

Address by the Chief Executive Officer of the National Heritage Council

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Introduction

My invitation here requested that I address myself on the subject of social cohesion and its relationship to heritage. I guess the Office of the Vice-Chancellor would like me to answer the question: How do we harness our heritage towards social cohesion?

I'm grateful for the opportunity to address this question. My gratitude stems not from my passion for heritage, but because of the importance of social cohesion for our country especially at this juncture in our history. Social cohesion is a serious matter especially because of our history of racism and conflict. Now and then incidents happen that remind us of the urgency of this issue.

You will recall, for instance, an incident at the University of the Free State not long ago. White students forced a group of black workers, some old enough to be their parents, to drink urine. To the white students, having other human beings drink their urine, was fun. That humiliating act apparently won them a lot of praise and admiration amongst their peers.

There was of course another incident earlier of a white farmer dragging the body of a black man behind his bakkie, and thereafter fed that body to a lion. In his own defense, the farmer argued that the man was already dead.

In light of such horrific incidents, and countless others not mentioned here, it is not unexpected of us to pause and wonder whether or not we can, as a nation, achieve social cohesion.

What is Social Cohesion?

Social cohesion entails identifying with the next person on the basis of common interests, which may be material in nature, cultural or even historical. Workers identify with one another on the basis of common struggles and work-place experience. Speakers of the same language are drawn towards each other because of that linguistic and cultural commonality. Similarly, shared political ideals create a common identity as communists or democrats. That commonality enables unity of purpose, among various individuals, communities or interest groups to attain common interests. People identify with each other, they have a sense of togetherness and, therefore, are able to empathise with one another. That bond of solidarity minimizes any chances of them harming each other, but fosters unity of purpose.

Social cohesion, therefore, exists at different levels and is fostered by different institutions. At a community level cohesion is generated by community institutions such as sport clubs, churches or stokvels. Members are socialized to follow rules and have obligations towards each other. Obligations and co-operation in turn generate ties towards each other.

At a national level, cohesion is moulded by affiliation in public institutions such as, among others, political parties, trade unions and universities. Political parties with a national orientation are especially critical because they transcend primordial and exclusive identities built on race and ethnicity. Membership in a national political party, for instance, cuts across language or community belonging. Members identify with each other on the basis of their common political ideals, without any regard to language or geographic belonging.

Two social institutions, however, are worth a special mention as agents of social cohesion. These are the State and family. A family is the building block upon which communities and indeed the nation-state is constructed. It is crucial both for socialization and the material well-being of individuals. Parents teach their children values, such as responsibility and observance of rules, will enable them to live productively once they become independent themselves. Such values are complementary to the well-fare not only of their own individual families, but also to their communities and the State as a whole. Families also provide a safety-net for their members. Next-of-kin provide shelter and sustenance to each other in times of need. One with a strong-family is less likely to become destitute and engage in anti-social behaviour as a way of making a living.

Where a family falters, the State has to come-in to provide for the material well-being of its citizens and, most importantly, create an all-appealing sense of common-belonging. This is crucial to create a sense of inclusion - to ward off feelings that some are less important or do not belong within the nation-state. Common belonging is cultivated through inclusive national symbols or celebrations of public holidays. The poor and destitute can be made to feel that they too count through provision of social grants and shelter.

In other words, social cohesion is fostered at different levels: at the family, community and national levels. Stable families are more likely to create a healthy community, and coherent communities, in turn, create a cohesive State. The point is that each institution creates a set of positive values which are congruent with the national, foundational values.

Social Cohesion and Heritage: The Link.

How does our heritage, therefore, assist us to cultivate social cohesion?

You may recall that apartheid ideologues wanted us to believe that, because of our racial diversity, we had nothing in common. Culture, they argued, was racially determined. Being black meant you were biologically programmed to have a different culture to a white, Coloured or an Indian person. From the 1960s onwards, and moving from the premise of a racially and ethnically-determined culture, apartheid ideologues then went-on to create separate states for each ethnic group: Xhosa-speakers had Transkei and Ciskei, Vende-speakers had Venda, Sotho-speakers, Qwaqwa; Shangaan-speakers, Gazankulu, and so on.

But, did our heritage – that is our history and traditional values - really support the apartheid assertion that culture is ethnic and racially determined – that individuals of different ethnicities or races can never develop a set of common values?

Frankly, our history does not show any correlation between race and culture. South Africa's early African nationalists are an instructive example that culture transcends race or ethnicity. Most of them were Anglophiles, but not out of their own choosing. It was purely by accident of history. They had grown up at the time when the indigenous society had succumbed to British conquest and missionary influence. Christianity and formal schooling followed, whilst indigenous cultural practices were weakened.

It is that early generation that bequeathed us our universal, public values. Their conception of a modern South Africa is one that was underpinned by the principles of non-racialism and equality. Theirs was not an Afro-centric conception that excluded the other on the basis of colour or foreign origin. Even when the Union government denied them of franchise, African nationalists held steadfastly onto the ideal of non-racialism, believing that colour could never be a measure of a person's character.

I'm also reminded specifically of a town called Botshabelo in Mpumalanga. That is a historic town, which was a place of refuge for Africans who had converted to Christianity. It was initially founded as a mission station in 1866. Botshabelo remains a powerful indication that African culture can be adapted to a new environment, whilst not losing its essence. The founders of Botshabelo, though open to Western influences, refused to renounce their African culture. They sought to create, what Steve Biko would later call, a joint-culture – one that is made up of the best of African and Western worlds. When the missionaries forced them to renounce their cultural practices, the African converts chose to leave Botshabelo rather than submit to false notions of European cultural superiority. They went on to establish a new settlement – Mafofologo, the place of gladness - and continued to practice their own culture, whilst also adopting the best of western influences.

Public institutions, such as this University, nurtured national and Pan- African identities that cut across ethnicity and nation-states. The very first black university established in 1916, Fort Hare attracted students not only from the various parts of this country, but also from throughout the continent. Individuals that would otherwise not have known each other, met here in this institution. From village boys, the students evolved here at Fort Hare into Africans that saw beyond one's ethnicity and language. Ethnic prejudices, which were nurtured by the seclusion of village life, melted in the course of interacting with others within a common space. The ANC Youth League would subsequently be formed 1944 by the graduates of this University. They strengthened the call to nationalism, against the 'demon of tribalism'.

When the African nationalist were later hounded out of this country by the apartheid government from the 1960s onwards, they found refuge in neighbouring countries that had gained freedom. Our leaders were welcomed also

because presidents of some of these neighbouring countries, such as in Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, were former colleagues at this University. This all-encompassing ideology of Pan-Africanism, which cuts across national boundaries, but stresses origin in Africa, was nurtured in this institution, Fort Hare University.

So when we talk of Fort Hare University, we're not only referring to an old building. This is a heritage institution that nurtured both nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Our celebration of Fort Hare is also a renewal of our commitment to nation-hood and Pan-Africanism.

Allow me to stress the point that non-racialism, which is one of founding values of the Republic, was not a creation of mission-schools, which was then popularized by Amagqoboka. Non-racialism was part of African culture, even before the creation of mission-schools.

The very first European settlers to be integrated into our African society, back in the 17th century, were survivors of a shipwreck. Their ship had perished on sea leaving them without any means of returning home across the ocean, nor did they have any certainty that they would live to see the next day. They had been told that ours was a "Dark Continent" populated by savages. If anything, they had resigned themselves to being victims of "African savagery". But their actual encounter with Africans proved quite the opposite of what they had feared. They were provided with food and shelter, and nursed back to health. They simply became equal members of our African society, essentially laying down a foundation for what would come to be known, centuries later, as a "rainbow nation". Many of these survivors refused to leave their newly found African homes

That culture of non-racialism stems from our traditional value of Ubuntu. Ubuntu premises one's humanity on how one relates to others. One can only be human if one treats others humanely. This takes the focus away from the solitary wellbeing of oneself to others as well. According to Ubuntu, therefore, humanity is a shared existence and thus fully realised through harmonious relations with others.

Critics amongst us will hasten to tell us that, in talking about Ubuntu, we're romanticizing the pre-colonial past – a world that no longer exists. The critics will go on to tell us that today's South Africa is just too individualistic, with people being more concerned about themselves than the next person.

On the contrary, the philosophy of Ubuntu has actually provided us with resources and solutions to challenges that threatened the very stability of our country. For starters, it offered us the remarkable leadership in the person of the late ANC president, Oliver Tambo. Through a consensus-based leadership, Tambo was able to keep together a multi-class organization, which was sometimes fraught by racial tension and strained by the pure harshness of life in exile. Consensus seeking is a quintessential element of Ubuntu – the idea is to reach a decision that appeals to all interests in order to maintain internal cohesion and unity of purpose. In the course of cultivating this consensus, people are made to feel that they count even though their ideas may be discarded.

The historian and biographer, Lulu Callinicos, described this African style of deliberation within the ANC as follows: "[a] speaker would begin ...by concurring with what the previous speaker had said before going on to qualify parts of the argument. Agendas inevitably took longer to work through, but the effect was to fashion a conclusion to which everyone felt they had contributed". Albei Sachs explained his own experience of the process as follows: "It makes you respectful of people. The idea isn't everything. There is a person behind the idea; somebody speaking, and you respect their views and their right to speak, and there might be some truth in it ... The right to be heard is very strong".

There is no doubt, therefore, that in the absence of such leadership values, inspired by the ethos of Ubuntu, the ANC would have possibly fractured, robbing South Africa of a pivotal political agent.

Another benefit of Ubuntu is found in the more recent history of our country, namely the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Notwithstanding its imperfections, the TRC gave the victims of police brutality and the bereaved families the much-needed sense of closure and a new beginning. Equally crucial, it enabled the country to avoid going down a dangerous path of outright legal prosecutions – a route that could have elicited a backlash thereby placing our political transition in jeopardy.

The idea of gaining forgiveness, following a public confession, is deeply rooted in an age-old African belief that a human being is innately good and therefore can be rehabilitated, however, hideous his deeds. Instead of pursuing retribution, compensation or reparation towards the victim takes priority. Agreeing to the TRC was also indicative of the inclination of the African majority to achieve harmony, rather than suffer the racial strife or political instability that could have possibly followed legal prosecutions.

What I am saying, therefore, is that the philosophy of Ubuntu can be adapted to our present-day society, to make it people-centered. The challenge is to infuse this value system widely into our society. Ubuntu is a path-way to reconciliation. Perhaps more than that, Ubuntu is the very source of our formation as a non-racial society. The South Africa of today, in its racial diversity, whose people owe their origin to the different parts of the globe, would not be possible without Ubuntu.

I also believe that the discourse of human rights is limiting in cultivating a moral-based society. South African citizens, for instance, feel entitled to discriminate or mistreat others because they're of a different race or foreign origin. Take the example of the white students at the Free State University, who mistreated black workers, or the foreign-national that was killed by fire by fellow South Africans.

It is therefore not surprising that the Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu should ask the question: Buphi ubuntu bethu?: Where is our humanity? In posing this haunting question, the Archbishop was of course asserting that doing anything harmful to the next person is un-human – it is against human behavior to inflict pain nor rejoice in the misery of others. This is the tenet that lies at the core of Ubuntu. Writing back in the 1970s and in his usual eloquence, Steve Biko reminded us that “Ours has always been a Man-centered society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other – not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy communication for its own sake”.

One can only humiliate others, in the way that those students did, if you do not consider them human. Yet, our public values are premised on the principles of equality and human decency. We even have a full day each year dedicated towards the celebration of human rights, which speaks to respect for, and the value of, human life.

One is therefore forced to pose the following questions:

Could it be that the individual-centered orientation of the discourse of human rights limits our ability to identify with each other?

In pursuit of our individual rights, have we become blinded to the humanity of others?

Is there sufficient emphasis on how our individual actions relate to others?

Do we only consider the next person if and when one violates the other person's rights? Otherwise, most of the time we continue to behave as if what we do has nothing to do with the next person.

An Ubuntu-based approach to rights will force us not to think only of ourselves, but be constantly conscious of how our actions relate to others. It will encourage us to be more considerate towards others. Perhaps we need to look at the human rights discourse and African belief system, not in contradiction to each other, but see them in a complementary light. Reinforcing the message of human rights with an equal emphasis on Ubuntu, is a point worth considering. Both concepts speak on the same subject with a similar objective, but accentuate different aspects. Ultimately the welfare of the individual rests on the well-being of others.

Though a traditional value, Ubuntu is adaptable. Culture is not rigid. It is not a frozen entity that is simply passed-on over time and generations. Communities adopt new cultural practices as much as they jettison others. This all boils-down to the fact that culture is a societal construct. It is neither ordained nor genetically pre-determined, but simply formed societal processes and actors at particular times.

We need to look at our history, our heritage, as a foundation upon which to build our new society. There are elements in our unique cultural backgrounds and histories that we can transfer onto our public space to form the basis of a national identity. Our history, both black and white, especially Afrikaans-speakers, has sensitized us to the ugliness of injustice and racial discrimination. Blacks derive this sensitivity from both apartheid oppression and British imperialism and Afrikaners from the latter. We have since developed an acute sense for justice, and thus feel quite strong about the principle of fairness, despite our racial diversity.

The importance of heritage for creating social cohesion should be self-evident. Heritage encompasses our values, which, in turn, form the foundation of our democratic republic. These are values intended to guide our public conduct, not only between ourselves and public institutions but also amongst ourselves as citizenry. The extent to which we comply with the constitution, therefore, depends on how well we've internationalized the foundation values of the republic. It's not enough that foundational values are encapsulated in that supreme document, but we should live them. This limits the possibility of uncivil behaviour.

Recollection of history also inspires us to address some of our pressing challenges. Part of our heritage involves self sacrifice for public service. These are qualities that are solely needed presently. It is easier for people to draw inspiration from their heroic figures, thus making the celebration of historical even more important for contemporary use.

The order of our public priorities, however, does not reflect the importance of values in the life of a nation. Priority has been placed on the visible, physical aspects of our democratic order. Shelter, water and bread are all indeed fundamental to our sustenance. And electoral democracy promotes this bias. Remaining in political office depends on the deliverables, and the tangible ones take precedence over the intangible. Governance delivery oriented.

Politicians hardly pause to ask: what kind of a nation do we seek to become? This has had dire consequences. It now seems that any behaviour is permissible so long as it falls within the confines of the law. Shouldn't our public conduct be guided by our pursuit of broader ideals, rather than simply avoiding to break the law? I cannot imagine a question more fundamental than: What does it mean to be South African? What values define us as a people?

Once we've defined our identity that then becomes part of public morality. There's a vast difference between public morality and the law. Moral persuasion is a much effective mechanism towards egalitarianism, than law enforcement. It's not illegal for anyone to accumulate as many empowerment deals as possible, but it is morally repulsive. Nor is there a 'moral stick' to deter such obscenity. We need to get to a point where certain behaviours, though legal, are defined outside the norm. Before we get there, we first need to establish what we're all about, that means looking into our heritage.

That heritage also includes indigenous languages and their literature offers an instructive example. Schools have a bias towards English because of its commercial utility. Parents are complicit in this. Yet, they also wish their children would grow up proud of their culture and language. To be culturally grounded, children need to be properly equipped with cultural material and tools. Language is the transmitter of culture and is context specific. Idioms for instance are expressive of the history and background of the language speakers.

And, indigenous languages are transmitted by the family, especially the extended family. Grand-parents are quite good in teaching our children our languages. They have no time for English. They don't even understand why they have to speak in English to their own grand-children. That's very good.

This means that we need to rejuvenate the concept of an extended-family. Extended families are especially critical not only as transmitters of culture, but to protect us against the ravages of today's life. Parents are dying from HIV/AIDS leaving children all alone at home. Teenagers are forced to grow up quickly and become heads of households.

Without strict parental guidance, some simply drop out of school. They then resort to criminality to eke a living. Others simply run away from home to find solace or support elsewhere. That means life of prostitution and drug abuse to dull their shame.

In the presence of grand-parents or other relatives, however, orphaned children are likely to remain within the family fold. Aunts and uncles have historically been mothers and fathers where biological parents have been absent. In African culture, a child does not just belong to his or her biological parents, but to all the elders within the extended family. We need to revive the institution of extended families, especially in the urban areas. In 2001 only 27% of the South African families were extended families, whilst a whopping 41% were nuclear. The percentage of extended families is possibly less by now.

Extended families are one of the few defences we have against social dislocation that can only have damaging consequences on our communities and nation. Fortunately, the State does recognize the importance of supporting poor and single-parent, guardian and child-headed households. A substantial number of needy people in country do receive social grants of one kind or another. Some have complained that we're building a nation of dependants and the social grants are a strain on our fiscus. But, the cost of doing nothing is even greater to the well-being of our country.

All in all, however, we're not doing badly as a nation, especially in the area of identity. In 2004, for instance, 54% of the citizens defined themselves as South African. Only 18% defined themselves as African, 4% used a racial identity, and 14% an ethnic identity. So, the national, South African identity is a lot stronger than an ethnic or a racial identity. In fact more and more are using their class or professional occupation as form of identification. This form of identification, for instance, grew from 14% in 2000 to 37% in 2004. This is even better because it reinforces the national identity that cuts across race, language and ethnicity.

Our households, however, under severe strain, especially because quite a number of them are headed by orphaned children. The future of our children is in peril. The old institution of an extended family is therefore critical here. The future of our children, both materially and culturally, depends on it.

Our past, history and traditional practices are vital. They are pillars upon which this society stands and are a memory that builds binding ties. Our future prosperity depends on our ability to remember the past. We should never forget.