

South Africa - Decolonising the Mind: Lecture to Unisa's Annual Spring Law Conference

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Hugh Masekela is a South African jazz musician, trumpeter and composer.

I always hear people, before they make a speech, say this, so I'm going to say it too. I don't know what it really means but "All protocols observed".

Because I am shaking in my boots, I want to give you, first of all, my full nickname. My full nickname is:

Ke nna Ramakgolo wa Batlokwa ba gaRamokgopa. Ke rena Bapau ba ditshwale; ke rena Bakone ba ga Selakane. Ke rena Baroka-meetöe-a-pula, bommamotshepa'a boloko, boThaba ya naka töa go ripöa. Ga di a ripelwa go kala; di ripetöwe go hlaba dingwe. Re Bapau, ba re felesetsang Mopau ge a eyo nya, ge a eyo ja ga a felesetöwe. Lesetja kobo e ntöho ke apere, ke saletöwe ke go apara nkwe [1].

Our real history

I've been asked today to come and talk about decolonising the mind. And the first thing I'd like to get us to think about is what are we decolonising ourselves from, because a lot of people are not aware even that decolonisation has taken place in their lives and that they come from a colonial

background.

And I think that the most important thing that we have to do is teach our real history; not the history that we were taught in school, because it is true that in our case the history was written by the conquerors. But I think that not only our children but even our generation do not know too much about Southern Africa.

I think people think Mapungubwe is a jazz festival in Polokwane. I think many people think that Monomotapa is a beautiful hotel in Harare. And I think many people think that most African countries were established by the presidents, like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, and then Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and that our history starts from when the first political organisations were put together. And it's a very big tragedy because you see how people during elections, even the cleverest people, completely become mindless, especially as soon as they wear the cap and the T-shirt. They're ready to rumble.

And I would just like to say that it's very necessary not just for our children but for all of us to learn about the Kingdom of Mapungubwe, the Kingdom of Monomotapa, the Kingdom of Mali, of Egypt, of Ghana, and the Songhai Empire. This was way before Arab traders came to Africa and then went back and told the Europeans that there's gold in the hills up there and that the people are giving it away.

And when they came and they saw, they took it and they took it all, and they didn't leave anything. I mean, they took it all, to the point where today we really don't own Africa. We're just working tenants in our own continent. So we have to go back to those times just so that we can figure out where we started from. And then we have to figure out what happened; and I don't think many people know who Sir George Grey is or Simon van der Stel or Ryk Tulbagh, or Piet Retief or any of those many, many African names who were here. Sir Harry Smith – all people can think about when you say Sir Harry Smith is his wife Ladysmith, and the Black Mambazo.

And we don't know how Lesotho came to be there. The story of Moshoeshoe and how he came from villages, lived on the mountain Thaba Bosiu for 45 years to form what is today known as Lesotho. Or the three kings of Botswana who made Botswana possible. All these places that we live in today, unfortunately, are artificial borders. They are not borders that were put there by Africans. They are borders that were put together in 1886 at a big party in Berlin or somewhere in Europe. And the Kaiser of Germany was the host and there was a map of Africa and I think they were drinking very good wine and other stuff. And somehow, in that process, King Leopold of Belgium was given the Congo as a private estate, as his own private estate.

The little-known story of the rise of King Moshoeshoe (pictured here with his Ministers) in Lesotho is an example of the artificial borders which we in Africa still cling to today. Masekela points out that these borders were not placed there by Africans, and yet they are borders "we recognise ... to a point where a madness enters us".



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We are all Makwerekwere

And these are funny things that I’m saying but they are true. And what breaks my heart most is that we go to war over these borders and we recognise borders to a point where a madness enters us. We believe them so much that we think that people who come from other places other than where we are should be chased away from here. But if you follow our history very closely you will find that very few of us who think we are from here are really from here. So when we are busy calling people “makwerekwere” we might be makwerewere, some of us, or many of us, because we originally, most of us, are not from here.

I’m going to confess that I’m one, because my great-grandfather came from what is called Greater Zimbabwe, Manicaland and I’m a Karanga. But we were adopted, 25 of our families were adopted by the baThlokoa who were tired of rustling cattle all over South Africa. The baThlokoa are all over Southern Africa, in Botswana, in the Eastern Cape and in Tlokwe. What is Potchefstroom is Tlokwe. And of course in Limpopo – they were all over because they were cattle rustlers. Ramokgopa decided that they wanted to learn how to read and write and agriculture. So it’s a long story, but they went to Southern Zimbabwe and adopted the families who were the main agriculturalists there, the Munyepawu. So they adopted 25 families of the Munyepawu which is my real surname; and then we came to teach them agriculture and they called us “masekela”. To “sekela” is to look for fertile land. So that’s why we are Masekela. I am saying this because I wish this for every African person: to know at least that little much about yourself. Because we don’t know anything about ourselves...

Masekela’s great grandfather came from a place known as Great Zimbabwe. In this lecture he urges people on the continent to know their history, the history of places like the Kingdom of Monomotapa and Great Zimbabwe if we are to truly decolonise our minds.



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We need our own academies

...And the thing that we have to really be aware of is how much heritage we have lost. So we need these academies to come up everywhere so that we can unteach a lot of what we've been taught to believe that we are. And that doesn't mean we have to abandon the western advantages that we learn from. But we have to unteach the fact that we were conquered, we were enslaved. And because of displacement, because of urbanisation, because of the misunderstanding of education, because of politics, and mostly because of religion, Africans have been painted into a corner where they really and truly believe that their own heritage is pagan, that it is heathen, that it is barbaric and savage, that it is primitive and backwards. And it makes us strive to be what we are not; to be those things that those people who have converted us want us to be.

We work very hard on that, and as a result we've become a consumer society internationally. We don't sell anything, because we think that anything we can make will be considered inferior...

...I'm bringing up artisanship because our artisanship is amazing, and one of the things that has to be learned in our academies is that Africans introduced the sciences, Africans introduced philosophy, Africans introduced the arts and architecture to the world. But those are things that we have been untaught; so they were never in our curriculums, we were never able to find the truth about our past, the real truth. But we have to re-learn all our languages. I don't know if the dean or the vice-chancellor of UNISA is here today, but I'm bringing up this academy idea because the Greeks learn Greek in their own schools, the English learn English in their own schools, and the same all over Europe.

But we go to our schools to learn the knowledge that has been handed down to us by the colonial powers. Of course we need the education but in there, there's nothing about us. If there is, it's very little - a little anthropology and a little Homo naledi here, a little Homo sapiens there - but we're not really getting into the very soul, the depths of who we are.



As the statue of Rhodes was removed from the UCT campus, students of RhodesMustFall cheered. A small victory had been won in decolonising tertiary institutions in South Africa.

We are losing our language

Our children, for instance. Today most urban children, especially the ones that are in high school and in the primary schools, most of them have lost knowledge. In fact they don't have knowledge of their own mother tongues. They don't. And when I try to speak to some of my nephews and nieces in our language, they can hear what I'm saying but go, "Oh, Uncle, why are you always speaking that language Uncle?" And I mean, I'm trying to make it look funny but it's really sad when you hear, especially when people hear you.

And some of them are even shy to talk. They want to talk and they can speak. But then there's also peer pressure: "Oh, you're talking that language!" But you find Chinese, Indians, Germans, Malays if they speak English, and they speak it well, but when they get home it ends at the gate. So what I'm trying to say here is that almost all other societies have their culture as a mirror against being absorbed by other cultures. It is that mirror that we have lost and I think that we have to revive that mirror into our lives.

We are losing our culture

And we need also like to see the excellence of our arts, visually. Our traditional performances have become invisible. When I grew up we took it for granted, on Friday nights when the sun went down, the first thing you'd hear all over the country, especially in the mining areas there, the first thing you would hear would be the Bavenda and the Bapedi drums and the reed and the bamboo pipes. And it rang right through from Friday evening until Sunday night, non-stop; that was the soundtrack of the weekend. And in there there'd come all the other groups and they'd have like their little spaces and open spaces where there would be Shangaan, the people, the maTshopis from Mozambique, there will be Nyanjas from Malawi, and Zimbabwe there'd be Namas and Hereros from Namibia. They were from all over and even from here at home, the Xhosas. And it was like an unsponsored carnival.



Traditional Bapedi drums on exhibition at the Drum Café museum in Johannesburg.

So when I came back from exile – two of my best friends came to pick me up at the airport on a Thursday and I went to stay with them in Westcliff. It's funny, I left from the township but when I came back I couldn't find a place in the township. I had to come and live in town. And I kept asking Gigi, is it okay for us to be here, are you sure? But, anyway, because you could hear the drums even in the town, in the city, the next day, Friday night, I looked at Gigi and I said, "Man, it's so quiet, isn't it Friday today?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "So what happened, where are the drums?" And they said, "Yrrrrrrr, man, you've been gone a long time; those things are all gone."

And then my best friend came to visit me and I said, "No, we'll start in the northern Transvaal (it was the northern Transvaal then), my ancestral grounds, and then I'll take you all over the country. We drove around for five weeks and we didn't find anything. And when he left, he looked at me and he said, "I'm sorry about this, man. Maybe it will come back one day." And I said, "I doubt it, man." I wanted to cry. "I doubt it."

Our heritage is marginalised

The funniest thing is that 80% or more of African people are rural ethnic people, and they bring that stuff with them to town hoping that they'll find a place, hoping that they'll be able to do it. And I know every time I have a ceremony in my home, I always get the Bavenda, the Bapedi people to

come, because it just feels like the right thing to do instead of a ballroom and orchestra. So those people are there and it is there, but one of the discouraging things is that we look down on it so much that sometimes even like the president, when there's a visitor, any of our presidents, not particularly the present one, sometimes they call those people to say, I want you to come to the airport and some important man is coming or important woman is coming, so we want you to come and play the drums and do your things. But far away from the red carpet, over there. And so our heritage belongs over there in our heads.

And it breaks your heart when you look at symphony music or ballet or opera – those are all disciplines that are over 600 years old that the Europeans have maintained. And they don't even have to advertise anymore. Their shows are always sold out, whether it's the music of Bach or Beethoven. So whenever they need their heritage, it's right there. When the English have a Royal wedding, they pull out all the stops. They've got 2,000 years or more. And they have the beefeaters and they have the yeomen and they have horse guards and carriages. And then when they have the Olympics they show the Industrial Revolution. They have them. But we don't have that and we have to have it.

We used to learn from our old people



When Masakela was young, he used to be sent back during holidays to his grandparents' home to learn traditional values and learn how to milk and how to herd cattle.

One thing that we have forgotten that was a major treasure when I was a kid, was the aged. Most of us grew up at our grandparents' homes, sometime some of them in rural farms, little farms or even big farms. And when we were old enough we went to live with our parents. But during the holidays, we always had to go back. Because we had to go back so we could learn again traditional values. So it's a very big loss for the children. But the aged are there, and today we put our aged in old age homes. We put our aged in the backyard most of the time, and they don't play any part in our lives. And the ones that are in our lives today between the ages of 85 and 90, we should be talking to every one of them. We should be recording them and have a database of everything, because they're the last people with the information. The same way we have to speak to everybody and to find a person in the family that can trace the genealogy as far back as possible.

The other day I went to a funeral of Zanele Mbeki's sister. We all grew up together in Alexandra township. We went up there and gave a vote of thanks, and one of the cousins who came from Northern Natal posted, "We the Dlamini from Northern Natal, we can trace our families as far back as 1597." In every family there's a person like that and we need to find each of those people, and put all that in a database, like in Europe, so that you can just go and press McAlister and your history for 1,000 years comes up. That's something that we're going to have to do. We have to bring the aged out to give us whatever little wisdom they still remember and to interact not only with us but our children too. And I think that if we can do that and bring out our pageantry, make it visible, and find places for it, our pageantry or regalia or traditional dance and music and singing, and stuff, it is very valuable.

But when people come to Africa, they can't find us. So they go and see the animals, and they go and see Victoria Falls and the geographical sites because they can't find us. Some of my African American friends, when they first came to visit me, they kept saying, "Where's the people? At least show us a little bit of the people, man, just a little bit. Maybe on the weekend there." And I say, "Well, man, that isn't happening anymore." "Shit, man, it's so sad to see bad imitations of me." And then, you know, those things are embarrassing to hear.

They talk about rainbow, rainbow, rainbow

And I'm not trying to run for office here. This is not going to be my ticket, what I'm talking about here, so you don't have to vote for me. But we have to try and bring back all those traditional values and knowledge, because if we do, and this is not just for Africa, people of African origin, if we're going to decolonise the minds then we have to decolonise the minds of those people of European origin who have been here for centuries and who still, to a very great extent, feel that they are not of here except when they were with us. And they talk about rainbow, rainbow, rainbow, rainbow nation. But I think that we have to make this available for all South Africans. And South Africa is probably one of the most, if not the most, cosmopolitan country in the world today. Because there's people from all over, here, from all over Africa.

But it's not new. We always had Syrians here, we had Greeks, we had Italians, we had Portuguese, from way back. And when it was illegal for us to drink liquor, they are the ones who used to sneak and go and buy it for us, and some of them actually had shebeens. And we had phrases in those days like, "meet me at the Syrians" or "meet me at the Greeks". And so all those people are here. And there's people from Niger, from South America, from the Congo, from Ethiopia, from Eritrea. We have people from all over the world here. And if we can tap into that well, I think we are one of the few countries in the world that will have an international cultural and arts fair without importing anybody from anywhere else. That's how much wealth we have. But we're just afraid; I don't know whether we're afraid or not but we're holding so much content and so much wealth and value culturally and socially.

We are trying to "outwest" the west

But like an Indian friend of mine said, a film maker – this is going to be my last jab at Africa. He was at film school when I was at music school in the 1960s, and I saw him in India in 2004 when we were celebrating our 10th anniversary, and he said, "Well Hugh, we're so proud about South Africa, we're so proud about Africa but what I want to say to you is, what is the matter? Africa has so much content, so much traditional content, but you people are busy looking west, you don't even look east, you know." He says, "Look at us in India," he says. "We only have two costumes. We have the sari, and the pyjamas for the men. But if you look at how we advanced the pyjamas to very, very high fashion." And he said, "We only have one dance, you know, but sometimes we do it with a little hippie-hoppie, but it's all the same dance. And we only have one song; we sing it sad, we sing it happy, we sing it fast, we sing it slow." So he says, "Look, we only have three things culturally but with those three things we keep India together and we mesmerise the rest of the world. But now you people, you have so much diversity, so much variety, but you are busy looking west. The day you look inside it will be the greatest education the whole world can get."

Our style of government is colonial

This is my last jab – I hope that you have bail money for me in case they re-open Robben Island for me. But I think one of the things that Africa as a whole should look at and academia too, is that the style of government that we've inherited is also not ours. You know, we've inherited the style of the colonial people. In fact, we still use still some of their robes, and all that stuff, especially the judges and what have you. And for some of us it looks so strange.

I want to make an example of countries that I think I envy very much. Scandinavia, the Scandinavian countries, nobody even knows who the president is or the prime minister. They don't know, and like the administrators, they might have a driver but they ride a bicycle, they ride the bus, some of them walk to work. They don't walk to the Blue Lights, they don't walk to the sirens and they don't have body guards because nobody really wants to kill them. But the main thing is they go to work and as a result those countries function. In Switzerland they have seven presidents, seven heads of state and they rotate each year. Each year the next person takes over and nobody knows their names either, but they just go to work. And it's a culture that I would envy very much, especially for Africa. I know that it's not only Africa that has that misconception that an inauguration is a coronation.

And I think that's one of the things in the academy also that would have to sneak in if they don't close the academy quickly. But we have to look at the way we are governed today and if it's relevant to who we are and our lives. Because I get really pissed off when I'm driving and all of a sudden I realise that there's five blue light cars around me and anything could have happened because they also drive very roughly. But then it's nothing compared to some of the countries I've lived in in Africa. I lived in Guinea in 1972-1973, and when the president Sékou Touré was going to visit Sierra Leone next door (it's a 30-minute flight), it was a public holiday and the whole town had to come out wearing white clothes. And there'd be drummers and we had to wave white handkerchiefs when he was going. And in the evening, when he was coming back, we had to do it again. And those people who don't come to the highway to wave, the committees take names, and there was worse than that.

But I'm saying that that frame of mind, even for us, has to stop. We have to stop being so excited about styles of elections that don't originate from us. So there's many things that are standing in our way, obstacles, and they are obstacles that don't come from us, they come from outside and we have adopted them. And as a result I think we are losing our identity. We are not recognisable anywhere. And people usually say, "But, Hugh, why do you want to take us back? Sifun'ukuya phambili ndoda, o re hulela morao (We want to move forward man, you are taking us to the dark ages). I say to them, "Well, if I'm pulling you back, where were you going, where are you going? If you don't know where you're coming from, you couldn't be going anywhere." So we're chasing our tails in this western maze, and as long as we do that, our minds will never be any other way except the way we are now. And the fact is that we accept it as a way of life. And we haven't really reached our pinnacle. We are still going. We want to top the west, that's what we want to do. We want to top the west because some of the things they don't even do – you know, we're "outwesting" them in many ways. And I always hear people say, "In conclusion". So, in conclusion I hope that I haven't offended anybody in this room, and if I did, hey, it's life. Thank you very much.

Hugh Masekela

P.S.

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<http://aidc.org.za/decolonising-mind-hugh-masekelas-lecture-unisas-annual-spring-law-conference/>

Footnotes

[1] I am Ramakgolo of the Tlokwa people from the Ramokgopa community. We are the Pau people of Tshwale, the Koni people of the Selakane kinfolk. We are the rain makers; and swear with livestock, whose horns are trimmed. The horns are trimmed not because they weigh heavily, but are sharpened to pierce others. We are the Pau people who would accompany a Pau to stool, but when it's time to eat, the Pau needs no company. Let loose the black garment I wear, soon I would be wearing a tiger's skin.