

**The Arts and their Role in Intercultural Dialogue
within the Context of Cultural Diversity and
Globalisation.**

Mokong Simon Mapadimeng (PhD)

Research Manager

National Arts Council of South Africa

Email: SimonM@nac.org.za

**A paper to be presented at the International Sociological
Association (ISA) Congress, RC37, to be held in
Gothenburg, Sweden, 11th to 17th July 2010.**

Introduction

One of the striking features in the world today is the stark contrasts marked by inequalities between the rich and the poor, both between the nations (especially the developed world and the lesser developed world) as well as within the nations. Within this context are multitude of problems such as violence, crime, conflicts, poverty, moral degeneration, diseases, poor health and living standards, and unemployment, on the one hand, and wealth accumulation by few, high living standards and life expectancy for some, and advancement in both information and communication technologies, and production technologies, on the other. This situation is best captured in contestation at the level of theory and ideas, especially around the discourse on globalisation through which scholars attempt to make sense of the current global situation. Within this discourse, are three dominant perspectives as identified by Susan Ziehl (2003) i.e. the hyperglobalist, the sceptical, and the transformationalist perspectives.

The hyperglobalists, Ziehl argues, assert that the world is no longer the same due to transnational networks and the highly integrated world economy, which has given rise to a single big global market place and a single dominant culture. In terms of this view, nation states have lost power which for neoliberals is seen as good but criticised by neo-Marxists as it could only serve to entrench inequalities. Contrary to the hyperglobalists, the sceptics see the world economy as less integrated and that growing cooperation and trade between nations has not necessarily resulted in a global market place but that it has instead seen the dominance of regional markets. They also dispute notion that national governments are weakened in the face of global capital but that the opposite is the case with national governments having influence through international organisations of global governance. The sceptics are of the view that the old divides and inequalities between the first world and the third world persist

marked by greater fragmentation of the world than a single global culture (see Ziehl, 2003: 322). The transformationalists, Ziehl observes, seek to reconcile these contrasting perspectives. They believe that globalisation is real and new, and that it has had a massive impact on the world creating new forms of stratification and greater interconnectedness. This, they argue, has not however undermined the power of nation states although it has transformed them but in a way that is not predictable since they develop different adaptive strategies (Ziehl, 2003: 322-323).

While these perspectives differ in their explanations of globalisation, they however share in common the view that while globalisation has brought significant changes (as witnessed by technological advancements and the attendant new ways of life), it has however not done away with inequalities. Such inequalities are not only between nations and regions, but also within nations, and starkly so in the generally marginalised third world countries. In the latter, they are most evident in the worsening poverty which has seen an upsurge in global resistance from the civil society organisations and social movements against the hegemonic neo-liberal capitalist system in demand for socio-economic justice. These inequalities were probably widened and aggravated by the recent global economic melt-down which has seen efforts and measures being taken to reduce costs, notably neo-liberal economic restructuring, resulting in widespread job losses. The question then is: can the arts help to promote intercultural dialogue aimed at supporting joint efforts towards overcoming these development challenges and inequalities? A closely linked question would be: does diversity, as proclaimed by many, provide an enhanced opportunity for intercultural dialogue or does it inhibit it? What does this imply for the arts' role in intercultural dialogue? These and related questions are what this paper attempts to answer. It starts with review of debates on arts, diversity and intercultural dialogue, followed by concluding remarks.

Arts, Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue

It is believed by some that addressing of deepening inequalities and other development-related questions through collective efforts, especially in the context of globalisation, would be partly enhanced and achieved through intercultural dialogue (ICD). Mike Van Graan (2009) quotes the 2008 Sharing Diversity Report of the ERICarts Institute as defining intercultural dialogue as “a process based on an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or mindsets” with its aims being “to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices, to increase participation, to ensure freedom of expression and the ability to make choices, to foster equality, and to enhance creative processes.”

It is difficult though to speak of ICD without reference to cultural diversity since ICD presumes the existence of cultural diversity. The 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions defines cultural diversity as “... the manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression.” The interlinks between these concepts is acknowledged in the Convention’s objectives of seeking “to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions” in order “... to encourage dialogue among cultures with a view to ensuring wider and balanced cultural exchanges in the world in favour of intercultural respect and a culture of peace” as well as to “... to develop cultural interaction in the spirit of building bridges among peoples.” A special guest at the 2009 International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) World Summit on Arts and Culture held in SA under the theme *The meeting of cultures – creating meaning through the arts*, UK’s Lola Young of the Commonwealth Group on Culture and Development argued for the need to partner towards a more equitable and sustainable future in which human and cultural rights of diverse people would be respected. This, she argued, could be achieved through harnessing of the arts and culture to humanise development.

She appealed to the Commonwealth states to support the arts and culture in order to maximize their potential role in development, especially towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Young's argument represented an overwhelming consensus amongst the Summit delegates that the arts are well placed to promote intercultural dialogue. Officially opening the Summit, the South African Minister for Arts and Culture, Lulama 'Lulu'Xingwana, said that culture and the arts "lay the foundations for mutual understanding, for celebrations of difference and diversity, as well as preparing the ground for working towards commonalities and coalescence" (See Ogova Ondego, September 28, 2009 - IFFACA World Summit Views, on www.nac.org.za). This view is consistent with the 2005 UNESCO Convention according to which "cultural diversity is made manifest ... through diverse modes of artistic creation, production, dissemination, distribution and enjoyment, whatever the means and technologies used."

This assertion is premised on the view that the benefits of the arts for society are both intrinsic (e.g. how people experience the arts) and instrumental (e.g. promoting tourism, social cohesion, and positive contribution to economy). The instrumental nature and importance of the arts is attested by past experiences such as the South African liberation struggle and indeed Africa's anti-colonial and anti-corruption struggles, which bear ample examples. One such example is the role that music, as art artistic form and expression, played in the anti-apartheid struggle as represented in the song *shosholoz*a, a Southern African traditional folk song described as the song for peace and hope, which called for unity in the struggle for an end to oppressive systems. Another song which inspired the struggle for an end to oppression and for peace is Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika/Morena Boloka Afrika. This song has since been adapted by the post-apartheid South African government through amalgamation with the historically

separate anthems i.e. Die Stem for the white Afrikaners which was sung as national anthem for the apartheid government and English version sung historically for the former Imperial British rule. The new song, now a national anthem for the democratic South Africa, promotes reconciliation necessary for the rebuilding and uniting of the historically divided nation. The anti-apartheid struggle was also strengthened by protest poetry and music e.g. Mzwakhe Mbuli's *Change is Pain, Unbroken Spirit, and Resistance and Defence* songs and poems. Literature's contribution took the form of, for instance, Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. In other parts of the African continent, literary publications such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Decolonising the Mind*, played a role in the fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism, as well as for independence.

In the light of this overwhelming consensus on the instrumental nature and significance of the arts to society, the questions that need to be asked are: under what objective conditions can the arts fulfil this function i.e. promotion of intercultural dialogue? Exactly how would the arts promote and contribute to intercultural dialogue? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the 2008 Sharing Diversity Report of the ERICarts Institute which asserts that for intercultural dialogue to take place, individuals and groups should be guaranteed "safety and dignity, equality of opportunity and participation", whereby "different views can be voiced openly without fear and where there are 'shared spaces' for cultural exchanges" (in Van Graan, IFFACA World Summit View 7, 16-09-2009 at www.nac.org.za). While agreeing with the report, Van Graan (2009) however is sceptical of the prevailing conditions, especially given the endemic levels of violent conflicts, divisions, mistrust and tensions in the world today. Furthermore, he questions the motives behind intercultural dialogue discourse and the interests that this dialogue serves i.e. do they serve the dominant groups' interests or interests of the marginalised groups? As he

rightly points out, it is far more unlikely for members of the latter group to go out of their way to seek multicultural experience, and that this is often done by those from the former group. This leads him to asking a question about where do the resources for cultural exchange and cultural diversity initiatives come from? He is doubtful that these come from the marginalised sectors of the society, leading him to raise the question of unequal power relations and their implications.

A closely linked view is the earlier one held by Marxist historians, and notably Antal (1986) and Hauser (1963), who argue that the arts, as cultural forms, constitute an expression of the dominant class interests in the society. That is that those practicing the arts and producing arts products, are doing so under the influence of the dominant class interests, mainly through commissioned and funded art works. This Marxist view was however criticised for its failure to recognise the creativity of artists as active, autonomous agents (see Swingewood, 1998). This limitation, it is argued, could be overcome through the recognition by the Marxist theorists of the differentiated nature of context and of the manner in which art works as an autonomous part of the superstructure elements in shaping and not just simply reflecting the socio-economic relations (Swingewood, 1998). What can be deduced from the above is that artists and their arts works have dual characteristics i.e. they could be shaped by the dominant interests or assume autonomy from those interests.

A further hint to answering the questions pertaining to the arts' role in intercultural dialogue lies in the diversity discourse. This is especially so the view that diversity is a potential source of strength and competitive advantage, but if not strategically harnessed, could lead to conflicts and be destructive as opposed to helping to forge social cohesion. Central to the diversity discourse is the creolisation thesis in terms of the which the growing contact between people

with different cultural experiences under globalisation, has an impact that changes the previously self-contained national cultures, resulting in those cultures ceasing to be stable and coherent systems turning them into cultural 'work' in progress (see Ulf Hannerz, 1997:14). Hence, it would be misleading to treat culture/s within complex differentiated societies as simply homogenous and coherent. This process of change undergone by national cultures is described as "creolization" that gives rise to creole cultures i.e. cultures that draw from two or more widely different historical sources (Hannerz, 1997: 14).

While Hannerz acknowledges that the Third world cultures are to some degree influenced by First world cultures – e.g. that their technologies and genres which are not completely indigenous – he however dismisses the view that First world cultures necessarily pose a threat to Third world cultures. He argues that rather than openness to foreign cultural influences being seen as necessarily leading to an impoverishment of local and national culture, it should be seen optimistically. That is, that it could provide people in other cultures with access to technological and symbolic resources which could enable them to deal with their own ideas and to manage their own culture in new ways (Hannerz, 1997: 16)

Furthermore, Hannerz sees the contact between the Third world and First world cultures, facilitated through various cultural apparatus, as being mutually beneficial to both worlds. In his own words, "along the entire creolizing spectrum, from First World metropolis to Third World village, through education and popular culture, by way of missionaries, consultants, critical intellectuals and small-town story tellers, a conversation between cultures goes on. One of the advantages of the creolist view ... is its suggestion that the different cultural streams can create a particular intensity in cultural process." Hence, diversity is a source of cultural vitality (Hannerz, 1997: 16-17).

At the 2009 IFFACA Summit, Professor Njabulo Ndebele, through his keynote address, offered what I would consider to be a qualified explanation of how the arts can contribute to intercultural dialogue pointing out to preconditions for enhanced role of the arts in promoting constructive conversation between cultures. He argued that before difference and diversity could be celebrated, it is necessary to first engage in open and frank debate and/or dialogue around diversities themselves or what he calls strangeness. This, he argued, would help people from different cultural and social backgrounds to openly talk about their differences, creating a platform for them to not only get to know but also appreciate their differences creating conditions for celebration of those diversities.

His argument was based on past experiences at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he served as the Vice-Chancellor. He related a story of the clash that broke out between white students and black students as transition occurred at the UCT from being a historically white university towards becoming a multiracial and multi-cultural institution. This clash he refers to as low-key cultural wars. Prior to enrolment of black students, as in other historically white universities in South Africa, white students at UCT used to play and dance to rock and roll music on weekend in university residences. Thus, rock and roll was the music until black students came. On arrival in big numbers, black students found it difficult to relate to rock and roll music and its attendant dance which were to them foreign. They felt alienated. This, Ndebele argues, gave rise to low-key conflict which resulted in black students taking over the control of the CD player at opportunistic moments and beginning to play their own music, soul, rap, kwaito, reggae and some Congolese beats. This alienated white students who responded by leaving and only to return later to play rock and roll as soon as black students are gone late at night (see Ndebele, 2009 on www.artsummit.org accessed on 10th May 2010 at 12h30).

Both sides, Ndebele argues, had to deal with something unfamiliar and their respective exposure to new experience that intrudes their lives and threatening to undermine and unbalance as well as to disorientate. This, he argues, presented a challenge whereby a decision had to be made as to whether or not to accommodate the new experience or resist it. He calls this new experience or the unfamiliar, strangeness as it invites curiosity and engages without judgement as well as accepts the lack of prior knowledge. Hence for him, it is crucial that for celebrating difference to become meaningful and sustainable, it is necessary to first engage with strangeness. Such engagement could result not only in perceptions of difference but also of familiarity or even similarity. Failure to engage, he argues, could lead to further perpetuation of past divisions as opposed to overcoming them (Ibid., 2009: 3). Ndebele clearly supports the view that intercultural dialogue is a necessary step towards enjoying diversity and enhancing its harnessing into a productive force such unifying a people around common course and vision. This, he believes, can be achieved partly through the arts.

Beyond the questions of how and under what conditions can the arts can contribute to intercultural dialogue, are ample examples today attesting to the assertion that the arts are not only best placed but are also often tapped to promote intercultural dialogue. One such prominent example today is the new football anthem titled *Waka waka – This time for Africa* composed for the 2010 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament to be held in South Africa. The song was written by Shakira, the world-famous singer from Latin America, who will perform with South African band Freshlyground. As explained on the FIFA world cup page, the song has rhythmical African sounds and represents the vitality and energy of the host continent, Africa. It is seen as a symbol and vehicle for promoting global unity around soccer. Note the remarks by Shakira on the song “I am honoured that *Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)* has been chosen to be part of the excitement

and the legacy of the 2010 FIFA World Cup... The FIFA World Cup is a miracle of global excitement, connecting every country, race, religion and condition around a single passion. It represents an event that has the power to unite and integrate, and that's what this song is about." Similarly, Freshlyground's leading vocalist, Zolani Mahola was also quoted as saying this about the song "We are thrilled to have collaborated with Shakira on *Waka Waka (This Time For Africa)*, especially as we feel that the song captures the spirit and energy of the African FIFA World Cup... We are certain that the song will inspire people around the world to celebrate the gathering of nations at the place where it all started. Here in Africa!" (See <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/FIFA> accessed on 7th May 2010 at 14h00).

Complementing the song in seeking to promote intercultural experience, is what is termed the Diski¹ Dance, which combines song and dance. This dance uses uniquely South African soccer playing moves each with names in indigenous South African languages such as *Tsamaya* (in Tswana language), *Heel Extension Mkhari* and *Chester* (in English). It is described as "rhythmic, showy, and never boring" (see <http://www4.southafrica.net/2010/WhatIsDiski>, accessed on 10 May 2010, 15h20). The Diski dance is aimed at getting the world jiving and dancing to an African rhythm when the football World Cup arrives on the continent for the first time. It is described as inherently African, rhythmic, celebratory, vital, joyful. Hence it seen as a way of getting the soccer fans from all over the world to appreciate and introduced to the uniquely African dance. As they say "It makes you want to go out there; cheer for your team; paint your face in your national colours; wave your supporter's flag; see goals being scored and celebrate with thousands and thousands of others (See <http://www.learntodiski.com/>, accessed on 10 May 2010, 15h15).

¹ Diski is an informal township word for football.

Industrial theatres, especially in countries with deep historical divisions that continue to affect the present such as South Africa, are another example of how efforts are being made to positively tap into the arts for positive outcomes. Through the use of a combination of music, drama and dance; messages are conveyed to forge common vision by promoting corporate identity and goals as well as stable employment relations in what is usually adversarial environment. Industrial theatres are a widespread practice.

Concluding Remarks

Inequalities aggravated by globalisation, both between the developed and less developed world on one hand, and within especially the less developed nations on another, present serious challenges to development. These have in turn prompted measures and strategies aimed at overcoming these challenges. Intercultural dialogue in what is greatly diverse and complex world is seen as part of such strategies. It was noted that under globalisation, things are no longer the same, including as Hannerz has pointed out, the national cultures ceasing to be coherent and homogenous. They become, he argues, creolised into productive dynamic cultures through conversation between cultures.

This conversation between cultures constitutes a form of intercultural dialogue, which for Ndebele is a necessary condition before the benefits of cultural diversity could be reaped and celebrated. This paper has established a greater consensus that the arts can be harnessed to promote intercultural dialogue needed for joint interventions aimed at overcoming development challenges presented by globalisation. I argue that the theoretical view that the arts have instrumental value is supported by practical examples from past experiences such as the liberation struggle in South Africa. It was observed that the instrumental role of the arts, especially in promotion of intercultural dialogue, is

however best enhanced where conducive conditions prevail for frank, open dialogue.

I also argue, contrary to the neo-Marxist concerns that while the autonomy and freedom of expression for artists should be guarded and protected, for the arts' role in promoting development-related initiatives through intercultural dialogue, it is necessary for the arts funders such as governments and their agencies to provide guidelines. Such guidelines would help to ensure that artists embark on projects that are of relevance to the promotion of such dialogue. Examples I have cited such as the FIFA 2010 World Cup anthem, *waka waka – this time for Africa* and *the Diski Dance*, attest to the importance of this approach. This approach is already used by statutory arts councils such as the NAC of South Africa and Arts Council of England.

References

Antal, F. 1986. *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*. London: Harvard University Press.

Hannerz, U. 1997. The World in Creolization. In Barber, K. (ed.). *Readings in African Popular Culture*. London: The International African Institute.

Hauser, A. 1963. *The Philosophy of Art History*. New York: Meridian Books.

Ndebele, NS. 2009. "Sword or ploughshare? Bridge or Dynamite? The Arts as Vehicles for Intercultural Dialogue" a keynote address at the 2009 IFFACA World Summit on Arts and Culture, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, 22nd – 25th September.

Ondego, O. September 28, 2009 – IFFACA World Summit Views, on www.nac.org.za

Swingewood, A. 1998. *Cultural Theory and the Problem of Modernity*. London: MacMillan.

Van Graan, M. 2009. "Intercultural dialogue ...," World Summit Views, no. 7, 16 September, on www.nac.org.za

Van Graan, M. 2009. World Summit Views, www.nac.org.za

Young, L. A Plenary Presentation at the 2009 IFFACA World Summit on Arts and Culture, held in Johannesburg, South Africa, 22nd – 25th September.

Ziehl, S. 2003. "Forging the Links: Globalisation and Family Patterns," in *Society in Transition*, 34(2)

Electronic Sources:

<http://www.learntodiski.com/>

<http://www4.southafrica.net/2010/WhatIsDiski>

<http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/news/FIFA>

<http://www.artsummit.org>

<http://www.nac.org.za>