Khayamandi Oral History Research Project Launch
Kayamandi High School, Kayamandi, Stellenbosch, 22 August 2015
Keynote address, Stellenbosch University Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof Wim de Villiers:
'The importance of history and heritage for transformation'

Good afternoon everyone. I am glad to be here at this important event. Kayamandi is an integral part of Stellenbosch, and while Stellenbosch University (SU) has a long history of involvement in this community, and of academic works in different disciplines on Kayamandi, there is a general absence of oral histories.

This initiative aims to help change that, and SU is on board as a knowledge partner. As a university, our strength is academic research. That is what we can bring to this project – not money or power, but expertise at unlocking knowledge, which is a collaborative process. We want to help to unlock knowledge that the people of Kayamandi already have, through taking and writing up their oral histories, with them.

It is absolutely crucial for any university to engage with its community – and Kayamandi is our community, just as much as Mostertsdrift and Cloetesville are. South Africa has a divided past. But I would like to think we are building a united future. And to do that, we need to get to know each other better. These oral histories will help us achieve that.

This project aims to give voice to people, so that we can listen to each other. It wants to bring neglected perspectives to the fore – ultimately to achieve development, which brings me to the topic I was asked to address, "The importance of history and heritage for transformation".

In unpacking the meaning of this phrase, I will start at the end. "Transformation" is the process of profoundly, deeply changing current reality into something different, ideally something better. In other words, it is moving from "what is" to "what could be", "what should be". It is up to all participants in this process to sharpen our vision and to take concerted action to achieve the outcome we desire.

Transformation is of particular relevance to universities; it is intrinsic to education. We transform society through research, we transform individuals through learning and teaching, and we transform communities through social impact. In the process, the University itself is transformed because it is a reciprocal process.

Now, "heritage" is what is passed down through the years, from one generation to the next. It is our inheritance, whether objects or practices. Heritage is mostly positive, the things we remember and recall from the past, and choose to cherish. But it can also be a negative legacy.

Lastly, "history" is a series of past events connected with particular person or place. It is not to be confused with "facts", which implies all-knowing and uncontested truth of what actually happened in the past. Instead, history – the historians tell us – is a representation or recreation of the past according to what the available sources tell us at a particular moment in time.

So, perhaps "perspectives" are better than "facts". Different stories all deserve to be heard. But herein lies challenge. How do we include all voices? Consensus needs to be reached, and for this we use variety of academic sources to construct representation of past. This is what this research project is about.

Now, connecting the three concepts, we can say that both history and heritage are necessary for transformation. We need to know as much as possible about the past, to decide what to cherish, to be able to evaluate the present, to get to a better future.

This brings me to my final point, Stellenbosch University's specific role in this project.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is currently being formulated between the three main participants: Imbadu Ma-Afrika Development Consortium, Stellenbosch University and Solms-Delta. The MOU will be specifically about this Khayamandi Oral History Research Project, which is envisaged to be Phase 1 of a larger initiative, the Khayamandi Heritage Research Project.

In this Oral History Research Project, it is envisaged that the University will be coordinating the research. Our Department of History will play the key role, specifically Mr Chet Fransch, a permanent staff member. Also involved, is our Division of Community Interaction, which is currently being rebranded as the Division for Social Impact.

The idea is to take existing sources – mainly a master's thesis that was done within the Department of History in 2011, and one that dates from much earlier – and to build on that. One step will be to do additional archival research.

Another step will be oral histories to be gathered from the community. Interviews will be conducted by fieldworkers from Kayamandi, with training provided by our Department of History.

A competition is also being planned for high school learners to write up mini biographies of particular persons – and the University Museum will be involved in showcasing the learners' work.

These three inputs – the additional academic research, the fieldworker interviews and the biographies by the learners – will feed into a process of producing a manuscript for publication.

And we are here today to discuss as a community how this should unfold. We would like this to be a truly collaborative process on many levels, we want to make this work, and we want your feedback of how we can make this a meaningful process.

It is very important for the resulting publication to be academically grounded. That is what universities do.

The hope is that in this way, Kayamandi's many untold narratives – beautiful stories, sad stories, but also hopeful and celebratory stories – will emerge and contribute to a new chapter of the history not only Kayamandi, but of Stellenbosch and beyond. We are building the future here.

This is in line with the Vision of Stellenbosch University to be inclusive and to advance knowledge in the service of all stakeholders. We are taking hands with the community of Kayamandi to do this.

Thank you for everyone's involvement and assistance – and a big thank you to Imbadu for hosting this event.

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