

TUCSIN Public Lecture – November 2008

SEVENTH PRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES¹

Formal education in Namibia: where from and where to?

The final presentation in the TUCSIN Public Lecture series on Thursday 12 November was made by Dr Joseph Diescho who flew up from South Africa. His reputation had preceded him and the Moringa Room (Kalahari Sands Hotel, Windhoek) was packed with Namibians, including Mr Bob Kandetu (Head of NBC) and Jackson Kaujera (popular liberation songwriter and artiste). There were several senior figures from The Ministry of Education there as well.

Andimba Toiva ya Toiva: Namibial role model

Dr Diescho began by dedicating his talk to a prominent Namibian, aged 84, who he felt was instrumental in bringing Namibians to their current situation: that man was Andimba Toiva ya Toiva, whom Dr Diescho described as an “unsung living ancestor”. In 1968 Mr ya Toiva faced the world and declared that he and his people should be recognised as equal to the white oppressors in South Africa. That declaration earned him 20 years in a South African prison. Diescho had recent met Advocate George Bizos, who had been ya Toiva’s lawyer at his trial. The Advocate’s advice to the 37 Namibians in Ovamboland particularly applied to Mr ya Toiva: he recommended that the activist moderate his speech or else he would receive a heavy sentence. Mr ya Toiva refused to change a single word.

Defining education

Explaining the nomenclature – the meaning of education – is not easy, Dr Diescho confessed. Ironically, we *can* identify an uneducated person: he stated that Namibia is led by uneducated people – uneducated through no fault of their own.

The starting point for this explanation was the three rubrics of education: experiential, informal, and formal. Experiential education was explained as the kind of learning which is acquired without being taught anything. Informal education actually conveys most of what we know, although no textbooks may be used: parental guidance might be considered one example of this.

Finally, there is formal education, described by Dr Diescho as “a few members of society who try to teach the rest of society how to survive, obtain food, and avoid dangerous calamities.”

Formal education began in Africa

Dr Diescho then embarked upon a whirlwind history of formal education, commencing with Egypt, 3,000 years ago. The *first* formal education system was African; so, according to Dr Diescho, it is probably no coincidence that in biblical times, subsequent

¹ Sponsored by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS, www.kas.de)

to the envy of King Herod, the Angel Gabriel appeared to recommend that Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus should decamp for Egypt.

China can lay claim to the second formal system of education two thousand years ago. The emphasis upon education has persisted in China throughout the centuries. Mao Tse Tung, for example, allegedly had achieved the highest possible mastery of Mandarin.

India produced the third formal system, followed by Greece with its great philosophers. Thereafter Buddah taught that life is in the service of God. The Israelites with Moses and the Ten Commandments might be considered to be next. Finally, Dr Diescho pondered upon Thomas Gibbons, Max Weber, and other political thinkers who subscribed to the notion of the Modern State.

Educating for Democracy

Pursuing the notion of the modern state, Dr Diescho identified the biggest problem in Africa: most African leaders cannot distinguish between a political party, the incumbent government, and the state. He referred the audience to the recent concession speech by the Republican Presidential candidate, John Mc Cain: the candidate conceded defeat with nobility and grace by advocating that now Barack Obama was now his President, too, and he urged all his Republican supporters to give Obama full support. Mc Cain had respected the will, the verdict, of the people. Dr Diescho acknowledged the significance of the U.S.A. where its citizens could appreciate the calibre of a man, thus going beyond the issue of skin colour. This, according to Dr Diescho, could not happen in Africa.

Most post-independence governments have inherited a state which was created by European oppressors and designed to subjugate the people. So education was alien in concept. Mr Toiva ya Toiva went into the mines in South Africa; when he left he stated that his intention was to teach his people what he had learned there. In Africa, Dr Diescho felt that people are still 'unfree' because 'the African mind cannot determine what is good for it'. He lamented the brain drain in Namibia, because the country does not use educated Namibians; on the contrary, it chases them away.

Tribalism and ethnicity is back, according to Dr Diescho. Generally speaking, the role of party membership is more important that what can be done to improve Namibia. Dr Diescho pointed to the huge Namibian flag behind him to make the point that "this is where allegiance should lie." Although we may quarrel and contest differences, the flag should bind Namibians together. It was Nelson Mandela who had stated, "In order for the nation to live, the tribe must die."

Tackling the Problems

Dr Diescho wondered why this country produced the worst English speakers in the SADC region. If formal education had achieved its objectives, this would not be so. If formal education had been more successful, Namibian citizens would be more pro-active about nation-building, too. Currently, however, Namibians believe that their mistakes are actually their successes. If formal education was meaningful, then the country would not be producing such 'hate-mongers'.

For formal education to effect national development, Namibians must be taught 'to love one another'. In this way a national identity will be forged. Dr Diescho cited India and its people, whose ethos involves helping one another. Unfortunately, Namibians are exclusive, preferring to shut other people out. Education, according to Dr Diescho, should serve us by inculcating an appreciation of others. John McCain was a role model for the educated approach in this regard.

Education never happens outside an ideological, socio-political context. It serves to address the ills of our society. Namibians are generally ignorant of the country's history except what has affected - and is important to - their own communities.

The system is not addressing the needs of the people. Democracy only solves the problems that arise from democracy. Education should start from the premise of conversation and dialogue. We need to know the issues that affect other people. We are quick to adopt systems from other parts of the world. Dr Diescho cited the example of calling regional leaders 'governors', a term used in the context of a federal state, which Namibia is not. He cited the example of Singapore, when the government went around the world exhorting its nationals to come back to serve the country.

The point Dr Diescho was trying to emphasise is that Namibians could achieve a success story; the country is blessed with space, freedom, democracy and a pleasant climate. He postulated several ideas by which formal education could assist the progress.

Firstly, Dr Diescho felt that reform and reconfiguration of early education was necessary. Resources needed to be pumped into teacher-training. Not enough time was spent training the teachers or management. He pointed to the model of China, where high school principals had to attend annual training courses in which they were taught ethics, morality, law and order – and love. Dr Diescho felt that there would be a benefit from recruitment of old teachers from English-speaking countries. Teachers, he stressed, needed to be role models – not people who came to class drunk or interfered with female students. He was grateful for the teachers who served him: they were moral, upstanding people. The educational process should inculcate the values of nation-building. This could be achieved in many different ways but one suggestion was to move teachers from one region to work in another, to encourage the development of relationships with others. Resources should be pumped into upgrading Namibian schools and Namibians should be taught that if one can serve then one is important.

At the end of an educational process we must feel that we have been given something of value: it must teach us to care for each other.

In conclusion, Dr Diescho returned to his dedication to Mr Toiva ya Toiva. It is our duty, he said, to live the future that Mr ya Toiva and his colleagues created. Perhaps everyone needs to forfeit a small portion of freedom for the general good.