

Address by Premier Thabang Makwetla, Premier of Mpumalanga Province, at the Mpumalanga Heritage Research Project Launch on 7 April 2005

Programmed Director,
MEC's and Members of the Provincial Legislature,
The CEO of the National Heritage Council,
Traditional Leaders and Political Leaders of the Province,
Honourable Mayors and councilors,
Our sponsors and partners,
Representatives of the private sector and community organizations,
Senior managers,
Members of the media,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

The proposal in 1994 to establish nine provinces in the new dispensation of South Africa, left many people anxious and apprehensive. Understandably so, because the previous bantustan administrations were created for the sole purpose of undermining the consolidation of unity among all South Africans.

In the early years after 1994 it seemed politically correct that we got preoccupied with the concern to keep these new entities at such a profile that will make them not to interfere with the strategy to consolidate and profile our national identity.

However, the first ten years of Freedom and democracy were important with respect to the consolidation of our nationhood. As we move further into the future as a more mature nation with higher degrees of unity, it should be increasingly apparent that our growth and dynamism as a country will be immensely served by the vibrancy of our regions. This must boost the country's profile as a country of many developed regions with varied destinations.

The two most important benefits of the new dispensation of provinces, is to bring government closer to the people as it were, and to realise the obliteration of the acute underdevelopment of South Africa's rural regions. The latter challenge demands that we must be enterprising.

In this regard, there can be no denying that each of the nine contemporary regions of South Africa possesses something peculiar and exciting about itself.

Mpumalanga, the land of the rising sun, is not short of such uniqueness.

Programme Director, in 1961 a schoolboy living on a farm near Lydenburg discovered the fragments of human like heads, which were later re-assembled by archaeologists and dated to 500 AD. "The Lydenburg heads", as these masks became renowned worldwide, were overwhelming evidence that in this region of our country there existed too, human settlements of societies that existed during the early iron age development stage of human societies.

"The Lydenburg heads" are evidently the 'tip of the iceberg' of the archaeological treasure trove that Mpumalanga is.

Most significantly, "the Lydenburg heads" are a strong rebuttal of the school of thought, which holds that white colonial settlers arrived in present day South Africa almost simultaneously with South Africa's aboriginal populace. And furthermore, that South Africa's pre-colonial societies were backward civilisations that did not possess the know-how to wrought the metals this country has, among others.

Programme Director, we are here today to launch a unique and an exciting project, the Mpumalanga Heritage Research Project, courtesy of First National Bank. Maybe I should call it the 'FNB Mpumalanga Heritage Research Project'.

The point I wish to underscore, Programme Director, is that we have been overwhelmed and humbled by the positive spirit and attitude of the business community in this province. My office would like the public to know that

government was spoilt for choice in this project, the response was phenomenal and a challenge to all other leadership sectors in the province to emulate in future endeavours.

Programme Director, comrades, we are here to commence a voyage of discovery of Mpumalanga's heritage to bring to the fore the many authentic, original and legitimate things about this region in order to brand this province effectively.

In the process of this work we hope many people will employ their intellectual faculties, to contribute to the endeavour of reconstructing the history of our people and make a humble contribution to the African Renaissance. This project I believe will produce resonance among our youth, for as they battle to conquer maths and science in their studies, they shall nonetheless remain seized with the broader challenge to reconstruct our identity as a people.

Among the challenges we hope this research will overcome is the fragmented and dislocated manner in which the story of who we are, has been largely presented over time.

Secondly, the enormous dimensions of this story must assist all of us to appreciate that however important we may think our subsidiary diverse identities are, there is a bigger picture, which must humble all of us. This project will hopefully also illustrate that part of our heritage arises from the fact that we are a people and a country that lived through colonisation, and heroically fought to build a just order. However, there are many positive things that are fused in our make-up by our colonial experience.

Another exciting dimension of Mpumalanga's heritage is her economic exploits. Viewed from the consideration that industrialisation of South Africa's economy in the second half of the 19th Century was driven by the discovery of gold and diamonds and that even before the discovery of the Johannesburg Reef goldmines, South Africa's first gold towns were in Mpumalanga.

The region always carried significant economic value for the country as a whole on top of being the traditional corridor to the outside world for South Africa's hinterland areas.

Hopefully, once the final report is tabled, more research will be sponsored in other areas of heritage that are linked to history but which lie outside the present scope and are relatively independent.

At this stage I would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Peter Delius, a historian and scholar, who has done immense research of this area over the past three decades. He and his team will pay particular attention to the issues that remain neglected in much of the available literature and to the reality of Mpumalanga as a zone of interaction and innovation.

This research by Professor Delius and his team would provide a resource for a range of initiatives, these include:

Providing a major contribution to a discussion about the issues of identity within the province. Ironically this process will play a pivotal role in the branding of Mpumalanga as it will unearth issues that will give this province a unique corporate identity.

It will make a key contribution to the identification and prioritisation of heritage sites in the province. It could play a catalytic role in the construction of historical sites that could open up new tourist routes. It would provide accurate, up-to-date and stimulating material that could be used to compile books, websites and other promotional material for tourists and travellers in the region.

The volume would also provide an important resource to educators and publishers engaged in developing course and material which can respond to the growing imperatives for the exploration of local history in schools. The volume could also provide a framework for a series of documentary films and videos about the historical and cultural riches of Mpumalanga.

The research product could also be enhanced in partnership with a commercial publisher and published as an illustrated history of the region.

In conclusion I would like to express my deepest gratitude to our two partners, namely, the First National Bank and the National Heritage Council for their unwavering support.

It is appropriate to say, without your financial and moral support, this colossal project that will put Mpumalanga on the historical and cultural map of our beloved country would not have been possible.

I THANK YOU ALL