

Cultural heritage

for nation-building and social cohesion

By **Mathole Motshekga**

The author is the ANC's chief whip in parliament. This is an edited version of his speech in the national assembly debate on Heritage Day, 24 September 2009



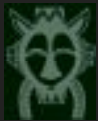
Heritage month is a time of the renewal of our identity and values and a re-dedication to what makes us human. It is the time to recover our humanity (ubuntu/botho) and its principles of equality, freedom and justice for all. In the spirituality of many ancient nations, including Africans, September marks the beginning of a new year. The African New Year, in particular, provides a home-grown framework for the cultural and agricultural festivals necessary to realign our spiritual and material existence and make us a truly value-centred society.

Marking September as Heritage Month offers us the opportunity to understand our origins, identity and the interrelationship of our spiritual and material existence. It

also assists us in understanding the critical importance of social cohesion, nation-building, rural development and agrarian land reform as priorities for the current term of President Jacob Zuma's administration. This strategic priority affords us an opportunity to restore our indigenous knowledge systems for sustainable development.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The founders of our democracy understood their spirituality and its relationship with the land and therefore waged protracted struggles to defend both. Even today there are



sacred spaces, such as Motoulong in the Maluti Mountains in the Free State, which need protection.

Our icon, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, traced the relationship between the African National Congress and the church to the Ethiopian church movement in the 1870s (Mandela, 1992). In response to rapid land dispossession in the 19th century, and sparked by racially discriminatory practices and the suppression of African cultural heritage in the missionary churches, African clergy sought to free themselves by establishing independent African churches. These became known as Ethiopian churches.

Nehemiah Tile made the first breakaway, founding the Thembu National Church in 1884. The most notable breakaway was that of Mangena Mokone. His church, the Ethiopian Church of Africa, was founded in Marabastad, Pretoria in 1892. This church was also Pan-African in character and gave moral support to Ethiopia in its 1896 war against Italy.

Although its basis was the African interpretation of the scriptures, the Ethiopian church movement was both spiritual and political. Its fundamental tenets were self-worth, self-reliance and freedom, the inherent values of African people that were forcibly denied by colonialism and cultural imperialism. Thus the wars of resistance and later struggles for freedom included the struggle for the recovery of African humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) and identity.

“The ANC has always valued the interaction with faith communities because its history and moral vision are rooted in the religious sector.”

– **Jacob Zuma**

These tenets drew the Ethiopian Christians like a magnet to the growing Pan-African nationalism of the early 20th century. The Pan-African movement produced provincial native congresses, culminating in the formation of the South African National Native Congress in 1912, renamed the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923. In this way, the seeds of the formation of the ANC can be traced to the Ethiopian movement of the 1890s.

The Ethiopian Christians also fought alongside traditional communities during the 1906 Bambatha rebellion that marked the end of the wars of resistance and the birth of liberation politics.

In his 1992 speech, Mandela had this to say on African heritage:

The centenary of the Ethiopian Church should have been celebrated throughout the length and breadth of our country because it touches all the African people

irrespective of their denomination or political outlook. The Ethiopian church is the only surviving institution that is in the hands of the African people. This is a remarkable feature for which we have to give credit to the leaders of this church throughout the difficult years of final dispossession of our people. Indeed, our people were not dispossessed only of their land and cattle, but also of their pride, their dignity and their institutions.

Mandela also appreciated the positive role that our religious heritage can play to advance social cohesion and nation-building. In a lecture titled “Renewal and renaissance: Towards a new world order”, delivered at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies on 11 July 1997, he pointed out that religion can provide spiritual leadership to bring about the social renewal of our continent and the world. He observed quite correctly that African history has also been profoundly shaped by the interplay between three great religious traditions: Islam, Christianity and African religion.

Mandela also remarked that the relationship of Islam and Christianity to one another and of these two to African religion could be pertinent to African rebirth and renewal. He called on Muslims to harness the more inclusive strands in their own theological heritage to contribute to a more humane Africa, acknowledging the humanity of the traditions that are unique to the continent:

As with other aspects of its heritage, African traditional religion is increasingly recognised for its contribution to the world. No longer seen as despised superstition which had to be superseded by superior forms of belief, today its enrichment of humanity’s spiritual heritage is acknowledged. The spirit of *ubuntu*, that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings, has added globally to our common search for a better world (Mandela, 1997).

In conclusion, he spoke of the strength of interfaith solidarity in action against apartheid that enabled each religion to bring forward its best and place it at the service of all. He challenged all the religions to walk a similar path in the reconstruction and renewal of our continent.

TO PRESERVE AND DEVELOP OUR NATURAL HERITAGE

African people were not only degraded and dehumanised, they were also forcibly deprived of the land and resources which formed the basis of their natural heritage. Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the convener of the founding conference of the ANC and an advocate of unity and co-operation, responded by buying farms in the Eastern Transvaal (now Mpumalanga) to promote agriculture and ensure food security.

Seme’s initiative was so successful that the white farmers called on the Union government to take away land from African people and prohibit them from buying farms. This was achieved through the Land Act of 1913, which allocated



only 7 percent of the total land surface of South Africa to African people. This was increased to 13 percent in 1936. African people were then forced into native reserves that were too small and barren for agriculture and livestock. This resulted in today's underdevelopment of African people, which leads to a variety of social ills.

The loss of land and its natural resources deprived Africans of skills in farming, indigenous knowledge and their underlying intangible heritage – their means for self-help, self-reliance and survival. Africans were forced to become mine-, farm- and domestic workers and to live in shacks and single-sex hostels.

This inhumane situation sparked off popular struggles for the recovery of African humanity, national pride, identity, self-determination, human and people's rights. Thus the Ethiopian (spiritual) and Pan-African (political) struggles of our forebears were intertwined.

Now the first of May is only a workers' holiday because the African calendar has been suppressed for too long.

No wonder that the founders of our democracy were both religious and political leaders. As early as 1892, the founding president of the ANC, John Langalibalele Dube, called for a spiritual, humane and prosperous Africa. In 1905, Seme not only echoed these values, but also called for a unique civilisation for Africa and Africans. The third president of the ANC, ZR Mahabane, articulated what became the ANC moral vision in his 1921 speech entitled "We are not political children".

Mahabane observed that African people were landless, voteless, homeless, hopeless, degraded and dehumanised by colonialism and cultural imperialism. He maintained that in such circumstances the ANC had to strive to restore the humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) of the African people as a prerequisite for the restoration of the humanity of the people of South Africa as a whole.

Thus the 1923 ANC national conference adopted the first bill of rights on the African continent, which reclaimed African humanity and the participation of African people in the economy. This bill was amplified by the 1943 African Claims document and the 1955 Freedom Charter, which laid the foundation for a value-centred post-apartheid society.

The Freedom Charter was adopted under the stewardship of Inkosi Albert Luthuli, a worker, Congregational Church lay priest and cultural and traditional leader. Luthuli reaffirmed the need for a unique African civilisation propounded by Seme.

Ubuntu values and principles found their way into both the 1993 and 1996 constitution. The ANC Strategy and Tactics

document adopted at the Polokwane national conference in 2007 mainstreamed the spiritual philosophy of *ubuntu* and its inherent values of human solidarity, equality, freedom and justice for all. It calls for the creation of a truly united, democratic and prosperous South Africa in which the value of all citizens is measured by their humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) without regard to race, gender and social status.

At the Presidential Religious Summit, held on 27 November 2008, President Zuma told the delegates:

Nation-building and achieving social cohesion are some of the most important responsibilities of the ruling party. Central to the two tasks is the need to re-affirm and recommit to the moral vision and the value system of our nation as outlined in various historical documents and the constitution of the land. The ANC has always valued the interaction with faith communities because its history and moral vision are rooted in the religious sector.

RECOVERING OUR INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

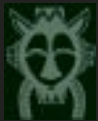
The intangible heritage of African people cannot and will not be understood without African history and languages. Sir Seretse Khama, first president of Botswana and paramount chief of the bamaNgwato, emphasised the importance of reclaiming our cultural heritage in emphatic terms:

We were taught, sometimes in a very positive way, to despise ourselves and our ways of life. We were made to believe that we had no past to speak of, no history to boast of... It seemed we were in for a definite period of foreign tutelage without any hope of our ever again becoming our own masters. The end result of all this was that our self-pride and our self-confidence were badly undermined (Khama, 1970).

Khama challenged us "to try to retrieve what we can of our past. We should write our own history books to prove that we did have a past that was just as worth writing and learning about as any other. We must do this for the simple reason that a Nation without a past is a lost Nation, and a people without a past is a people without a soul" (ibid.). The African soul is embedded in its intangible heritage that today calls for our attention.

Western philosophers and scholars successfully convinced us and the world that we have no history and heritage by cutting us off from the ancient past and attributing to foreigners the achievements of Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Meroe in Sudan and Axum in Ethiopia. Cheikh Anta Diop said that the history of Africa will not be complete until it is connected to that of Egypt.

Pixley ka Isaka Seme, in a public lecture titled "The Regeneration of Africa" (1906), called us to come with him to the ancient capital of Egypt – Thebes, the city of one hundred gates, whose grandeur and venerable ruins and the gigantic proportions of its architecture reduce to



insignificance the boasted monuments of other nations. The pyramids of Egypt are structures to which the world presents nothing comparable. The mighty monuments seem to look with disdain on every other work of human art and to vie with Nature herself. All the glory of Egypt belongs to Africa and her people. These monuments are the indestructible memorials of their great and original genius. It is not through Egypt alone that Africa claims such unrivalled historic achievements. I could have spoken of the pyramids of Ethiopia, which, though inferior in size to those of Egypt, surpass them in architectural beauty, their sepulchres evince the highest purity of taste and of many prehistoric ruins in other parts of Africa. In such ruins Africa is like the Golden Sun that, having sunk beneath the Western horizon, still plays upon the world which he sustained and enlightened in his career.

To these ancient ruins, Nelson Mandela added the names of Carthage, Mapungubwe and Great Zimbabwe. Nearer home, we have Lwandali (now Tshiendeulu) and Thulamela.

COMMON ROOTS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE

The most decisive affinity between the ancient Egyptian tangible and intangible heritage and our own can be found in the languages, religion, astral sciences and indigenous knowledge systems.

In Africa south of the Sahara, there are about 400 languages and 2 000 dialects belonging to the Bantu family of languages that derive from the ancient Egyptian language. Their identity lies in the common monosyllabic words, e.g. *ka*, *ba*, *ta*, *pa*, and concepts like *ntu* in *ubuntu*.

By neglecting our indigenous languages, we lose our past and intangible heritage. We can preserve indigenous African languages by prescribing an indigenous language for every university degree and entry into the public service. This will restore respect for and enhance the development of African languages and lead to the re-opening of African language departments at all universities.

Like ancient Ethiopians and Egyptians, all people in southern Africa trace their origins to the Great Lakes region and they share the intangible heritage of *ntu*, which has variants throughout the length and breadth of Africa. The cradle of the Bantu languages is in the Niger-Kordofan province of Ethiopia. African migrants to southern Africa brought names like Naphta, Mutapa, Mwanamutapa, Mohale, Kalanga or Karanga from the north.

In African religion, Mohale and Lundi/Luti are the Black Madonna – Divine Mother – and child depicted on the full moon to show that humanity descended from the celestial spheres. In southern Africa, the word *rundi* (as in Burundi) is found in many variants:

- Lundi River (ancient name of Limpopo, Zimbabwe)

- Undi (another name for Limpopo)
- Odi (region of Gauteng)
- Maluti mountains (Free State and Lesotho)
- Malundi mountains (KZN)
- Ntaba za ka Lundi (Eastern Cape)
- Ulundi (KZN).

These place names all derive from Rundji-Ntare, the son of Mohale, the goddess who is revered throughout southern Africa and beyond. Her name survives in Magaliesberg (Thaba Mohale) and Mohalesnek. Mohale is also known as

- Mwalinkulunkulu
- Mwari (Karanga/Shona)
- Muali (Khelobedu/Venda)
- Nwali (Venda)
- Mwari (Tsonga).

It is evident that, through language and popular religion, we are able to establish the cultural unity in the diversity of African peoples. The introduction of focused African culture and language studies could contribute to Pan-Africanism, unity, peace and harmony in Africa. The teaching of Swahili as a Pan-African language would promote communications within Africa.

AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

The proponents of African “otherness” convinced us that Africans have no intangible heritage. Thus our cultural and natural heritage in Mapungubwe, Lwandali, Lake Funduzi, Thulamela, Timbavati and elsewhere in the Kruger National Park are reduced to national parks and tourist attractions with total disregard for the intangible heritage embedded in these sites. There is an urgent need to review the history and cultural heritage of these sites and remove the distortions that hamper the recovery of the African soul embedded there.

The timelines of South African history must be revisited in the light of findings that astronomy has had a major effect on various cultures throughout Africa since the dawning of recorded time. An analysis of the zodiacs of ancient African cosmology reveals the cultural unity of African people, especially in terms of their philosophy of origins and being, religion and spiritual, cultural and agricultural festivals.

The Mapungubwe zodiac is substantially the same as those of Great Zimbabwe, Meroe and others. It is inscribed on a round wooden slab. On its rim, we find twelve characters corresponding to those of the Greco-Roman zodiac, which is derived from it. At the centre we find a turtle (Haramanuba) or crocodile (Nyambe), symbolising the solar (Kara) principle, also called God.

The zodiac constitutes the eight spheres of heaven that lead into the Ennead, or the nine emanations of the first cause. Heaven is linked to the earth and humanity through the seven outer planets, which mark the ladder on which human souls descend from and ascend to their maker. Thus the



Mapungubwe and related zodiacs provide a framework for a holistic (spiritual and material) worldview, bringing us closer to a spiritual worldview that transcends race, gender, class and religion. This could contribute to social cohesion and begin to address the problem of global polarisation.

THE AFRICAN CALENDAR AND SOCIAL COHESION

We need new ways of celebrating our national holidays and using them as instruments to impart moral and social values to our youth. A short exposition of the African calendar will illustrate the desired realignment of our spiritual and material existence.

In the spirituality of many ancient nations, including Africans, September marks the beginning of a new year. The African New Year, in particular, provides a home-grown framework for the cultural and agricultural festivals necessary to realign our spiritual and material existence and make us a truly value-centred society.

The African year is divided into three seasons of four months each: summer (September to December), autumn (January to April) and winter (May to August). African people also divide the year into four quarters, which correspond with the four cardinal points of the universe, represented by the four holy beasts, with a central sun (or star) that symbolises God. All major religions, including African religion, share a belief in the four holy beasts before the throne of God. These are encircled by the seven circumpolar (Pleiades, Khelemela) stars that appear in September to announce the beginning of the new year.

These stars appear as a reminder to the traditional leaders and healers to cleanse the land in preparation for rains and the ploughing period. In October, rainmaking ceremonies are held to thank family and royal ancestors, the intermediaries between humankind and God, for rains and fertility of the soil. During this month, ploughing starts. The observance of rainmaking ceremonies in October every year would promote water conservation.

In November, seeds germinate, animals reproduce, flowers blossom and nature is reborn after a long winter. Trees may not be cut, female animals may not be killed and the whole of nature is sacred. The December new moon announces that preparations for first fruits celebrations should begin. These celebrations start with the full moon and reach their peak between the 21st and 25th of December, the birthdays of our primal ancestors. December 25, in particular, is the birthday of the god of light and life, born of a universal virgin mother and symbolised by a first fruit. Thus, December 25 is not only a Christian holiday. It is a universal holy day which was celebrated in the solar temples of Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe, Mutokolwe (Lwandali), Meroe and various Egyptian temples.

The god of light and life is also symbolised by a black bull that is sacrificed to God and royal ancestors at the beginning of January to welcome the harvesting period (January to April). The harvest properly begins on March 21–22, when the sun crosses the equator on its return to the northern hemisphere. This period also coincides with the Jewish Passover and Easter weekend.

According to the African calendar, the first of May is a spiritual holiday on which traditional communities celebrated the nativity of Mohale, the Queen of Heaven and Earth. Now the first of May is only a workers' holiday, because the African calendar has been suppressed for too long. The revival of African religion opens the door for the celebration of this spiritual festival. This would enhance solidarity between the faith communities and workers.

On May 25, now Africa Day, the star Canopus (Kanuba) appears before sunrise to announce the beginning of winter and the initiation ceremonies that take place between May and August.

CONCLUSION

These spiritual, cultural and agricultural festivals give expression to the intangible African heritage. They are ways of life that sustained African moral and social fibre and enhanced social cohesion and nation-building.

The suppression of African spirituality, culture and traditions weakened the African moral and social fibre. The current education and moral regeneration programmes have neglected indigenous African values, which are embraced by the overwhelming majority of the people, and thus failed to stem the tide of moral degeneration in schools and communities. There is an urgent need for the state's social cluster, the legislative sector, and cultural and religious organisations to come together to review the situation and take appropriate action. ☞

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