South Africa at the Festival: The Historical Context

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For most of this century, the mere mention of South Africa has evoked images of immeasurable racist inhumanity in the minds of people across the globe. Yet the country has also represented a gloriously just struggle fueled by democratic aspirations for high human achievement. It was to this struggle that curators Bernice Johnson Reagon, Rosie Hooks, and I dedicated the three-month *African Diaspora* program at the Bicentennial Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Every morning at eleven o'clock, from June through August 1976, elders from African diaspora communities in the Americas and Africa paraded on the National Mall just below the monument to the nation's first president, George Washington, to pour a libation, invoking the spirits of the ancestors and acknowledging the aspirations of millions of South Africans to freely express their humanity and cultural ways of knowing and doing. A few weeks into the Festival, on June 16, the Soweto Uprising occurred against the forced use of Afrikaans as the language of educational instruction. Twenty-five children were killed by police.

In the 1980s, while the administration of the Smithsonian debated the Institution's corporate investment policy in apartheid South Africa, concern with the nexus of culture, democracy, and economic sustainability — today common in government bodies, U.S. foundations, the World Bank, and the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization — was evolving in the work of many Smithsonian staff and Festival programs. In 1988 the Smithsonian Office of Folklife Programs — now the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage — and the Department of Anthropology of the National Museum of Natural History organized a symposium with The Smithsonian Associates, "South Africa Today: Life in a Divided Society." South African historians, biographers, and writers from all racial backgrounds were invited to the Smithsonian to discuss how the rigid system of racial separation impacted the lives of the majority populations. And in 1994, when the South African liberation movement emerged victorious, the South African Ministry of Culture's Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and the Smithsonian initiated discussions and plan-

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Ndebele bead work. *Photo by Paola Gianturco*

ning for a long-term collaboration on a broad range of cultural heritage projects, including a Festival program. Since 1996, in the framework of the South Africa-Smithsonian Culture and Community-Building Reciprocal Learning Program, Smithsonian and South African colleagues have participated in educational and capacity-building activities designed to enhance professional development through collegial exchange.

South Africa: Crafting the Economic Renaissance of the Rainbow Nation features nearly 100 South African grassroots community artisans and cultural officials. Of course, their presence on the National Mall of the U.S. capital is linked in direct ways to the country's recent past. South Africa's monumental achievement came through often bloody battles and life-defining sacrifices, especially among rural and urban grassroots communities, who used their cultural traditions to resist oppression and to affirm their identities. This fact was not lost on the country's future leaders, many of whom participated themselves in cultural acts of resistance and affirmation. However, the significance of their presence is also bound up with the newly democratized nation's use of its cultural heritage to craft its immediate future. The South Africa Festival program addresses the role of handicraft and statecraft in the formulation of a new South African national identity, economy, and political democracy.

As South African communities discover and rediscover the value of their heritage, they proclaim their numerous, varied, and distinctive cultural traditions: languages, religions, healing practices, modes of democratic representation and participation, musical styles, recreational games, regional cuisines, and uses of available natural resources. The artisans, cultural communities, and public servants who are coming together to present, discuss, and debate concepts of cultural identity, cultural enterprise, and cultural democracy are indeed consciously engaged in fashioning a collective national story.

The apartheid regime emphasized individual identity to divide, demean, and exploit the country along lines of race, color, culture, and economic class. This racialized history makes it difficult to employ cultural distinctions in the formation of a new national identity that equitably reflects the diversity of values and economic capacities of all citizens. Nevertheless, South Africans are forging ahead on all fronts to draw upon their rich diversity in the transformation from the old to the emerging national identity.

No tried-and-true formulas for success exist. Criteria that define a successful marriage of cultural enterprise and cultural tourism are not altogether clear. Many ethical issues arise as living cultural communities enter the marketplace seeking remuneration for the sale of their cultural products and display of their cultural life.

Individual artisans and cultural communities are using their traditions to start cultural businesses, cultural centers, and museums. Private and government-sponsored cultural tourism is also being developed. As the philosophy and practice of cultural industries and tourism evolves in developing countries — and in developing communities in developed countries — new, sometimes thorny questions arise about authenticity, integrity, and exploitation. Such is the case in South Africa.

Should, or how should, communities benefit from marketing their cultural traditions? Should one community control the finances and administration of cultural enterprises and reap the bulk of the profits from the sale of another community's living cultural representations? Should not the independent decisions of cultural communities and individual

culture bearers be respected as to how they use their agency in the marketplace — with whom and under what arrangements — to display or represent their culture? What role, if any, should the South African government play in fostering cultural enterprises and tourism that achieve acceptable balances between national craft export policies, maintenance of community cultural integrity, and sustainable community economic development?

No doubt some people argue that commodification of community heritage is disrespectful of tradition and demeaning of the individuals who might choose, because of economic necessity or other personal reasons, to perform or package tradition for monetary gain. Some of the cultural tourism villages and craft cooperatives in South Africa, capitalized and administered by people historically privileged with access to education, funds, and administrative skills, are artificial and disturbing ventures in which whole families live on site and open their homes to droves of tourists bused in to see "authentic" ethnic community or township life. A contrasting model of control of cultural production, marketing, sales, and consequent creation of jobs, however, can be found among some traditional cultural communities in which women are the sole craft producers and entrepreneurs.

The implications of crafting the economic renaissance of the Rainbow Nation are clear to South African cultural communities and their representatives. They involve nothing less than issues of cultural education and respect, political participation, and economic advancement for the whole country. Craftspeople, as citizens and knowledge keepers, have become central to the work of provincial and national governments, educators, trade and tourism industries, museums, art galleries, corporate supporters of the arts, and, of course, their own entrepreneurial projects. Integration of traditional knowledge and technology into national development is underway. Extensive research, public forums, cultural policy papers, and constitutional laws have been developed to guide and assess the South African national cultural project.

Through its struggle with tensions between principles of individual and group rights, monolingualism and multilingualism, rural-urban inequities, and the intrinsic local value of culture and its use to pursue wider goals, South Africa may once again capture the world's imagination and advance the understanding and practice of cultural democracy as a key to national economic development.

The cultural work going on in all sectors of South Africa indicates rather convincingly that crafting the economic renaissance of the Rainbow Nation will not be forestalled by challenging questions or abstract moral concerns. As in the freedom struggle against apartheid, answers are to be found in the process of conscious national transformation.

The Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage dedicates this program to the memory of two South African cultural workers who lived exemplary lives of commitment to grassroots community culture and democracy. Lazarus Mphahlele, an accomplished singer and performer, and Paulos Msimanga, noted for nurturing young musicians in community traditions, participated in the 1997 Festival program **Sacred Sounds: Belief and Society**. ***Both died shortly afterwards.***

Lazarus was deputy director of Culture in Pietersburg, Northern Province, and former leader of the African National Congress cultural ensemble Amandla. Paulos was the public relations officer of the South African Traditional Music Association.

Suggested Reading

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