

# THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA: AN OVERVIEW

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The dominant view on the progress and development of libraries in South Africa and the country's cultural heritage was, until recently, Eurocentric. It focused primarily on an appreciation of the aesthetic value of colonial-inspired architecture and respect for Cape Dutch and British settler culture, i.e. on a colonial heritage that took root on African soil after 1652. This view on heritage was strongly advanced by successive governments after the founding of the Union of (white) South Africa in 1910, and even more so when it became an Afrikaner nationalist-dominated republic in 1961. A radical change in approach was only possible after the founding of democratic South Africa in 1994 with the election of the first black president.

The founding of democratic South Africa in the mid-1990s was the outcome of an intensified guerrilla and political struggle of three decades against the apartheid regime. By the end of the 1980s, the intensified racial struggle left the regime with no option but to unban all organisations participating in the liberation struggle, including the African National Congress (ANC). After the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and four years of negotiations between the governing National Party leaders and the ANC, the first democratic elections were held on 27 April 1994. All these developments, which gave South Africa a new Constitution in 1996, had a profound bearing on the discourse about what constitutes the cultural heritage of post-apartheid South Africa.

Against this backdrop, the chapter focuses on the dynamics of cultural heritage in South Africa as manifested in cultural heritage discourse and legislative processes after the apartheid era, with particular reference to the reinvention of heritage resources management agencies such as libraries, archives, museums and art galleries. A defining moment for the discourse was the adoption of the nation's new Constitution in 1996.

## 2. REDEFINING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF SOUTH AFRICA

The essence of the nation's new understanding of its cultural heritage is captured in not only the title of the statement, "I am an African", made by then Deputy President Thabo

Mbeki on behalf of the ANC to the Constitutional Assembly of South Africa on 8 May 1996. It also appears in the new coat of arms of democratic South Africa, launched on Freedom Day in 2000, as well as in the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage of the same year.

### 2.1 The new Constitution, the Mbeki statement and national identity

Deputy President Mbeki's statement, made to particularly white South Africa on occasion of the adoption of the South African Constitution Bill in Cape Town, set the tone and laid the basis for a non-racial understanding and appreciation of the new nation's diverse heritage. The poetically phrased statement had a personal ring to it with which South Africans of different persuasions could identify. It was a political statement in conciliatory terms, embracing the being and African-ness of all South Africans irrespective of their background.

In the early part of his statement and referring to the first indigenous people of the land, Deputy President Mbeki acknowledged (Mbeki, 1996):

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and dependence ...

The statement also recognises the historical contribution of other South Africans that made Mbeki and his broad constituency *African*. Thus, "I am formed by the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still, part of me", and "In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East". Mbeki saw himself as the metaphorical grandchild of the Bantu-speaking and (white) Afrikaner heroes who fought and died in South African wars of resistance for their respective freedoms. Inspired by these words of wisdom, the leader of the New National Party which ruled South Africa for over 40 years, F.W. de Klerk, responded in similar vein to the challenge of redefining his identity and heritage (De Klerk, 1996:423):

Although my people came from Europe more than 300 years ago, I became an African through the blood of my forebears which drenched our soil in fighting for freedom. I became an African through the dedication and hard work of my forebears ...

These statements, and the subsequent adoption of the Bill and promulgation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa later the same year, paved the way for robust debates at national, provincial and local levels of government and in civil society about the meaning of "I am an African" in different spheres of society, including the heritage sector.

### 2.2 A new motto for the nation: *!ke e: /xarra //ke*

The launch in 2000 of the new Coat of Arms was a further step initiated by national government to give new impetus and direction to the national discourse about culture,

nation-building and social cohesion. The Coat of Arms represents a South African dialogue of heritage symbols of Africa, the West and humanity. The nation's heritage, rooted in the artistic creativity of the first indigenous people, is depicted in the centre of the national symbol as well as in the motto.

The only human figures depicted are two images derived from the Linton Stone, a world-famous example of South African rock art on display at one of the Iziko Museums in Cape Town. The motto, *!ke e: /xarra //ke*, is derived from a saying in the almost extinct language of the /Xam Khoisan people, meaning “people who are different joining together”, i.e. unity in diversity. It is a call from our earliest African ancestors to strive towards building a uniquely prosperous nation conscious of its diverse heritage.



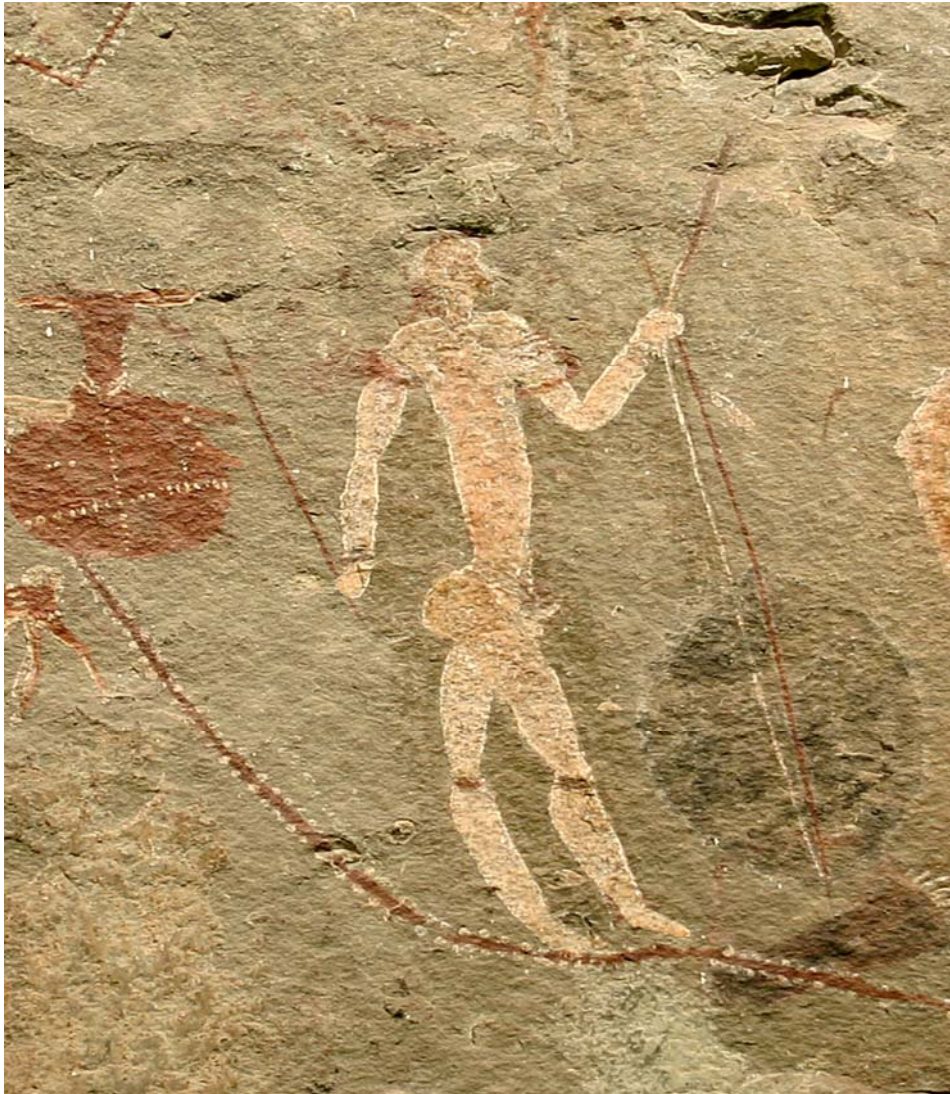
The Linton Panel, a slab of rock art dating back to the 18th or 19th century, was removed from the farm of Linton in the Eastern Cape in 1917. The complex paintings reflect the intangible beliefs and cosmology of the San people, the earliest inhabitants of the African subcontinent.

(Courtesy of the Iziko Museums, Cape Town)

The prominence of San rock art and their almost extinct language enjoyed at the turn of the century as markers of the new South Africa's heritage, inscribed on one of its national symbols, stimulated popular interest in this universal heritage. It had the stamp of approval of distinguished scholars of rock art, who also contributed significantly to the process of inscribing the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park, with its superb range of rock art sites, as one of South Africa's four World Heritage Sites in 2004.<sup>(1)</sup>

Growing amazement at the spiritually inspired artistic achievements of the San of pre-colonial South Africa has broadened the vision of fellow South Africans in their appreciation of the country's diverse cultural heritage and the African-ness of the Khoi and San. Little was known about these indigenous groups in popular memory until the last

<sup>1</sup> By 2007, South Africa had seven world heritage sites proclaimed by UNESCO: uKhahlamba-Drakensberg Park; Robben Island; Great St Lucia Wetlands Park; the Cradle of Humankind near Krugersdorp; Mapungubwe Heritage Site; the Cape Floral Kingdom; and Vredefort Dome.



The figure above from the Linton Panel appears as a central motif in South Africa's coat of arms (left). As the oldest known inhabitants of South Africa, the Khoisan hunter-gatherers represent our common humanity and heritage.

(Courtesy of the Iziko Museums, Cape Town)

quarter of the 20th century. Interest was also revived in the Khoisan communities of the present, such as the ǀKhomani of the Kalahari, the Nama of the Richtersveld and the Griqua of the Southern Cape and the Knersvlakte of the West Coast. Proponents of an Afro-centric approach to the cultural heritage of South Africa are increasingly re-imagining and redefining the nation's heritage more inclusively than in strict Bantu-speaking "black" terms, which tended to exclude and devalue the culture and heritage of fellow South Africans even beyond apartheid.

### 2.3 The White Paper of June 1996

Another important text that impacted on the consciousness of the heritage sector a few years earlier was the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage tabled in Parliament in 1996, within a month after the adoption of the new Constitution. The White Paper contributed significantly to a redefinition and thus re-imagination of the nation's cultural heritage and all legislation pertaining to it.

The first point made in the section on heritage (DACST, 1996:20) is that countries acknowledge the importance of cultural heritage by preserving:

... their heritage through permanent collections of various kinds, and through restoration and care of sites having religious, political, cultural, scientific, archaeological or environmental significance. In so doing, they declare what has value for them, what they seek to preserve as evidence of their own as well as other's development and achievement.

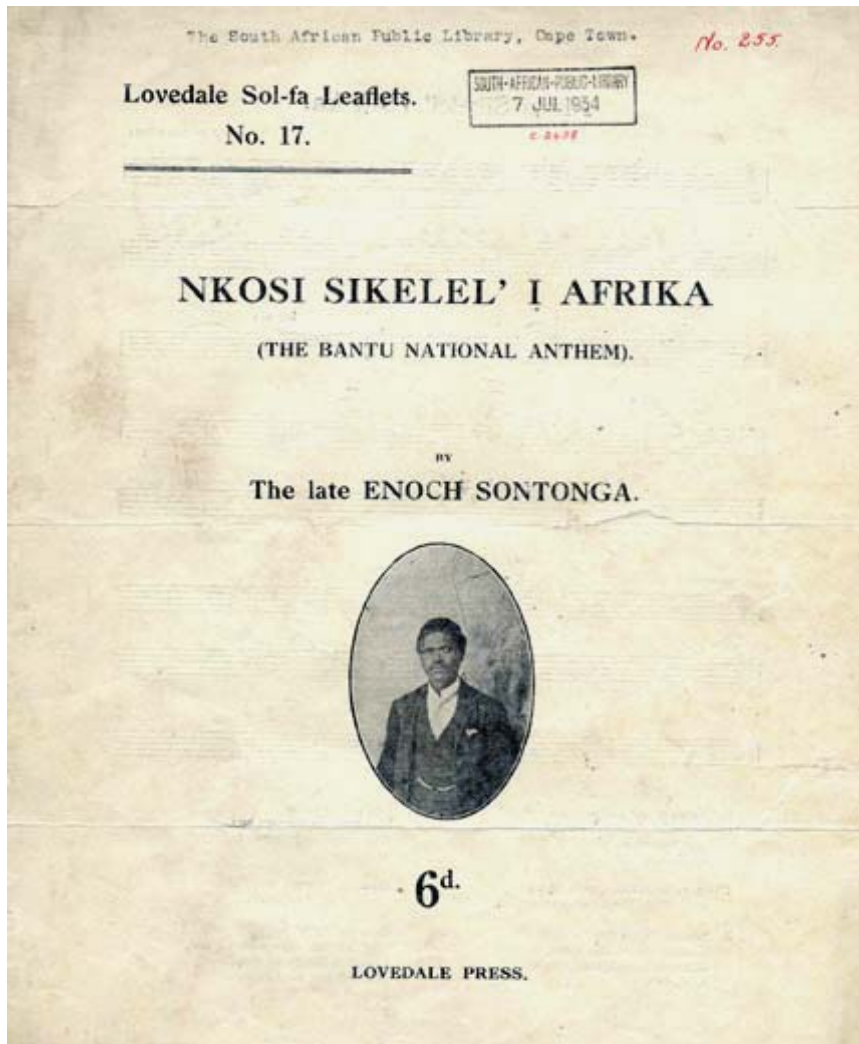
The second point dealt with the paramount importance of living heritage for the reconstruction and development process in the new South Africa. Considering the apartheid legacy of devaluing and erasing African living heritage from the consciousness of the nation, the Ministry stated uncompromisingly that "means must be found to enable song, dance, story-telling and oral history to be permanently recorded and conserved in the formal heritage structure" (DACST, 1996:20).

Ever since the tabling of the White Paper, the emphasis on the promotion of living (or intangible) heritage as being crucial to the sector's transformation imperatives has become a key strategic goal and focus of the Ministry, Department and its heritage institutions, most of which have been re-established since 1996.

## 3. RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATION'S CULTURAL HERITAGE INSTITUTIONS

### 3.1 Re-imagining the state archives

The first colonial and apartheid-inherited institution at which transformation was legislatively directed in 1996, was the state archives. When the White Paper was tabled earlier the same year, the archives of the nation were seemingly not yet perceived as a heritage institution. However, a re-imagining of the archives began only two years later, after its functionaries were exposed to "Refiguring the Archives", a humanities and social sciences project by the University of the Witwatersrand (see Hamilton et al., 2002:45).



### Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika.

ENOCH SONTONGA.

Original sheet music of *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika* [God bless Africa], a hymn by Enoch Sontonga, a teacher and lay preacher from the Eastern Cape (c.1873), which now forms part of the national anthem of South Africa.

(Courtesy of the NLSA)

Leading participants in the project, with the National Archives as one of the collaborators, advocated a Derridean theoretical approach to the core function of a state archive. They saw all archives essentially as institutions or repositories of knowledge rooted, particularly in the South African case, “in the traces of phylogenetic memory” (*phylō* meaning race or tribe), i.e. the place where the “traces” of particular objects of our nation’s past is kept in the form of historical documents. There, over centuries of colonial rule and apartheid, the collective memory of the South African nation – defined in European terms – was accumulated.

Starting on African soil in the early 1650s, colonial officials in control of the nation’s memory designed the beginnings of what became South Africa’s local Dutch and British archive in Cape Town. About two centuries later, with the founding of the two Boer republics inland, separate state archives were also created in Pretoria and Bloemfontein, with a particular nationalist view of society. With the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910, the white supremacist view of the archive remained almost unchanged until after the adoption of the new Constitution.

By the time of its adoption, the state archives contained holdings that exceeded almost 140 km of shelving space, comprising records in a variety of media such as paper-based textual records, electronic records as well as audio-visual, photographic and cartographic material. These were records generated over many years of colonial and apartheid rule at national, provincial and local government levels, and included court records, estate papers of deceased persons, records of property rights and tenure. Since then, one of the most crucial acquisitions has been the archives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2002).

The National Archives of South Africa Act of 1996, amended in 2001 as the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARS) Act, had a dual objective in mind.

Firstly, it envisaged a differently organised National Archives managed properly and where good care would be taken of the records of government bodies. Secondly, the entire nation should accept the inherited National Archives as re-imagined spaces for the preservation and use of a national archival heritage. In due course, the Act contributed to a reawakening among the functionaries of the archives, who realised that their institution had immense potential as a special resource for collecting the nation’s social memory and fostering a national identity.

A most commendable initiative in this regard has been the National Oral History and Indigenous Music (NOHIM) Programme, which is being incorporated into the Public Programming project of the NARS. As a transformation project, the NOHIM Programme addresses the relative absence of historical sources in its holdings reflecting the experiences of particularly those South Africans who had been marginalised by apartheid. The NARS has therefore embarked on several programmes encouraging people to bring their stories and experiences – their intangible heritage – into the archives, and therefore to participate actively in the process of forming the collective memory of the whole society.

This programme is also stimulated by the institution’s active outreach Public Programming projects with the slogan, “Taking Archives to the People”. These include guided visits to the state archives by various social groups, exhibitions, popular publica-

tions, open days, public lectures and services to the public, such as an introduction to genealogical research.

As stipulated in Schedule 5 of the Constitution, provinces are responsible for their own archives and the National Archives has transferred the control of the archives repositories in Pietermaritzburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and Cape Town to their respective provinces (Dominy, 2007). This development is in line with one of the top priorities of the National Archives, namely that of bringing archives closer to the people.

### 3.2 Re-imagining the administration of the two libraries of the nation

The most important documentary heritage institutions after the state archives that had to be transformed under the new dispensation were the two national libraries in Cape Town and Pretoria, dating back to 1818 and 1887 respectively. By force of law, both are national legal deposit libraries entitled to receive from publishers a free copy of every printed item published in South Africa. Over the years they have succeeded in building up “extensive collections of material of great scholarly value” (NLSA, n.d.).

The South African Public Library of 1818, which after 1954 developed into a national reference library for researchers, became the South African Library in 1967 and retained this name until 1999. From the turn of the century, based on the National Library of South Africa Act of 1998, it had to amalgamate with the Pretoria-based State Library of 1887. After amalgamation in 1999, the old South African Library operates as a campus site of the National Library of South Africa with its headquarters in Pretoria.

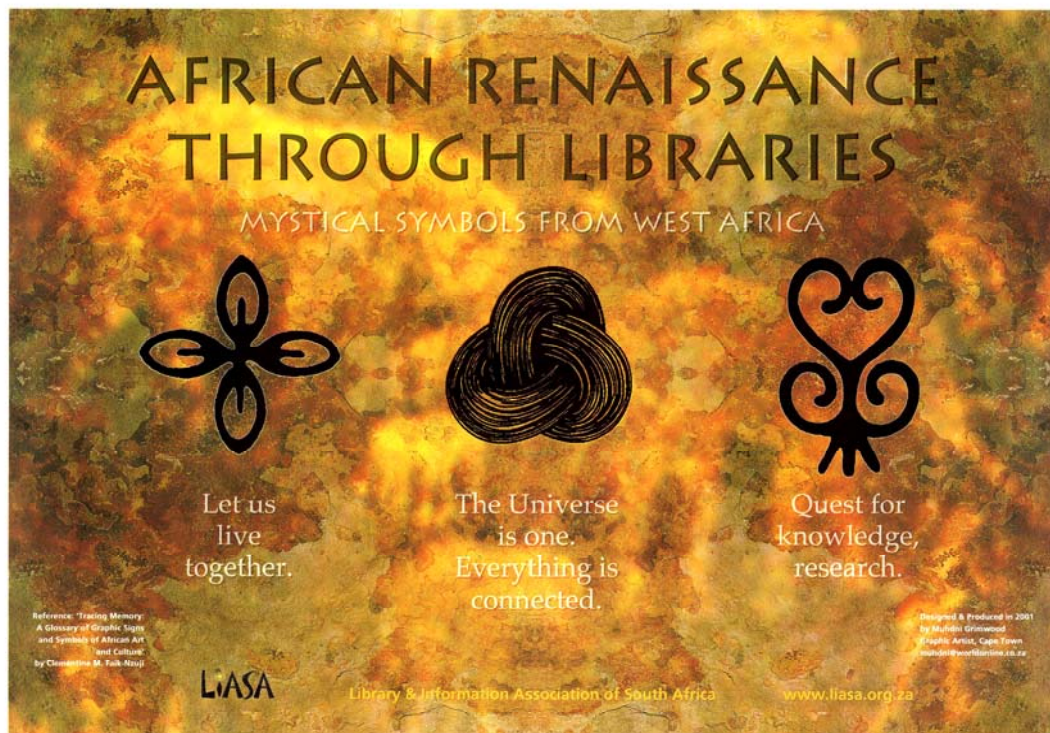
A critical objective of both the enabling Act and the new National Library is to revitalise and transform the institution in line “with the goals of the new democracy” (NLSA, n.d.). It is therefore no wonder that the administration of the National Library rests in the NARS division of the Department of Arts and Culture to facilitate closer cooperation between the two documentary heritage sectors. The Council of the National Library, appointed by the Minister as accounting authority, has relative autonomy.

### 3.3 From foundation to National Arts Council

A third heritage institution in need of transformation was the Foundation for the Creative Arts, replaced by the National Arts Council within a year after the adoption of the new Constitution. Based on its parliamentary mandate as stated in the National Arts Council Act of 1997, the National Arts Council (NAC) developed a vision to promote – through the arts – the free and creative expression of South Africa’s cultures, its core business being the development and promotion of excellence in the arts.<sup>(2)</sup> In accordance with its vision, the main genres the NAC supports are music and opera, literature, visual arts, craft, theatre and musical theatre, and dance and choreography. With a view to redressing the iniquities of the past, the Council strives to transform the arts by empowering artists to perform with pride and dignity at arts festivals.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.nac.org.za](http://www.nac.org.za)



The theme of the fourth Annual Conference of LIASA in 2001, alluding to the role libraries could play in realising President Thabo Mbeki's vision of an African Renaissance.

(Courtesy of LIASA)

### 3.4 Transforming the governance of national museums

With the dawn of the new democracy, national museums – known as declared cultural institutions in terms of the Cultural Institutions Act of 1969 of the old regime – were perhaps the heritage institutions that suffered most with a serious image problem. The White Paper of 1996 had pointed out that these institutions nonetheless had the potential of playing a vital role in the development of heritage if the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) would continue funding them. This recommendation was finally embodied in the (new) Cultural Institutions Act of 1998.

The White Paper also suggested that the declared cultural institutions “be evaluated according to agreed criteria of what constitutes ‘national’” and, in the absence of a coherent national museums policy, called “for transformation through a systematic process of restructuring and rationalisation” (DACST, 1996:21). This recommendation led to the establishment of, *inter alia*, two flagship institutions, known after June 2001 as Iziko Museums of Cape Town and the Northern Flagship Institution in Pretoria respectively.

In the case of Iziko Museums, the five museum institutions that amalgamated with their satellite sites into one heritage institution were fully integrated by 2005, with no museum site operating autonomously any longer. Apart from the two flagship institu-

tions there are 11 other cultural institutions, including Robben Island Museum established in 1997.<sup>(3)</sup>

Their official re-establishment was on 1 April 1999, the same year legislation to re-establish a national heritage resources management institution was enacted. In that year the National Heritage Resources Act was promulgated to replace the National Monuments Council with the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) and provincial heritage authorities as from 2000. Following the first three years of implementation of the Act, a submission to the first Council of SAHRA by its chief executive officer (CEO) (SAHRA, n.d.:2) noted with concern that one of the challenges the institution had to cope with was that:

... culture and heritage cut across the functions of various institutions. Therefore, every institution plays a role in heritage resources management. There is a potential that the principles of heritage management are compromised.

It was noted that some departments were custodians of legislation that addressed key aspects of the mandate of SAHRA and its executive authority, the Ministry of Arts and Culture. The CEO was also ambivalent about SAHRA having inherited a rich history and diverse cultures that sometimes posed unforeseen challenges to the institution in pursuance of its vision and mission.

Meanwhile, in a somewhat uncoordinated manner, the different provincial governments proceeded with the establishment of their own provincial heritage resources authorities. The Department of Arts and Culture has embarked on a review process of all heritage-related legislation passed in the first decade of democracy, a process to be completed in 2007.

At present, coordination of all these cultural heritage institutions has become the responsibility of the National Heritage Council (NHC) in terms of the National Heritage Council Act of 1999. Implementation of the Act began only in 2003. Although the Council has not yet been able to fulfil its role of coordinating transformation of the heritage sector in South Africa as effectively as it had hoped, noteworthy strategies have been initiated in the past two to three years.

One of the NHC's most ambitious initiatives is an "Ubuntu for Nation-Building" campaign in response to a challenge the President of South Africa posed on Heritage Day 2005 at Taung. He stated that "the central tenets of the values that drive the behaviour and approach of the Afrikaner, Indian and Jewish communities ... are consistent with the value-system of Ubuntu" (Mbeki, 2005) and continued:

... we have not done enough to articulate and elaborate on what Ubuntu means as well as promoting this important value system in a manner that would define the unique identity of South Africans. Indeed, there has not been a campaign to ensure that Ubuntu becomes synonymous with being South African. Accordingly, I ... suggest that we should perhaps constitute

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<sup>3</sup> For a list of the museums see [www.dac.gov.za/projects/heritage/geographical\\_names/declared\\_cultural\\_inst.htm](http://www.dac.gov.za/projects/heritage/geographical_names/declared_cultural_inst.htm).

a task team that would look closely at this matter of Ubuntu, elaborate on its value system and suggest the manner in which we can use it to define ourselves as South Africans.

#### 4. UBUNTU AND NATION-BUILDING

Within a year the NHC, for its part, had heeded the President's call by inviting the people to an *Ubuntu Imbizo* (national conference) at Botshabelo in Middelburg, Mpumalanga. The venue was a place of memory and land restitution for the African mission community that was forcibly removed under apartheid in the early 1970s.

At the Imbizo, held in November 2006, Nelson Mandela received in absentia the first Ubuntu Award of the NHC and reminded the gathering in his message of acceptance that Ubuntu is about being human and that "we are human only through the humanity of other human beings" (NHC, 2006:26):

[Ubuntu] is not a parochial phenomenon, but rather has added globally to our common search for a better world. Our heritage is the world's heritage. And our heritage should be lived in the present ... We should strive for excellence in the living of Ubuntu and not allow it to become merely a subject of study by heritage institutions.

In an almost similar vein, participants discussed the practical aspects of Ubuntu, emphasising values such as honesty, sharing, human solidarity, compassion, respect, humility and communality. They maintained that upholding these values might serve as a remedy for the many ills characterising the nation.

At the end of the Imbizo, all suggestions were condensed into a seven-point campaign document, drafted in the form of a set of resolutions, calling for:

- the incorporation of Ubuntu into the formal education system;
- the establishment of a National Youth Service;
- the establishment of a Corporate Ubuntu Investment Programme;
- the mobilisation of all publishing firms and related organisations to promote and publish work produced by African authors;
- engaging with the Minister of Arts and Culture to facilitate the process of developing a White Paper on Ubuntu as a cornerstone of integrating Ubuntu values in all key government policies, legislation and programmes;
- renaming Reconciliation Day, 16 December on the national calendar, as National Ubuntu Day, with a view to encouraging South Africans to reflect on their humanness and how they can apply the principles of Ubuntu in their daily lives; and
- a request to be made to the Office of the Deputy President to lead the campaign.

This process is now being taken further by the CEO of the NHC in consultation with other CEOs and directors in the heritage sector.

The NHC-initiated Ubuntu and nation-building campaign is thus still in its pre-planning phase. Once implementation of this project starts, the ethic of Ubuntu will be the guiding principle on which all programmes within and outside the cultural heritage

sector of the land will be based. Only in the course of implementation will we be able to appreciate fully the progress made in transformation from a Eurocentric definition of national identity to a re-imagined Afro-centric human identity relevant to the cultural heritage of South Africa in the African century.

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#### ACTS REFERRED TO

- National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act No. 43 of 1996), as amended
- National Arts Council Act (Act No. 56 of 1997)
- National Library of South Africa Act (Act No. 92 of 1998)
- National Heritage Council Act (Act No. 11 of 1999)
- National Heritage Resources Act (Act No. 25 of 1999)