

Tapping into *Inimba* to show deep Transformative Leadership in Mandela University

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Nelson Mandela University has installed three powerful and imaginative black women in three of the most influential positions of the university, namely, Chair of Council, – Adv Nozipho January-Bardill, Chancellor – Dr Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi and Vice Chancellor – Prof Sibongile Muthwa. We have to ululate and celebrate, for this is history in making. Out of 26 public universities in South Africa, we have less than five female vice chancellors.

Nowhere in the country, dare I say, the continent, has the university seen such transformation in its governance. It is clear that Nelson Mandela University is positioning itself as the leader of meaningful transformation within the higher education sector where less than six per cent of A-Rated professors is black women.

Let us remember that black women were never intended to become first-class citizens of our colonial and apartheid universities. Black women were something of an afterthought in these institutions. One of our foremost international black sociologists, Professor Zine Magubane, often quotes novelist Nellie McKay (2004, 1) in saying that “to be black and female in the academy has its own particular frustrations because it was never intended for us to be here. We are in spaces that have been appropriated for us”. It is this very ‘afterthought’ position that makes this trio of black women significant and brave for the university.

This is why many of us are hoping that these three black female leaders will tap into new definitions and practices of power in their tenure at Nelson Mandela University. It is no longer enough to have black women as numbers at the helm of institutions; we need them to exercise radically transformative leadership that can steer our universities towards world-class, African-driven intellectualism.

After all, let us not forget that historically, power in our universities was defined from the perspective of men, white and black, usually from the middle classes. In such male-dominated contexts, Amina Mama (2001) has warned us that power structures tend to produce autocratic

women; she called them ‘femocrats’. The word describes powerful women who ally themselves with oppressive male-dominance in institutions.

In order for our university leaders to move away from crushing practices of power, I suggest we begin to create new frameworks of ethical leadership that speak to our context by drawing from African philosophy and idiom. In my work as an African sociologist, I place great emphasis on studying the many dimensions of matriarchal practices amongst Africans. One concept that I find helpful in thinking of the difficulties of managing the tough process of change in our universities, is *inimba*.

Inimba (isiXhosa) is loosely translated as the unbearable pains before the birth of a child. When it is said *inimba iyasika*, it refers to these birth pains, which intensify in the lower stomach of a woman giving birth. These unbearable labour pains seem to be translated as *mahlaba* in SeSotho, which speaks to the same lower abdominal pains experienced by a woman during the birthing process. This saying is also used generally to refer to a deeply empathetic and compassionate feeling towards children – *imvakalelo*. The principle of *inimba*, is “life giving, life sustaining, and life preserving” (Oyewumi 2015, 220). These principles should form the underlying foundation for managing change in educational institutions in a violent and unequal country that has a history of brutality.

Inimba emerges as one matriarchal ideology that drives the character of African women’s leadership. This is why African feminist scholars, including Nomboniso Gasa (2007), Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), Ifi Amaduime (1987), Darlene Miller (2016), Filomina Steady (2011) and many others, have all argued for motherhood as a political tool for the mobilisation of African women. However, as Oyewumi Oyeronke says, “the challenge is to convince society that motherhood should not be the responsibility of just one woman or just one nuclear family but should be the bedrock on which society is built and the way in which we organise our lives” (2015, 220).

For me, *inimba* forms an alternative point of departure for leadership, where the governance systems in universities continue to be domains of egoism. In our universities, socially and economically precarious students, workers, and emerging and black academics are still contending with outdated curriculums, conservative senates, university councils fighting to maintain old apartheid identities, administrations that treat learning as a factory process, and

just a general disdain for the intellectual purpose of a university. The examples of regressive leadership are many. The example of a South African university where women lecturers complained about having to make slides for senior male professors in order to keep their contracts was particularly heinous. The abuse of power in our universities is systemic and often invisible to the public.

Both the newly inaugurated Mandela Chancellor and Vice Chancellor have emphasised rootedness, social justice and tapping into broader African intellectual histories in the continent at large in crafting the university's transformative identity. When I suggest that meaningful change to the university needs *inimba*, I am not trying to subject these black women to different 'moral standards' as Zenani Mandela rightly pointed out, "men and women are held in different moral standards in our society". I am advocating that we unapologetically theorise from matriarchal wisdom to break with the narcissistic model of institutional power set for us by the likes of Cecil John Rhodes, whose statue at the University of Cape Town was toppled by students in 2015.

Inimba means understanding that the black working-class students now form the majority of our higher education system and it is for their liberation we labour. *Inimba* means understanding that most of the students who enter our universities come from a place of socioeconomic precariousness. Higher education becomes their last hope in an economy and society where youth (ages 15 to 35) unemployment is approximately 60%. *Inimba* is not a soft-doting power, which is not the character of an African matriarch. *Inimba* implies a power that commands the stern but affirming respect modelled by our grandmothers, aunts, *oodabawo*, *makhadzi*, our mothers. *Inimba* as a matriarchal concept provides us then with an idiom of change management that dedicates itself towards the development of institutions that will use scarce resources to ensure that even the most precarious student receives the most compelling education necessary for life itself.

We know of the rich power and strong character of African women, such as Mkabayi ka Jama of the Zulu monarchy in the 18th and 19th centuries. With this kind of history, it is almost laughable when debates about 'readiness for female president' happen in South Africa. Women have always been ready; the question is, will their being women make a substantive difference or not. I hope the Nelson Mandela University matriarchal triumvirate of Muthwa, Fraiser-Moleketi and January-Bardill will show the higher education sector a radically new path.

References

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