

AFRICA DAY – ENHANCING OUR ROLE IN THE ONGOING CONTINENTAL KNOWLEDGE PROJECT

Prof Vasu Reddy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Internationalisation

The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they aren't true, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story — **Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian author.**

As we commemorate Africa Day 2023, we reflect on our achievements and noble goals, while triggering new impetus for renewed energy and collective efforts to address the many challenges of our time.

Despite progress, there is still more work to be done on our continent – politically, socially, economically, culturally, and intellectually across the many domains that matter to us in the academic and knowledge project.

2023 is particularly symbolic, as 25 May commemorates sixty years since the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, the precursor to the African Union. We should not forget the critical role played by the OAU in mobilising against colonialism and apartheid. Not just continentally, but globally, this is a day to celebrate African diversity, successes, and opportunities, both for all of us on the continent as well as for those in the many African diasporas that have shaped us through our shared histories.

We highlight today, once again, that Africa is not a country. As the world's second largest and second-most populous continent after Asia, we are a vast tapestry of innumerable stories, journeys, and experiences that colour and texture our worldviews.

We at the University of the Free State are in so many ways in a fortunate position to capitalise on our location in the central heartland of our country. The diversity of our people, cultures, traditions, and our contributions to the human resource development of the country, the continent, and the globe confirm that we are not simply located in the breadbasket of South Africa.

Beyond our agricultural heritage in the Free State, as well as our contributions scientifically, we at the UFS are endowed with valuable human and intellectual resources to propel us forward with cutting-edge teaching, research, and international engagements that shape our transboundary relationships with African universities.

Vision 130, a road map to drive our aspirations, underpinned by our curiosity, human and social endeavours, also provides a strategic and enabling framework to promote, appreciate, and foster new knowledge in and from Africa.

As we embrace the opportunities to celebrate our shared heritage as Africans, as scholars in and from Africa, Africa Day 2023 should give us renewed energy to embark on the necessary transformative interventions.

What are these?

It includes strengthening our bonds as a continent; enhancing our research collaborations by providing opportunities for our scientists – emerging and established – by pushing the frontiers and boundaries of science; tapping into the rich resources for basic and curiosity-driven research; developing the capacity of our scientists; recognising and celebrating the diversity of our knowledge; exploiting the uses of technology; and finding creative ways to resolve the challenges of our time. There is, in fact, so much more at our disposal to realise the potential that is out there.

For some of us, these aspirations may seem overly ambitious. However, they direct and navigate us to be steadfast, agile, and curious to reflect our unique location, our talent, and our resolve. After all, there is no singular, final, and uniform story that presents one perspective that is repeated again and again. While we have, for example, overcome the yoke of colonialism and apartheid, a number of challenges remain: the struggle to institutionalise democratic systems, women and gender equality, xenophobia, armed conflicts, poverty and inequalities, the burden of illness and many other communicable diseases.

There is, in other words, a deeply creative opportunity for all of us as scholars, scientists, and advocates. There are prospects before us to leverage our disciplinary and transdisciplinary approach to co-create interventions, co-design knowledge and innovative technologies for research impact.

Africa Day is a day that recognises solidarity and unity, but it is also an appropriate and timely occasion to harness, mobilise, promote, and appreciate our role in the ongoing knowledge project.

If Africa is poised to capitalise on its potential, let us then, on this occasion as a university, rededicate ourselves to fruitful partnerships in pursuit of the knowledge project in and from Africa, and the sustainable progress of all the continent's people.