

# **THEBE IKALAFENG**

## **SOL PLAATJE UNIVERSITY**

### **Chancellor's Investiture Address**

*Kimberley, Northern Cape, South Africa*

*24 March 2026*

***Lesedi la Afrika:  
Building on Legacy. Advancing Knowledge.  
Securing the Future.***

#### **Protocol and Welcome**

The Premier of the Northern Cape, Dr Zamani Saul, your presence here today affirms that we can count on your this province as the birthplace of this national institution and the springboard of our ambition. We are grateful to you as the leader of the naming committee that gave expression to the people's demand for name that embodies gives this institution a lofty identity.

The Executive Mayor of the Sol Plaatje Local Municipality, Honourable Martha Bartlett and Speaker Dipuo Peters of the municipality that shares the name of the great man whose spirit animates this very ceremony. There is poetry in that coincidence, and a covenant in it too.

The Chairperson of the SPU Council, Professor Randall Carolissen and the Council of Sol Plaatje University - thank you for your unparalleled leadership, your belief in me and responsibility and stewardship of this institution.

The Deputy Chairperson of Council, Mr Boitumelo Cox Mokgoro, you have known me for over fifty years. You were one who first bet on me, and asked me: Do not ask what Kimberley can do for you. Ask what you can do for Kimberley.

I heard you. I am here today because of your urging.

Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor Debra Meyer, I am honoured to serve alongside you as you too start your tenure through to its next decade.

To our distinguished gathering of Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors and from across South Africa and our continent, welcome to the city where the modern world was, in many ways, first mined into being.

Ambassador Barbara Masekela. Your presence here today is a pan-African statement in itself.

I'm humbled and honoured to be joined today by many of the people I deeply admire, the Chancellors of our foremost institutions:

Dr Judy Dlamini, Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand; Professor Bonang Mohale, Chancellor of the University of the Free State; Ambassador Teballo Seretse, Chancellor of the University of Botswana; Professor Sheila Tlou, Chancellor of the Botswana Open University; Professor Brian Figaji, Chancellor of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology; Dr Thabane Vincent Maphai, Chancellor of the Central University of Technology; Dr Penny Moumakwa, Chancellor of Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University; Mr Vincent Zwelibanzi Mntambo, Chancellor of the Vaal University of Technology; and the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Affairs) Professor Ellen Ndeshi Namhilla of the University of Namibia, represented here today.

*Vice-Chancellors:* Professor Puleng LenkaBula, Vice-Chancellor of UNISA; Professor Letlhokwa, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Johannesburg; Professor Norris, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Botswana; Professor Tinyiko Maluleke, Vice-Chancellor of TUT; and Professor Yunus Ballim, this university's own founding inaugural Vice-Chancellor, who helped lay the very foundation on which this day stands.

Members of the SPU Council, Senate, the SRC, the staff of this university: You are the everyday architects of the miracle that is Sol Plaatje University.

The family of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje who are here with us today under the leadership of Dr William Steenkamp, Dr Sebeka Plaatje and Gopolang Spencer Plaatje, and the Trustees of the Solomon Plaatje Museum - your ancestor gave us the values and ethos we must strive for, for a better society and a better Africa.

Former Premier Manne Dipico as early as 1996 tirelessly championed the establishment of this university, understood before many others that the Northern Cape deserved its own institution of higher learning, and his advocacy laid the political foundation for what stands before us today.

My family have always been my first champions. My 83-year-old mother, Gaolebalwe Mirriam, whom you have just met: the living bridge between my grandparents' home and this stage. My sister Dr Keromamang Ikalafeng and Galebotse. My brother Montshiwa. My nephews Tshiamo, Reba, Motheo, Thando and Pinagare. My remaining uncle, Simon Ikalafeng. And the extended Ikalafeng and Mpuang family in Kimberley and Botswana - thank you for your love, your patience, and your pride.

**Whatever I carry today, I carry because you first carried me.**

Friends, family, associates and partners from across our continent - from Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Benin, Kenya, Burundi, eSwatini, DRC, Ethiopia, Namibia, Ivory Coast, Uganda, and beyond; your presence here today is itself a statement: that what we are building at Sol Plaatje University is not a local affair. It is an African one.

To every high school learner in this hall today, you are not a guest at someone else's future. You are its authors. Welcome home.

Distinguished guests, families, friends, and above all — graduates, scholars, and the people of Kimberley and the Northern Cape:

**Dumelang.**

Today is a day of double significance. It marks exactly 200 days to the 150th anniversary of the birth of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje who was born on 9 October 1876. That this investiture falls on this date is not mere coincidence, but a reminder that we are not simply administrators of an institution. We are the custodians of a legacy, trustees of a centennial, and architects of what the next 150 years of his vision will look like in practice.

I grew up here. I walked these streets - kilometres of them - before the idea of a university in this city was anything more than a dream. And as a child growing up in Galeshewe, the dream of becoming a Chancellor was never written into any horizon the system held out for me.

But standing here today, I am reminded that the most powerful act of transformation is not to wait for permission, but to return and build.

This is not simply an investiture of a person. It is the investiture of an idea: that Kimberley - this city of diamonds and dust, of struggle and spirit - is not merely a chapter in history but the author of its own future. And can once again be the author of Africa's destiny.

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje understood this. A man who, without a university degree, mastered seven languages, wrote the first full length English novel by a Black South African, *Mohudi*, written 1920 and published 1930, first African to translate Shakespeare into an African language; founded newspapers that gave voice to the voiceless, and walked to the corridors of empire not to beg, but to demand justice. His methods were words. His weapons were ideas. His legacy is this institution.

***"The viewpoint of the ruler is not always the viewpoint of the ruled," Sol T. Plaatje, *Mhudi****

Today, we do not merely honour the legacy of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje. If he were here, he probably say about himself:

**Ke mmina Tshipi fa go le tlala  
Fa go le kgora ke bina Tholo  
Tholo e e thupana thekeng  
E e reng go utlwa lengola e tlole  
Go bona lerole e tlolele godimo  
Tholo e e sa latelweng ka motlhala  
E e bonwang ka bojang go thethekela  
Ke wa marara a Noto,  
Tshipi e ntsho  
Tshipi e ntsho a Morolong  
Ntsha sehuba Morolong,  
Go tle go bonagale  
kwa o tswang gone ka tlhago.**

Today we deepen it, institutionalise it, and deploy it in the service of a new generation.

# ***Building on Legacy. Advancing Knowledge. Securing the Future.***

## **1. Sol Plaatje: Mining the Legacy**

Sol Plaatje is not as a name above a gate. Not as a portrait on a wall. But as a living intellectual and moral force whose values must shape everything we do, teach, research, and stand for.

***Today, we begin the intentional alignment between Sol Plaatje University and the Sol Plaatje Museum – which I will work to ensure is formalised into a partnership and scholarly covenant between heritage and higher education. This is not symbolic. It is strategic. The museum is not a resting place for the past; it is a laboratory for the future.***

Today, we unveiled the commissioned portrait of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje; a work produced through a collaboration that is itself a statement about who we are. Celebrated photographer Trevor Stuurman who is Kimberley-born, raised in this city, and a Time Magazine Next Generation laureate, worked alongside Dr Lesley Mofokeng, whose ancestral roots run through Kimberley and who earned his doctorate on Plaatje's writings, and award-winning visual artist Mark Modimola to create this work.

Three artists. Three disciplines. One city. One soul restored to institutional memory.

This portrait will hang not merely as decoration. It will hang as a permanent question to every person who passes beneath it: what would Sol Plaatje say about what we are doing here today?

And today, I take possession – albeit temporary - of the Chancellor's ceremonial gown of Sol Plaatje University – specially reimagined by Thebe Magugu, Kimberley-born, Africa's first LVMH Prize winner, and one of global fashion's most celebrated voices. Thebe did not leave Kimberley behind when the world came calling. He took Kimberley with him, and now he has brought it back, woven into every fold of this gown. It is both a tribute to global African brilliance and a celebration of our academic tradition.

The gown is inspired by the writings of Sol Plaatje, by the visual language of Solomon Plaatje's legacy, by the cultural richness of this province. It is not a European academic costume. It is distinctly, unapologetically, proudly ours.

Every element of this investiture is intentional. This is a ceremony where this city does not merely host the occasion, but authors it.

***"Our people may pride themselves on the fact that their black muscles are the pillar and main-stay of one of the mightiest commercial corporations in the world," Sol T. Plaatje, Koranta ea Becoana, 1903***

When Plaatje wrote that about the mines that were started in this region, he was describing labour. I am invoking it differently today. The muscle of this city; the intellectual muscle, the creative muscle, the moral muscle, has built things of global significance before. And it will again.

## 2. Reclaiming Kimberley as the Centre of Mining Excellence

Historically, Kimberley has been the place of mining leadership. No less than the University of Wits started as the School of Mining right in the cusp of these mines at the height of the diamond rush, to support a rapidly expanding mining industry.

And Kimberley was left without the excellence it inspired and conceived.

SPU can be that place of thought leadership, scholarship, and institutional courage that rebuilds that leadership.

In the 2026 State of the Nation Address, President Ramaphosa described mining as a "sunrise industry." South Africa holds ore reserves valued at over R40 trillion. The Northern Cape sits atop one of the most significant mineral landscapes on the continent: iron ore, manganese, copper, zinc, rare earth elements — materials central to the global green economy, to batteries, to the digital infrastructure of the 21st century.

The Industrial Development Corporation has already approved more than R300 million for the Frontier Rare Earths Project in this province. The Northern Cape is not being positioned as a legacy mining zone. It is being positioned as a future-facing mineral powerhouse.

And yet — there is no place of mining excellence in this city. In this province. The talent pipeline drains north. The value addition happens elsewhere. The intellectual infrastructure for the next phase of mining - beneficiation, geology, mineral economics, environmental science, sustainable resource management - is not anchored here, where it most belongs.

Sol Plaatje University, in partnership with Wits University's School of Mining Engineering, has already begun to change this. The Centre for Mining Beneficiation, under the leadership of Debra Meyer, and our growing collaboration in mining related science and research, are the seeds of something much larger.

During my tenure as Chancellor, I commit to working towards the re-establishment of this province through this university as the center of mining excellence — not to replicate what others have built, but to reclaim what was always ours, and to build it for the mining challenges of the next century: beneficiation, just transition, environmental stewardship, and the conversion of mineral wealth into human development.

***"We have dug for Englishmen diamonds and gold which have enriched South Africa. We built the railway lines; and it is very painful that our work of many great years can be wiped away while we wait for gratitude," Sol T. Plaatje, Tsala ea Bacoana, 1911***

Plaatje understood the injustice of extraction without benefit. We now have the tools, the mandate, and the moment to ensure that the next chapter of mining in the Northern Cape is written differently, with the Northern Cape's own people as engineers, economists, scientists, and owners of the intellectual infrastructure.

We must transition from thinking of mining as the physical diamonds, and begin to mine the minds and talent that this province has always produced in abundance. That is the deeper revolution. That is the school I am committed to building.

### **3. Sustainability – Universities as Anchors, Partnerships as Pathways**

Sustainability is the most urgent need for today and beyond.

Sol Plaatje University already contributes 34% of Kimberley's GDP. We are not an institution at the margin of this city's economy. We are at its centre. We are an anchor institution -- not in name, but in fact.

And it is worth pausing to remember how this university came to be, because it is unlike almost any other in the world. This institution was not born of government decree alone. It was born of civil demand. The people of this city and this province marched for it. They demanded it. As I said in my introduction, former Premier Manne Dipico tirelessly championed its establishment, understanding long before others that the Northern Cape deserved to anchor its own intellectual future. And Premier Dr Zamani Saul, who chaired the naming committee, fought for this university to be named not merely after a destination - the Northern Cape - but after a person – and one of our own: Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje. That distinction matters. A destination tells you where you are. A person tells you who you must become.

The scholarship on anchor institutions is clear: universities that embrace their place-based mandate, that leverage their human, physical, and intellectual resources for the communities around them, create mutual transformation. The university improves the city. The city enriches the university. Neither can fully flourish in isolation.

SPU's Strategic Plan for 2025–2029 embeds this understanding. The vision is not just of a university that produces graduates. It is of a university that is critically engaged in learning, research, and development while enhancing democratic practice and social justice in society. That is a vision of sustainability in the deepest sense.

But sustainability requires partnerships. And partnerships require courage -- the courage to show up fully, to co-invest, to co-design.

#### ***Four Compacts for a New Partnership***

Earlier this month I spoke at the inaugural Association of Universities Convocations. I repeat and deepen the compacts I offered at that occasion:

First: Every partner, every industry, every government agency that benefits from the talent SPU produces must establish genuine advisory relationships, not to govern, but to keep our programmes connected to the economy, the environment, and the society our graduates will enter and shape.

Second: Work-integrated learning must become standard, not optional. The Northern Cape's mining houses, its agricultural enterprises, its energy projects, its public institutions, must open their doors as sites of learning. An equipped graduate is not charity. It is a return on investment in the future of this province.

Third: I am calling on industry and government to co-fund research chairs, support the Centre for Alternative and Sustainable Energy, and invest in the School of Mining. The IDC has already shown what is possible. We need more partners willing to make the same bet on Kimberley.

Fourth: The skills and funding ecosystem must be reformed to include small enterprises, co-operatives, and informal sector actors who constitute the real economic fabric of the Northern Cape. If our programmes only serve the formally employed, we are failing the majority.

### ***Pan-African and Global Alignment***

Africa holds approximately 30% of the world's known critical mineral reserves. But for too long, our continent has been the quarry for others' prosperity. The global green economy -- solar panels, batteries, electric vehicles, digital infrastructure -- runs on African minerals, extracted on African terms that rarely benefit African people.

SPU, through its research in arid region studies, desert science, just energy transition, and heritage, is positioned to engage this challenge not as a bystander but as an intellectual leader. Our partnerships with universities on the continent, and our alignment with Africa Vision 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, are not administrative compliance.

**They are a moral commitment to ensuring that African knowledge produces African benefit, on African terms.**

The convocation I addressed on 7 March spoke of intellectual sovereignty. I repeat it here: they may claim our cobalt and our manganese. They are not entitled to our minds — unless we surrender them through neglect. The founding purpose of this university is to ensure that we do not.

***"Righteousness exalteth a nation. The foundation of righteousness is justice, and justice seeketh not its own, and protects the weak." — Sol T. Plaatje, Tsala ea Batho, 1913***

### **The Covenant I Make Today**

This journey did not begin this morning. It began yesterday, as it must for anyone who understands what we in Africa call *sankofa* -- the Ghanaian imperative to reach back in order to move forward. In Setswana, we call it *go ikgata metlhala* -- to follow in your own footsteps, to honour the path that made you.

Yesterday, I began with a time-honoured African tradition of gratitude to our ancestors. I laid a wreath at the grave of my grandparents -- Mediole and Dikalabua Ikalafeng, who gave this world my mother, Gaolebalwe, 83 years ago. I was joined by the leadership of Solomon Plaatje's family and the University to pay our respects at the grave of Solomon Plaatje at West End Cemetery, and slaughtered to the ancestors -- because no elevation is complete without first bowing to those who laid the ground beneath your feet.

This morning, the investiture procession began at my grandparents' home -- the house where I was born and raised until I was eighteen and a half years old. Then to

St. Boniface School, where I spent every single year of my schooling, and concluded my high school journey under the leadership of Brother D.D. Madden -- who is 93 years old, and who is with us in this hall today.

**Brother Madden: You shaped the boy. I hope the man honours your investment.**

From there, the procession moved to the Solomon Plaatje Museum -- Plaatje's final home until his death in 1935 -- and then through the streets of Kimberley in a 500-metre public procession to this Great Hall. In arguably a first for South African higher education, the formal academic procession did not begin on a campus. It began in a township home. That is not a sequence of locations. It is a statement of continuity: from the ancestor who built the intellectual foundation, through the community that raised me, through the school that formed me, into the institution we are building together.

***Sankofa. Go ikgata metlhala. Ukuzilanda.***

You cannot know where you are going until you have truly reckoned with where you have come from. That's why the Ethiopians say, 'I am because you were.'

That spirit of return is also embodied in a remarkable tribute that has accompanied this investiture. Soweto-born cyclist Tebogo Galagala completed a symbolic 480km solo ride retracing a historic route linked to Plaatje's final journey to Kimberley. The journey began on Friday, 20 March 2026, when Tebogo and I met the archival team custodians of Plaatje's historic passport -- issued by the Canadian government in 1921, after the colonial-era South African government refused to do so. That passport is a testament to Plaatje's global reach: to a thought leadership that crossed oceans, moved governments, and demanded to be heard on the world's stage. Today, Tebogo completed that journey here at the Sol Plaatje, delivering the symbolic return of the passport to its home. It is a reminder that Plaatje's intellectual legacy was never local. It was always international. And it is our responsibility -- through this university, through our global partnerships -- to carry that legacy forward, and to internationalise it for the generations that follow.

I stand before you in a gown designed by Kimberley's own. Beneath the portrait commissioned through Kimberley's own scholarship. On a stage anchored by this university, built in the name of one of Kimberley's greatest sons.

**The talent of this city surrounds me. And so does its unfinished business.**

To the Premier, Dr Zamani Saul, this university is the province's greatest intellectual asset. The partnership between SPU and the provincial government must deepen, must be sustained, and must be funded with the same commitment that you bring to the Northern Cape's economic future.

To the Executive Mayor, Honourable Martha Bartlett -- the Sol Plaatje Municipality and Sol Plaatje University share more than a name. We share a responsibility. I commit to working with your administration to make the covenant between town and gown real, visible, and lasting.

To Chairman Randall Carolissen and Deputy Chairman Cox Mokgoro, and the Council at large -- I am grateful for the trust you have placed in me. Cox, you have

known me for close to fifty years. You were among the first to say: do not ask what Kimberley can do for you — ask what you can do for Kimberley. You encouraged me to put up my hand, not to claim a title, but to take up a calling. I heard you then. I honour that today. You elected me not to occupy a chair, but to carry a charge. I carry it willingly.

To Vice-Chancellor Debra Meyer and the entire academic and professional community of SPU -- my role is to amplify what you have built, to open doors, to attract partners, to advocate loudly, and to protect the institution's integrity and ambition. You lead the university. I pledge to support that leadership with everything I have.

To every learner from every high school represented in this hall today: I see you. I was you. The university is not a place apart from your world. It is the place your world becomes possible. Come. We are building it for you.

During my tenure, I will work towards three enduring contributions:

One: The deepening of Sol Plaatje's values and ethos into the DNA of this institution not just in words but in deeds; and reflect is not just through portraits and ceremonial costumes, but through every academic programme that carries his name with the weight it deserves.

Two: the reclamation of Kimberley as the intellectual and institutional home of mining excellence in South Africa -- and work towards ultimately laying the foundation to re-establish a School of Mining, build the foundation school which through our partnership with Wits, through the Centre for Mining Beneficiation, and through a curriculum that serves the province's mineral future and the continent's just transition.

Three: the growth of SPU's impact as an anchor institution — not just 34% of GDP today, but a deeper, wider, more transformative presence in the social, economic, cultural, and educational life of this city and this province.

***"No country in any age has prospered by oppression or suppression of any people within its borders. Emancipation is the theme and practice of all civilised peoples," Sol T. Plaatje, Tsala ea Batho, 1913***

Sol Plaatje did not wait for emancipation to be granted. He wrote it into existence. He published it. He argued it. He walked it.

We inherit that tradition. We inherit the responsibility to do the same — not through protest, but through production. Not through grievance, but through excellence. Not through waiting, but through building.

***The first revolution in Kimberley was built on physical diamonds. The next revolution will be built on the one resource that does not deplete with use — the human mind.***

I do not ask what Kimberley can do for me. I do not ask what this university can give me. I stand here today, before you all -- before the graduates and the learners and the leaders and the ordinary and extraordinary people of this city -- and I ask only: what can I do, through this institution, for South Africa, for Africa, and for the world?

The answer begins now. Here. With all of you.

I pledge to earn this.

I understand and accept this much. This role is a relay marathon. And we are privileged in this institution not only to bear the name of a great African, but to have been shaped by giants from the very beginning.

***The late Justice Yvonne Mokgoro – founding Chairperson of this Council, one of South Africa's most luminous legal minds, and a daughter of this soil – gave this university its earliest governance with wisdom, dignity and moral authority. We also remember her and honour her memory today. And working with his children represented here by Ithateng Mokgoro, in my tenure will ensure that legacy is entrenched and institutionalized here to carry forward and deepen her legacy as a living force -- shaping law, ethics, and society through the lens of ubuntu, justice, and human dignity.***

And I receive this baton as Chancellor from one of Africa's greatest sons: the esteemed Justice Steven Majiedt, who led this institution as its inaugural Chancellor with distinction, honour, and an unwavering commitment that has set the standard for all who follow. Justice Majiedt -- I thank you. Kimberley thanks you. This university thanks you.

## **This University Belongs to You**

But I want to speak a final word -- not to the University, not to industry, not to government.

I want to speak to the people of Kimberley – to the Northern Cape.

To the residents of Galeshewe and Roodepan, of Floors and Greenpoint. To the taxi driver, the street vendor, the domestic worker, the small business owner -- to every person in this city who has watched this institution rise from the ground and wondered whether it was built for them.

### **It was. It is.**

Remember how this university came to be. It was not handed down. It was demanded. You marched for it. You called for it. You named it. Citizens of this city stood up and said: *we deserve this*. That act of civic courage is the founding character of this place -- and it must remain alive in everything we do.

In getting to today – I reached out to friends and colleagues to bring them along on this journey:

- My former high school classmate, Nelson Mosiapo and the Mosiapo Family Trust raised their hands to support the upkeep of the Sol Plaatje Museum;
- Nelson mobilized his partners at Vermeulen Galeshewe and Pro Plants to give this historic place a lift;

- King Price, facilitated by another old school friend, Robert Malunga said we'll contribute to getting the busses that will bring the pupils from the 21 schools in Kimberley to bring them to this occasion, and
- My sister, someone we grew up admiring, Innocentia Khunou raised her hand and said whenever you're in Kimberley, I'll be your hands and sight.

I'm eternally grateful.

Sol Plaatje University is not a monument to be admired from a distance, gleaming on the landscape of Kimberley while the city around it struggles. It must be a catalyst — with you, and through you. Your development is not a byproduct of this institution's success. It is the measure of it.

So I am asking you to hold us accountable. Come to this campus. Ask hard questions. Expect to see yourselves in our programmes, our research, our leadership. Expect your children to see their futures made possible here -- not somewhere else, not for someone else. If this university is not reaching into your street, your school, your home -- tell us. Challenge us. That is not interference. That is ownership.

**And this university belongs to you.**

We will not always get it right. I promise you this: the door is open, the intention is real, and the standard by which we measure our success will always include one question:

*Is Northern and Africa better because we are here?*

The answer must always be yes. And we will earn it -- together. And we must be the light from Africa that shines our excellence.

***Ke a leboga. Ngiyabonga. Enkosi. Baie dankie. Thank you.***

*Sol Plaatje University — Kimberley, Northern Cape — 24 March 2026*

*Light from Africa — for Humanity • Lesedi la Afrika — go Baine*