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HERITAGE PRESERVATION IN MODERN SOUTH AFRICA.



CHRONICLING THE HERITAGE OF FREEDOM SONGS AS STRUCTURAL TOOLS OF RESISTANCE AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION



CDE SELLO MAECO

Introduction: Song as the Expressway of the People

In African tradition, a people without song is a people without memory. Long before colonialism, our people used song as an expressway - as pina, ingoma, kosa, sefela - to carry history, to mourn and to mobilise. When the apartheid regime banned political organisations under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, it also sought to ban the singing of revolutionary songs. It failed.

The first party to be banned was the Communist Party of South Africa, later the SACP. It went underground and into exile, and it was the SACP that used its international networks to secure accommodation for the ANC in many African countries after the ANC was banned in 1960. This unity between ANC and SACP was existential.

Freedom songs were never entertainment. They were structural tools of resistance, political education and cultural preservation. They were sung by all ANC, PAC, Black Consciousness, UDF, SAYCO, COSAS, SANSCO because the enemy was one: apartheid colonialism. In Heritage Month, we must reclaim this heritage in its totality from exile and from inside the country.

From Kongwa to Wankie: MK, ZIPRA and the Frontline States

When most movements went into exile, Tanzania under Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and Zambia under Dr Kenneth Kaunda became the rear bases of revolution. Tanzania gave us Kongwa and Morogoro for MK training. Zambia hosted ANC Headquarters in Lusaka for over 20 years, despite bombings by apartheid forces. Kaunda's doctrine of Humanism meant Zambia paid with its economy and lives for our freedom.

The most concrete military expression of Pan-African solidarity was the alliance between Umkhonto we Sizwe/MK of the ANC and ZIPRA of ZAPU led by Joshua Nkomo. In the 1960s, MK adopted the fighting style and singing culture of ZIPRA.

The Wankie Campaign of 1967 and Sipolilo Campaign of 1968 were the first joint MK-ZIPRA operations to enter then Rhodesia to fight their way to South Africa. ZIPRA had a tradition of singing before battle to invoke ancestors and show determination against the Ian Smith regime. MK adopted it. Songs like 'We are the soldiers of Umkhonto' became battle orders. Militarily we suffered losses, but politically we established that our struggle was a regional struggle.

Inside the Country: The Vaal Uprising of 1984, Rent Boycott and the Songs of the Township

While MK and ZIPRA fought outside, the masses fought inside - and song was the bridge.

By 1984, apartheid had created illegitimate Black Local Authorities - community councillors who were seen as puppets, who increased rent, service charges and shack rents while people had no jobs. On 3 September 1984, the Vaal Triangle - Sharpeville, Sebokeng, Evaton, Boipatong - exploded. This was the Vaal Uprising, popularly known as the Rent Boycott.

Our people refused to pay rent. The slogan was clear in song:

Asiphatile I-rent, Asiphatile!
Sohlala Sinyova, Sinyova!

Asiphatile I-rent, 'We will not pay rent, was not just a song, it was a programme of action. Sohlala Sinyova, 'We will remain squeezed / we will stay ungovernable, was a declaration of ungovernability. When our people sang these songs in Sharpeville and Sebokeng, they were mobilising behind the banner of the ANC and UDF to make apartheid unworkable.

The apartheid state responded with brutal repression. Councillors who were seen to be collaborators were attacked, and in some cases killed by angry protesters. The state then arrested community leaders and charged them with treason. This led to the famous case of the Sharpeville Six: Mofokeng, Sefatsa, Theresa Ramashamola, Reid Mokoena, Oupa Diniso, Motse Mokone and Duma Khumalo who were sentenced to death in 1985 for a murder at a rent boycott protest they did not directly commit, simply for being part of the protesting crowd that sang.

The Sharpeville Six became a global symbol of how apartheid criminalised song and protest. Around the world, people sang 'Free the Sharpeville Six'. Their death sentences were only commuted after massive international pressure. Their case proved that the song Asiphatile I-rent was considered by the regime as dangerous as a gun.

The Vaal Uprising spread across the country to the East Rand, Soweto, Cradock, Port Elizabeth. In every rent boycott meeting, songs were the minutes and the constitution. Before leaders spoke, the community sang. The song told the puppet councillors: you have no legitimacy. The song told the youth: you are part of a long march from Wankie to Vaal.

This is why freedom songs are structural tools. They linked the guerrilla in Kongwa singing Hamba Kahle Mkhonto to the mother in Sharpeville singing Asiphatile I-rent. Both were fighting the same system: apartheid colonialism.

Current Relevance: What Does This Heritage Mean Today?

Why must we chronicle this in 2026, in the era of the Government of National Unity GNU?

First, because some want to sanitise heritage. They want freedom songs declared 'hate speech' while preserving statues of Verwoerd as heritage. We in the ANC say: No. Freedom songs are intangible heritage protected under UNESCO and our National Heritage Resources Act. They are the national anthem of the struggle. They are evidence of crimes of apartheid - rent hikes, puppet councils, Sharpeville Six.

Second, because the Vaal Uprising teaches us about local government today. The rent boycott of 1984 was about illegitimate local authorities who did not serve the people. Today, in communities like Muldersdrift, our people complain about water cuts, roads, lack of title deeds. If we as ANC in local government behave like the councillors of 1984 aloof, corrupt, not listening our people will again sing Asiphatile I-rent. The lesson is: ANC must be a listening, community ANC.

Third, for the youth. The youth of today were not in Vaal in 1984. They find Asiphatile and Sohlala Sinyova on TikTok. We must conscientise them. Teach them that the song they sing during a service delivery protest is linked to Sharpeville Six who nearly went to the gallows for singing. Teach them that their township's heritage is not only Amapiano, but also resistance. Teach them that the same Zambia and Tanzania that hosted MK also supported the Vaal youth with scholarships.

When we include persons with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ youth in this heritage, we are being true to the Freedom Charter South Africa belongs to all. The rent boycott was about all residents, women, disabled, everyone paying rent. Today, heritage must include everyone.

Conclusion

The freedom song is our living archive. It preserved our culture when apartheid sought to tribalise it. It was a weapon in Wankie with MK-ZIPRA, it was a constitution in Vaal with Asiphatile I-rent, it was solidarity in Lusaka and Dar es Salaam with Kaunda and Nyerere.

As ANC Members of Parliament, our duty in Heritage Month is to ensure this heritage is taught in schools, TVETs and ANC political schools not as museum nostalgia, but as a tool to understand the world we live in today. Let the youth sing, but let them sing knowing why Sharpeville Six nearly died for a song about rent.

Long live the heritage of freedom songs! Long live!

Long live the Revolutionary Alliance ANC, SACP, COSATU, SANCO Long live!

Long live the Mass Democratic Movement UDF, SAYCO, COSAS, SANSCO, Women's and Civic Movement Long live!

Long live the memory of the Vaal Uprising and the Sharpeville Six! Long live!

Long live the spirit of MK-ZIPRA, Lusaka and Dar es Salaam! Long live! Amandla! Awethu! Matla! Ke a Rona!



CELEBRATING THE CONSTITUTIONAL ELEVATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES AND THEIR INTEGRATION INTO OFFICIAL STATE AND JUDICIAL SYSTEMS



CDE OM MATHAFA

September is Heritage Month in South Africa, a time when we are called upon to celebrate, preserve, and deepen our understanding of the diverse heritage that defines our nation. Our heritage is reflected in our history, cultures, traditions, music, arts, customs, and indigenous knowledge. At the heart of these expressions of our heritage, however, is language.

Language carries the memory of a people and preserves our oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, names, histories, values, and ways of understanding the world. To celebrate our heritage is to recognise, protect, and promote the languages through which it has been transmitted from generation to generation.

As a result, the constitutional elevation of South Africa's indigenous languages must be understood as an important achievement of our liberation struggle and as part of the ongoing project of building a united, non-racial, non-sexist, prosperous and democratic society.

The struggle for linguistic equality has deep roots in the history of the African National Congress (ANC). The 1955 Freedom Charter declared that "all people shall have equal right to use their own languages, and to develop their own folk culture and customs." This shows that language equality was not an afterthought in the ANC's vision of a democratic South Africa; it was embedded in the movement's conception of freedom, equality, and human dignity.

This vision stood in direct opposition to the apartheid state's systematic marginalisation of African languages. For decades, English and Afrikaans dominated the formal institutions of government, education, Parliament and the courts, while African languages were largely

confined to spaces defined by the apartheid state. Language therefore became one

of the instruments through which colonial and apartheid power was exercised and reproduced.

The events of 16 June 1976 brought this struggle into sharp focus. The Soweto uprising was triggered by the apartheid government's insistence on making Afrikaans compulsory as a medium of instruction in Black schools. For the young people who took to the streets, this was not merely a dispute over educational administration. It represented the arrogance of a state seeking to impose its authority over the education, identity and future of Black children.

The courage of the learners in 1976 transformed a language struggle into a defining moment in the liberation struggle. We must, however, distinguish between Afrikaans as a language and the apartheid state's use of language as an instrument of domination. Afrikaans is an important part of South Africa's rich linguistic heritage and is constitutionally protected alongside our other official languages. The lesson of 1976 is therefore not the rejection of Afrikaans, but the rejection of linguistic domination, coercion and inequality.

The democratic breakthrough of 1994 fundamentally transformed the relationship between language and state power. Section 6 of the Constitution recognises South Africa's official languages and acknowledges the historically diminished status and use of indigenous languages. It places a positive obligation on the state to take practical measures to elevate their status and advance their use.

This constitutional settlement reflects the ANC's long-standing policy position that political freedom cannot be complete if the democratic state continues to reproduce the linguistic inequalities of the past. Our constitutional order therefore provides the foundation for a new language dispensation grounded in equality, dignity, parity of esteem and equitable treatment.

Comrade Oliver Tambo captured this broader understanding of culture and nation-building when he observed that "language, oral literature, dance, etc., become elemental parts of the national culture", emphasising that our diverse cultural traditions should contribute to a common national culture rather than serve as instruments of division.

This principle is particularly important in the administration of justice. Justice cannot be genuinely accessible if the language of the law becomes a barrier to citizens' constitutional rights. A citizen must be able to understand the proceedings that determine their freedom, property, rights and obligations.

The integration of indigenous languages into our courts and the broader justice system must therefore be part of the unfinished

transformation of institutions inherited from apartheid. It requires more than interpretation when a person appears in court. It requires developing indigenous-language legal terminology, translation capacity, legal education, judicial resources, and digital technologies that enable our courts to function effectively in the languages of our people.

Recognising and elevating indigenous languages also demonstrates the seriousness with which the democratic government must pursue the Batho Pele principle of putting people first. Citizens should not feel like strangers in government offices simply because the language of administration is inaccessible to them. Government communication, public information, Parliament, schools, universities and public broadcasting must increasingly reflect our society's linguistic diversity.

For our young people in particular, language transformation is essential. If future generations are to value their heritage, they must see their languages used successfully in the modern economy, universities, Parliament, the courts and digital spaces. We must ensure that an African child does not grow up believing that their mother tongue is suitable only for the home, while English or another language is regarded as the language of intelligence, opportunity and advancement.

The constitutional recognition of South African Sign Language as an official language further demonstrates that our understanding of heritage, equality and inclusion must continue to evolve. Our heritage belongs to all South Africans, including communities whose languages and forms of communication have historically been excluded or marginalised. The true celebration of our linguistic heritage will therefore be achieved when indigenous languages are not merely protected in constitutional texts, but are fully integrated into the everyday functioning of the democratic state.

It will be achieved when a citizen can access government services, participate meaningfully in Parliament, receive quality education, engage with the economy and seek justice in a language that affirms their dignity and identity.

As we celebrate Heritage Month, we must recognise the constitutional elevation of indigenous languages not merely as a celebration of our past, but as a call to action for the present and future. The task before us is to ensure that the promise of our Constitution becomes a lived reality: a South Africa in which linguistic diversity is not a barrier to opportunity, but a source of dignity, equality, social cohesion and national unity.

THE HERITAGE ECONOMY: LEVERAGING CULTURE TO DRIVE TOWNSHIP AND RURAL GROWTH



CDE M DIKGALE

Heritage Month is a time when we proudly celebrate our languages, our dress, our music and our shared history. But as the ANC, we must ask a deeper question: how does heritage put food on the table?

The answer lies in building a Heritage Economy – one that deliberately leverages cultural tourism, heritage sites and local craft markets to drive township and rural economic growth. This is not romantic nostalgia. It is a serious economic strategy for inclusive growth, for job creation where our people live, and for ensuring that economic freedom follows political freedom.

Our townships and rural villages are rich in culture but poor in investment. The Heritage Economy reverses that by turning identity into an asset and story into an industry.

1. Cultural Tourism: Making the Township a Destination

Townships are the soul of South Africa's democratic story. Soweto's Vilakazi Street – home to two Nobel laureates – has shown what is possible. Around that single heritage footprint, a whole ecosystem thrives: guesthouses, tour operators, restaurants, shisanyamas, transport providers and craft traders.

But why should it be only Soweto? Every township has a heritage route waiting to be developed. Umlazi, Mdantsane, New Brighton, Sharpeville, Alexandra – each carries stories of resistance, of culture, of jazz, maskandi, amapiano and kasi lingo.

What is needed is intentional state support: municipalities, working with the Department of Tourism and provinces, must map township cultural routes, invest in signage, lighting, safety and cleanliness, and provide enterprise development for youth-owned tour companies,

homestays and food SMMEs along those routes. When a tourist spends a night in the township, not just an hour on a bus, the rand circulates locally and jobs multiply.

Cultural festivals – from the National Arts Festival to local heritage carnivals – must also be decentralised. Let the township and the village become the stage, not just the city hall.

2. Heritage Sites: Communities as Shareholders, Not Spectators

South Africa boasts ten UNESCO World Heritage Sites, from Mapungubwe and the Cradle of Humankind to Robben Island and the Khomani Cultural Landscape, alongside hundreds of provincial heritage sites. Yet a painful contradiction persists: world-class sites surrounded by communities locked in poverty.

A progressive heritage economy demands a new social compact: no heritage site should be an island of preservation in a sea of poverty.

Communities adjacent to sites must be direct beneficiaries – trained and employed as guides, rangers, hospitality staff and conservators; organised into cooperatives that supply catering, maintenance and transport; and allocated trading spaces for craft markets at site entrances under preferential terms.

In rural areas especially – the Wild Coast, Venda, the Karoo, the Drakensberg – heritage and eco-tourism can anchor entire local economies if we get the basics right: access roads, water, connectivity and aggressive marketing on global platforms. Land restitution and traditional leadership institutions should be partners, not obstacles, in structuring community-public-private partnerships that keep value in local hands.

3. Craft Markets: From Pavement Hustle to Global Value Chain

Our crafters – predominantly black women and youth – are the backbone of the heritage economy. From beadwork in KwaZulu-Natal to woodcarving in Limpopo, from the Midlands Meander to Greenmarket Square, their talent is undeniable.

But they remain trapped at the bottom of the value chain. They produce beautiful work, yet middlemen capture the profit, and cheap imports undercut them.

We must move crafters from pavement to value chain. This requires three interventions: firstly, product development, quality assurance and design support so our crafts meet export standards; secondly, digital access – e-commerce training and zero-rated platforms so a weaver in Giyani can sell directly to Johannesburg or London; and thirdly, demand – government departments, hotels, conferences

and corporates must commit to buying local craft for gifting and décor instead of importing.

The mandates of the Department of Small Business Development and the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture must converge here, with dedicated funding, incubators and market access programmes for creative SMMEs in townships and rural areas.

Heritage Must Work for the People

Comrades, our liberation heritage taught us that culture was a weapon of struggle. Today, culture must be an instrument of development.

If we invest in township tourism routes, ensure heritage sites uplift their neighbouring communities, and formalise the craft economy, we will create decent jobs for youth and women without them having to migrate to the cities.

This Heritage Month, let us move beyond celebration to economic action. Let us make heritage work – for township renewal, for rural transformation, and for the dignity of our people.

Amandla!



YOUTH, IDENTITY AND DIGITAL HERITAGE: HOW GENERATION Z AND MILLENNIALS ARE RE-DEFINING SOUTH AFRICAN CULTURE AND HERITAGE.



CDE T TSHOTETSI

South Africa is a country rich in cultural, linguistic and historical variety. Its history comprises indigenous languages, music, dance, oral traditions, food, dress, customs, religious practices and historical memories. This tradition was handed down through families, communities, ceremonies, schools, museums, archives and other institutions. However, the rapid rise of digital technology has altered the ways in which South Africans engage with, preserve and disseminate their cultural legacy. For Gen Z and Millennials, in particular, digital platforms have become vital spaces to express identity, share cultural knowledge and redefine what it means to be South African.

Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube allow young people to develop and share cultural content, not just consume it from traditional media. Podcasts have also generated new forums for discussions on history, identity, language, politics, music and everyday experiences. Consequently, digital technology is gradually becoming a part of South Africa's living legacy. Research has shown that social media can be used to assist young South Africans to negotiate personal and collective identities, while at the same time providing opportunities for indigenous languages and cultural practices to remain relevant in contemporary society (Lesame and Malatji, 2022; Ligidima and Makananise, 2020). This essay contends that Generation Z and Millennials are not only consumers of digital technology. They are active makers and caretakers of digital history. These generations are changing the way South African culture is remembered, portrayed and experienced through social media, podcasts, music, film and online storytelling.

Digital Platforms and the Making of Youth Identity

Identity is the way people understand themselves and their relationship to other people, communities and society. In South Africa, one's identity is shaped by language, ethnicity, familial background, location, race, music, religion and common history. Digital platforms give another vital dimension to this process.

For Generation Z and Millennials, social media is a daily setting where identity may be presented, negotiated and contested. Young South Africans are free to select the language they speak, the cultural traditions they demonstrate and the communities they engage with online. Research with South African emerging adults indicated that social media offers an essential context in which young people engage with others, develop their perceptions of themselves and society, and negotiate notions about individuality, solidarity, diversity and responsibility (2024).

This indicates that digital identity is not necessarily distinct from cultural identity. For example, a young South African could publish a TikTok video in traditional attire, share a family recipe on Instagram, explain an indigenous proverb on YouTube or join in a podcast conversation about the history of apartheid. Such events provide opportunities for young people to share aspects of their heritage with audiences that may reach beyond their immediate communities.

Social media has thereby altered cultural involvement from something that mostly happens inside physical communities into something that can happen beyond geographical boundaries. For example, a young person in Rustenburg can discuss Setswana traditions with audiences in Johannesburg, Cape Town, London or New York within minutes. Digital platforms have so developed what could be called digital cultural communities.

Indigenous Languages and the Digital Space

Language is one of the most important elements of cultural identity. Historically, South Africa's indigenous languages have been under assault from dominant languages, particularly English and Afrikaans. However, digital platforms are opening up new chances for young people to utilise and promote indigenous languages. Studies on South African adolescents have indicated that social media can give chances for the promotion of African languages. For instance, Ligidima and Makananise (2020) observed that young individuals use platforms like WhatsApp to communicate in indigenous

languages and contribute to their promotion. Research in Limpopo also revealed that young people choose different languages based on the platform and situation, with African languages being particularly prevalent in WhatsApp conversation (Lesame and Malatji, 2022).

This phenomenon has become much bigger with the rise of short form video services. Increasingly, TikTok makers are using languages like Setswana, isiXhosa, isiZulu and other African languages to create humour, music, storytelling, fashion and educational material. Thus, modern digital content can embed indigenous languages into current popular culture, instead of associating them solely with traditional or rural surroundings.

This is especially crucial for future generations, for it does not force young people to reject modern society just to preserve their language. Instead, they can blend indigenous languages with modern music, memes, fashion and internet humour. A young person might employ Setswana slang in a TikTok video, code-switch English and Setswana in a podcast or explain a traditional adage in an Instagram post. Culture is thus made dynamic rather than frozen in the past.

Recent research that has been conducted only on Setswana content on YouTube and TikTok has shown that cultural symbols, proverbs, music videos and podcasts can be contemporary extensions of oral tradition. These platforms provide Setswana language and culture with the opportunity to be located in contemporary digital settings and can serve to engender cultural pride and linguistic identity (2026).

Podcasts and the Return of Oral Tradition

Podcasts have become yet another significant tool in the reimagining of South African cultural heritage. In the past, knowledge of culture and history was often passed down orally from one generation to another through stories, chats with elders, songs and community meetings. Podcasts have developed a modern iteration of this oral practice.

Unlike short social media updates, podcasts allow for extended interactions. Young South Africans can debate themes like apartheid and post-apartheid experiences, traditional leadership, African spirituality, relationships, music, language, family history, and current societal issues.

Podcasts are important because they allow for the recording and preservation of cultural knowledge in a digital format. The story of an elder that may formerly have been heard exclusively by members of a particular family can be recorded and made available to thousands of listeners. Thus, podcasts can take individual memories and make them part of a

larger digital collection. The link between oral tradition and podcasts is evident in the Setswana cultural content. Research on Setswana YouTube and TikTok material has shown that podcasts can function as spaces to communicate moral lessons, cultural knowledge, and historical memory, hence extending oral traditions into current digital spaces (2026). Podcasts also allow Millennials and Generation Z to challenge dominant narratives of history. Instead than only textbooks or traditional media, young people can hear from historians, activists, singers, traditional leaders, professors and regular community members giving their viewpoints. This can widen the range of voices involved in defining South African heritage.

Social Media as Digital Heritage Archive

Increasingly, digital platforms are informal archives of South African culture. Photographs, movies, music, interviews, recipes, traditional rites, fashion, personal tales can all become digital recordings. This is particularly important considering that many indigenous communities have been historically under-represented in formal archives. For example, research on the Hlubi nation showed concerns about the under-representation of indigenous knowledge, narratives and marginalised communities in cultural archives and examined how social media could help to capture cultural activities and histories for future use (Ndlela and de la Harpe, 2023). Digital heritage, therefore, provides communities greater choice over how their own histories are represented. A community does not have to wait for a museum, scholar or media organization to document its culture. They can videotape ceremonies, interview elders and distribute historical images with community members. But digital heritage has its issues as well. Not anything that is uploaded online is accurate. Cultural activities can be reduced, commercialised or decontextualised. Algorithms also risk prioritising content that is entertaining over stuff that is historically correct or culturally sensitive. Moreover, cultural knowledge can be used by persons who are not part of the groups from which the information originated. Therefore, responsible engagement is required in the digital heritage. Young people should not only be encouraged to produce cultural content, but they should be educated about cultural ownership, consent, historical accuracy and ethical storytelling.

South African culture reimagined: Generation Z, Millennials

One of the most significant qualities of internet culture is that it allows young people to mix numerous cultural influences. South African teenagers can be consuming global popular culture while being strongly connected to local traditions. A youth can listen to American hip-hop, dress in modern streetwear, take part in global TikTok trends and still celebrate traditional ceremonies, speak an indigenous language and cook traditional food. It shows that culture is not

static. It changes as individuals connect with new ideas and technology. Generation Z and Millennials are so producing hybrid forms of South African culture. Take music, for example. Genres like as amapiano have showed how local sounds, languages and cultural experiences may be introduced to global digital platforms. A South African song can go from a local community to an international audience through TikTok, YouTube and Instagram. Research on youth use of mobile media similarly indicates how young Africans are using TikTok, YouTube and Instagram to perform, remix and creatively reinterpret indigenous musical practices (Izu, 2026). This technique challenges the idea that heritage solely exists in museums or other heritage institutions. Heritage can be found in today's music, vocabulary, fashion, memes, dances, recipes and online chats. The digital generation is in fact producing a new type of live digital heritage.

Challenges in Digital Cultural Heritage

Digital cultural heritage has benefits but also challenges. The first difficulty is the digital gap. Not all South Africans have equitable access to affordable data, smartphones, dependable internet connectivity and digital skills. Therefore, certain communities may not be well-represented online. A second problem is cultural misconception. Social media promotes content that draws attention, which means that dramatic or false takes on history can go viral. Young users may find unsupported or purposefully deceptive historical claims. Third, cultural commercialisation can arise when traditions are changed into material for the purpose of only views, following or money. Making money from cultural content is not necessarily a negative, but producers should examine if communities gain from the depiction of their past. Finally, there are problems about the preservation of the digital content itself. Posts on social-media can disappear when accounts are terminated or sites change their policies. What is recorded on TikTok today may not be accessible to future generations as a cultural activity. Heritage institutions play a crucial role in building sustainable digital archives. Research on South Africa's living legacy archives indicates that heritage organisations have not yet fully explored the potential of social media for engaging young people, pointing to a need for more robust digital heritage strategies (2026).

SUMMARY

Generation Z and Millennials are changing South African culture by utilising digital technology as a venue for identity creation, cultural expression and heritage preservation. Social media, podcasts and video platforms have enabled young people to actively participate in chronicling and re-defining South African heritage.

The significance of this change is that young people do not just reproduce traditional culture. They're re-figuring it. Indigenous languages are being mixed with internet slang; traditional

stories are being turned into podcasts; cultural dances are becoming viral films; historical recollections are being discussed on YouTube; and traditional food, clothes and music are being given to global audiences. Digital technology is therefore both an opportunity and a responsibility for South Africa. "This is the opportunity to make heritage more accessible, participatory and relevant to younger generations". The job is to make sure that digital heritage is respectful, truthful, inclusive and community owned. Ultimately, the future of South African legacy will not be found just in museums, archives or text books. It will also be on smartphones, podcasts, social media feeds and digital communities. Generation Z and Millennials are already demonstrating that ancestry is not merely something you receive from the past. It is something that each generation actively recreates, negotiates and takes with them into the future.



RECLAIMING LAND, RECLAIMING HERITAGE

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ANCESTRAL LAND, CULTURAL DIGNITY AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



CDE M MODISE

Introduction

Land is never merely soil. For many African communities, it embodies memory, identity and belonging. It is where generations are born, where ancestors are buried, and where families preserve customs, raise livestock and pass indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next.

When land was taken through colonial conquest, discriminatory legislation and forced removals, communities lost far more than physical territory. They lost livelihoods, sacred spaces, cultural continuity and a secure foundation from which to build their future. The 1913 Natives Land Act restricted African land ownership to approximately seven percent of South Africa's land area, later expanded to about thirteen percent under the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act. These laws systematically excluded Black South Africans from meaningful land ownership and entrenched generations of inequality and poverty.

More than three decades into democracy, South Africa faces an important challenge. Restoring dignity requires more than acknowledging historical injustice. It requires rebuilding the relationship between dispossessed communities and their ancestral land.

Sustainable rural development will remain incomplete if communities lack both secure access to land and the infrastructure, finance, skills and institutional support required to use it productively.

Land restoration is therefore not only an economic imperative. It is a cultural, social and developmental necessity.

1. Land as Cultural Dignity

Colonial and apartheid governments understood that separating people from land weakened their political, economic and cultural

Abstract

Land is more than an economic asset. For many African communities, it is a source of identity, heritage, dignity and belonging. The legacy of colonial conquest, the 1913 Natives Land Act and apartheid-era forced removals disconnected millions of South Africans from their ancestral land, cultural heritage and economic foundations.

I argue that meaningful land reform must extend beyond the transfer of title deeds and hectares. It must reconnect communities with their history, restore cultural dignity and create sustainable pathways for rural economic development. By integrating heritage preservation, land restitution, agricultural development and youth participation, South Africa can transform land reform into a vehicle for both justice and inclusive growth.

independence. A people disconnected from land could be transformed into tenants, migrant labourers or farm workers within their own country.

The consequences of dispossession were not merely economic. They were also spiritual, social and cultural.

For communities such as the Bathlakoane Ba Manzimnyama in Mpumalanga, dispossession meant losing access to ancestral graves, sacred sites, grazing land, medicinal plants and places where important ceremonies were conducted. Such losses cannot be reduced to their monetary value.

Land restitution should therefore be viewed as both material redress and social restoration. Forced removals fractured families, disrupted communities and weakened systems of indigenous knowledge that had developed over generations.

When communities return to ancestral land, they regain the ability to:

- **Protect ancestral graves.**
- **Preserve sacred and cultural sites.**
- **Practise customary traditions.**
- **Safeguard indigenous knowledge.**
- **Re-establish a sense of belonging and identity.**

In doing so, they restore *isithunzi*; the dignity and social standing that comes from knowing where one belongs.

This cultural dimension is particularly significant for young people. When rural youth see ancestral places neglected, inaccessible or controlled by others, they may conclude that their history offers little value for their future. Urban migration then appears to be the only path toward opportunity.

Yet rural renewal cannot be achieved through

sentiment alone. Communities require access to water, electricity, roads, healthcare, education, digital connectivity and markets.

Recognising ancestral land as a living cultural resource is therefore a critical foundation for creating rural communities in which young people choose to invest their talent, energy and creativity.

No nation can claim to have fully repaired historical injustice while families must ask permission to visit the graves of their ancestors.

2. Dispossession and Economic Exclusion

South Africa possesses one of the most advanced agricultural sectors on the African continent, yet millions of households continue to experience food insecurity.

This contradiction reveals an important reality: national food production does not automatically guarantee household food security. Food may exist in abundance within commercial markets while remaining unaffordable or inaccessible to poor households.

Household agriculture already contributes significantly to food access, although its full potential remains underutilised. Across the country, millions of households engage in agricultural production to supplement household nutrition and strengthen livelihoods.

However, land ownership remains highly unequal, reflecting historical patterns of exclusion that continue to shape who benefits from agricultural opportunities and rural development.

Land reform can contribute to a more inclusive and productive rural economy, but land transfer alone is insufficient.

Successful land reform requires:

- **Secure land rights and tenure.**
- **Access to water and irrigation.**

- **Affordable finance and credit.**
- **Agricultural extension services.**
- **Skills development and mentorship.**
- **Infrastructure investment.**
- **Access to local and regional markets.**

Where these conditions exist, land reform can become a catalyst for economic participation, food security and sustainable development.

Food Sovereignty

Small-scale producers have the potential to improve household nutrition while supplying local markets with affordable and nutritious food.

Government institutions such as schools, hospitals and clinics can strengthen local production through procurement programmes that support emerging farmers while maintaining food quality and safety standards. Such an approach keeps economic activity circulating within local communities and strengthens rural economies.

Food sovereignty means empowering communities not merely to consume food, but to participate actively in its production, distribution and management.

Heritage-Based Enterprise

Ancestral land presents significant opportunities for cultural and heritage-based economic development.

These opportunities include:

- **Cultural and heritage tourism.**
- **Indigenous livestock production.**
- **Traditional medicine cultivation.**
- **Community-owned craft industries.**
- **Heritage trails and cultural education initiatives.**

Such ventures must ensure that ownership, authority and economic benefits remain with the communities whose heritage is being promoted. African culture should serve as a vehicle for community development, not as a commercial product controlled by external interests.

Youth Enterprise and Rural Innovation

Land reform must create opportunities for a new generation of rural entrepreneurs.

Young people require access not only to land, but also to:

- **Agricultural technology.**
- **Irrigation systems.**
- **Broadband connectivity.**
- **Business management skills.**
- **Processing facilities.**
- **Market agreements.**
- **Renewable energy opportunities.**

Agriculture must be recognised as part of a modern economic value chain encompassing technology, logistics, tourism, manufacturing, renewable energy and agro-processing.

The experience of communities such as Richtersveld demonstrates that sustainable outcomes are possible when land restoration is accompanied by good governance, investment, skills development and long-term institutional support.

The lesson is clear: land reform succeeds not through transfer alone, but through transfer supported by opportunity.

3. From Restitution to Restoration: A Four-Pillar Model

South Africa must move beyond measuring success solely by the number of claims settled or hectares transferred.

While restitution achievements remain important, true transformation requires lasting social, cultural and economic restoration. A restoration-focused model should be built on four pillars.

Pillar One: Transparent Land Administration and Fair Beneficiary Selection
State-owned land suitable for agriculture, housing and community development should be identified through transparent and publicly accessible audits.

Beneficiary selection processes must be fair, accountable and protected from political interference.

Government should strengthen mechanisms for resolving:

- **Overlapping claims.**
- **Community representation disputes.**
- **Governance conflicts.**
- **Land administration challenges.**

Communal Property Associations must receive sufficient governance support to prevent corruption, mismanagement and elite capture. **Pillar Two: Integrating Heritage into Land Reform**

Every restitution or redistribution project should include a community-led heritage assessment. These assessments should identify and protect:

- **Ancestral graves.**
- **Sacred sites.**
- **Historical settlements.**
- **Traditional grazing routes.**
- **Indigenous knowledge systems.**
- **Cultural landscapes of historical significance.**

Agricultural development and heritage preservation should reinforce one another. Government departments responsible for agriculture, land reform, arts and culture should coordinate efforts to ensure that development and heritage protection proceed together.

Pillar Three:

Long-Term Post-Settlement Support
Land transfer alone is not enough. Sustainable success requires long-term support that includes:

- **Water rights and irrigation access.**
- **Agricultural extension services.**
- **Skills training and mentorship.**
- **Infrastructure development.**
- **Affordable financing.**
- **Governance support.**
- **Access to public and private markets.**

Transferring land without providing the means to succeed risks transferring responsibility without opportunity.

Failure should not become the predictable consequence of inadequate support.

Pillar Four:

Securing Women's Land Rights

Women remain underrepresented in land ownership and agricultural decision-making structures.

Land reform must affirm and protect women's rights to:

- **Own land independently.**
- **Inherit property.**
- **Access productive resources.**
- **Participate in governance structures.**
- **Shape decisions regarding land use and development.**

Women are not secondary beneficiaries of land reform.

They are farmers, food producers, workers, entrepreneurs, seed keepers and guardians of household food security.

Imbokodo, the woman who holds families and communities together, should be recognised not only in words but in enforceable rights and equal participation within landholding institutions.

True restoration requires gender justice alongside economic justice.

Conclusion

The Soil Knows Its Children

A tree cannot flourish when its roots have been severed. For generations, dispossessed communities have been expected to overcome poverty, exclusion and inequality while remaining separated from the land that once sustained their cultural, spiritual and economic lives.

Reclaiming land is not about revenge.

It is about justice.

It is about belonging.

It is about restoration.

It is about ensuring that every child knows that the land beneath their feet carries the footsteps of those who came before them and the possibilities of those who will come after them.

When we reclaim land, we reclaim heritage.

When we reclaim heritage, we restore dignity.

When dignity is supported by secure rights, infrastructure, skills, investment and accountable institutions, it becomes the foundation of sustainable rural development.

Land is more than an economic asset.

It is identity.

It is heritage.

It is dignity.

When a family regains its land, it receives more than property. It regains its place in history and secures a foundation for future generations.

The land is waiting.

The work of restoration cannot wait.

"The struggle for land is not only a struggle for ownership. It is a struggle for dignity, memory and the right of future generations to inherit both opportunity and identity."

ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT MANDELA ON HERITAGE DAY ROBBEN ISLAND, 24 SEPTEMBER 1997



Minister of Arts & Culture, Science & Technology; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and gentlemen,

Few occasions could awaken such a mixture of emotions as today's, or illuminate so sharply the changes of recent years. Fewer still could bring to such sharp focus the challenges ahead.

It is a great joy for me that we can all come as free South Africans - with our friends - to Robben Island; and even more that we are gathered to celebrate our joint heritage as a nation, to acknowledge this heritage in the context of our commitment to Democracy, Tolerance and Human Rights.

In affirming a joint heritage, in this place, we are reminded that our noble ideals were spurred on even more by their long denial, that today's unity is a triumph over yesterday's division and conflict.

The memory of the political prisoners confined on this island and in other prisons, reminds us that these ideals must have concrete content if they are to have real meaning. They must bring secure protection under the law, access to justice, clean water, adequate health-care and shelter. They must entrench the conditions in which one can participate in building our collective democratic future; speak one's own language, have pride in one's culture and one's heritage.

In seeking to ground our heritage in these ideals we are striking out in a new direction.

During colonial and apartheid times, our museums and monuments reflected the

experiences and political ideals of a minority to the exclusion of others.

Most people had little or no say in the depiction of their history in textbooks, libraries, or research institutions. The demeaning portrayal of black people in particular - that is African, Indian and Coloured people - is painful to recall.

Of our museums, all but a handful - three per cent - represented the kind of heritage which glorified mainly white and colonial history. And even the small glimpse of black history in the others was largely fixed in the grip of racist and other stereotypes.

Unfortunately we have to acknowledge that the redressing of this situation has barely begun.

Having excluded and marginalised most of our people, is it surprising that our museums and national monuments are often seen as alien spaces? How many have gone to see one of our monuments? In other countries such places throng with citizens.

Our cultural institutions cannot stand apart from our Constitution and our Bill of Rights. Within the context of our fight for a democratic South Africa and the entrenchment of Human Rights, can we afford exhibitions in our museums depicting any of our people as lesser human beings, sometimes in natural history museums usually reserved for the depiction of animals?

Can we continue to tolerate our ancestors being shown as people locked in time?

Such degrading forms of representation inhibit our children's appreciation of the value and strength of our democracy, of tolerance and of human rights. They demean the victims and warp the minds of the perpetrators.

Through the Apartheid years, people responded to the denial and distortion of their heritage with their own affirmation - as indeed Afrikaners had done in an earlier period. They celebrated their heritage outside of the country's museums and monuments: in song and in ceremony; in festivals and carnivals; in the selling of their own wares and in buying items associated with their heritage; by working the history of their communities into everyday artifacts, as the women of Hlabisa weave their stories into beer baskets.

With democracy, we have the opportunity to ensure that our institutions reflect history in a way that respects the heritage of all our citizens.

Government has taken up the challenge. Our museums and the heritage sector as a whole are being restructured. Community consultation, effective use of limited resources, and accessibility are our guiding principles as we seek to redress the imbalances.

The recently established Legacy Project will promote a fuller representation of our nation's



"When our first democratically elected government decided to make Heritage Day one of our national days, we did so because we knew that our rich & varied cultural heritage has a profound power to help build our new nation"

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela



heritage, through new monuments and heritage sites. This will ensure that we have national monuments that live in our people's hearts.

When our museums and monuments preserve the whole of our diverse heritage, when they are inviting to the public and interact with the changes all around them, then they will strengthen our attachment to human rights, mutual respect and democracy, and help prevent these ever again being violated. Friends; Ladies and gentlemen;

Robben Island is a vital part of South Africa's collective heritage.

Siqithini - the Island - a place of pain and banishment for centuries and now of triumph - presents us with the rich challenge of heritage. Its future has been the subject of intense and wide-ranging debate.

How do we look at the histories of different people who lived here, through various ages: lepers, prisoners, jailers all together; leaders of resistance not only from South Africa but from as far afield as Namibia and the Indonesian Archipelago? How do we give expression to these diverse histories as a collective heritage?

How do we reflect the fact that the people of South Africa as a whole, together with the international community, turned one of the world's most notorious symbols of racist oppression into a world-wide icon of the universality of human rights; of hope, peace and reconciliation.

How do we represent the tradition of intense political and academic education that the Island has come to symbolise?

These and many other important issues are canvassed in the 200 or more submissions received on the future of the Island, and they will be given full consideration.

I am confident that we will together find a way to combine the many dimensions of the Island, and that we will do so in a manner that recognises above all its pre-eminent character as a symbol of the victory of the human spirit over political oppression; and of reconciliation over enforced division. In this way we will help strengthen the ethos of heritage as a binding force, rather than a divisive one; as a force for truth rather than an artificial construct to satisfy all and sundry.

When Cabinet decided that Robben Island should be developed as a National monument and National Museum, it set in motion its redevelopment as a cultural and conservation showcase for South Africa's democracy which will also maximise its educational potential.

In the short time since January this year, when the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology took over responsibility for the Island, great progress has been made in this direction. We thank Professor Andre Odendaal and the interim administration for their sterling work, and we are certain that their experience and expertise will continue to stand us in good stead.

Today, a second phase of the Island's redevelopment begins. We wish the new Council well in the challenging task with which they have been entrusted.

This ceremony confirms for us that the struggle for human dignity and freedom - throughout the world, and in particular in South Africa - is an ongoing one.

It challenges us to ensure that future generations of South Africans can claim the heritage of a nation that has eradicated the legacy of grinding poverty that our generation inherited for most of its people; the heritage of a nation that has deracialised all spheres of social life and secured the dignity of all its diverse communities.

Let us recommit ourselves to the ideals in our Constitution, ideals which were shaped in the struggles here on Robben Island and in the greater prison that was Apartheid South Africa.

May this monument and the museum strengthen our resolve that never again shall this land see the oppression of one by another; nor the suppression of any community's heritage.

In conclusion, it now gives me great pleasure to formally open the new Robben Island Museum, the first major new heritage institutions of democratic South Africa.

I thank you!