

**The need to move the arts and culture from the periphery to the centre of  
South Africa's national struggle and discourse to achieve non-racialism, non-sexism,  
democracy and prosperity**

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I take it that the issues we will be raising here, as African intellectuals, will be raised because our objective is to achieve a culture which manifests the Renaissance of Africa and Africans, wherever Africans are. We will, I take it, also be raising the issues which must contribute to and promote Pan Africanism in our country, on the continent, among the diaspora, within the global context and among all humanity for the nurturing of non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy which have been established; put in place through the liberation struggles in our country, in parts of the continent, among the African diaspora and within humanity in the past centuries.

We must note, at the onset, that even as the foundation for the implementation of the strategic objective of the liberation struggle in our country, fledgling as it has become in recent times, the suppression of that has been sustained by capitalism and imperialism.

These capitalist and imperialist systems, have, historically, been the basis for the creation of a culture of cheap labour among the majority. This has been enforced through maximum oppression and exploitation, including violence, of and against the oppressed majority and any raising opposition, in defence of and for maximum profit for the minority.

What then is a culture which must be nurtured, which must be entrenched, which must become the main stream of all quality of all forms of life? That is the question which must be answered as we become part and parcel of the next rupture of our being, time and space - namely the 4th revolution.

We note also, as we raise these matters, that the past nine or so years of our country were years when there was a conscious and deliberate effort to nurture a culture with symptoms were rampant corruption, and recognise that was the tip of the iceberg, because underneath all of that was also a conscious and deliberate effort to undo and reverse a cultural process which was establishing the basis for a national democratic revolution in our country.

It must also be consciously and deliberately noted that historically, for many reasons, this has been a prevalent tendency on the African continent and in the south-south countries inspired by its being a symbiotic triplet process of the systems of capitalism and imperialism.

As a people, South Africans, we were challenged by the past quarter of a century to resolve the two juxtaposed elements of the historical and political contradictory elements which defined the culture of our nation: on the one hand, the entrenched elements of a "... colonialism of a special kind ..." whose historical objective has been profit for a racial minority at all cost; on the other,

were the qualitative leaps of the liberation struggle whose objective was to entrench the culture of the national democratic revolution based on non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy.

In other words, it must be noted that in order for the minority to oppress and exploit the majority, the minority must create and have the means and ways to suppress the means and will of the majority to express their freedom of choice. This means that the minority means for maximum exploitation and effective, oppressive culture must be entrenched against the free will and culture of the majority. The majority must be suppressed and denied their freedom, security and peace in order for their exploitation to be maximised.

Basing our approach on this the subject at hand, we must, right at the beginning, surmise that the processes of the renaissance of Africa or of the renaissance of any other place on earth for that matter, will in large measure depend on whether we understand, generally speaking, the relationship between history and culture.

### **What is Culture?**

The organised and collective activities of the human race, with a clear and progressive strategic objective informed by s national objective realities; the nurturing of the quality lives of the nationals, as they eke a living from nature in an organised manner through the development of dynamic knowledge - which is continuously developed - to further nurture knowledge and material culture; the conscious creation of a national consensus to deliberately agree on reference points for the creation of peace, freedom, protection of gains and relations with others - all of these are some of the building blocks of 'culture'.

As the processes for the creation of the systems and structures to ensure the further nurturing - whether through education or other means and methods conducive to the furthering of the development and protection of the nation and its gains - as they so do, they define a universal culture; however, the different contexts within which human activity happens also define the unique culture as influenced by the objective realities of the various and different environments within which that national culture flourishes.

For instance, it is a historical dynamic development that in our country the land question is closely related to and directly not only defines but resolves the national question. In other words, as the South African cultural expression. "... South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white ..." is a historical reality, which defines South Africa's diverse cultural reality.

The implication of this understanding must be that there is a relationship between culture and history. "History" as a past, also as an ongoing, process of the evolving life of a nation or nations; "culture" as the current and future expression of life being lived which will also be entrenched as heritage-tangible and intangible, in time, is the result of history and it is also a motive force of history depending on the quality of and how the forces, both material and human, are organised;

in the case of our country, to manifest non racialism, non-sexism, democracy and the possibility of national prosperity.

This does imply that at all times there must be a ripple effect educational programme whether organised or informal, through various means, and that it must be accessible to the nation. This also implies that besides this education being available, the consciousness about its content and objective must be consciously and deliberately nurtured according to national subjective and objective needs.

Culture does not "... exert ..." itself. It is consciously and deliberately nurtured; it is this requirement and need - that the role of the arts as a means to educate, entertain, dramatise, conscientise and even to express the national culture - must be deliberately primed and developed formally, for this purpose.

"... Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history, by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between (human beings) and their environment, among (human beings) or groups of (human beings) within society, as well as among different societies ..." (Amilcar Cabral).

Culture and history are not static, but are naturally continuous and active phenomena - each with its own dynamism while also being symbiotic in their relation to each other. Because of being mutually dependent and always being susceptible to change and forever being symbiotic with each other in their processes of development- culture and history are indestructible.

Or: even as they atrophy, so to speak, when they degenerate to the extent of the destruction of the quality of all forms of life - as the apartheid system clearly illustrated in its half century reign - the frills of white material abundance notwithstanding - - they are subject to the rules of change - which are constant. They remain vulnerable to being contradicted by the will, through struggle, of the oppressed in as much as that too is vulnerable to reactive forces.

That is the current greatest challenge facing the Movement and the masses of this country, who waged the liberation struggle which successfully implemented a national cultural contract: the Constitution of the land. This was earned through struggle, sacrifice, including the thousands of South Africans, black and white, who paid the supreme price.

These in my view are the reasons why we cannot pontificate, or be trapped in philosophising about the dire and drastic situation, which has plunged our country and people, into a spiralling historical, cultural and political crisis which seeks to, before our daily-open eyes, undo all the cultural gains of the history of the struggle -the national processes of the democratic cultural revolution, whose values, traditions and culture - which we refer to in this discourse - have been completely undermined!

Which "... culture ..." must we move from the "... periphery ...": how and to where? Once more let us ask: which is this "... culture..." "... which is the result of history..."? Let us also ask which is

this “culture ” “... which is a determinant of history by the positive... influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between (human beings) and their environment, among (human beings) or groups of (human beings) within society, as well as among different societies ...” (Amilcar Cabral)

So also, the national democratic revolution as it was consciously and deliberately nurtured through the four pillars of struggle. It was to be sustained and maintained, based on the constitution of the country - a historical, political and cultural national contract - which was inspired by the history of the struggle. It was to find expression, through the reconstruction and development programme (RDP) - also a cultural process anchored in and inspired by the history of the struggle of and by the majority of the nation - black and white.

If culture is “... the result of history...”, which continuously transforms and changes; and if it is also the “... determinant of history...”, drastic or dynamic, we can from this seek to determine that because objective reality has and does illustrate that history can have “... positive or negative...” results and impact - as the colonial and apartheid systems and history have so clearly illustrated in our country - culture itself is a motive force

We must note that the apartheid system, whether special or not, was declared “...to be a crime against humanity...” (UN declaration): it is a dire and drastic indication that culture is not and cannot only be virgin.

Drastic and demanding as the combination of the methods of struggle seemed, as formulated, practised, and implemented during the liberation struggle in our country by the Movement, the result of their impact, on both the history and culture of the South African Nation as expressed through the constitution of our country - they were most positive.

It was so because the strategic objective of the liberation struggle was progressive, positive and clearly defined.

It was so also because there was consistent, not only mobilisation but also conscientisation - not only of the vanguard or leadership - of the masses to be conscious of the strategic objective and its deliberateness in attaining it.

That strategic objective, therefore, determined the tactics to be used to achieve it. It must also be noted that various and consistent means and methods were and must be consciously and deliberately nurtured to become part and parcel of the education and mobilisation of the nation, which must conjure and shore up the “culture “of the national democratic revolution.

Part of this process is the engagement and utilisation of the arts, which are a critical cultural expression in any nation. We shall come back to that later.

This is also an indication that culture is not only a motive force for history but also a gigantic and dynamic means for drastic changes in the future of the nation. Culture defines - in a

“...negative...” or “...positive...” manner- the relationships among people and populations, populations and their environment; in other words there must be a deliberate and conscious choice to make it the “... positive...” national expression of the moral, ethical, values and traditions of our nation.

The negative cultural practices and expressions, of neglect and abuse, cannot produce what is not inherent to them. What then is the renaissance of Africa, of Africans where ever they are?

It is important for the nation to be aware, to be conscious and to act deliberately and consciously in relation to the creation and emergence of this culture we keep referring to. We did so as a nation from 1990 up to Polokwane – after which gradually as the sun set, would, , slide and set and plunge the era of hope into an era wherein the dream of millions of humanity - the “...renaissance of Africa...” - was deferred.

It was a dream which had engulfed not the continent and the African diaspora only, but all of the international community - to the extent that, after decades, Africa - as it should be - was becoming an international reference point in most international platforms, including the United Nations.

We dare not forget that that cultural “... dawn ...” of the “... renaissance ...” of Africa had been willed in our country 87 years before 1999 by the founding president of the ANC, Seme, in South Africa; In the 90’s, as noted here, it gained a momentous and powerful ripple effect from our country once more, led by among others, President Mbeki, to engulf the continent and almost all of the international multilateral organisations.

This, it must be noted, that it is to state categorically that we neglect the (basis - “... the history ...”) and “... need to move the arts and culture from the periphery to the centre of South Africa’s national struggle and discourse to achieve non-racialism, non-sexism, democracy and prosperity ...” at our own peril as a generation, and at the peril of future generations, not only of our country without any inclination to exaggeration, to that of humanity. That is why I have a deep sense that this is not the time to pontificate and to philosophise about where to from here. The theory and the practice which we claim to have been steeped in by the Movement, is in itself a clarion call for all us to act!

With what happened after Polokwane on the continent, to site a few examples: the “... cultures ...” of Lesotho, Botswana, eSwatini, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, the DRC, in southern Africa, to name a few similar to some on the subcontinent; there are many more on the continent which can become part of the list. To use a crude parlance for emphasis: if our country does not take the initiative as it did in that past before Polokwane, is there any chance in “... hell ...” for them?

Has Mwalimu Nyerere shortly before his passing not strongly admonished us not to undermine the role of South Africa in the emergence of the African Renaissance culture of the Continent? I state this here because I was there, when he said so, categorically, at the Presidential Guest House in Pretoria in the late nineties before his passing.

I say this because all of us must know that we are where we are today, as I stated above, because the "...renaissance of Africa..." took root after many decades, when South Africa clearly indicated in a decade and half of non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy, through action, to all the world that it was consciously and deliberately taking on:

"The challenge the generation of political leaders faced (which was huge): to dismantle the legacy of a regime that had been the bulwark of minority racial privilege for centuries, and in its place to build the political, social and institutional - I add( cultural) foundations for a new South Africa ..."(Mahmood Mamdani: foreword: *The Thabo Mbeki I Know*).

Then, during and inspired by the struggle and after and during the emergence of the non-racial non-sexist, and democratic state, a myriad of organs of civil society emerged-"... to build the political, social and cultural institutional foundations for a new South Africa ..."

Some of those organisations of civil society which emerged then - in1998 - were motivated and inspired by the culture which would underpin the "...Renaissance of Africa..." e.g. the South African Chapter of the African Renaissance (SACAR); The African Renaissance Organisation of Southern Africa (AROSA) inspired also by the transition from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union(AU) when it eventually emerged in 2002.

It is also this discourse which inspired the emergence of a discourse on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) which was spearheaded by the Portfolio committee of the national parliament. This discourse engulfed, as reference and participants, its holders and practitioners throughout the country, mainly in the rural areas; science councils, historically disadvantaged universities, different national government departments; international organisations like the world intellectual property organisation (WIPO); a myriad of organs of civil society in South and southern Africa, including the African Union, through NEPAD..

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We must note, I would like to suggest, that different environments, as influenced by whatever forces of the universe, will and do influence the dynamism of the history and culture of all circumstances and species.

We must conclude from this that African culture exists and that it is our objective to contribute to African culture which in itself must be positive and progressive, so as to become a locomotive of the Renaissance of Africa: it will immediately factor the massive knowledge of the masses, as also we consciously nurture universal culture within this context.

It is against this backdrop that we must put on the non- racial, non- sexist and democratic national agenda the AIKS. This phenomenon was and has been the absolute target for destruction by colonialism, the apartheid system and imperialism, which have also exploited it to the maximum.

It has not only shown strong resilience as it has been the basis for resistance against colonialism, apartheid, capitalism and imperialism as systems of oppression; it has been also the historical and cultural motive force for the liberation struggle by the masses for the nation.

It is, only if its cornerstone anchor of *Motho ke Motho Ka Batho* as a cultural expression and motive force, is a point of reference and departure for furthering the struggle against oppressive and exploitative systems.

The five categories of AIKS namely: social; institutional; technological (biodiversity - which include, bioprospecting, and biotechnological IKS); and liberatory processes are pregnant with bounds of possibilities for political, educational, social, economic and cultural development. They are so if the objective for engaging in the processes of AIKS is to promote, protect and innovate its outcomes, within the context of the 4th revolution.

We will make that contribution if we have clarity and a common understanding about the role of history and culture, as expressed by AIKS.

That meaning is that we must understand the relationship between culture and history; that culture emanates from historical processes, as also "... it determines history ..."

We note also that culture has, at any given time, the potential to contribute "...positively or negatively..." to national history.

There was a time when the history of the land which became South Africa was based on and defined by the culture of the splinter groups of tribes. That contributed to a colonial defeat and take- over of the land of the tribes eventually. A negative culture emerged and was expressed by the colonisation, oppression and exploitation of the tribes. That lead to the emergence and the creation of a negative culture of the suppression of a people based on race, and divide and rule, and eventually the colonial and apartheid systems which were and are interrelated with imperialism.

However, we must note also that at the point of the take-over and defeat of the tribes by the colonialists what were tribes became stronger based on their creation of a united resistance culture- based on their being Africans and the spirit and culture of the "...renaissance of Africa..." as stated above. The leaders of the time, the founders of the ANC, pitched the power of the masses against the "... colonialism of a special kind ..." system and culture. A historical reference for the renaissance of Africans became a cultural reference point for African rupture from colonialism and apartheid and also, the negation and revolt against the impact of the slave trade. That has also been expressed throughout the human experience by the content of Pan

Africanism through leaders from the diaspora like Padmore and W.E.B Dubois and some African leaders like Seme and Nkrumah on the continent respectively.

This was based on a common and collective resistance culture of *motho ke motho ka batho; umunto ngu muntu nga bantu*, a human being is a human being because of other human beings; as the Khoisan also stated, “...*a dream is a dream if it is a dream of a community...*”. This is an indigenous approach to progressive culture, which laid the basis for the defeat of colonialism and the apartheid system, when the nation eventually claimed the “... dream ...” ,described itself through a claim that: “...South Africa belongs to all who live in in it, black and white...” : a historical claim, but also a cultural expression.

It is this positive culture, which has resulted in a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic culture, a qualitative progressive leap, which redefines the history of a liberated united South Africa.

This historical development, this cultural evolution determined that the fact of South Africa being united under an African cultural definition, must consciously influence the emergence of a humane culture, based on the human being first: “... by the positive ...” influence which it ... exerts ...” on the evolution of relationships between (human beings) and their environment, among (human beings) or groups of (human beings) within society, as well as among different societies...”

We do of course also understand that this culture and this history has become the reference point of the South African and African art forms. This is not, of course to say that there are no “... negative ...” art expressions in our country or on the continent and the diaspora. There are, there will be for time to come. However they will not if there is conviction, commitment and understanding that by removing art forms from the “... periphery ...” and locating and contextualising them within the progressive political and historical objectives of our country, thus will innovated and progressive arts emerge.

“Amandla ...”; the “revolutionary songs of our struggle ...”; the Staff Rider” literary magazine; the progressive posters of Medu Art ensemble; the many cultural organisations which mushroomed in our country as the struggle for liberation escalated in South Africa, and as also, cultural manifestation like “... Festac: Lagos 1977 ”; ... Culture and Resistance: Gaborone, 1982; “ ... Culture in another South Africa: Amsterdam 1987; “...Zabalaza London 1989’; and “...Culture and Development: Johannesburg, 1993”.

These art forms are informed by the dynamism of culture, which culture is also amplified by the arts. There is therefore a role which the arts play to inform and portray culture, as also culture does inform the arts. Because culture informs the arts there is therefore the fact that - because culture is dynamically related to history - the arts also, at the least, are a record of history.

We must also add that there is much to the arts in relation to history than meets the eye. The arts, as also language, are a basis of the development of the cultural consciousness of a people, a nation.

Both organic and conventional African intellectuals, especially when engaged in liberation struggle, history and culture, have always sought to put on the agenda, through various types of formations, the history of Africa as they sought to define their objective to emancipate Africa.

That is the definition of the African renaissance and Pan Africanism; both of which can only, and which must, catapult all of the African continent to become part and parcel of the human race and collective by being consistently progressive and humane; by being part and parcel of the non-racial, non-sexist and democratic struggle of our country.

The arts do play a decisive role in this context, if they emanate from a culture which expresses clear and progressive strategic objectives, which are informed by objective national reality.

Usually, as these processes and phenomena unfolded and took place, they began with the casting of eyes over the collective shoulder - the return to the source.

That process, if it is to be progressive, must have as its strategic objective the resolution of the tribal, racial, gender and class struggles as a means to recreate, regenerate, reawaken, rebirth and reclaim being African.

If we recall that the human race sprouts from the African continent, this fact demands of us to reflect on how we must prepare, so that we must accept that the human race will forever come here, to rekindle and renaissance itself - especially as we expect the 4th revolution to progress and create deep roots in all of human life.

In other words, the concept of African renaissance and the cultural positive and progressive nurturing of Pan Africanism, whose basis must be, as we have said above, amplified, portrayed and expressed through art forms - that is: music, in this case ,Maskandi Mbaqanga, and other myriad forms of musical genres in our country, literature (novels, plays, poetry, lyrics,) theatre, dance, photography, film and plastic arts. That concept is a reality when it is underpinned by art forms which are informed by the dynamic progressive culture and history of the liberation struggle.

We must note, we must be vigilant, we must be committed and convinced at all times to ensure that culture has, at all times, the potential to be positive and progressive.

This must also be the approach we have as we assess the role of the art forms which are an expression of culture, and therefore a result of history.

Some of the first two novels (indigenous literature) to come out of South Africa, whose basis and reference is the emancipation of the indigenous voice of Africans in our country are Chaka and Mhudi, by Mofolo and Plaatjie respectively. However it is also crucial that we re-examine the role

and place of story- telling, the myriad literature in indigenous languages, and so called praise poetry (within the context of the twenty first century), all of which have played a key and crucial role in emancipating and shaping the African voice and consciousness.

So also has the indigenous institution of ubuGqiga - a scientific and cultural institution of healing like many others in the world. This institution, which in Sesotho is Bongaka, if denuded of superstition and witchcraft, has great potential and possibilities to contribute to national and comprehensive healing consciousness and spiritual strength and systems. In its influence of the arts and culture and nation building it also can contribute to the collective quality of life of the nation.

UbuGqiga - Bongaka is anchored in both the history of the life of a people; as also, it is forever concerned with the history, culture of a people and the spirituality of the human race, because its focus is the quality and stature of the foundation of any nation -the family.

This indigenous institution, which has contributed significantly to the art forms as defined above; to progressive culture and to history, is also a national environmental consciousness.

It is also an indigenous scientific search for the relationship between the universe and the humane basis for the holistic health progress of all forms of life.

We must not be surprised then, that in its attempt to be progressive at this hour of democracy in our country, it has become most attractive to the youth and some intellectuals of our country.

UbuGqiga - Bongaka is a spiritual, scientific, historical and cultural journey of a nation, a people, which claims for the human race that the human race is part and parcel of the ecosystem, if it is humane.

We are the cycle of the universe, which does not die, ubuGqiga - Bongaka claims. Listen to its songs and experience, its art forms and philosophy; this institution and the other, allopathic medicinal institution - must sooner rather than later enter into a dynamic and not peripheral dialogue, because that is to the detriment of the health of the nation.

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Let me conclude:

Black and white men and women of South Africa: you are on your own; you are either part of the problem or part of the solution of this country - or you are part of the problem of the world; or you may choose to be part of the solution of the challenges of the world.

Look over the collective shoulder of the nation and ask where were we for over three and a half centuries?

And seriously, let us ask now ourselves now, where are we: in a revolution or a counter revolution?

We are on our own and are faced with and must answer the question Vadi South Africa?-  
Humankind awaits our answer!

Mongane Wally Serote.

Johannesburg 7th April, 2019.

I thank you.

Mongane Wally Serote.