World Summit of Arts and Culture

The Birth of the National Arts Council of South Africa: Developing an Arts Council in a Post-Apartheid Era, by Doreen Nteta

I came to work in the Arts from a slightly different background to most of you. I am a museum curator. I think in museums and art galleries things are more ordered and have to be planned beforehand. We don't often act on impulse, and if we waited for inspiration, things would move very slowly (Or is that the reason things move slowly? Are inspirational moments rare with us?). I came to work for the Arts Council with the view that I'd sort, organise and manage the administration and I could not understand how so many people could live their lives in such disorder. What this bunch of people had in common was their passion for the arts. It is this passion I was soon caught up in and humbled by. Today I feel honoured that I work for and among such talented people. People who help us to realise our humanity, our creativity and the very essence of who we are and what we are. Without art and artists the world would be a sad and bleak place to live in.

Because the arts and culture are inherent in our lives they always get short changed because they and the people who practice them are taken for granted. The artists get used but are not rewarded because sometimes people feel they cannot pay for culture as it is a way of life and practitioners are doing it for pleasure. Perhaps this is not so obvious in developed countries, but in developing countries it is still very much so, especially where arts and culture have to compete for resources with many social needs such as education, health, housing and simply the fight for survival.

It is for this reason that the world was suitably impressed when one of the newest things that the new democratic government of South Africa (1994) did was to set up a ministry for Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and the National Arts Council in 1997. Whether this Ministry and the NAC will survive, considering the resources available for them and the country, remains to be seen.

In 1995 the new government of South Africa put together a group of people to consult nationally and internationally on the policy for guiding arts administration, practice and education. The group was called the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG). The resultant consultations resulted in a White Paper for Arts and Culture.

Dr B S Ngubane in introducing the White Paper in 1996 writes: "South African society has been undergoing fundamental transformation over the last two years. In accordance with the principles of justice, democracy, non-racism and non-sexism, every sector of our society is facing change. While this may be unsettling for some, for many, it brings hope that their needs, views and aspirations will now also become part of the mainstream. South Africa's first democratically elected Government has contributed to this process by creating our first Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. South Africa is indeed on the brink of experiencing a cultural Renaissance."
The arts, culture and heritage cannot be an exception in this transformation process, since they too were overtly affected by the mal-distribution of skills, resources and infrastructure during the apartheid era. In fact, given that the arts are premised on freedom of expression and critical thought, transformation is this area is crucial to empowering creative voices throughout the country and in thus integral to the success of the democratic process”.

The White Paper was inspired by the best practices in different parts of the world, such as the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden. The White Paper aimed at addressing seven (7) critical areas in order to give practical expression to the new arts and culture dispensation.

These are:
• transparent and catalytic mechanisms for distributing funds
• transformation of all arts and culture institutions and structures
• redistribution, redress and access
• human resource development: practitioners, administrators and educators
• integration of arts and culture into all aspects of socio-economic development
• the rights and status of practitioners, and
• sources of funding

The White paper also proposed the establishment of a National Arts Council, as well as other related heritage councils.

The problems in the Arts and Culture in South Africa are traced to the apartheid government, which used culture as a political strategy, shifting free expression, and distorting all cultural forms. Everything was divided along racial and cultural lines for purposes of economic, political and social activities. People lived with those who shared the same colour or culture. An interesting dimension happened in townships in the cities where different cultural groups were lumped together because of the colour of their skins. There was a dynamic cultural enrichment resulting in a rich and unique and diverse culture. This was because South Africans share a rich linguistic, religious and cultural heritage in spite of what the government of the day might have thought.

The White Paper was based on the values of access to, participation in, and enjoyment of the arts. The arts were moved away from the preserve of the privileged and as a government tool for controlling - a "governing" tool, a tool for developing appropriate attitudes.

The new National Arts Council was established by an Act of Parliament in April 1997 and has to face many challenges. One of these challenges is accessibility, which is proving to be a major challenge to the government and the National Arts Council. All cultural institutions are situated in cities that were until 1994, only accessible to the minority White population. All museums, art galleries and theatres were (and still are) in the cities, thus entrenching and expressing governments’ policies of providing for the rich, the privileged and the educated. Up until 1994 only the Eurocentric cultural forms and institutions were recognised and funded in South Africa. Today those institutions are being restructured in order to distribute the resources more equitably. One of the
things that the new government did was to build Community Arts centres in previously disadvantaged areas and cut down on financial resources previously provided to Performing Arts Councils. Until 1994, there were 4 PAC and they consumed 67% of all Art resources. Today, with the down-sizing and attempts at redistribution of resources, they consume 32.4%. This act has resulted in some of these institutions closing down and accusations levelled at Government for causing the shut down of theatres.

The change was inevitable if a democratic government was to be a reality for the arts community. It is not the closing down of theatres that is important here, but rather the new forms of artistic expression that are surfacing. The arts of the majority are for the first time being openly practiced. The decline of theatre going audiences and the closing down of theatres is a global concern for the creative artist. The electronic developments are making it unnecessary for people to go out to theatres, cutting down on human interaction, thus making human beings poorer for lack of interaction. We know, of course, the importance of human interaction. No e-media can ever take the place of live performances and human interaction. So the NAC and the Government are concerned about the future of the performing arts - theatre, orchestra, etc.

In South Africa when we question the closing down of theatres, the decline of museum going audiences, we need to take into account the social and economic conditions of our people. People are concerned with the act of living, especially in developing countries. Culture is now a source and a means of survival, and an emerging democracy is faced with many problems, most of which are a legacy of the apartheid era.

The Arts and Culture policies of the new government are aimed at redressing imbalances in the resource provisions for the arts. In this instance the National Arts Council has a pivotal role. The NAC does not only provide funding, but it is also charged with the responsibility of advising government on arts policy, arts education and advocacy for the arts. The culture policies are aimed at promoting the rich and diverse cultural expression of South Africa through the provision of infrastructure, capacity building for organisations, human resource development, sourcing of funds, promoting the rights of artists and developing international relations.

It is exciting for us that this new democracy, which is South Africa, is tackling the problems of arts and culture accessibility and democratisation.

Arts and Culture are the soul of a people, especially African people. Up until now the world has believed that the regeneration of Africa will come through economic revival. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies have failed to revive the economies of developing countries. Structural Adjustment Policies have caused more suffering and plunged the affected countries into deeper problems. I think it is generally agreed that these policies have failed. Developing countries are crippled by debt resulting in untold suffering. President Mbeki of South Africa is preaching African Renaissance. I believe we should be looking at the original concept of renaissance, a movement which started in the 19th century Europe, which was led by the Arts and Culture.
A cultural renaissance introducing people into the equation. People mean culture, the soul and development that is people centered. Inherent development messages are to be found where the people are.

Culture and renaissance are the return of what Africa people call "Ubuntu" which simply means "humanity". It is, however, more that humanity. "Ubuntu" is how we live and relate to each other. It is the values we profess; it is our morality. That is what should guide African renaissance. These values are not housed in theatres, museums and galleries. They are to be found among communities. It is for this reason that the NAC of South Africa is promoting community arts and culture, which unfortunately to some, is seen as destroying arts as understood by those with different values.

In a new democracy, in South Africa, and I dare say in most developing countries, the question is often asked as to whether there is room for art for art's sake. Even in the most remote areas of Africa there were and are people who practice art for art's sake. Therefore for us in South Africa there is a danger that we may fail to recognise and reward excellence in the arts because of other pressing social and economic needs. Failing to recognise creativity means we share no future because artists are the future.

In the face of scarce resources, there is always pressure for the Arts Council to operate within national priorities which are not always easily seen as arts development policies. In this case art is used as a medium for conveying social development messages. We have not solved the problem, but recognise it and hope that this is a transition stage.

We have to be vigilant and ensure that we do not stifle creativity in an attempt to improve the lives of our people. Because of poverty and disease in developing countries, there is even more urgency than before to recognise the economic value of arts and culture. Government leaders who are trained in the economic and political sciences do not readily recognise the economic value of the arts. Because of the education of arts practitioners, they are often unable to convince planners of this contribution of the arts to the economy as they are often seen as only having an intrinsic value.

We welcome therefore projects that attempt to measure the economic value of the arts, because in times of scarce resources, funders and government want to know if their monies are making a difference in people's lives. In 1997 the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and technology commissioned a preliminary research on four cultural industries - Craft, Film, Publishing and Music. Although the study is not an in-depth one, it clearly shows the economic contribution of culture and how it can uplift standards of living.

Today there is even greater need to advocate for proper recognition of cultural and social workers who are often the worst paid and ignored. When we campaign for the African renaissance, we are asking tired people to lead the way and are selling false hopes. It is notable that in Africa there are at most two Arts Councils that are functioning reasonably well. The continent is riddled with problems including wars that are destroying "Ubuntu". In most cases government still uses arts and culture to control. Traditional cultures are changing and
becoming commercialised. People are working in culture only it pays. This is not bad in itself, but it is difficult to accept when it changes cultural values.

The National Arts Council of South Africa is set up as an "arms-length" organisation. This means that, in theory, the NAC can decide who and what to promote. In a democracy this is no problem, but where there is a weakness on the government side arms-length becomes a problem because for the policy to succeed there should be strong government policies which are recognised nationally. Arms-length requires stable policies and a vision that is clearly enunciated.

The National Arts Council of South Africa is also set up as a transparent and democratic institution. It is composed of twenty-one (21) Board members, nine (9) of whom are elected by the nine (9) Provinces. A system of peer evaluation is used.

The South African government of National unity meant that South Africans had to adopt a policy of redress, reconciliation and acceptance of diverse cultures, thus overlooking the backlog created by apartheid. The government undertook not to punish the former privileged by reducing resources thus inadvertently perpetuating imbalances. This meant that the gap between those who have and those who have naught is difficult to close. There is still geographical separation of population; the privileged continue to expect similar provision as before and development becomes unplottable on the graph of progress. This is problematic for the new NAC, which has tried to bridge the gap.

To begin with, the NAC concentrated on funding mainly the previously disadvantaged communities. After three (3) years of such funding, the needs have increased more and further discussions of the policies of the NAC have become imperative. Unfortunately the NAC also adopted the division of genres as practiced by other Arts Councils world over. We called on Councils, an Arts Council, not an Arts and Culture council. We categorised the arts into Craft, Theatre and Musical Theatre, Multidiscipline, Dance, Music and Opera and Literature. Africans and developing countries need arts and culture councils and 3 divisions of the arts: Music and Dance, Theatre and Literature and Craft. You can't do any of these without the other. You can't dance without singing or sing without dancing or theatre without poetry. You use drums and wear your livery, which is made of beads, feathers, skins, which are your craft.

The Government of South Africa also inherited an international debt, which means that the poor of the new democracy continue to pay for the services they did not enjoy. When the developing countries ask for Global Corporations to reduce their debt, they are asking to be given a chance for development, not to engage in wars.

The South African Government is committed to the arts, but lack of resources or scarce resources make that commitment a sham, a charade and a false hope. The National Arts Council of South Africa is aware that government cannot be the sole provider of resources, and therefore has set up a fundraising committee. It is also aware that unless proper evaluation of the NAC's work thus far is done, it will be difficult to increase resources for the arts. Therefore the NAC after 3 years of operation is going to be evaluated in order to determine its value and
review its *modus operandi*. The funding up to now has been on an arts-for-all basis. This is now changing. A new funding criterion has been developed which encourages the NAC to fund projects in collaboration with others, to fund projects with a national impact.

Democracy does not mean that we have won the race. It means that we are now in the race, and needing all the sustenance to win. That sustenance comes through the international community. It is the interest of all of us in the World Community to prove that democracy pays. We have not had too many successful models. Perhaps even with the South African Arts Council model we can prove that democracy works.

Above all, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the world to be blown about my house as freely as possible, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Mariama Ba, a wise African woman from Senegal, says education is meant to "make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, make up for our inadequacies, develop universal moral values in us." (*So long a letter*, 1981: 15).

The setting up of a democratic and transparent organisation lends credibility to the government of South Africa, but we have to ensure that peers and the grassroots communities identify with the NAC. It is really difficult to promote the arts where the artists mainly want to be rewarded appropriately and given proper contracts and social security. The South African cultural industry has grown out of exploitation of Black people, so these matters of contracts and social security are for us as important as promoting excellence. They are the fertiliser for the development of art.

To those who want to promote art for art's sake, they are perhaps a distraction. Here we are. We stand on the threshold of great technological change. We do not know if we will be moving forward or backwards. We know that with your help we shall make the journey and win the race. With "ubuntu", the spirit of humanism we can make it together.

Thank you for inviting us to participate in this ground-breaking meeting. Thank for your indulgence.