should be moved, and those who think it should stay just as it is), it is not the main issue. So whatever is done with it in the end, will not make the real issues go away.

From where we sit it feels to us like the intensity of feeling on the campuses, just more than 20 years into democracy, is reminiscent of the earlier periods of heightened student politics, then of course in opposition to apartheid.

Now, we learned by listening, the main issue for the students wherever they find themselves in the current debates, is transformation and it is devilishly complex. Being a Vice-Chancellor trying to do the right things at any one of our tertiary institutions has to be one of the most difficult – and perhaps under-appreciated – jobs in our current society. Our impression is that among a great number of students, not all of them black, there is real, and sustained fury about perceived institutional racism and continuing white domination in higher learning. In the larger society a structural legacy continues to spawn disparities. There is palpable unhappiness and widespread disillusionment. So a statue, even though mute, can be used akin to a ventriloquist's dummy to throw the voice of the ventriloquist. And that is the role that the metal Mr Rhodes is playing now.

These are challenging times for all of us and we need to try to find each other, sincerely and openly. Now more than ever, we encourage our Scholars to tap into the Foundation's principles to seek wisdom as they deliberate about the current debates. Our Foundation was brought into being by Mr Mandela in 2003 when he agreed to partner with the Rhodes Trust, implementers of the world famous Rhodes Scholarships. The Trust wanted to mark its centenary by 'giving back' to the continent that was the origin of Rhodes' wealth: Africa.

It was Mr Mandela's judgment that the potential benefits of a new, world-class scholarship and leadership development programme for Africans and run by Africans, would outweigh any obvious discomfort in joining the

names of a 19th century imperialist and a 20th century liberator. He said we should embrace, explore and interrogate the inherent tensions to help our Scholars to develop sophisticated understandings of the complexity of real-life leadership in real-life situations.

And this is certainly what we have done. Even when writing their first essay as applicants for the Scholarship, candidates are challenged to grapple with the contradictions of two such different legacies. If they are fortunate enough to win the Scholarship, they participate from the very outset in robust debate (especially about Rhodes). There is no Rhodes praise-singing involved. But by the end of their year in residence Mandela Rhodes Scholars know a great deal more than they did about Rhodes, Mandela, and the past 112 or so years of our history. They also learn a great deal about each other, and themselves. Almost every one of the close to 300 young Africans from nearly 20 different African countries has commented that aside from the obviously important financial and other benefits of the Scholarship, the leadership workshop experience has been the most valuable.

The Board of Trustees of the MRF met earlier this month in Cape Town (before the statue debates) and approved a proposal to expand the Mandela Rhodes Scholarships programme from its current level to having 100 Scholars 'in residence' in any one year, by the time of our 15th anniversary in 2018. This is a thrilling target which will place a world-class African institution and programme firmly on the international stage in terms of size and reach. We think this is the sort of ambitious target Mr Mandela had in mind when he said, launching the MRF in 2003: "We have agreed to and support this joint initiative ... representing a symbolic moment in the closing of the historic circle ... And we know with confidence that the work of The Mandela Rhodes Foundation will substantively contribute to a better life for the people of South Africa and further abroad on the African continent."

Achieving this, Mr Mandela believed, made it worthwhile embracing the fine gesture from the Rhodes legacy's modern-day custodians. He felt the 'oxymoronic' coming-together also spoke to the South African Constitution's injunction to come together across historical divides. The tensions between these two legacies – and many others – will never be resolved, and nor should they be. We believe that in having our Scholars wrestle honestly and openly

with questions that evoke so many others, they will themselves become better leaders. Most importantly, we relish the prospect of thousands of talented youngsters from across the continent being given an exceptional educational and leadership development opportunity in the years to come, so that they too can help contribute to the task of creating a better life for the people of Africa.

- *Ndebele, Johnson and Sikuza are, respectively, Chair, Executive Director, and Programme Director of The Mandela Rhodes Foundation*
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