



The Internationalist

Episode five transcript – name and face – living with the past in the present

Natasha Lokhun:

Hello, and welcome to this latest edition of The Internationalist Higher Education Matters, a podcast from the Association of Commonwealth Universities. I'm Natasha Lokhun.

Natasha Lokhun:

In this series, we're looking at the responsibility of universities to confront both the past and the present. I'm asking, who gets to learn and who gets to teach in today's society, where the legacy of empire is still an open and often painful issue? Universities are places of learning and places of transformation, and have a critical role to play in creating open and fairer societies. But they also reflect the world in which they operate and they can even reinforce inequalities.

Crowd:

Take it down, take it down, take it down.

Speaker 3:

In the world-famous university city of Oxford, anger at this statue has rekindled.

Crowd:

Rhodes must fall, Rhodes must fall, Rhodes must fall.

Natasha Lokhun:

2020 has seen an upsurge in calls for symbols of colonialism to be removed. There have been protests at the University of Oxford against the statue of Cecil Rhodes, and these are a continuation of protests that began at the University of Cape Town, where the statue of Rhodes was removed five years ago. Universities across the world are reflecting on what the physical environment of their campuses, the statues, the building names, actually mean in today's world. We're talking about name and face, living with the past in the present.

Natasha Lokhun:

I'm delighted to be joined by Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Welcome Gethi, and thank you for joining us.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

Thank you very much, Natasha.

Natasha Lokhun:

And Dr. Vagishwari, Professor in the Department of International Studies, Political Science and History at Christ University in India. Hello to you, Vagishwari.

Dr Vagishwari:

Hello Natasha. Thank you very much for having me. Thank you.

Natasha Lokhun:

Vagishwari, I'm going to come to you first to draw on your background and your academic discipline as a historian.

Dr Vagishwari:

Yeah.

Natasha Lokhun:

To ask why do you think that the statues and building names really matter?

Dr Vagishwari:

Let me look at the whole issue from the context of what exactly a statue means for a community or for a society. Now, one of the very important points to keep in mind is that statues and architecture, buildings and statues, are the most visible symbols, most tangible and visible symbols of a society's identity. And they also have the power to communicate very quickly to the onlookers. They have a power to elicit response from the onlooker, and hence it becomes very easy for state, for powers, for authorities, or even for patrons, to constantly opt for statues and buildings to communicate, to represent their identity, rather than maybe a soft art like painting, or maybe literally a written text, which do not elicit the same kind of responses from a reader or from an onlooker.

Dr Vagishwari:

So by that yardstick, even the most uninitiated and the most unread, or somebody who is unaware of the historicity or the evolution of identities of a nation or a society, also responds to a statue or an architecture. So it's very, very crucial to have these. And that is why patrons prefer buildings, prefer statues, rather than commissioning a piece of art or a piece of music to be composed.

Natasha Lokhun:

So at the University of Cape Town, a hall that was named after a white colonial politician was recently renamed in honor of Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was enslaved in the 19th century and was taken to Europe and exhibited as a circus curiosity. Gethi, reflecting on what Vagishwari just said about the importance of things like statutes and names, why was this so important?

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

Well, it was important because our choice of symbols are a part of the work of the university in shaping future leaders. So the symbols we choose, the names we choose are part of that agenda of us shaping future leaders. So if we leave the colonial names as they are, we are communicating something, not only to our students, but to whoever comes to our campus. We are communicating what we value, we're communicating what we are proud of. We communicate the kind of leaders that we want our students to emulate.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

And so changing the name of Great Hall to Sarah Baartman was a way to recognize our other legacy, our other people who occupied this land, who owned it and it was taken from them. So it's a way of recognizing, but also saying, this is what we value as well. That's why symbols matter for that reason.

Dr Vagishwari:

It can be very powerful changing the name of a building or changing the name of a street. It does send a very powerful message across in terms of what are the desirable priorities, what are the desirable parameters that the society has in mind? So changing the name of any structure of an airport, of a street, or removal of a statue and replacing it with something else, all of these are indicative of the changed priorities of the society and the change thought processes of the society. However, is that right or not right, is what the historians have to look into.

Natasha Lokhun:

Would you like to elaborate more on this question of, is it right or is it not right?

Dr Vagishwari:

These kinds of changes are required. Otherwise we stagnate. Otherwise we don't move forward. So these changes are very important, but then, as a historian, I'm looking at the idea of, are we bringing these changes by erasing our past? Are we bringing or rooting these changes on the foundations of a past that we do not want to remember, that we do not want to recall? Are we trying to completely denude the past and bring us a change overhead so that our future generations do not remember from what part of the past we come from? We are what we are because of what we were.

Dr Vagishwari:

So I would very strongly argue that retain the past, but build a parallel narrative to it, so that we get a very clear idea. Our present generation and our future generation gets to know the two dimensions or multiple dimensions of the issues that exist. Otherwise, what happens? We are going to build a unilateral kind of a narrative.

Natasha Lokhun:

Gethi, if I can ask you your thoughts on this idea of whether renaming, removing statues, is that erasing the past?

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

I don't think it's erasing the past. I think there's different ways you can do this. The act of renaming offers an opportunity to think deeply about what the university represents at a particular time in history. We look at our history... Of course, society's changing, the country's changing, so we pause and we ask ourselves, "What do we represent? And how can we reinforce the values that we uphold through the naming or renaming process?"

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

So it's a moment of reflection. So it is not trivial. In fact, the history continues because the story about the renaming of Jameson Hall to Sarah Baartman is part of the history. And so there'll be questions about, so why was it changed? And let me say this about the statues. I mean, the statue of Rhodes was removed on our campus in 2015, but just next to the university, there's the Rhodes Memorial, and the Rhodes Memorial has got a Rhodes statue. It's not part of the university property, but it's just next door.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

When I took office, we launched the Mandela School of Public Policy and Governance, and we named it the Mandela School and we decided that we want to put up a building and build a Mandela Center of Memory. And our view was that we just had a moment where the statue of Rhodes was removed. And my view is that, it's not always that you've got to remove the statue. My view is that the statue was removed because in fact, when the country changed, the symbols were not considered and they were not dealt with. So you remove a statue, it's a moment of anger, but if you didn't wait for a moment of anger, you could have done something else with that space.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

So then we thought we want to build the Mandela Center of Memory alongside the Rhodes Memorial. And I said to colleagues, "We've got to do that now, before we have anger rising to say, 'That statue, even if it's not on my campus, let it go down.' Rather, let's make another legacy rise."

Natasha Lokhun:

So really this is a question about... It is about history, isn't it? It's about acknowledging history and acknowledging the painful aspects of it, as well as the aspects, as you've said, that we're proud of. And I think this example of the Mandela Center, it's interesting to think about different ways to do that. So how do we acknowledge this history. And this idea of a discussion it's fascinating. The fact that there's a dialogue between the symbols themselves, if you have them side by side, but having that can then prompt an actual sort of dialogue, a verbal dialogue between people within communities.

Natasha Lokhun:

Vagishwari, do you have thoughts on alternative ways, I guess, to memorialize the past, both the good and the bad aspects?

Dr Vagishwari:

No, I would say, if we were to look at memorializing the past, the past has done that immensely and much more. For instance, it could be the statue of Cecil Rhodes, or it could be any statue. When patrons put up statues, it is based on their understanding of the prevailing ideas. It could be ideas and ideologies.

Dr Vagishwari:

So over a century later, we are looking at our past and we are problematizing our past based on how far we have gone ahead in our future. So what was perhaps considered as a legitimate concern of, let us say, white man's burden of European colonization, is no longer an accepted understanding of it in the post-colonial period. So I would accept with what professor was telling, that we cannot erase our past, but we can bring in a parallel understanding by bringing in, for instance, they have both the Mandela Center, as well as Rhodes.

Dr Vagishwari:

So my major departure is when statues are brought down, discarded, and on the same pedestal, a new statute comes up. So the moment that gets done, a very rich part of our past gets away from the memories of collective memories of our present and future generations. So that is where I have a very big problem.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

Here's the thing, Natasha. So we can talk about memorializing the past, or we can talk about rejecting the past. And in this case with the two legacies standing side by side, we are saying, "Well, we cannot wish our past away. It's here. We cannot wish it away." We don't want to lie about it or pretend it didn't happen, like Vagishwari's saying. But we want to raise another past.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

But the other way of doing it is actually, you can do a symbolic rejection of the past. For example, we've been working on our Vision 2030 as a university. We're taking it to Senate tomorrow actually, and we hope Council approves it by the end of the year. And one of the things that we're doing in our vision document is to spell Africa with the word K as a symbolic rejection of colonial usurpation of African agency.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

So rather than writing paragraphs and paragraphs and paragraphs of stating our rejection of colonial usurpation, we're symbolizing it by using the letter K to spell Africa. Because we say through our Vision 2030, we want to reclaim African identity and African agency.

Natasha Lokhun:

You've touched on something that I did want to explore, which is, I guess, what the role of universities is specifically in this conversation. That's a great example there where through its strategic plan, UCT is really signaling this change. And it's a way to do that. I mean, I'll ask you both, but Vagishwari, I'll come to you first. How should universities be getting involved in this discourse?

Dr Vagishwari:

Now, my very, very, very strong thinking about this is the generation that brings this change is aware. It's literally standing on the precipice of knowing where we were from and how we are going to respond. But then if we do not retain this transition from the past, which wasn't very problematic for us, and our opposition to it, if we do not build a discourse in university spaces about both of the changes, then our future generation will be recipients of only the change, but not the context in which the change came from, and may not be aware. We are talking about 50 years down the line, or maybe a century down the lane when the whole understanding of where exactly the change is coming from, and why were we protesting? That part gets lost out.

Dr Vagishwari:

So universities have to keep these two dimensions of the inheritance and the response to the inheritance. Both of these must be kept a part of the university curriculum, university engagement. It should be made a part of a lot of themes that the university will be bringing in through conferences, through seminars, somewhere it should be kept alive, the reasons as to why the changes came about. And the theoretical construct into which the argument was being brought in.

Dr Vagishwari:

That should be made a part of the university curriculum. Only then the next generation will realize why these changes were brought in and how was the society responding to their past. So if universities do not retain this or bring in these kinds of exchanges, then a very rich part of our present responses is completely lost out. We need that.

Natasha Lokhun:

So it's this idea then, that the universities is like a guardian. It's a kind of a guardian of the symbols and the legacy, and an understanding of how we've arrived at changes in symbols and that history. I want to pick up on this point about-

Dr Vagishwari:

I...

Natasha Lokhun:

Go on, please.

Dr Vagishwari:

Yeah. I wouldn't call university as being just a guardian, but I would say university should facilitate a space for such discourses and such transporting of knowledges to be kept alive.

Natasha Lokhun:

I was going to say that I wanted to pick up on this point, because I think when we talk about these idea of spaces, and, I guess, epistemology is this idea of knowledge systems. Actually, what we're talking about, I guess, within that is students. And the fact that it's about the way that students are interacting. It's more than interacting with it. It's how universities, I guess, are enabling students to think critically about these issues and to have these discussions. Gethi, would you agree? Is that right? Is it more than that?

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

I'm not a historian. I find history very interesting because history actually, it's not innocent. We shape it. We make it. So actually the very act of activism against the symbols we are not proud of is the making of history. And it transforms, it builds on this that Vagishwari doesn't want us to forget.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

Now, for me, the role of the university... First of all, I think the university should have been much more proactive about symbols way before students started saying they must go down. We are places of ideas. These debates come up, but we are not always as proactive to do something. Now, we were not, and the statue came down at a moment of activism. Now the statue of Rhodes is down. So what? The students, on the other hand, the students who led the Rhodes Must Fall and the Fees Must Fall challenged us and said, "We want to start a scholarship, a scholarship on fallism, the activism of fallism and so on."

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

So I said to colleagues, "We've got to think creatively about this moment in the life of the university and the country, and in many ways, higher education in the world." And so we are planning, we are working on a bigger project. We've already approved the scholarship. We're thinking creatively about how we draw on the statue of Rhodes. We don't want it to be somewhat in the dark. In a way we're doing what Vagishwari is saying, because when you recognize that moment, not only the moment

of Rhodes taking the land, but the moment of Rhodes falling, and then some meaning arising from that, what do you build? What do you build from there?

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

And my view is that we can do something very powerful. And I think as places of ideas, it is our role as universities to be creative and think of these opportunities. How do you preserve history, how do you preserve legacies? How do you build on them? How do you create something more powerful out of them rather than stop at the moment of anger?

Natasha Lokhun:

As you say, this isn't the end. It's a milestone in a journey that continues. Vagishwari, you spoke about the fact that in India, whole cities have changed names. It's one example of the kind of change that's come about. Could you comment on what you think the consequences have been in subsequent actions and whether you've seen this trajectory of these moments that happen, and then the change that follows as a result?

Dr Vagishwari:

Most of our cities, for instance, in India, their names were anglicized quite a lot. If one looks at Bengaluru, the colloquial name is Bengaluru, but then it was anglicized into Bangalore. The same thing with Kolkata, it was renamed as Calcutta by the British colonial administration. So there are a lot of such transformations that happened.

Dr Vagishwari:

And almost for, I would say, the first four or five decades of being free from colonial control, and other post-colonial period, we were not very deeply worried about reclaiming our lost past, literally. So the trend of renaming began almost from around '90s, approximately. So for instance, Bombay was renamed Mumbai. Then very recently, Bangalore was renamed Bengaluru. So there is a very strong response to the colonial identities framing our thought processes. These are new ways of creating our own histories. These are new ways of reclaiming something that we were proud of and we lost out in between. So we need these kinds of activism to create and carve out specific niches for our own identities, for our own existence.

Dr Vagishwari:

My only concern is, it has come to one or the other kind of an option. We are unable to straddle both the worlds and create a discourse on that, which is what the next generation needs. Like Santayana, who says, "The generation which forgets its past, is condemned to repeat it."

Natasha Lokhun:

That brings me to my final question, which I will ask both of you. I guess we've spoken about what the symbols are, what they were, what they could be. What I'm interested in is who gets to decide that? So Vagishwari, I'll come to you first. Who do you think should be involved in those decisions now, given what we're trying to achieve?

Dr Vagishwari:

Primarily it is the academic who needs to be involved because for the simple reason that an academic is a recipient of the legacy of the past, and he's also poised enough to understand where the new changes is going to take us to. So it cannot be anybody other than an academic who has that strength of theorising, at the same time translating these theories into an understandable and comprehensible symbols, representations, in public domain.

Dr Vagishwari:

And to a certain extent, or I would say, to a very large extent, the historian, the political scientists, the philosophers are to be made a part of this whole process. They are the ones who are blessed enough and who have the strength by the virtue of training that they receive throughout their lives, that they are the ones who are able to bring in all of these exchanges onto a single platform.

Natasha Lokhun:

Gethi, your thoughts, please.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

I think it should be the university community, and the university community includes students, staff, both academic, admin, as well as alumni who actually own the university. And also members of the community who haven't studied, but are in the land that university is occupying. Because we occupy the university now, but the land where the university stands has got history. The people who own the land, most of them can't even access the university. So this is in a small way, a way to say this university is in the community, it belongs to the community, as much as the community is in the university. The way to bring the two together to actually strengthen the reconciliation is to bring the community together.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

So we have a naming of buildings committee that includes all these different constituencies. That is chaired by a member of council and proposals for renaming of buildings or whatever comes to that committee and they are considered. Even the renaming of Jameson Hall to Sarah Baartman wasn't trivial. It took a long time because even after the committee agree on a name, we publish that in the university community for people to send their comments, objections and whatever. They get considered. Once it's agreed, then we had to bring members of the Khoi and San community.

Mamokgethi Phakeng:

And I understand that academics might want to have sole ownership of this process because they are scholars, but doing that actually gives an impression that the university is innocent in this whole history of oppression and colonization. And the university is not innocent. The university is very much complicit. Inclusivity is part of our big agenda. Transformation and inclusivity, it's part of our big agenda, and that's why this process goes that way. And it's not easy at all, Natasha, I can tell you, even as I say this, but we've got to walk the journey. If we don't, whatever we do will not be sustainable.

Natasha Lokhun:

That was a really fascinating discussion. I think it was for me, this idea of applied history almost, that you're talking about, history not just being in books, not just being about the past, not just about looking back, but looking forward. And I was really, really struck by just how visible these symbols are and how much they tell us about a nation's identity and also what's missing, or what's been rejected as well.

Natasha Lokhun:

And I think one of the key points is this idea of a journey, that it's not as simple as rise and fall, or a name change. It's about a journey. It's about understanding that journey and how we got to where we are now, but also understanding that there's further to go in the future.

Natasha Lokhun:

I'd like to thank our guests for today. Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and Dr. Vagishwari, professor of the Department of International Studies, Political Science and History at Christ University in India. Thank you both.

Natasha Lokhun:

Our next episode is going to look at relationships between universities in the global south and the global north. What does a fairer future for international collaboration look like?

Natasha Lokhun:

I hope you found this episode of The Internationalist Higher Education Matters valuable. The Association of Commonwealth Universities is committed to highlighting issues that influence learning and teaching in our world. Please do subscribe to the series wherever you get your podcasts and like, comment, and share the program. You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Just search for the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Thank you for joining me,

Natasha Lokhun. The Producer is Lindsay Riley, Executive Producer, Richard Miron, and it's an Earshot Strategies production.