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ANC In-house Seminar on Culture

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PREPARING OURSELVES FOR FREEDOM

We all know where South Africa is, but we do not yet know what it is. Ours is the privileged generation that will make that discovery, if the apertures in our eyes are wide enough. The problem is whether we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about.

For decades now we have possessed a political programme for the future - the Freedom Charter. More recently the National Executive of the ANC has issued a set of Constitutional Guidelines which has laid down a basic constitutional approach to a united South Africa with a free and equal citizenry. What we have to ask ourselves now is whether we have an artistic and cultural vision that corresponds to this current phase in which a new South African nation is emerging. Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of the apartheid imagination ?

For the sake of livening the debate on these questions, this paper will make a number of controversial observations .

The first proposition I make, and I do so fully aware of the fact that we are totally against censorship and for free speech, is that our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I suggest a period of, say, five years.

Allow me, as someone who has for many years been arguing precisely that art should be seen as an instrument of struggle, to explain why suddenly this affirmation seems not only banal and devoid of real content, but actually wrong and potentially harmful.

In the first place, it results in an impoverishment of our art. Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct. The more fists and spears and guns, the better. The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out, and the only conflict permitted is that between the old and the new, as if there were only bad in the past and only good in the future. If we had the imagination of Sholokhov, and one of us wrote : And Quiet Flows the Tugela, the central figure would not be a member of UDF or Cosatu, but would be aligned to Inkhata, resisting change, yet feeling oppression, thrown this way and that by conflicting emotions, and through his or her struggles and torments and moments of joy, the reader would be thrust into the whole drama of the struggle for a new South Africa. Instead, whether in poetry or painting or on the stage, we line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other, occasionally permitting someone to pass from one column to the other, but never acknowledging that there is bad in the good, and, even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad; you can tell who the good ones are, because in addition to being handsome of appearance, they can all recite sections of the Freedom Charter or passages of Strategy and Tactics at the drop of a beret.

In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions -hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus.

And what about love? We have published so many anthologies and journals and occasional poems and stories, and the number that deal with love do not make the fingers of a hand. Can it be that once we join the ANC we do not make love any more, that when the comrades go to bed they discuss the role of the white working class? Surely even those comrades whose tasks deny them the opportunity and direct possibilities of love, remember past love and dream

of love to come. What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world? There is nothing that the apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly. ANC members are full of fun and romanticism and dreams, we enjoy and wonder at the beauties of nature and the marvels of human creation, yet if you look at most of our art and literature you would think we were living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid. It is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing. Listen in contrast to the music of Hugh Masekela, of Abdullah Ibrahim, of Jonas Gwanga, of Miriam Makeba, and you are in a universe of wit and grace and vitality and intimacy, there is invention and modulation of mood, ecstasy and sadness; this is a cop-free world in which the emergent personality of our people manifests itself. Pick up a book of poems, or look at a woodcut or painting, and the solemnity is overwhelming. No-one told Hugh or Abdullah to write their music in this or that way, to be progressive or committed, to introduce humour or gaiety or a strong beat so as to be optimistic. Their music conveys genuine confidence because it springs from inside the personality and experience of each of them, from popular tradition and the sounds of contemporary life; we respond to it because it tells us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves, not because the lyrics are about how to win a strike or blow up a petrol dump. It bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space. So it could be with our writers and painters, if only they could shake off the gravity of their anguish and break free from the solemn formulas of commitment that people (like myself) have tried for so many years to impose upon them. Dumile, perhaps the greatest of our visual artists, was once asked why he did not draw scenes like one that was taking place in front of him: a crocodile of men being marched under arrest for not having their passes in order. At that moment a hearse drove slowly past and the men stood still and raised their hats. "That's what I want to draw," he said.

Yet damaging as a purely instrumental and non-dialectical view of culture is to artistic creation, far more serious is the way such a narrow view impoverishes the struggle itself. Culture is not something separate from the general struggle, an artifact that is brought in from time to time to mobilise the people or else to prove to the world that after all we are civilised. Culture is us, it is who we are, how we see ourselves and the vision we have of the world. In the course of participating in the culture of liberation, we constantly re-make ourselves. It is not just a question of the discipline and interaction between

members that any organisation has; our movement has developed a style of its own, a way of doing things and of expressing itself, a specific ANC personality. And what a rich mix it is..... African tradition, church tradition, Ghandian tradition, revolutionary socialist tradition, liberal tradition, all the languages and ways and styles of all the many communities in our country; we have black consciousness, and elements of red consciousness (some would say pink consciousness these days), even green consciousness (long before the Greens existed, we had green in our flag, representing the land). Now, with the dispersal of our members throughout the world, we also bring in aspects of the cultures of all humanity, our comrades speak Swahili and Arabic and Spanish and Portuguese and Russian and Swedish and French and German and Chinese, not because of Bantu Education, but through ANC Education, we are even learning Japanese. Our culture, the ANC culture, is not a picturesque collection of separate ethnic and political cultures lined up side by side, or mixed in certain proportions, it has a real character and dynamic of its own. When we sing our anthem, a religious invocation, with our clenched fists upraised, it is not a question of fifty-fifty, but an expression of an evolving and integrative interaction, an affirmation that we sing when we struggle and we struggle when we sing. This must be one of the greatest cultural achievements of the ANC, that it has made South Africans of the most diverse origins feel comfortable in its ranks. To say this is not to deny that cultural tensions and dilemmas automatically cease once one joins the organisation: on the contrary, we bring in with us all our complexes and ways of seeing the world, our jealousies and preconceptions. What matters, however, is that we have created a context of struggle, of goals and comradeship within which these tensions can be dealt with. One can recall debates over such diverse questions as to whether non-Africans should be allowed on to the NEC, whether corporal punishment should be applied at SOMAFCO, or whether married women should do high kicks on the stage. Indeed, the whole issue of women's liberation, for so long treated in an abstract way, is finally forcing itself on to the agenda of action and thought, a profound question of cultural transformation. The fact is that the cultural question is central to our identity as a movement: if culture were merely an instrument to be hauled on to the stage on ceremonial or fund-raising occasions, or to liven up a meeting, we would ourselves be empty of personality in the interval. Happily, this is not the case - culture is us, and we are people, not things waiting to be put into motion from time to time.

This brings me to my second challenging proposition, namely, that the Constitutional Guidelines should not be applied to the sphere of culture. What?! you may declare, a member of the Department of Legal and Constitutional Affairs saying that the Guidelines should not be applied

to culture. Precisely. It should be the other way round. Culture must make its input to the Guidelines. The whole point of the massive consultations that are taking place around the Guidelines is that the membership, the people at large, should engage in constructive and concrete debate about the foundations of government in a post-apartheid South Africa. The Guidelines are more than a work-in-progress document, they set out well-deliberated views of the NEC as enriched by an in-house seminar, but they are not presented as a final, cut-and-dried product, certainly not as a blueprint to be learnt off by heart and defended to the last mis-print. Thus, the reasoning should not be: the Guidelines lay down the following for culture, therefore we must line up behind the Guidelines and become a transmission belt for their implementation. On the contrary, what we need to do is to analyse the Guidelines, see what implications they have for culture, and then say whether we agree and make whatever suggestions we have for their improvement. In part, we can say that the method is the message; the open debate the NEC wants on the Guidelines corresponds to the open society the Guidelines speak about. Apartheid has closed our society, stifled its voice, prevented the people from speaking, and it is the historic mission of our organisation to be the harbingers of freedom of conscience, debate and opinion.

In my view there are three aspects of the Guidelines that bear directly on the sphere of culture.

The first is the emphasis put on building national unity and encouraging the development of a common patriotism, while fully recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country. Once the question of basic political rights is resolved in a democratic way, the cultural and linguistic rights of our diverse communities can be attended to on their merits. In other words, language, religion and so-called ways of life cease to be confused with race and sever their bondage to apartheid, becoming part of the positive cultural values of the society.

It is important to distinguish between unity and uniformity. We are strongly for national unity, for seeing our country as a whole, not just in its geographic extension but in its human extension. We want full equal rights for every South African, without reference to race, language, ethnic origin or creed. We believe in a single South Africa with a single set of governmental institutions, and we work towards a common loyalty and patriotism. Yet this is not to call for a homogenised South Africa made up of identikit citizens. South Africa is now said to be a bilingual country: we envisage it as a

multi-lingual country. It will be multi-faith and multi-cultural as well. The objective is not to create a model culture into which everyone has to assimilate, but to acknowledge and take pride in the cultural variety of our people. In the past, attempts were made to force everyone into the mould of the English gentleman, projected as the epitome of civilisation, so that it was even an honour to be oppressed by the English. Apartheid philosophy, on the other hand, denied any common humanity, and insisted that people be compartmentalised into groups forcibly kept apart. In rejecting apartheid, we do not envisage a return to a modified form of the British Imperialist notion, we do not plan to build a non-racial yuppie-dom which people may enter only by shedding and suppressing the cultural heritage of their specific community.. We will have Zulu South Africans, and Afrikaner South Africans and Indian South Africans and Jewish South Africans and Venda South Africans and Cape Moslem South Africans (I do not refer to the question of terminology - basically people will determine this for themselves). Each cultural tributary contributes towards and increases the majesty of the river of South African-ness. While each one of us has a particularly intimate relationship with one or other cultural matrix, this does not mean that we are locked into a series of cultural 'own affairs' ghettos. On the contrary, the grandchildren of white immigrants can join in the toyi toyi - even if slightly out of step - or recite the poems of Wally Serote, just as the grandchildren of Dinizulu can read with pride the writings of Olive Schreiner. The dance, the cuisine, the poetry, the dress, the songs and riddles and folk-tales, belong to each group, but also belong to all of us. I remember the pride I felt as a South African when some years ago I saw the production known as the Zulu Macbeth bring the house down in the World Theatre season in London, the intensely theatrical wedding and funeral dances of our people, performed by cooks and messengers and chauffeurs conquering the critics and audiences in what was then possibly the most elite theatre in the world. This was Zulu culture, but it was also our culture, my culture.

Each culture has its strengths, but there is no culture that is worth more than any other. We cannot say that because there are more Xhosa speakers than Tsonga, their culture is better, or because those who hold power today are Afrikaans-speakers, Afrikaans is better or worse than any other language.

Every culture has its positive and negative aspects. Sometimes the same cultural past is used in diametrically opposite ways, as we can see with the manner in which the traditions of Shaka and Ceteswayo are used on the one hand to inspire people to fight selflessly for an all-embracing liberation of our country, and on the other to cultivate a

sanguinary tribal chauvinism. Sometimes cultural practices that were appropriate to certain forms of social organisation become a barrier to change when the society itself has become transformed - we can think of forms of family organisation, for example, that corresponded to the social and economic modes of pre-conquest societies that are out of keeping with the demands of contemporary life. African society, like all societies, develops and has the right to transform itself. What has been lacking since colonial domination began, is the right of the people themselves to determine how they wish to live.

If we look at Afrikaans culture, the paradoxes are even stronger. At one level it was the popular creole language of the Western Cape, referred to in a derogatory way as kitchen Dutch, spoken by slaves and indigenous peoples who taught it to their masters and mistresses. Later it was the language of resistance to British imperialism; the best MK story to appear in South Africa to date was written (in English) by a Boer - On Commando, by Denys Reitz, a beautiful account of his three years as a guerilla involved in actions of armed propaganda against the British occupying army. Afrikaans literature evolved around suffering and patriotism. Many of the early books, written to find a space in nature to make up for lack of social space, have since become classics of world ecological literature. At another level, the language has been hijacked by proponents of racial domination to support systems of white supremacy, and as such been projected as the language of the baas. In principle, there is no reason at all why Afrikaans should not once more become the language of liberty, but this time liberty for all, not just liberty for a few coupled with the right to oppress the majority.

At this point I would like to make a statement that I am sure will jolt the reader or listener: white is beautiful. In case anyone feels that the bomb has affected my head, I will repeat the affirmation, surely the first time it has been made at an ANC conference: white is beautiful. Allow me to explain. I first heard this formulation from a Mozambican poet and former guerilla, whose grandmother was African and grandfather Portuguese. Asked to explain Frelimo's view on the slogan: Black is beautiful, he replied -Black is beautiful, Brown is beautiful, White is beautiful. I think that affirmation is beautiful. One may add that when white started saying black was ugly it made itself ugly. Shorn of its arrogance, the cultural input from the white communities can be rich and valuable. This is not to say that we need a WCM in South Africa - in the context of colonial domination, white consciousness means oppression, whereas black consciousness means resistance to oppression. But it does establish the basis on which whites participate in the struggle to eradicate apartheid.

Whites are not in the struggle to help the blacks win their rights, they (we) are fighting for their own rights, the rights to be free citizens of a free country, and to enjoy and take pride in the culture of the whole country. They are neither liberators of others, nor can their goal be to end up as a despised and despising protected minority. They seek to be ordinary citizens of an ordinary country, proud to be part of South Africa, proud to be part of Africa, proud to be part of the world. Only in certain monastic orders is self-flagellation the means to achieve liberation. For the rest of humankind, there is no successful struggle without a sense of pride and self-affirmation.

The second aspect of the Guidelines with major implications for culture is the proposal for a Bill of Rights that guarantees freedom of expression and what is sometimes referred to as political pluralism. South Africa today is characterised by States of Emergency, banning orders, censorship and massive State-organised disinformation. Subject only to restrictions on racist propaganda and on ethnic exclusiveness such as are to be found in the laws of most countries in the world, the people in the South Africa envisaged by the Guidelines will be free to set up such organisations as they please, to vote for whom they please, and to say what they want.

This highlights a distinction that sometimes gets forgotten, namely the difference between leadership and control. We are for ANC leadership; our organisation's central position in South Africa has been hard won and the dream of the founders of the organisation is slowly being realised. Without doubt, the ANC will continue to be the principal architect of national unity after the foundations of apartheid have been destroyed and the foundations of democracy laid. Yet this does not mean that the ANC is the only voice in the anti-apartheid struggle, or that it will be the only voice in post-apartheid South Africa.

We want to give leadership to the people, not exercise control over them. This has significant implications for our cultural work not just in the future, but now. We think we are the best (and we are), that is why we are in the ANC. We work hard to persuade the people of our country that we are the best (and we are succeeding). But this does not require us to force our views down the throats of others. On the contrary, we exercise true leadership by being non-hegemonic, by selflessly trying to create the widest unity of the oppressed and to encourage all forces for change, by showing the people that we are fighting not to impose a view upon them but to give them

the right to choose the kind of society they want and the kind of government they want. We are not afraid of the ballot box, of open debate, of opposition. One fine day we will even have our Ian Smith equivalents protesting and grumbling about every change being made and looking back with nostalgia to the good old days of apartheid, but we will take them on at the hustings. In conditions of freedom, we have no doubt who will win, and if we should forfeit the trust of the people, then we deserve to lose.

All this has obvious implications for the way in which we conduct ourselves in the sphere of culture. We should lead by example, by the manifest correctness of our policies, and not rely on our prestige or numbers to push our positions through. We need to accept broad parameters rather than narrow ones: the criterion being pro- or anti-apartheid. In my opinion, we should be big enough to encompass the view that that the anti-apartheid forces and individuals come in every shape and size, especially if they belong to the artistic community. This is not to give a special status to artists, but to recognise that they have certain special characteristics and traditions. Certainly, it ill behoves us to set ourselves up as the new censors of art and literature, or to impose our own internal states of emergency in areas where we are well organised. Rather, let us write better poems and make better films and compose better music, and let us get the voluntary adherence of the people to our banner ("it is not enough that our cause be pure and just; justice and purity must exist inside ourselves" war poem from Mozambique).

Finally, the Guidelines couple the guarantees of individual rights with the necessity to embark upon programmes of affirmative action. This too has clear implications for the sphere of culture. The South Africa in which individuals and groups can operate freely, will be a South Africa in the process of transformation. A constitutional duty will be imposed upon the state, local authorities and public and private institutions to take active steps to remove the massive inequalities created by centuries of colonial and racist domination. This gives concrete meaning to the statement that the doors of learning and culture shall be opened. We can envisage massive programmes of adult education and literacy, and extensive use of the media to facilitate access by all to the cultural riches of our country and of the world. The challenge to our cultural workers is obvious.