

So what can the 'Rainbow Nation' teach the world about intercultural dialogue?

Input by Ryland Fisher to the 4th World Summit on Arts and Culture

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Thank you, chairperson.

It is indeed an honour to be at this conference and to interact with people from all over the world. I hope you are having a good time in our beautiful country.

I come from Cape Town, a coastal city in South Africa, a city those of us who live there like to believe is the most beautiful city in the world. It is the one city in the world that is built around a mountain but where, within minutes, you can be at a beautiful beach, on top of one of several mountains, or among beautiful vineyards, sipping some amazing wines.

I have lived in Cape Town for most of my life and, despite living in other cities over the years, I always go back there. It is where I grew up and it informs my soul.

I am passionate about Cape Town, I have a love/hate relationship with its residents but I have always tried to make Cape Town a better place. And I love this city despite not having grown up among all the beauty the city has to offer. I grew up in what is known as the Cape Flats, a collection of rugged townships where gangs thrive, where small sub-economic houses and corrugated iron shacks are the order of the day, where women and child abuse is rife, where gangsters and drug dealers run the show, and where hundreds of young men stand on street corners in the middle of the day because they can't find work. I no longer live on the Cape Flats but like so many people of my generation, who have managed to escape from the Cape Flats, we are still linked to it because of family ties with people who live there.

Because of its beauty, people sometimes overlook the fact that Cape Town is a deeply divided city. It is a city with the highest economic growth rate in South Africa, but also with the biggest gap between rich and poor. It is the only South African city which does not have a black majority – it has what is called a coloured majority – coloured is a term we used in South Africa to describe what in some parts of the world are called mixed race people. And because of all of this, Cape Town is ripe for people who thrive on exploiting differences between people and using that to foment discord in society.

In 1999, this discord, this intolerance, was at its height in Cape Town. A vigilante group called People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) exploited unhappiness about drug dealers to create serious divisions in Cape Town. It was a time of pipe bomb attacks on all kinds of people, of drive-by shootings, of assassination attempts. It was also shortly after Planet Hollywood, a popular restaurant at Cape Town's waterfront, had been bombed and destroyed.

It was a time when white people were suspicious of black people and vice versa, Muslims were almost violently critical of Jews and vice versa, poor people were growing increasingly angry about the riches some people had accrued while rich people were getting incredibly impatient with poor people, who they believed to be unproductive.

I was editor of the Cape Times, one of the city's major newspapers, at the time and I suspected that a time-bomb was waiting to explode in Cape Town. I thought about what I could do about this. I have always believed that the role of newspapers should not only be to be a mirror on society, but newspapers should sometimes play a leadership role in society and this was one of those instances.

I decided to introduce an editorial campaign, called "One City, Many Cultures" which set out to explore how the different racial and cultural groups in Cape Town related to different rites of passage, such as birth, growing up, marriage, looking after our elderly, and death and remembrance. Every day, for 12 weeks out of that year, we showed how the groups who live in Cape Town celebrate their diversity.

"One City, Many Cultures" became a huge project in Cape Town and grew beyond the Cape Times. It turned into a major promotional project involving essay competitions, photographic competitions, diversity dinners and a range of other events. But it also created an opportunity for the people of Cape Town to talk about what they had in common and how they differed.

This project culminated in what was then known as the "One City Festival" which later became the Cape Town Festival.

Unfortunately, the "One City, Many Cultures" campaign died after I left the Cape Times in 2000, but it still lives on in the Cape Town Festival where our official slogan remains "One City, Many Cultures". This year we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Cape Town Festival and the "One City, Many Cultures" project.

The pictures you can see in the background are from the original "One City, Many Cultures" project and some more recent scenes from this year's Cape Town Festival.

Our aim with the festival remains to create a more tolerant, more integrated and more united city of Cape Town. And we believe that we can use the arts and culture, particularly music, to promote and achieve this aim.

Our festival format is very simple. We have a series of community festivals, followed by a youth workshop programme, and then we have our main festival which is a series of free concerts in a public space in our central business district.

We chose to locate our main festival in the CBD because of the history of South Africa, and particularly Cape Town, where black people still sometimes feel uncomfortable about being in the city centre, which has traditionally been white. We believe that, through our event, it gives black people an opportunity to take ownership of our city centre, to come into the city centre and feel completely comfortable.

Through our community festivals, however, we create an opportunity for people from different areas to go into areas they would not normally go, to experience the arts and culture of that particular community.

Because of our history in South Africa, it is highly likely that when we have a community festival, it would only attract people from a specific racial or cultural group – after all, most of our people still live in racially segregated areas.

So what we do with our community festivals at the Cape Town Festival is to insist that each festival involves more than one community, so that the content and the audience reflect these communities. And the communities have to be different from each other to encourage integration between diverse communities.

Some people call this social engineering but we feel that, because of our history and the social engineering of apartheid and colonialism, we need a progressive form of social engineering to undo the wrongs of apartheid and colonialism.

While I would like to believe the Cape Town Festival was unique in its origins, there are presently many initiatives in South Africa with similar aims, of bringing together people who were previously prevented from socialising or interacting with each other.

We are very sensitive in South Africa about our history. In fact, some people, mainly whites, do not want to be reminded of the past. They feel that, since we have become a democratic country, we should focus on the positive and move forward as a so-called “rainbow nation”.

My feeling is that these people are driven by their own guilt, their feeling that, just maybe, they did not do enough during the apartheid years to fight for a democratic society. They also tend to believe that we have overcome apartheid and walk into the future hand in hand. They often quote Nelson Mandela, saying: “Madiba said it was okay to be white, so why are you creating such a fuss.”

Unfortunately, it is not so easy. We might have overcome legalised apartheid, but the effects of 50 years of apartheid and more than 300 years of colonialism will be with us for a long time to come. We can see it throughout South Africa, where the majority of people, who happen to be black, live in abject poverty in bleak townships, while the minority, who happen to be white, still live in relative luxury in tree-lined suburbs.

So can the so-called “rainbow nation” teach the world anything about intercultural dialogue?

I mentioned the example of the Cape Town Festival and the “One City, Many Cultures” project as but one example of how we have grappled with intercultural dialogue in South Africa and in particular Cape Town. We are still a very young democracy and many of us are still suffering the effects of years and years of separation and not speaking to each other. Add to this the fact that South Africa has eleven official languages, many of which are only spoken in certain regions of the country, and you should begin to understand the need for us to have intercultural dialogue in a highly complex situation.

Apartheid was very effective in dividing the people of South Africa. It made us believe that we are all so different and that some of us were better than others. It made some of us believe that we would never be allowed to reach our full potential.

So it is important for us to talk about what it means to be a South African and an African, to understand that it is not necessarily a bad thing to be white or black in South Africa today. Not all white people are bad, just as not all black people are good, and vice versa. We should not be ashamed of who and what we are, but we should not use it as tools against other people.

The issue of race continues to bedevil South Africa today and I fear that we have become so obsessed with race that we have begun to sacrifice ideas and values. For instance, we would rather appoint a conservative black person than a progressive white person. I have never been comfortable with chasing numbers at the expense of values. I have never believed that one should merely appoint black people to make up numbers. I understand where we come from as a society, where blacks have been excluded from making a meaningful contribution to our economy but sometimes, for the sake of expediency, we tend to go in the opposite direction. I fear that our society could lose good, progressive people who happen not to be black.

It is because of all of this that the work that we started as “One City, Many Cultures” remains important to this day and why we intend to expand the work that we do, to not only be a festival, but a movement that deals on a daily basis with intolerance and hatred, that tries to teach people about how we are similar when we think we are so different.

For instance, Cape Town has an image as a city that is not very friendly towards black people. As the “One City, Many Cultures” Movement, we intend to look at ways in which we can change this perception but also this reality.

We also intend to do a range of other activities throughout the year that will focus on promoting the vision of “One City, Many Cultures”, of creating greater interaction between the different groups of people who live in our beautiful city. These events could be talks or musical events or even other cultural events, but its central premise will be to bring people together to talk about their culture and their heritage.

In short, we have realised that the work that we have started, of trying to create a more tolerant, more united and more diverse city of Cape Town, is not something that can start on Day One and end on Day Two. We need to work on it all the time.

Of course, we will not be able to do anything without proper funding but that’s another discussion altogether.

Essentially, what I wanted to share with you today is how necessary intercultural dialogue is in our deeply complicated and divided society. At the Cape Town Festival, we are trying to deal with it in innovative ways and are succeeding, despite having scarce resources.

There are people who believe that we are fighting a losing battle but it’s a battle which, I believe, we cannot afford not to fight.

Thank you so much for listening and I hope that you will take with you some encouragement from the work that we are doing.

Enkosi Kakul. Baie Dankie. Shukraan. Thank you very much.