ARTS BOOK LAUNCH
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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:
MINTIRHO YA VULAVULA – ARTS, NATIONAL IDENTITIES AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Welcome to all the colleagues!

It's a proud moment today, as MISTRA launches the book on arts and culture – particularly as it is a project that has been long in gestation. There was much to-ing and fro-ing as the project evolved – and it started to look like we would not reach this important milestone.

Of course, the theme does not lend itself to easy treatment, because arts and culture speak to the very being of a people. They straddle the meanings of history, current existence and future trajectories.

As a result, discourse on the arts and national development cannot but cover a very broad canvas about the political economy. The arts take from real life and give back to it in many generous ways.

Artistic expression cannot be captured, chained and rendered an instrument of any one cause. It is in the nature of humanity that we constantly seek to interpret our being in both direct and indirect ways. This can take a life of its own, unchained from material existence. But in time, artistic expression voluntarily flies back into the coop of lived experience, in an endless virtuous cycle.

South Africa's cultural life and artistic expression evolved as people of this nation-state intermingled, subjugated and fought against one another and, ultimately, fashioned today's political settlement.

The authors of this volume, appropriately titled *Mintirho ya vulavula* (or 'actions speak for themselves'), seek to describe this omnipresence of the arts. They reflect on past and present value judgements, and on the grey areas in-between. They also present the technicolour of struggle narratives, the tortuous birth of a new nation, as well as inter-generational fusions and fissions in a post-colonial society.

Contained in the various chapters of this book are reflections on the issue of whether an overarching identity is possible in the midst of diversity.

This is covered in an array of treatments of lived experience, using different genres to interpret the ongoing struggle to create a new nation. Artificial 'rainbowism', which eschews tension and contradiction, is critiqued; and inter-generational contestations are explored.

Using music, publishing, theatre, painting, opera and other forms as frames of reference, the authors seem, by quirk of fate, to converge towards a question posed in one of the chapters: has the history of South African society not rendered ours 'a mad, mad country' – suffering from a multitude of unresolved collective and individual pathologies!

Who constitutes this nation, one of the authors dares to ask! And in this context, the issue of belonging and 'liveability' arises, in the context of a society and spaces continually defined by internal and cross-border migration.

Compiling a volume of this kind is an act of some bravery; and the editors and authors should be congratulated. If the content may appear eclectic, this should have been expected. But there is a golden thread; and this is that there is a strategic role for the arts in national development.

This requires an appropriate policy framework, straddling social, psychological, educational, entertainment, informational and other meanings. This should be developed in consultation with art theoretician, practitioner, enthusiast and critic alike. It also requires an appreciation of the changing environment brought about by the infusion of new technologies, in all social endeavours – a reality reflected in the nascent Fourth Industrial Revolution, further underlined by experiences in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Mapungubwe Institute is profoundly grateful to the authors and all the partners who have given us this unique product. We hope that their assertions and provocations will generate deeper reflections on the role of arts and culture in a transforming society. Our thanks also go to the donors and the broader MISTRA family.

You are all welcome.

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