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Ethnicity, Culture Prickly Pear in South African Museums?

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Ethnicity is, and always has been, a topic of great concern in South Africa. Even more so today:

[South Africa today] resembles a newly born infant, struggling to find its feet and discover its identity in a fast-moving, rapidly changing environment.²

In multi-cultural societies the expression of ethnic identity often becomes wrapped up with issues of ethnic conflict and ethnic nationalism. South Africa has suffered the fate of violent political conflict as a result of racial, ideological, cultural and linguistic divides. Ethnic division and separation was the cornerstone of the abominable apartheid regime, the basis of political struggle in our country.

One of the bastions of apartheid ideology was the perpetuation of the fallacy of racial stereotypes, with an over-emphasis on tribalism to foster the rationale of Bantustan policy under which black homelands were created,³ underpinned by an assumption of ethnic superiority of those of the so-called "white" or "European race." The apartheid policy was rooted in ethnic division, in the so-called "separate development" of various ethnic groups, in

¹ South African Cultural History Museum, P.O. Box 645, Cape Town 8000, South Africa.

² H. J. Bruce and D. Y. Saks. "A new museum for a new South Africa." *Museum* 11(4). 1992. 238.

³ D. A. Webb. "Winds of Change." *Museums Journal* 94 (4) 1994. 20.

allocation of "Group Areas" for various people, in laws prohibiting marriage across the colour-bar. People were deprived, separated from one another, oppressed, imprisoned, exiled and murdered. The system was devastating and abhorrent, South Africa became "the pariah of the entire world."⁴

There is the feeling among certain people that ethnicity was purely a creation of apartheid and that to discuss it somehow legitimizes its existence.⁵ If non-racialism is to be taken seriously, the idea of race should be banished from the consciousness of people along with discussion and thinking along these terms. Others argue along the structuralist lines that it is part of the inherent features of the human mind to differentiate and categorise, distinguish and label and that there are dangers in universalism and the disappearance of differences. Another line of thinking is that individual identity is of much greater significance than group affiliation.

Internationally, the politicization of ethnic discord has resulted in abusive laws, land and resource disputes and ultimately, wars. Yet, despite this scenario of national and international calamity associated with ethnic conflict, there appears to be a world-wide upsurge in the recognition of the concept of national unity, of the larger population, transcending but also including the identity of various ethnic groups. In a post-apartheid era, the issue of cultural diversity in South Africa, has become one of the landmarks of the struggle for freedom. The new government emphasises the pivotal role which our pluralistic society has to play in a reconstruction and development programme in the country. As per quote from Dr Namane Magau, head of human resources development for the government's reconstruction and development plan,

every sphere of our society, economic and social, has been scarred by the past, and we believe that arts and culture can be a magic wand in closing the cracks and making our humanity whole again.⁶

The key words in the new political dispensation relating to the country's cultural diversity are "integration" and "nation building." The demise of apartheid has left our country with many challenges, a time,

⁴ M. Martin. "Restoring our Otherness-reflections on the meaning of Eurocentrism and its effects on South African culture." *South African Journal of Art History* 11: 1993. 93-100.

⁵ P. McAllister. "Tackling thorny issues." *CSD Bulletin* 5 (5) 1993. 4.

⁶ *The Weekly Mail and Guardian*. "Who will play Fairy Godmother to the arts?" 7-13 October 1994. 33.

to begin building new structures on ruins of the discredited old, fostering a genuinely South African identity based on a common patriotism and citizenship.⁷

In theory, the Reconstruction and Development Programme aims to promote the rich and diverse expression of all South African cultures, to develop a unifying national culture representing the aspirations of all South Africans and to reflect, fully, all the components of our diverse cultural heritage, especially the neglected and suppressed aspects of our culture.⁸ All in all, this, however, begs the question, how is the concept of nation building to be achieved in museums and archaeological work?

Museums, the Winds of Change?

South African museums and galleries have been labelled "bastions of ideology,"⁹ "eurocentric,"¹⁰ "patronising and paternalistic,"¹¹ "elitist,"¹² "exclusive,"¹³ accused of distorting Black history and alienating Black South Africans, reinforcing separatism, one-sided, portraying romanticised, sanitised versions of our history, and so on it goes. Can museums truly outlive this infamous legacy?

Many museums have made changes, but these have been slow and painful and in many cases hardly perceptible to outsiders. The democratization of museums is immanent and the process demands, among others, full accountability, informed access by all citizens to what is being done and achieved, participatory involvement by all sectors of society, especially to correct imbalances, mobilizing and enfranchising the community to have access to

⁷ Bruce, H. J. and Saks, D. Y. "A new museum for a new South Africa." *Museum* 11 (4). 1992. 238.

⁸ African National Congress. *The Reconstruction and Development Programme; A Policy Framework* (Johannesburg: ANC. 1994) 69.

⁹ Martin, M. "Restoring our Otherness-reflections on the meaning of Eurocentrism and its effects on South African culture." *South African Journal of Art History* 11: 1993. 93-100.

¹⁰ A. Odendaal. "Let it Return!" *Museums Journal* 94 (4) 1994. 24-26. A. Odendaal. Letter from Create (Commission for the Reconstruction and Transformation of the Arts and Culture in South Africa) to Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Future of Museums in South Africa. 18 May 1994. A. Odendaal. "Give life to learning: The way ahead for museums in a democratic South Africa." Paper presented on behalf of CREATE to Southern African Museums Association. Annual Conference, East London, 23 May 1994.

¹¹ E. Rankin. "Art out of Apartheid." *Museums Journal* 94 (4) 1994. 30.

¹² D. A. Webb. "Winds of Change." *Museums Journal* 94 (4) 1994. 20.

¹³ J. Wright and A. Mazel. "Bastions of Ideology: the depiction of pre-colonial history in the museums of Natal and Kwazulu." *South African Museums Association Bulletin* 17 (7-8) 1987. 307.

resources and decision-making in the field of the arts, culture and ethnic issues. Participatory involvement is the key to sustaining successful developments in these emotional and subjectively-loaded realms.

Archaeological Interpretation

A fellow archaeologist says the following about the remains of the vanished African American culture.

The most complete and unbiased archive of African American history lies in the ground . . . in many cases . . . the only direct historical statement African Americans have left for posterity.¹⁴

Yes and no, depending on a number of variables. Within my own discipline, historical archaeology in a museum environment, there has been a major shift in direction in the last fifteen years or so.¹⁵ The interpretation of archaeological evidence has become the focus of increasing critical analysis. The debate revolves around the recognition that researchers impose value judgements on the evidence which they study and present to the public. Archaeologists and academic historians have access to remains of the past but the way in which the evidence is used to interpret the past, becomes a critical issue, particularly in view of increasing ethnic conflicts in the modern world. Schuyler, another fellow archaeologist, proposes:

¹⁴ P. H. Garrow. "The remains of a Vanished Culture." *Federal Archaeology Report* 7(1) 1994. 3.

¹⁵ L. R. Binford. *In Pursuit of the Past: Decoding the Archaeological Record*. (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson. 1988). D. Clarke. "Archaeology, the loss of innocence." *Antiquity*. 47. 1973. 6-18. K. Deagan. "Avenues of inquiry in Historical Archaeology." *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, Vol. 5 (New York: Academic Press. 1982). R. C. Dunnell. "Five decades of American Archaeology." in David J. Meltzer, Don Fowler and J. A. Zabloff (eds.) *American Archaeology Past and Present* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1986) 23-49. I. Hodder. *The meanings of things; material culture and symbolic expression*. (London: Unwin Hyman. 1989). M. Leone. "Some opinions about recovering mind." *American Antiquity* 47. 1982. 742-760. C. Renfrew. *Towards an archaeology of mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1982). R. Schuyler. "The spoken word, the written word, observed behaviour and preserved behaviour: the context available to the archaeologist." Conference on Historic Sites. *Archaeology Papers* 10 (2) 1977. 99-120. Schuyler, R. "The spoken word, the written word, observed behaviour and preserved behaviour: the context available to the archaeologist." Conference on Historic Sites. *Archaeology Papers* 10 (2) 1977. 99-120.

It is the context within which scholarly research is carried out, more than the specific methodology used, that will eventually determine the end product.¹⁶

It is not the identification of the presence of various ethnic groups in the material culture evidence which presents a problem, but the interpretation thereof. Archaeological evidence does not constitute an objective self-revelation. The evidence requires interpretation by archaeologists and inasmuch as the evidence changes over time, so do the attitudes and views of archaeologists. We are not only reading the signs of the past but writing them into the present.¹⁷

The study of ethnicity in historical archaeology has sometimes been labelled "an intellectual fad . . . by scholars seeking relevancy and attention" and as a matter of jumping onto the "bandwagon."¹⁸ The basis of a new approach in the study of ethnicity in America in the 1960s, centered around the rejection of a singular American experience, rising minority discontent and the emergence of ethnic identity and self-respect. The image of American society as a melting pot lost favour, "except among those who would see it as a bitter joke about the scum rising to the top and those on the bottom getting burnt."¹⁹ The main theoretical underpinning of the new approach emphasises the richness and diversity of plural societies and the way in which group identity is used as a tool for social action.

Historical archaeologists' interest in ethnicity has grown out of their concern with the interaction between cultures and the history of everyday people, those who could not write, the ordinary common folk, the unrepresented, the underprivileged, the subjugated, the disenfranchised, the silent majority.²⁰ In this sense there is a valid case for important work in the discipline, in encouraging a consciousness and rediscovering and recreating a perspective on the neglected history of these people.

¹⁶ R. Schuyler. "Images of America: The contribution of Historical Archaeology to National Identity." *Southwestern Lore* 42(4) 1976. 29.

¹⁷ C. Tilley. "Interpreting material culture." in I. Hodder (ed.) *The Meanings of Things* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 185-194.

¹⁸ McKee, L. W. "Delineating Ethnicity from the Garbage of Early Virginians: Faunal Remains from the Kingsmill Plantation Slave Quarter." *American Archeology* 6(1). 1987) 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁰ J. Deetz. *Invitation to Archaeology* (New York: Natural History Press. 1967). J. Deetz. *In small things forgotten* (Garden City. Anchor Books. 1977). A. E. Yentsch and M. C. Beaudry. *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology* (Florida: CRC Press. 1992).

In dealing with historical data employed in historical archaeology, it is a given that the nature of history and historiography is itself in flux. Historical archaeology has been used to contradict, reinforce, supplement and to bring certain historical evidence to the fore, and, more indirectly, to unmask some of the hidden, ideological constructs of the past.²¹ History is made by ordinary people but written by those in power, for those in power. But how do we avoid perpetuating former errors under a new political dispensation? How do we ensure a people's history with an honest, objective approach to individual and ethnic representation as well as a collective history of our country? Is this at all possible?

Concluding Comments

It goes without saying that a radical reinterpretation of our history and approaches to ethnicity is imperative in the reformulation of diverse cultural issues in South Africa. It is never too late, even though our country and its people have suffered major cultural deprivation and damage of inestimable proportion and many of the bureaucratic structures which have stifled cultural growth under the apartheid era, are still in place. The future in South Africa means sorting out our complicated past, disentangling the biases, distortions, prejudices, lies, and rewriting a more balanced history for the future. Whichever way we deal with it, it will be controversial in our multi-cultural society. We have a great deal of work ahead of us!

Only time will tell whether we can build a new nation without bitterness, with relentless trust, dedication, optimism, sensitivity and respect for the ethnic integrity of all cultures.



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²¹ P. B. Potter. "Critical Archaeology: In the Ground and in the Street." *Historical Archaeology* 26 (3) 1992. 118.

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