

How can we Promote Reading and appreciation for African arts, culture, heritage and history and World arts and heritage on our Continent?



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By Mongane Wally Serote

This is not the theme which we were supposed to explore, launch and roll out at the symposium hosted by the African Union (AU), the Thabo Mbeki Foundation (TMF) and the Pan African Writers' Association (PAWA) in Ghana this March (2018). The theme was: "Promoting African Literature and Reading: The Role of African Writers in Enhancing African Identity, Shared Values and Integration." The task facing us, which is not stated in the theme, in my view, is much broader and much more urgent than the theme suggests. The three organisations (AU, TMF and PAWA) provided an extremely important platform for African writers to enter into dialogue with each other on what I consider a

contradiction which, if resolved, would let an important discourse emerge. This would result in a rupture away from a morass into dynamic discourse for deep change on the continent.

The challenge for the African writer is: on the one hand, that the struggle for the liberation of the continent has recorded major and deep changes away from the impact of the Slave Trade; on the other, compared to the dialectic of development in the world, (the first, second, third and now the fourth industrial revolution) we are most backward. We are a creative sector of one of the greatest continents of the world, but we are characterised by tailism. This was my struggle with the theme. I struggled to internalise

and to transform this theme which I have had to use as a reference point to explore a very important challenge facing us as Africans.

The theme does not put the responsibility as it should, squarely on the shoulders of the writer, but also more importantly, on the collectives of the creative sector on the continent. I do not think that as writers we must be involved in tailism. We must creatively search for the continent's way out of the cesspool in terms of consciousness and discourse, into fresh air where the masses and the vanguard of the African struggle are, in search of the African revolution.

The theme as a statement is more of an indictment on African academics, intellectuals, non-governmental organisations and governments – the conventional intellectuals – than it is for the masses of our continent. The masses stood their ground, knowing that the odds were great against them. They the masses have never ever failed to respond to take the front line when the clarion call was sounded. The pinch of the shoe has been on their feet and toes forever.

Because the question is an indictment, there are serious questions which we must ask and which we must answer. The questions are: Why did we not answer this question sixty-one years ago when Ghana liberated itself from British colonialism? Or: even many more years before that, when what is now called Sudan was the first African country to liberate itself? Or: even after more than two decades after the New Democratic dispensation in South Africa – if ever the question was raised, that is where it ended, as a question and nothing else!

There is no "promoting reading in school curriculum and appreciation for African and world literature..." as a mandatory position in South Africa. I will therefore approach this question from a different perspective. If we agree that the arts are an expression and reflection of history and heritage and, as Amilcar Cabral asserted four decades ago, that "...culture is simultaneously the fruit of history... and a determinant of history, positive or negative..." then we must as a people, as Africans, throughout the continent and the world, take stock by asking a few

guiding and basic questions, namely: What did the OAU, which was established, spearheaded by none other than the late and former founding president of Ghana, President Kwame Nkrumah and his peers, Nyerere, Nasser, Lumumba, Cabral, Tambo and others, achieve in over three decades? Was that positive history and heritage after a negative history and heritage of over sixty decades of the Slave Trade and colonialism on our continent? We must at least record the important gains which emanated from the processes of the OAU. So as not to divert from the core subject of my thought processes, a brief sketch: by 1994, almost all African countries had wrenched political power from the various colonial powers like Britain, Portugal, Spain, from white domination and apartheid.

Unending and costly efforts have also been exerted against the imperial forces, which have persistently sought to entrench and maximise exploitative systems across our continent for the benefit of their individual and collective countries.

There have been attempts by African compatriots across the continent to use the gained collective political power to wrench social, cultural and economic power and to further deepen the political gains which were achieved using different methods. This has been a fierce and concerted struggle for the emancipation of the African voice on the continent and in the world. In addition, very importantly, the African narrative and discourse was transformed when it was informed by explorations for the unification of Africa. Is it not correct to state what, before colonialism, during colonialism and post colonialism, the most oppressed, the most exploited African men and women did – as African organic intellectuals – besides fighting against the greatest odds and laying down their lives in anti-colonial and anti-exploitative struggles throughout the length and breadth of the continent?...Did they not also sing, produce sculptures, paintings, poetry and novels, in different African and colonial languages, as also they produced photographs and films, theatre and dance productions? They

kept the record.

They printed their finger print on the continental and world page. What happened, where are these artistic productions? Are they available and accessible to the nation and future generations as a creative record and as evidence of the heart beat and spirit of the nationals of the continent?

This in my understanding is the same question as the original theme of the conference suggests. The implication of that statement is: If we, who are educated so to speak, us the conventional intellectuals, ask these very serious questions now, so many decades after the political liberation of the continent, we who were educated by the poor of the poor generations

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before us, who educated us at great cost, who decided that education is a weapon of struggle, if we now put this very serious statement: “promoting African Literature and Reading: The role of African Writers in enhancing African Identity, shared Values and Integration”, is the demand for us not to engage the two pillars of one of the most glaring creative contradictions in the discourse of Africa?

On the one hand there is a deep consciousness on the continent, among the masses, informed by the unrelenting and concerted struggles against all forms of oppression, exploitation, injustice and discrimination and collaboration with the enemies of Africa, by some among us; on the other, a total lack of reflection which must have been mounted and catapulted to the level of a collective consciousness and expression which is present and

available at all times, in all forms of the arts to nurture culture as expressed by Cabral?

That because we must at this hour of history know and forever remember that besides the fact that artificial intelligence, which is one of the tools of the fourth industrial revolution, is at the verge of catapulting the world within the universe to where it has never ever been, we must choose whether we will now either be subjects or objects of that rupture – the fourth revolution.

In other words, we are once more offered a choice by the history of human kind – to “...submit or fight.” I take it that it is most obvious to us that we will not submit. That would be a ghastly phenomenon to contemplate! Our history as a people of the world, denies us that thought.

That is why I pose the question as I have posed it: **How can we Promote Reading and appreciation for African arts, culture, heritage and history and World arts and heritage on our Continent?**

I take it that we are noting that time has run out on us; that generations who are coming after our own will be at a great disadvantage if they are not knowledgeable about who they are, because then they will have to become professional students about themselves and about the world, as has been the trend thus far.

That is because for any nation to know anything about anything else, it must first know itself.

Cabral, as did the founding fathers and mothers of the OAU, elaborated on how Africans must “promote... a ...curriculum... to being... African.”

Given human experience, and given the unique African history, we had to know and be human first, so that we can then know what it is to be African. The OAU was founded after a long nightmare of colonialism, inhuman systems, devised by human beings against other human beings. We also had to devise various measures and systems of waging struggle, so as to liberate ourselves throughout the length and breadth of the continent so as to claim our being human.

This and the struggle against that most inhuman system by humans

against other human beings, besides it having had to claim the best among us, left a high toll of loss of life and sanity of people. For more than three decades, after the founding of the OAU, we were as Africans still in struggle to claim and to announce to other human beings, through many means including through the supreme sacrifice – that we will not submit – that we are human.

We are at the crossroads once more. We count among the youngest continents (our people are mostly young) – I wish I could say: we count among the youngest countries in the world, instead of continents, precisely because we are now at the advent of a major rupture in human experience as I have indicated. If Africa were united now, that is what I would say, we would speak of a United Africa, a country! But then the English have a warning saying which states that if wishes were horses all would ride.

There is nothing wrong in dreaming; but then if one dreams it is also incumbent upon the dreamer to engage in reality. That is the challenge of the creative sector – those who must reflect on a warning that one must deal with reality. We dream when we ask the question: what must be done?

However, because that question has been made a historical question by harsh realities of struggle, strife and of sacrifice and great deeds of human kind in search of justice and freedom, it is also a harsh command for Africans to act and to march towards reality.

I take it that those who convened us in Ghana did so because they are aware and have heard the historical command for Africans to deal with the harsh realities of the twenty-first century. Even as I have barely scratched the surface of our great history of six hundred years of struggle as Africans, I must claim that we have never, whatever the odds, failed as Africans to respond to that revolutionary historical question.

Let us dream then!

More than two decades ago the African Union (AU) was born. Since then, Africa talks about Nepad, the five regions of the continent and the sixth – the diaspora; the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); one and a half billion citizens, the majority of

whom are the youth and therefore a very young continent (country); gender equity; illicit flow of finances from the continent; even as I am being selective in naming the processes for the fundamental transformation of the continent, they are a reflection of some strides Africa has taken to ensure that the gains of the revolution on the continent become irreversible.

And finally, the concepts and advocacy, which are perennially on the African agenda – the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism – must once more, as it was ten years ago, spearheaded by leaders like Mwalimu Nyerere, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Thabo Mbeki, Olusegun Obasanjo, Abdoulaye Wade, and others, be put not only on the continental agenda, but also on the global one. They must not be the issue of governments, but

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be carried together with organs of civil society among whom are the creative sector whose work must continually ask the most creative beings the masses: is this you? or is this you? or is this you? in search of the reality of the aspirations of the revolution as the various artforms emulate a mirror in front of the masses. I select these phenomena precisely because they would be a correct reference for the subject at hand, per statutes of the AU.

I have done a bare historical sketch of the struggle for being human by Africans by turning the theme of my exploration upside down. It must be a question. The creatives must answer it, even better, through their work-actions in word or other forms. If it is, and if we are not only to be condemned and not also be indicted, given the history I have sketched above, our question must then be:

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It is my suggestion that what we were supposed to do in Ghana was not to be an event but a process. We must therefore emerge from there with an interim steering committee to be backed by the AU, TMF and PAWA. The interim committee must take charge of the processes I am suggesting. I must hasten to state that I am aware that this is a mammoth task. It is especially so when we consider where both the material and human resources will come from. Generally speaking we must look at the resources from among Africans throughout the world, the International Community, African, European and the American governments and all active private sectors on the continent. In as much as as a continent we are part and parcel of the global financial portal, a world which shrunk from a soccer ball size to become a golf ball size, to transform nations of the world to be come closely knit neighbourhoods, we must, as the Setswana saying suggests, state that *mamepe aa foo ke mamepe aa ka kwana* – that is, we know and must all agree that all of us must agree to share the sweetness which each has.

Besides the steering committee having to replicate itself in the six regions of the AU, through regional committees under the AU, TMF and PAWA, it must adopt Nepad positions and policies fine tuned for advocacy as a means to reflect on the being of Africans as human beings.

There must be a deliberate and conscious effort to mobilise the participation of youth and women in the processes – so as to not only seek human resources but also contribute to African material and politically trained human resources for the continent and diaspora, through the youthfulness of the continent and gender equity.

Internet and information technology must be set up in the six regions to enhance the motive force and become a locomotive force which must drive the process and projects. Equally all the six regions must, at the onset, be subjected to an African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to continuously

assess the progress of these processes, as also it will inspire progress. Progress as assessed through the APRM must also be to answer the question: how have we successfully nurtured an African Renaissance and Pan African consciousness – an African Patriotism, which will be an unrelenting enemy to the African culture of collaboration with the enemies of Africa?

The regional interim committees which will spread across the continent and the sixth committee (the diaspora), must therefore have a broader mandate on online arts, culture, history and heritage centres. This, by also linking the arts, culture and heritage to the history of the regions where they are set up, but also of the continent and the world.

The objective of these online centres must be to promote, protect, innovate and to put on the human agenda, the history, arts and culture and heritage of Africans.

They must also be linked to the AU committee or commission which is charged with the responsibility to trace the systems which lead to the illicit flow of funds from the continent and the repatriation of the arts which were removed through pillage from the continent from time immemorial.

These internet and information technology links, of the arts, must also have as their objective to detect the illicit expatriation of historical, arts, culture and heritage products, as also they seek to put in place the systems for the distribution of the heritage products on the continent and in the world.

As we all know, the arts, culture and heritage of our continent are more available in Europe and North America than they are here. This is as a result of the pillaging policies of Europe and America.

Those efforts were assisted and abated by corrupt and selfish Africans the same way as those who aided and abetted the Slave Trade, by collaborating with the slave Masters (see *Saltwater Slavery*, Stephnie E Smallwood, 2007). The African philistines and corrupt and selfish beings they were and are, collaborated with slave masters, murderers and thieves who, while despising Africans,

valued and sought the creative treasures of the continent at the lowest price to sell them to the highest bidder.

The challenge put before us by the question I pose therefore is: how, in the first place, must African and world history and heritage be accessible to the different African and world generations?

What I am going to suggest, I am certain, will not be and is not new to most people on the continent. What is a reminder in what I am saying, is that:

On the one hand the collective experiences we gathered in the struggle for justice and peace even against the neo-colonial phase, must and have created firm bonds among us so that we can form collaborations across the continent for our own freedom and for the freedom of coming generations;

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and emancipate citizens of other countries from a collective guilt of being nations of thieves.

On the other hand, in the same way as the concept of the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism have been for decades on the agenda for the majority of countries on the continent and in the diaspora, so has the agenda for the creation of a common revolutionary consciousness on the continent and in the diaspora, to participate in the freedom and justice struggle for human kind.

This consciousness exists on the continent, in the diaspora and among many millions of other peoples of the world. The question which the theme raises is: how do we continuously nurture and sustain the Pan-African Consciousness among the masses of Africans and in the world?

The first lesson from that is, we must

not reinvent any wheels. That is not to say we must not be creative. We have a history and therefore also an experience of mobilising and engaging in heightening consciousness. The continent and the world are ready for that, if the immensely negative impact of the rise of terrorist activity, reactionary forces, oppressive and neo-fascist activity is any indication to go by in the world.

How must we introduce internet and information technology to the processes we set up in the six regions, so that we can harness and enhance this struggle consciousness to spread across the continent as we also link them to the arts, heritage, culture and history of the continent and the world?

An attempt to execute this possibility exists in Southern Africa, spearheaded by the South African History Online (SAHO-www.sahistory.org.za), which was founded eighteen years ago in South Africa. I suspect that there are similar initiatives and efforts on the continent and in the diaspora, which were founded for different, and also, for similar objectives.

Can we be creative in linking them for the purposes of... promoting access to an artistic, cultural, heritage and historical curriculum for African and world progressive consciousness...?

Can we, as the SAHO initiative suggests, link organs of civil society, schools, universities, libraries, museums, memorials and archive centres, through information and internet technology – all of which will, of course, link to personally owned computers in homes?

This to create a seamless process of education on the continent, while also not compromising the levels and standards of education.

One of the greatest problems of education on the continent, arising out of a lack of mother tongue education, is that home education – that is pre-school and primary education – and the education systems are severed. That is where the formula for a possible deep self-knowledge of Africans, emanating from our history, manifested and still manifests itself.

Can we, through the six regions of the AU, reclaim African languages, by borrowing and learning from the AU

Language Academy processes based in Bamako? Would this be the reference for the creation of communication, with an African cultural content which would also address the scourge of tribalism on the continent? Would this be the regenerating, reclaiming and recreating process for the culture and heritage inherent and intrinsic to the African languages and culture which, as the concept, in part, of the African Renaissance and Pan-Africanism imply, issue the African creative acumen on the continent which would contribute to the global discourse which must state that the world is not a mono but multi and diverse cultural expression?

Is this the moment when Africa must introduce Swahili, as the official African language? However that must not mean that the other African languages must be killed. As they are nurtured, simultaneously, can Swahili be nurtured as the official African language? Is this not to be one of the ways to bring down the artificial cultural borders, created by the colonialists, exploited by collaborators with the colonialists, and promoting tribalism?

We would therefore also begin to mobilise for the repatriation of all the creative arts products which are held in different European and American monuments and museums which must be relocated in the regional centres, as those art products are a form of cultural language and legacy. They must be made accessible to Africans and humanity, wherever they are, through the visual means which are enhanced by the internet and information technology?

Would the infrastructure which must be created to embrace the processes, projects and content, at these centres, be a means to create jobs among the poor, the discriminated against and the unemployed on the continent and in the diaspora?

Since the subject and issue of reparation has been dropped from the agenda of the United Nations and therefore of the world, is it not time to put it back on the agenda of humankind – are there allies for this? The Anti-racist, Anti-sexist, Anti-imperialist and anti-fascist, the Green and Environmental Movements can

become and are allies of this possible expression for peace of humankind.

Does internet and information technology occupy the youth's imagination on the continent and in the diaspora?

If we learn from what television did by impacting on the imagination of this youth, seizing their imagination, which is living out what the mind sees and says, should we not challenge the TV networks to engage the youth by... promoting access to an African and world artistic, cultural, heritage and historical curriculum for African and world progressive consciousness... through what occupies the imagination of the youth – the internet and information technology?

Is this not, in terms of adverts of all those who make business on the

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continent also the manner to finance this very important project? All of these questions, in my view, would be a necessary and worthwhile research programmes and projects to engage.

I have above referred to the Internet and Information Technology, the means for communication and exchange of ideas faster than a click of the finger. I have also contemplated on the implications of Artificial Intelligence and by implication, robotics and by implication also the fourth industrial Revolution – to ask another question which the African creatives, the cultural workers, must reflect upon, ponder over and answer:

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and heritage on our Continent?

Would this project, if successful, result in a rupture, which breaks down barriers, whatever they may be, which exist on the continent and in the world to reveal the humanness of Africans and the Africanness of being human among human beings in the world?

“...SAHO's innovative website, student internship and archive programme has changed the way people view and use knowledge in the technology age. The success of the SAHO website can be gauged from the fact that in 2017 close on 5 million visitors used our website, and we have had a 35% increase in traffic to the site. In 2018 we have had sixty million (60 million) views...” (SAHO's CEO).

What would we say to each other,
when the false curtains which were
shut around us are forced to fall
around us
and when we are revealed to each
other
by the wires which like blood vessels
or nerves
spread beneath the earth
everywhere
and into the depths of the seas
transporting our ideas to each other
and to the world

How would we see the world, and
how would the world see us?

Would this say to Shakespeare we,
we are no monster
we are Caliban though
and you must know

Would we say to us in jest as every
scar on our limb declare
look how Caliban we are
we are not Prospero nor Gonzalez
nor Miranda or Ferdinand we
would say
but we are Caliban tempered in the
tempest of this vast land
dubbed Africa for Africans where
humanity must be welcome
here we come

listen to our footsteps as we enter
the 21st century to be part of the
4th revolution
here we come as humans of a
humane change. ■