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The question is: what does South Africa have to teach the world about intercultural dialogue?

A lot, one would think, because this was exactly where our species first started practising culture and art.

More than a third of the total record of early human evolution stretching over 2 million years was found in the caves making up the Cradle of Humankind complex not far from here.

While it is now generally accepted that all human beings originated in Africa south of the Sahara, not many know that there is overwhelming evidence that South Africa has the longest continuous habitation of humans and their ancestors in the world. Never since the early development of the earliest hominids more than two million years ago did our ancestors leave these parts uninhabited.

But South Africa's role in the evolution of our species is far more spectacular than this. All the available evidence indicate that the Cape coastal region played a special role in the development of culture among the first modern humans around 70 000 years ago, a fundamental rearrangement of human behaviour that then slowly spread to other human populations. Most top researchers in the field now agree that the evidence is strong enough to say that all cultural modernity originated there.

The first evidence of humans producing art was found at Blombos Cave near Stilbaai: ochre tablets engraved more than 70 000 years ago. Tiny shells were found at Blombos and other caves along the southern coast. These shells did not come from the site, they were fetched from many kilometres away. They had no real practical use. They were used in necklaces, body adornments, they had a spiritual, a cultural meaning.

Our ancestors who lived along our coastline more than 70 000 years ago were learning that there was more to life than eat, sleep and procreate. (However attractive such a life may now sound to you...).

The evidence is of activities that went beyond simple survival, such as producing art, decorating the human body, rituals suggesting spirituality, the modification of living spaces and manipulation of the environment.

These ancient peoples were your and my ancestors – not in the spiritual sense, in the real genetic sense. The ancestors of those of you who you are from Asia or Europe or the Americas left Africa around 60 000 years ago and gradually settled in virtually every corner of the world.

The direct descendants of these coastal people who never left the region were later called the San or Bushmen, who lived as hunter/gatherers and extreme naturalists until relatively recently. The Bushmen's vast knowledge of nature's secrets, of animal behaviour and the medicinal and other values of plants, has not even been surpassed by modern, Western science.

The Bushmen were also deeply spiritual and artistic people. Since very few Bushmen survived by the time other people started studying their art and culture, our knowledge of them is very limited. Our appreciation of their art, of which many thousands of examples are still to be seen on rock faces all over southern Africa has only blossomed during the last two decades or so.

There are more than 40 000 recorded rock paintings in South Africa – it is the oldest and biggest art gallery in the world. The World Heritage Committee stated that this art treasure was “one of the supreme achievements of humankind”. These were not just pretty pictures. The San's rock art was about their rich spiritual life, about symbols and metaphors we still don't fully understand.

About 5 000 years ago the people who had developed in the valleys between Nigeria and Cameroon started moving away and within 3 000 years occupied most of southern Africa. By the time some of these people, who were identified only by the common language they spoke, arrived at the borders of today's South Africa about two thousand years ago, they had a complex culture and spirituality and were master iron workers, artistic potters and able cattle farmers.

Those humans who left Africa and eventually settled in Europe only rediscovered the continent they came from about 600 years ago. It was once their home, but now they viewed it as a dark and primitive place.

My French, German and Dutch ancestors came back to the mother continent 350 years ago. Here their genes got mixed with those of slaves from Indonesia and India and of the aboriginal Khoikhoi. They then started speaking a language first developed by the slaves and the Khoi labourers who simplified Dutch, mixed in some local words and messed with the grammar. They called it after the continent: they called it Afrikaans. And they called themselves after the continent: they called themselves Afrikaners. Unlike most other colonizers of Africa, these mixed-blood, pale-skinned people never left Africa again and came to view themselves as indigenous too.

So now we have the aboriginal San and Khoikhoi, we have the Bantu-speakers, the slaves from the East Indies and Africa and the Europeans from Holland, France, Germany and Britain all living in one country. During the late 19th century they were joined by indentured labourers and later traders from India as well as sizeable numbers of Chinese, Greek and Portuguese-speaking immigrants. A real melting pot.

The aboriginal people were partly wiped out and partly assimilated. After many generations of brutal subjugation, oppression and bloody resistance, the remaining groups got together in 1990 and agreed to a political settlement that gave hope to all of humanity.

What a sweet and romantic story. The poetic tale of humanity fracturing and then getting back together again in the Mother Continent. And it all happened here in sunny South Africa.

Of course a society like this would have a lot to teach the rest of the world about intercultural dialogue, would be a shining example of the cross-pollination of cultures and art. If any society could set an example of how people of different backgrounds, histories, cultures and languages could live together and grow together, it would be the Rainbow Nation of God, the Children of Mandela.

Well, sorry, it just didn't happen this way. Despite this spectacular history, we have done no better on this front than societies with a similar history of colonial settlement such as the United States and Australia.

When those settlers I talked about who called themselves after the African continent, the Afrikaners, got the political power in this country, they wrote

“Europeans Only” on park benches, lifts and buses, referring to themselves and other whites. They believed their calling was to tame South Africa and make it as close to a European country as possible, to make it as un-African as possible.

Black people were thus banned to remote rural Bantustans. English speaking whites thought this was a bit crude, but supported it anyway and enjoyed the privilege it brought them – if things really went wrong, they could always go back to England.

In the 1980s the black nationalists and the white nationalists both realised that they could not prevail through violent means and started negotiating. For a brief period of euphoria followed the 1994 settlement – we called ourselves the Rainbow People of God.

It wasn't real and it didn't last long. The resentment, the prejudice and the fear came back soon enough. We are all back in our racial jails. If we talk about our non-racial democracy and our non-racial constitution, don't believe us. We have entered the era of racial solidarity. Our heroes are those who can muster the worst insults towards people of other races. We all attack and defend from our racial trenches.

We have new legislation forcing us to classify ourselves according to race: African, Coloured, Indian, white, even “Other African” for those who come from beyond our borders. We're obsessed with racial head-counting – how many Africans, how many members of minority groups have what kind of position. Our national discourse is determined by a 28 year old populist rabble rouser with expensive tastes in whiskey and cars and with profoundly sexist, racist and xenophobic views.

A culture of entitlement and crass materialism has taken hold of the black middle classes – the white middle classes had been suffering from that for a long time, of course. (Even the phrase “crass materialism” has been robbed of its meaning: it was a favourite phrase of the leader of our Communist Party, who had just bought himself a BMW worth R1,3 million with taxpayers' money...) The leader of the Youth League of our ruling party had a house-warming party last week. His home is not among the disaffected, impoverished, badly educated and unemployed youth, but in the wealthiest gated suburb of Johannesburg, Sandown. He imported his champagne from

France and only served whiskey that cost almost R2 000 a bottle. We are so proud of this young man.

When we paint our faces and put on African shirts and beat the drums, don't be fooled. When we curse the European and North-American imperialists, don't believe us. We would actually love to be just like them. In fact, scratch those who scream hardest against Western colonialism, and you will find someone who is deeply ashamed of being African.

When we go on holiday outside our borders, we don't go to Ghana or Senegal, because these places have no bragging value. We go to New York and London and Paris. We don't read books from Africa, we have no interest in films made in Africa. At least we love Oprah Winfrey and she is a member of the African Diaspora, we will have you know.

When we pledge solidarity with our African brothers and sisters, laugh in our faces. Because we don't want them to live and work among us. They are not welcome here, and if they don't listen, we will kill them.

More than a million white South Africans left South Africa during the last decade for whiter places like Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada. A large chunk of those who remained dream of also leaving, but they can't afford it or don't have the qualifications.

But those whites who are here physically may as well stay, because their minds have long ago emigrated to a closed space, to a world of their own where they can entertain themselves by spotting black people failing, by swapping crime stories or forecasting how quickly we are going to deteriorate into a Zimbabwe-type situation.

My own ethnic group, the Afrikaners, suffer from a lethal mix of ethnic chauvinism, guilt, identity crisis, insecurity and low self-esteem. Those who can, emigrate to Australia or New Zealand, both rugby-loving countries, where they form Afrikaner cultural societies and spend their time corresponding with the letters pages of Afrikaans newspapers or internet chat rooms. If there is one attribute we Afrikaners have that the rest of the world should be jealous of, it is our brilliant ability to be perpetual victims.

Now that Nelson Mandela's life is about to fade, Desmond Tutu is getting old and JM Coetzee has emigrated to Australia, I'm afraid we have nothing

to offer the rest of humanity. Oh no, I forget: we have a unique cultural instrument to offer you: the vuvuzela, a plastic trumpet-like pipe we use to make huge amounts of noise at soccer matches.

Come visit us next year when we host the Football World Cup. We promise to paint our faces, beat the drums and to pretend to love each other while you're here.