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CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is in preparation for the upcoming parliamentary debate on the 2025 Heritage Day commemorations. This year's heritage is commemorated under the theme "Reimagine our heritage institutions for a new era." Thus, South Africa's cultural institutions are at the centre of 2025 heritage commemorations. The aim of the paper is to offer a framework that would guide the debate about 2025 heritage commemorations. It highlights the regulatory framework that safeguards South Africa's cultural heritage, the international conventions, and the role of cultural institutions in promoting values that promote nation building and social cohesion.

2. OVERVIEW OF SOUTH AFRICA'S CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

South Africa's cultural institutions consist of museums, theatres, art galleries, libraries and other heritage sites including churches, community halls, archives and opera houses. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC), through programmes 3 and 4 supports a total of 26 entities that are custodians of South Africa's cultural heritage. These institutions are spread across the country's 9 provinces. They are:

- Amazwi South African Museum of Literature
- Artscape
- Die Afrikaanse Taalmuseum & Monument
- Ditsong Museums of South Africa
- Freedom Park Trust
- Iziko Museums of South Africa
- KwaZulu- Natal Museum
- Luthuli Museum
- Mandela Bay Theatre Complex
- National Museum
- Nelson Mandela Museum
- Robben Island Museum
- The Market Theatre
- The Playhouse Company
- Performing Arts Centre of the Free State
- South African State Theatre
- Umsunduzi Museum
- War Museum of the Boer Republics
- William Humphrey Art Gallery
- South African Heritage Resources Agency
- National Heritage Council
- National Arts Council
- National Film and Video Foundation
- National Library of South Africa
- South African Library for the Blind
- The Pan South African Language Board

In addition, the DSAC is implementing two programmes to accelerate the transformation of the South African heritage landscape. These are the Resistance and Liberation Heritage Route (RLHR) and the Community Library Conditional Grant programme.

2.1 Resistance and Liberation Heritage Route (RLHR)

RLHR is the result of a resolution by the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) at its General Conference in October 2005 which recognised African liberation heritage as:[1]

- A common heritage of shared global values
- Promoting dialogue amongst nations and cultures
- Developing and promoting a culture of peace
- Contributing to the memory of the world, and
- Generating data and databases that raise awareness on the African liberation heritage

As such, the aim of RLHR project is to commemorate, educate, celebrate, promote, preserve, conserve and provide a durable testament of South Africa's road to independence.[2] Additionally, the project draws from heritage as testimony and depiction of South Africa's journey from the first contact with colonists to the attainment of democracy through a series of connected multi-dimensional sites at local, provincial, national and international level.[3] Moreover, RLHR uses an integrated approach to leverage the potential of resistance and liberation heritage to help demonstrate a shared past and shared future, and tap into the socio- economic potential of this heritage for the benefit of different communities.[4] To this end, a series of sites have been identified, developed and researched. These include the Wesleyan Church in Bloemfontein where the African National Congress (ANC) was formed, the Sharpeville Massacre, Lilliesleaf Farm, Victor Verster, Bhisho Massacre, Ingquza Hill Museum, Johny Makhathini's House and many other sites that have an imprint of the struggle for liberation. Many other sites are yet to be identified, developed and researched. Together they are an embodiment of the country's collective experience, ideals, values and principles, that unified people who were subject to national oppression through a repressive system.[5]

2.2 Community Library Conditional Grant

The Community Library Conditional Grant programme was started by the DSAC in 2007. Its aim is to enable South African society to gain access to knowledge and information that will improve their socio-economic situation.[6] In addition, the programme aims to transform urban and rural community library infrastructure, facilities and services (primarily targeting previously disadvantaged communities) through a recapitalised programme at provincial level in support of local government and national initiatives.[7] It is envisaged that the programme will result in the following outcomes:[8]

- Improved library infrastructure and services that reflect the specific needs of the community they serve.
- Transformed and equitably library and information services delivered to all rural and urban communities.
- Improved coordination and collaboration between national, provincial and local government on library services.

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[1] G. Houston, N. Pophiwa, K. Sausi, S. Dumisa & D. Seabe, 2013.

[2] National Heritage Council, [date not provided].

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] G. Houston, N. Pophiwa, K. Sausi, S. Dumisa & D. Seabe, 2013.

[6] Department of Arts and Culture, 2012.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

- Improved culture of reading.
- Improved staff capacity building at urban and rural libraries to respond appropriately to community knowledge and information needs.

The two programmes discussed above have added a significant facet in the preservation of South Africa's cultural heritage.

3. RELEVANT REGULATIONS GOVERNING THE SOUTH AFRICAN HERITAGE

The following international treaties, conventions and laws provide a framework for the safeguarding and promotion of heritage in South Africa. They are:[9]

Conventions and treaties

- Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954)
- Convention the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970)
- Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)
- Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001)
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005)

The South African legislation:

- Cultural Institutions Act (1998)
- National Heritage Resources Act (1999)
- National Heritage Council Act (1999)
- Revised White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (2017)

4. SOCIAL COHESION: SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In South Africa concerns with social cohesion date back to the advent of colonialism and its disruptive and destructive effects of dispossession and exclusion on local communities and society at large, as well as social upheavals this system spawned.[10] The concept of social cohesion has been closely linked to nation building, a concept that dates back to the struggles for national liberation in the 19th century which saw a spirit of nationalism inspired by struggles for independence across the globe.[11] Palmary (2015) argues that social cohesion has a fairly short history in South Africa appearing predominantly in the post-apartheid period when the Department of Arts and Culture hosted a social cohesion summit and adopted a social cohesion and nation-building strategy in 2012.[12] Since then, the concept has become commonplace and is defined as degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and societies at large, and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression itself among individuals and communities. Thus, community or society is cohesive to the extent that the inequalities, exclusions and disparities based on ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, age, disability or any other distinction which engender divisions, distrust and conflict are reduced and/or eliminated

[9] DSAC, 2020.

[10] Department of Arts and Culture, 2012.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Palmary, 2015.

in a planned and sustained manner.[13] On the other hand, nation building is defined as a process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, languages and religions come together within the boundaries of a sovereign state with a unified constitutional and legal dispensation, a national public education system, an integrated national economy, shared symbols and values, as equals, to work towards eradicating the divisions of the past; to foster unity; and promote a countrywide sense of being proudly South African, committed to the country and open to the continent and the world.[14]

It is abundantly clear that unlike in other societies where social cohesion is something localised and where it is connected to the State it is usually as a reflection of how people in a country feel about the State (rather than each other), in South Africa social cohesion is uniquely understood as a project of nation building. This is understandable because concerns about the unity of South Africans have been persistent, and ideas associated with social cohesion have been used in the immediate lead up to democracy. For instance, reconciliation was used in the similar way to social cohesion even though it was designed to reflect a more specific moment of peace building in the immediate aftermath of war.[15]

Through their mandate as representatives of diverse communities, museums and galleries are in a uniquely positioned to challenge stereotypes and promote tolerance and social cohesion.

5. MUSEUMS AND THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL COHESION

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a "museum is defined as a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."[16] Specifically, this paper discusses some of the experiences that museums offer to the public to promote diversity and inclusivity. To do so, one of the tools that museums employ to offer unique experiences to the public, which is the subject of this paper is empathic identification.

Empathic identification as a pedagogic tool in museums emerged when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) finally opened its doors in 1993 some fifteen years after it was initiated by former President Jimmy Carter in 1978. There, museum visitors were given "identity cards" booklets with which they passed through the historical exhibition, discovering at each stage the personal fate of a potential Holocaust victim of their own gender.[17] This strategy was solicited to evoke an emotional response that serves to elicit empathy for and/ or moral engagement with historical events and actors portrayed through an exhibition. It's a strategy that refers to the reconstruction of people's perspectives through the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the broader historical contexts, in which figures have acted and an analysis of the possible motives, beliefs and emotions that guided their actions.[18] In addition, empathic identification is the ability to sense other people's emotions and the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Since the opening of the USHMM, museums throughout the world have increasingly shown

[13] Department of Arts and Culture, 2012.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Palmary, 2015.
[16] ICOM, 2022.
[17] Sutcliffe, 2024.
[18] Crysler, 2006.

interest in the subject of empathy both as a museum object and a museum objective. For instance, in 2018 the American Alliance of Museums conference featured interactive demonstrations and sessions dedicated to the topic of empathy. Also, in 2017 the Minneapolis Institute of Art received grant funding to create the first centre on empathy and art to explore practices of fostering empathy and global awareness through the power of art and to share their findings with the field. Researchers believe that museums are better positioned to fostering empathy because:

- Some museums are dedicated to the telling and the preservation of historical conflicts and violence.Other museums focus on cultural groups and exhibit and highlight histories of violence.

In this regard, South African museums that are dedicated to the telling, and the preservation of the historical conflicts and violence do, wittingly or unwittingly, employ empathic identification when engaging their visitors. For instance, the Slave Lodge Museum, a satellite of the Iziko Museums of South Africa, an entity of DSAC tells and preserves the story and the legacy of the enslaved people at the Cape Colony from 1658 to the abolishment of the slavery system in 1838. In addition, the Robben Island Museum (RIM) stands as a unique symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, suffering and injustice. A significant part of the RIM is the story of the persecution of those who fought for freedom against tyrannic regimes. As such, the two museums are appropriate sites for empathic identification due to their unique ability to immerse visitors in narratives of collective violence, persecution, torture, subjugation, tyranny and repression. This enables visitors not only gain insights into the cultural milieu of the victims and survivors of repression but also imagine the experiences and emotion that they might have gone through. Thus, these two cultural institutions promote historical empathy. Savenije & Bruijn (2016) state that historical empathy involves a reconstruction of people's perspectives through the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the broader historical context in which figures have acted and an analysis of the possible motives, beliefs and emotions that guided their actions.[19] In other words, museums that employ empathic identification as a pedagogic tool are dominated by reconstructions of state-orchestrated violence and brutality and attempt to produce memories of collective pain and suffering among visitors who often have no direct experience of the events depicted (Crysler, 2006).[20]

In discussing empathic identification Morrison (2019) starts with associated terminology. These include empathy, empathetic engagement as well as historical empathy. The term empathy was coined in 1909 by the British psychologist Titchener. It was translated from the German word Einfuhlung which means "feeling into" and the Greek word *empatheia*.[21] Moreover, and in the context of art museums, Morrison defines empathy as a response to art that brought objects to life from human feeling.[22] This definition is supported by the literal critic Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux who argues that just as historical works of art can make the past seem "present and immediate" to the viewer, the poetic mode of ekphrasis- where a writer responds to a work of art- can fulfil a mediating role between the past and the present (Carney, 2024).[23] Additionally, Carney (2024) argues that ekphrasis is an engagement with the foreign- a reference to art objects itself and its subject – other cultures, time, periods, races- so that the past can be perceived by the reader/ viewer as one of many possible others.[24] The emphasis is not on the art object or the rhetoric but that it is a stimulus for an emotional impact so that viewers and/or listeners may feel as if they were present. The central thesis of empathic identification, empathy and historical empathy is the ability to perceive and share the feelings and thoughts of the other. Empathy allows people to connect with others who seem

[19] Savenjie & Bruijin, 2016.

[20] Crysler, 2006.

[21] Morrison, 2019.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Carney, 2024.

[24] *Ibid.*

different and make them aware of the commonalities between them. Also, it is about creating spaces where people can listen deeply and connect with stories that might challenge their assumptions.

5.1 Different components of Empathy

Morrison (2019) traces a movement towards the recognition of the two components of empathy. The first component is affective empathy. This refers to the sensations and feelings that people get in response to other people's emotions and include the mirroring of what those people are feeling.[25] The second component is cognitive empathy and it refers to the ability to understand and recognize other people's emotions and feelings.[26] Nonetheless Morrison (2019) adds another component of empathy called "empathic concern" where one is moved to help those with whom they are empathizing.[27] Empathic concern is similar to what Sutcliffe (2024) refers to "empathy instinct" which, if it is unleashed enables us to realize our better selves and heal our divided societies.[28] This is the positive outcome of empathy and museums that advocate for empathy seek to promote this behaviour. It is the ability to perceive and share the feelings and thoughts of the other. It is about creating spaces where people can listen deeply and connect with stories that might challenge their assumptions and open their hearts.

5.2 Museums and empathy.

Museums of empathy can be placed in two broad categories. The first category are museums that are located at the physical sites where collective violence took place. Such sites may include concentration camps, forced labour camps, mass graves where victims of genocide are buried, prisons where political detainees were detained and tortured and slaves' lodges. Some of the most prominent of these sites have formed an international coalition of the "sites of conscience" to develop "transferable practices" and encourage "dialogue for democracy".[29] The RIM and the Slave Lodge fall under this category. The second group consists of museums that recreate historical sites of violence within their walls and are often removed from the locations where the events that they depict originally took place. Most of these museums are based in large cities or capitals and attract thousands of visitors. Both these categories are commonly called the experiential museums of national trauma and are a relatively new phenomenon. Their key characteristic is their consistency with the central features of what is commonly described as "dark tourism" or "fatal attractions" due to the tendency to induce anxiety and are organized around the therapeutic administration of simulated of trauma.[30] In addition, their most distinctive feature is the intimate linkage they forge between memory and affect by displaying emotional experiences of others. Moreover, they solicit the visitor's identification with a collective subject of history that undergoes escalating experiences of pain and suffering and is ultimately reborn as a model citizen. Examples of these museums include the USMM in Washington DC, Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, both opened to visitors in 1993 and 1994 respectively. Other examples include the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, opened in Cincinnanti in 2004 and dedicated to the memory of the underground railroad, a reference to the clandestine routes created by abolitionists for slaves fleeing from the southern U.S. before Emancipation in 1861. In Argentina there is a Museum of Memory, a DMZ Museum between the North and South Korea and a Jewish Museum in Berlin, Germany.

5.3 Limitations of empathic identifications

[25] Morrison, 2019.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] Sutcliffe, 2024.
[29] Crysler, 2006.
[30] *Ibid.*

Theorists and researchers are critical of empathic identification's ability to bridge the divide between ethnicity, religion, and nationality and call to question the idea of empathy proceeds, ethical behaviour, tolerance and deeper understanding of contemporary conflicts.[31] They examined the use of family histories in history museums and concluded that such practice was problematic because visitors do not have enough critical distance to relinquish personal memories. Sutcliffe (2024) concurs with this criticism with reference to the "uniqueness of Holocaust" as being closely associated with the moral prioritization of opposition to antisemitism. Thus, he calls for a move towards a "post- uniqueness era".[32] Moreover, Markham's criticism of the District Six Museum states that, empathy at the museum serves as a means through which alternative memories of District Six are silenced.[33]

6. CONCLUSION

The Heritage Day commemorations' focus on cultural institutions highlight their role in fostering social cohesion and nation building. They do so by narrating histories of violence and conflict to elicit empathy and tolerance. Cultural institutions are regulated by several international conventions and treaties as well as national legislation in policies. The DSAC support them with the necessary funding to run their operations.

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[31] Morrison, 2019.

[32] Sutcliffe, 2024.

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