

STUDYING UNDER THE BARREL OF A GUN BY ERNEST SHIPOYILA KHOSA

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Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Ernest's book, *Studying Under the Barrel of a Gun*, captures and narrates a significant if fascinating epoch in the history of tertiary / university education in South Africa. The macro-environment of the time was thick with Apartheid's stuffiness, suffocating Blacks in all walks of life, with University students one focal point.

Apartheid you will recall, was politics of oppression and suppression. More critically, it was economics of exclusion and exploitation.

The army of occupation Ernest narrates is but a nadir in that Apartheid hell. In that era white lecturers and professors coming to class with revolvers and pistols particularly during student unrests were fairly familiar spectacles. This was the lucid, ugly side of the pedagogy of intimidation and domination.

For a comparison and contrast between this and the call for decolonisation of education manifest inter alia in the Rhodes Must Fall clamour, I invite you to read Prof Muxe Nkondo's Foreword to Ernest's book.

Ernest's book is as evocative as it is provocative. It tempts extensive commentary, but let me focus on just two aspects:

THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The fundamental issue to address in this regard is: what are the requirements towards making African Universities a healthy, humanistic and therefore enjoyable and elevating learning environment?

Well, first the basic freedoms have to be realised according to universal standards: intellectual freedom; freedom of expression; freedom of association; freedom of enquiry; which is built into intellectual freedom; freedom to reject faculty and educational content that seek to undermine those rights and to humiliate students and fellow lecturers with racist motives and detached leadership.

Only then can there be a healthy, humanistic and therefore enjoyable and elevating learning environment. Without recognition of and adherence to these principles there must continue a turbulent campus atmosphere which the mindless use of political authority can only aggravate and render unbearable.

A CHALLENGE TO THE INTELLIGENTSIA

Ernest throws down the gauntlet to our intelligentsia. South Africans have to contend with many paradoxes in their country. Knowing and not speaking has become a national challenge. For me, there is no dilemma of dissent: it is necessary and vital to speak up when all around are falling silent. Our intelligentsia, which should be pivotal to the success of our new democracy, is failing.

The intelligentsia suffers the tantalising temptation to ignore the demands of the masses and turn to self-enrichment instead. The critical mass of our intelligentsia needs to retune itself to the mission of true development and poverty alleviation. Strategies for development differ according to ideological positions and the evidence of success. Our leadership has tried various tacks. These include black economic empowerment through equity deals, incentives to spur entrepreneurship and innovation, large capital-intensive projects, broad-based black economic empowerment through skills development and affirmative procurement, and high-profile international collaborations in science and technology. All form part of the effort to transform the economy and place us on the path to equity and steady growth. Let us not forget that upliftment does not equate simply with socio-economic equalisation or gross statistics of per capita income. There is a lot more to quality of life and 'development' than that. Ultimately sustainable development is all about human development. The poor are growing in numbers and the country is still not on the high road to progress. We certainly do require physical and intellectual infrastructure – electricity, roads, schools, hospitals – but more than anything we need a social revolution to realise the benefits of democratic freedoms. The populace has to regain the human dignity that exploitation and oppression have stripped away, and begin to believe in their full potential as human beings capable of directing their own destiny.

Jack Welch predicated his success in corporate business on the philosophy 'Control your destiny or someone else will'. South Africa had a harbinger of this philosophy and practice in politics in the personal leadership of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe.

Intellectuals by and large provide the thought-through leadership of society: connecting ideas with deeds. They ground morality and political strategy in patterns of understanding that give meaning and purpose to social action. They expound principles. They fashion programmes. They dwell on problems and find concepts and words to suggest the solutions. Intellectual activity may appear like a selfish and withdrawn exercise if the intellectual is the retiring type. In Africa we expect intellectuals to be engaged in dialogues with their fellow men and women, whether rich or poor, educated or not. In other words, we regard intellectuals as the compass-bearers of our day and age, the voices of our communities, and the standard-bearers of our causes.

Ernest's book is a significant contribution to this essential discourse; an essential rod to prod the nation to take appropriate action.