

ADDRESS BY FORMER PRESIDENT MR KGALEMA MOTLANTHE
MISTRA 'WHITENESS' ROUNDTBALE

05 November 2015

Programme Director, Gail Smith
Honourable Deputy Minister, Andries Nel,
MISTRA's Executive Director, Mr Joel Netshitenzhe,
MISTRA Director of Operations, Amb Yacoob Abba Omar,
Distinguished guests, and
Ladies and gentlemen:

I am pleased to join you today as we undertake to discourse on a topic we rarely converse about in South Africa, namely 'whiteness' and what it means, or should mean, in post-apartheid society. I take this opportunity to thank the organisers of this Roundtable, the Mapungubwe Institute (MISTRA). You should be congratulated for daring to be brave by providing a platform for all of us to understand the history of whiteness, recognise its political-economic structures and the architecture of its power relations and privileges.

This subject is topical given recent events that have occupied our landscape, from the student protests against fee increases, growing calls for transformation in both our public and private institutions, to the movement calling for decolonisation of curriculum and staff representativity. What unites all these events is the perception, rightly or wrongly depending on one's social and ideological position, that identity issues remain satisfactorily unresolved, two decades into our Constitutional Democracy. We do well to remember that the Preamble to our Constitution command and impel all of us to prioritise the creation of "a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights".

What then contributes to preventing the full and maximal realisation of these human rights and freedoms? Indeed, racial discrimination is no longer sanctionable either in our legislative framework or allowed in public practice, but this has not prevented the perceptions to grow and fester that some racial groups remain, consciously and unconsciously, untransformed in attitudes and unreconstructed in behaviours.

I would say what contributes to this unfortunate status quo, to a large extent, is both a wilful ignorance and protection about the intellectual notion and social practice that accrues from 'whiteness'. As a subject of study and an issue for discussion in our homes, schools, and churches, 'whiteness' is still in its nascent stage. We easily talk, debate, and complain about the effects of 'whiteness' but scarcely on its underlying causes.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This, I hope, is what this Roundtable seeks to achieve in its stated objectives, that is, attempt to untangle the webs of mystery surrounding the foundations of 'whiteness'. Allow me to offer my few thoughts on these underlying causes.

Firstly, I would venture to say, 'whiteness' derives its privileged position in the past and present history, in the centredness of 'whiteness' from the Greco-Roman period, to the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment all the way to the nineteenth century's industrial revolution which has given us our modern society. Throughout these historical epochs, it has been assumed that the symbolism and material reality of 'whiteness' has remained central to developments that have driven civilisations in contrast to the static subalterns who were regarded as not central to driving the levers of science, technology, and knowledge production. And therefore, if we are serious about advancing a more inclusive narrative, we have to decentre whiteness and create spaces for other narratives.

Secondly, related to the centredness of whiteness is the troubling fact that has been regarded as normal and normative. Quite often, only the non-whites have been defined as such and almost never have we referred to whiteness as both a racial and an ethnic category.

Richard Dyer in his classic 1997 book, *White*, is apposite when he says: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are not. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can’t do that – they can only speak for their race”.

Thirdly, in dislodging ‘whiteness’ from its perch of invisibility or normativity, what should it be replaced with? The narratives of others should be elevated to the same position of privilege as the dominant western canons we are familiar with, the so-called canon of ‘dead white men’ like Plato, Newton, Kant, Marx, Wittgenstein, Chomsky with still-unknown figures like al-Khwarizmi who mathematised science and the Chinese polymathic scholar Shen Kua.

This is a reason I wish to commend the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg, Dr Ihron Rensburg who has undertaken to “establish inclusive traditions, with particular reference to Africa...to do so earnestly, urgently and with integrity;” and in furtherance of this mission, “this work will be kick-started with a focus on designing new compulsory undergraduate modules on topics such as Key Themes in African History, Great African Philosophers of the 19th and 20th Centuries, Important Anti-Colonial struggles of the 20th Century, The State of the Post-colony — Progress and Retrogression, and, Critical Citizenship in the 21st Century.”

Distinguished guests,

Fourthly, these initiatives – partly aimed at extricating ‘whiteness’ from its historical standing of privilege – also call for recognising that ‘whiteness’ comes with access to power, economic power that is able to include and exclude. In the past few weeks this power was highlighted by the pronouncements from a prominent white human rights lawyer who tried to defend his decision for only briefing and working with white lawyers, since, in his biased opinion, only white lawyers have the cognitive capabilities to close and win cases.

Fifthly, acknowledging ‘whiteness’ as a social and historical construct, like ‘blackness’, is an urgent reminder for all progressive forces, to heed and popularise the dedicated work that is done by thinkers like Dyer and Melissa Steyn. Professor Steyn has remained unswerving in her decades-long project of focusing on critical whiteness studies. I wish I was young enough to have the mental wherewithal and time to attend her course at the University of the Witwatersrand, which she has entitled *Critical Diversity Literacy*.

What is signified and meant by this phrase? As she says, it is about communicating the point that there are certain hegemonic identities which are taken as given – like whiteness – but need to now be supplemented with other forms of literacies, learning or proficiencies about masculinity, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, and other social markers that have been marginalised, oppressed, or taken for granted in our past.

Furthermore, we cannot afford to treat these social identities as confined to our past since their presence is felt in our daily lives, with women oppression, discrimination against people of different religious or national sects. All these unfortunate thoughts and acts stain our human rights record and disfigure our ultimate goal of deepening democracy and freedom to all sectors of our society.

Ladies and gentlemen,

By way of wrapping up, please allow me to conclude with the following words. Indeed our globalised world has rendered social, political and economic identities both fragmented and homogenised. This paradoxical process offers opportunities to rethink anew our identities and most importantly, reconsider our primary identity as human beings who share one common lifeboat that requires everyone to focus on the crises or problematiques that assail us such as rising inequality, unemployment especially amongst young people, violence against the most vulnerable members of our people, and the scourge of corruption that robs our public of scarce and much-needed public service.

What is more, debunking 'whiteness' has the advantage of setting standards which are inclusive and shared so that we make real the Preamble in our Constitution that stipulates that: "This Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic" and "All citizens are equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship: and equally subject to the duties and responsibilities of citizenship."

I thank you.