

## **Fly Me to the Moon but Please Don't Stop in Africa on the Way**

*Tina James (June 2003)*

Boitumelo is staring out of her window on a sleepy Monday morning – the late autumn wind is blowing whirls of leaf clouds and dust across the campus – leaves and dust, somethings and nothings, puffs of chaos. Chaos gnawing at her soul. Twenty years of study and too many aching years of yearning - for a glimpse of dry African bush through rain-spattered double-glazed windows, for lost dreams and brilliant ideas (and always too little money), for well-fed children with time to play, for African pride in a world which sees and hears no such thing.

A lecture in a while, a sea of students in various states of readiness – asleep, half-asleep, alert, zombie? Boitumelo wonders how she can face the masses this morning. Her heroine Mamphela Ramphele's words whistle through her brain in fits and starts, but do little to calm the growing chaos in her mind.

“No scholarship.....

no university..... [no job?]

new knowledge....[in Africa? Is there such a thing?]

research.....

teaching..... [no money, no books, no connections]

writing.... writing....writing [so they say, but no time to write]

.....ask questions.....critical thinking [Africa's real issues?]

... foundations.... excellence.....good future [in Africa? difficult to believe]

.....community of scholars..... community of scholars?”<sup>1</sup>

Why only a community of scholars? It smacks of cloisters and dusty books, thick walls and incomprehensible Latin chants, superstition and ignorance. No, too medieval. It needs light and luminaries, technology and technologists, links and language and learning, bridges not boundaries. Thinking of luminaries and light and leadership, Boitumelo allows her mind to wander to things past and present, and a little beyond - to communities now and communities of the future. Will the African universities be part of it all or not? A scary question.

Communities - Boitumelo reckons this could be as good a start as any to think of some future dreams. So who matters? The masses of illiterates who need to read, the parentless armies of children who have to fend for themselves, the farmers who need to ensure good crops, entrepreneurs (oh too few of those), the women (neglected, abused, poorer and sicker), the academics, the connected and the unconnected, the governments struggling to meet so many

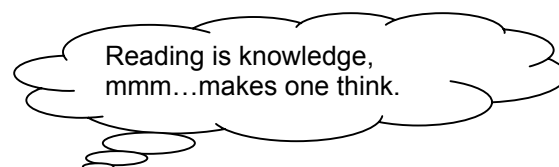
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<sup>1</sup> Drawn from the inaugural speech of Dr Mamphela Ramphele, October 1996

demands from growing populations, those multinational monopolistic states with so much decision making power on African states.

Boitumelo reflects that the universities make far too little impact on the communities around them. Who knows they even exist? How should universities be creating more bridges to this alarmingly complex suite of communities? She starts a list, more to make herself feel at least a little in control of the situation. Maybe a spark of inspiration may lead to something bigger and brighter. Who knows?

And so the list is built.....



1. *Literacy programmes for communities – accelerated learning using ICTs for literacy as well as how to use the technology. Imagine how much research students could do to understand this better in the African rural setting. Collaborative research in Francophone / Anglophone/ Lusophone / Arabic countries. Social issues, technology solutions, appropriate ICT solutions.*

2. *Create regional centres of technology excellence – communities of scholars with focus. A regional network of biotechnology centres / a network of agricultural centres of excellence – fast connections, bandwidth and focus. Imagine what this could do to improve crop and livestock in Africa, and then some technologies that farmers could use without having to use the fear of speaking to a University Professor! Some friendly Zulu-speaking translator (digital of course) would certainly make a difference.*

A speech bubble with a tail pointing towards the text '3. A network of African Studies experts...'. Inside the bubble, the text reads: 'And the dollars on the continent!'

3. *A network of African Studies experts all offering courses from their own universities using distance-learning technologies. Why should the African Studies professors sit in the United States? Let's keep them in Africa and use the technology to get our voices heard across the oceans*

4. *Community Resource Centres – let's use the technologies to get our students learning in their communities. The community of older students cannot afford to move to a city to attend a university. Move the mountain not the man (or woman more likely). We need education of the masses to move our countries forward. Let the universities lead.*

5. *Build the bridges for industry innovation. Where does the beekeeper in Swaziland go to market his new beehive design? What do we do with biometric identification systems that don't work too well with labourers' fingerprints (ever thought that many have very damaged fingerprints), land issues and national address systems that can*

*talk to each other across the region. Seems like we need a lot more focus - visioning, and foresighting and roadmapping. Let's focus – we cannot do it all.*

Although I hear the registrations for Physics are rocketing this year. Good start!

6. *Where are our technology heroes? Shuttleworth in a space suit is not enough. Where are we going to find our role models for scientists and technologists if the universities don't play this role?*

Boitumelo is starting to enjoy herself and is rather happy with her little list. What her students will make of it is anyone's guess.