

## 4<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Culture

Session: Traditional Culture versus Modernity

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### Abstract

The presentation explores the nexus of tradition and modernity. The issue to be debated is the tension between UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2007), affirmation of the cultural diversity and the practice of the traditional culture on the one hand. It will look at cultural practices that contradict human rights principles such as gender and democracy. Some of the questions to be raised are: Who decides what is progressive or not? Which traditional values are we to salvage or leave behind? Further, which of these do we celebrate and affirm? Finally, how do we celebrate diversity if some of the diversity conflicts revolve around cultural values? While it is apparent that all these heated questions cannot be addressed adequately in fifteen minutes, the challenges they pose cannot be ignored, and hopefully we will grapple with these issues beyond the summit.

### **TRADITION AND MODERNITY**

Before I get into the main presentation, let me first start by acknowledging the problems associated with the notions of “tradition” and “modernity”, given their conservative outlooks and racial chauvinism. On the surface, when we think of traditional culture in Africa, we conjure pictures of mud-huts etc. often juxtaposed with skyscrapers, which serve as the Western epitome of modernity. Conversely, in the performing arts, in particular, music, the instruments can be divided into these two broad categories, based on the viewer’s aesthetics and cultural background. Of course, aesthetics and taste remain old themes in the arts with the usual dichotomy between “high” and “low” culture as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979). The challenge remains overcoming this biased view by creating and promoting ways of judging each other’s cultural artifacts from a contextualized vantage point. Unfortunately, what people pay to see (i.e. cabaret as opposed to traditional dance), in the different discursive contexts allows us to place the mediated tastes under scrutiny, and yet this variable is not at the core of disaggregated data on cultural diversity. To date, one of the glaring disparities in the arts is the need to preserve aesthetic standards, the question then is whose standards?

The following image is meant to de-stabilize our usual categorization and gestures towards **inter-cultural diversity** as we witness instruments from all over the world at a musical camp in Botswana, among them: The marimba, the piano and the drums with “Bra Hugh” Masekela blowing the trumpet.

## **Cultural Practices that contradict Human Rights**

The issue to be debated is the tension between the UNESCO Convention's affirmation of cultural diversity, the practice of traditional culture on the one hand and practices that contradict human rights principles. Without making generalizations about Africa, I will use an incident that took place in my country recently, to show how continuing conservatism by those who perceive themselves as custodians of culture infringe on cultural diversity and freedom of expression as espoused by the UNESCO Convention.

In August 2009, 15 members of the *Maranyane* Institute of Information Management and Accounting Drama group, along with their coach, John Marumo, were dragged before the Bakgatla Kgotla along with their families and ward leaders and censored after the group performed and won with a play depicting Bakgatla men initiation school, *Bogwera* in a drama competition organized by the Botswana Training Authority (BOTA) *Mmegi* September 04, 2009. "They faced charges of dragging the name and image of the tribe in the mud through their award winning play *E maithukotho mabe*. A play about two friends, Lucas and Sizwe, who were involved in different sorts of anti-social activities entailing unscrupulous love affairs, alcohol abuse and nightlife. Lucas's parents being a conservative Tswana Family raised him according to their cultural values including enrolling him for initiation school. On the other hand, Siswe continued his wayward behavior and ended up inevitably infected with HIV" *Botswana Daily News*, Monday August 31, 2009 No. 163.

Here I am interested in the **structural limits set by cultural norms and regimes of regulation** especially issues of "cultural normativity" backed by recourse to tradition, such as "it is our culture (*ke ngwao ya rona*) or we never do that in our culture, or women are not allowed to do certain dances in our culture". For example in this case Kgosi Segale Linchwe was quoted saying "The group had insulted and undermined the tribe by acting and posing bare-breasted during the performance of their winning play" BOPA, August 31 2009 No 63. Locals' claims about their own culture serves as a given, and outsiders are usually intimidated by the contemptuous look, as if saying, "Its cultural thing, you will never understand". On the other hand as an African researcher, I have often times been told, how Westernized, I am and that my research is anti-tradition. I always respond by saying, far from that, I am not against my culture, but I am cognizant of the fact that culture is dynamic, and that we need to keep that in mind all the times, and not perceive it as something static. For instance, some of the rituals that were performed in the last fifty years, have changed and adapted to the modern times, and some have been discarded because the community no longer finds them useful. The example of the Maranyane group, which could be one among other cases, which go unreported, can be used to highlight the tension between UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity of Cultural Expression (2007) and the practice of traditional culture on the one hand. Furthermore, the Maranyane issue can be used as an example of cultural practices that contradict human rights practices.

## Tradition/Culture Vs Human Rights Principles

The fact that Maranyane actresses and actors were whipped for performing a skit based on *bogwera* (male initiation), which in my view is only a way of presenting tradition on stage as imagined through rites of passage, leaves a lot to be desired. Not only does this act contradict the ideals enshrined in Botswana's democratic constitution, but it also violates the individual's human rights as the critics pointed out. In his response Kgosi Kgolo Kgafela II, who is a trained lawyer had this to say " ...those People have to understand that human rights on its own is a fluid concept which is relative to the values of a particular community". *Mmegi*, September 4, 2009. But in this incident it is apparent that most articles from the UNESCO convention on cultural diversity and freedom of expression were thrown out of the window by someone who used his powers as the chief to punish his "subjects". Since, the culprits who were punished for dancing bare-breasted were women; this to me also had some implications for gender equality and the status of the female artist in Africa, especially the censoring of their "erotic autonomy" which I will address later.

This brings us to another question, tabled for discussion. Who decides what is progressive or not? What exactly is the role of the artist in the tribal society can s/he appropriate material from his or her culture without risking the wrath of the custodians of culture? The artist's role then becomes two- fold to serve the state and the need to pay a totem bow to his tribal chief. It is interesting that the culprits regretted their actions, accepted the blame and were reluctant to talk to the media.

Following, the silence from the culprits, Kgosi Kgolo Kgafela II, confidently came out to lash at the media and some of the critics who had voiced their satisfaction with his actions. The chief came out to lash out at those who had criticized his actions, quoted as saying that, "...he is surprised that it is only the media which is making so much noise the Maranyane issue while the victims and their parents as well as the ward leaders have not raised any complaint" *Mmegi* September 04, 2009.

Several newspapers carried the story, where several of his criticism was echoed, albeit in more toned language.

The challenge then is, **which traditional values to leave behind and which ones to salvage and recreate?** If bogosi/chiefdom is becoming an extreme form of traditional authority, I will say it needs to be re-evaluated, so that those who wield power do not infringe on citizen's human rights especially freedom of expression. Having said that, I don't want to give the impression that all African cultural practices are bad, we have some good practices that have been used for conflict resolution and promotion of cultural diversity which, in my opinion are worth salvaging. Two examples that come to mind are: ubuntu (botho), indaba. (kgotla). Most Botswana's success as a "beacon of democracy" is attributed to the collaboration between the *dikgosi* and the government.

Of course, the actions and the responses of Kgosi Kgafela give the impression that the chief has absolute power to monitor what his "subjects" can and cannot perform. This is a chief who enjoys sovereignty and has symbolic power as the paramount chief of the

Bakgatla ba Kgafela, who reside in Botswana and Moruleng in South Africa. While the Bakgatla in Moruleng are under the role of Kgosi Nyalala Pilane, he still reports to Kgosi Kgolo Kgafela II, who enjoys certain powers within democracy modernity in a modern state. After all, a lot has been written about borders and ethnic identity in Africa, which builds on Benedict Anderson's observation of nation states as imagined communities " [A] nation is a community socially constructed, which is to say imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group" (Anderson 1983), which renders the notion of borders useless. Needless, to say that this situation is not peculiar to Botswana, most participants from Africa noted how African identity continues to vacillate between citizenship and ethnic subject. On the whole, the incident can help us look at structures of power and identity politics, especially in Africa. These are some of the cultural particularities that the UNESCO convention has to address if it is to fully promote cultural diversity between Africa and the rest of the world.

Consequently, this creates a paradox, where we are expected to celebrate diversity when some of the conflicts revolve around modern cultural values versus traditional cultural practices. This has serious implications for ethnic minorities and women, whose voices continue to be muffled by proclamations from above. It is common to find that the dances of the ethnic minorities are appropriated by those in the majority for stage etc., I am wondering what would happen if the ethnic minorities appropriated the dances of their "superiors"? Would they be whipped as well? Another related point is the masculinization of traditionally female dances in the name of diversity, and the demonization of women who venture into traditionally male instruments and dances. The double standards here undermine diversity instead of promoting it. Therefore, one has to grapple with different modes of agency, which allow the artist to play with different kinds of identities depending on the context.

### **Different Modes of Agency: The Erotic Autonomy**

One of the least discussed of these agencies is the "erotic autonomy". According to Audre Lorde in her collection of essays *Sister Outsider*, "The erotic has often been misnamed by men against women. It has been made into the confused, trivial, the psychotic, and the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have been often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as source of power and information, confusing it with the opposite, the pornographic" (54).

Traditionally, most maidens danced bare-breasted, a practice which was outlawed by the missionaries as vulgar. However, certain ethnic groups have maintained this practice despite censorship from both locals and people from abroad. Swaziland, to date stages annual Swazi Reed Dance, "a traditional ceremony celebrating Swaziland's young women".

While the Swazi maidens perform their erotic autonomy under the watchful eyes of the Queen mother and all the patriarchs, in some of the interviews the girls said they did it for themselves, because it was a way of flaunting their sexuality. The fact that they feel good

about themselves is one of the points overlooked by those who read this festival as mere commodification of women. The inter-cultural dialogue will mean that as diverse cultures, we take time, to listen and understand each other's culture. After all, celebrating one's heritage is not always tantamount to tribal chauvinism. As Clifford Geertz astutely asserts in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those whom they probably belong. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to make a Freudian quake, and some moral perplexities as well" (Geertz 173: 452).