CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA.

We think of South Africa as a country of diverse cultures because we automatically define culture in terms of its external, most obvious manifestations: food, dress, rituals, song, dance, games, etc. But culture is a way of life and external manifestations are merely signposts to an infrastructure of beliefs that determine the manner and style of our existence. And the old signposts no longer point to our actual culture; they are really the remains of eviscerated cultures no longer supported by the beliefs that gave rise to them.

What they really provide is variety.

Variety and diversity may seem the same but variety is variation on a theme while diversity indicates difference, separateness, and it derives from our real culture, our common culture. We don't realise it but we do have a common culture, a culture of race and colour consciousness based on the hierarchical ordering of races and the need for separation.

It is a culture that evolved, was instilled and nurtured through colonial and apartheid separate development.

In focusing on our differences, we accepted the need for separation and developed a culture based on race and all of us, black and white, became racists, that is, we used race as the determining factor in our interactions. There are many who deny being racist because they see racism mainly in violent discriminatory acts and do not recognise it as their way of life, and that even their most benign actions flow from a consciousness of difference, from attitudes of superiority and inferiority. Even though racism has been legislated away, it has not disappeared.

When we look at people, most of us still see colour and race first and we think of one another in terms of stereotypes.

(Yesterday, 1 October 2009, at age 73, I was referred to as
‘my girl’ in the charity shop in which I am a volunteer.) Furthermore, as apartheid structures have not disappeared from our lives, we still, for the most part, live in group areas, still exhibit signs of xenophobia, still do not trust people of other races, still assert attitudes of superiority or succumb to feelings of inferiority, are arrogant or defensive, patronising or patronised, doubting of the capabilities of those of a different race, and we decry affirmative action forgetting that apartheid was a system of affirmative action.

And in the new South Africa, the great disparities in wealth between black and white promoted by colonialism and apartheid, still obtain.

So there is contempt, fear and hatred on the one hand, and vengeful resentment and hatred on the other.

Consequently, attempts to transform our culture from one of separate development to a human rights culture are thwarted by apartheid attitudes.

Though we now celebrate the diversity of our cultures, there is no real substance to our traditional practices; they have become perfunctory. The vital connection between the individual and insular race-based traditional cultures was lost when our society was structured along hierarchical racial lines.

We lived in group areas but our community was not that small self-contained racial unit.

It was a much wider community, a community of people of different races and ethnic divisions, closed off from one another except for trade and labour purposes.

Group areas gave us the illusion that we were separate communities but we were part of a nation state and our essential connection was to the norms and values of the state. Ours was the culture of unity in diversity; unified under one rule but cordoned off into separate units. Old traditions continued to survive in the group areas, but were increasingly becoming irrelevant.

Old traditions based on ubuntu, or the ummah, or karma/dharma, lost their hold in the new culture of separate development which conflated class and race, and placed us in a racial hierarchy.

Those who belonged to the lower race-classes were held to be inferior and they conformed, willingly or unwillingly, to racist norms and values and became ghosts of themselves.

And as black people began to assimilate Western traditions, those of the dominant culture found validation of their superiority in this general acceptance of their way of life even though it was
And black peoples' affiliations to old traditions changed. As they now belonged to a wider community, their aspirations were to succeed in that wider community and in order to succeed they had to adopt Western norms and values. And they lived complex lives.

Inside their group areas, though they followed ancient customs, new ghetto cultures were developing which integrated Western norms and values with old customs and individuals began to evaluate old ways, retaining or repudiating them according to need.

Because it was expedient to adopt the values and norms of the dominant culture, traditional values became syncretised on a culture of separate development and to a large extent lost the power to inform individual behaviour.

They became irrelevant in providing a sense of identity and self-worth, and though people maintained the external trappings of traditional cultures, food, dress, rituals etc, these no longer reflected the reality of their lives.

In South Africa, we may eat, pray, worship, sing and dance in a variety of traditional ways but we have set up Western style governance, we build Western style homes, we are educated in Western thought and technology. People with black skins and white masks are, therefore, a constant reminder to White people of their superiority. And because Black people have assimilated Western culture, they do not have a sense of authenticity and suffer from feelings of disempowerment and inadequacy. Today, as we try to transform from a culture of separate development to a human rights culture, we are attempting to overcome deep conditioning to attitudes of superiority and inferiority.
Belief in the inequality of human beings was not exorcised from our thinking and behaviour simply by being outlawed. It will take many years for us to learn to understand who we truly are and respect ourselves and one another. Structures and institutions are the means by which we inculcate values and norms.

As we still retain apartheid structures and institutions, transformation that hopes to overcome three hundred years of conditioning, cannot happen overnight.

Many of us are not aware that we still behave according to the norms and values established under separate development.

We take for granted that we are free of racism because we now mix fairly freely, but habits die hard and we need to be constantly alert, not to other people's lapses, but to our own.

We will eventually change because structures and institutions for transformation are being set up, but it will take many years before the belief that all are equal before the law, becomes a habit of thought and action.

Until such time, we must recognise that we act on the basis of a belief in racial inequality.

And as long as those who believe in their superiority, whether old or new-found, believe that they are entitled to the best of everything, and continue the colonial trends of exploitation and fraud, we will never have a democratic society, if by democracy we mean what is expressed in the Freedom Charter. At present, we are still a diverse culture and by diverse, I mean separate and unequal. I do not mean the way we dress, the food we eat, the songs we sing, our rituals; all these external manifestations of culture are still tied into our identities.

People who fear losing their culture, fear losing these elements but they will never lose them because they threaten no one.

What we have lost are old ways of thinking and being.
My personal feeling is that we place too much emphasis on cultural difference and that leads readily to discrimination. If one thinks of culture in superficial terms, then South Africa is a land of diverse cultures. During apartheid, differences were emphasised and the society was balkanised into ethnic ghettos bound together by a dominant public culture and existing privately as esoteric sub-cultures. Consequently, black people were compelled to seek affirmation in the wider context through the adoption of Western cultural norms and values and the repudiation of their own cultures. Those who adapted best were rewarded. That kind of transformation was disempowering and robbed people of their dignity.

Though we want to restore dignity and pride through an African Renaissance, we cannot escape the fact that various forms of imperialism have had an irreversible impact on people's cultures not just in South Africa but all over the world and attempts to return people to former cultural traditions is fraught with problems.

With celebrations such as Heritage Day, efforts are being made to reinstate traditional cultural values but these efforts can only focus on externals because the infrastructure of beliefs on which they originally rested, have disappeared.

The focus on the traditional, therefore, is a focus on an empty past. We need to focus on the present and on the future. Our present and future, as was declared in the Freedom charter, lie in the adoption of democracy. Even though we have the wonderful concept of ubuntu, which, in my opinion, expresses in one word all that is involved in democracy, traditional cultural practices do not reflect that kind of democracy, i.e. a culture in which there is no discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, gender and disability.

Old traditional ways tend to be authoritarian, sexist and homophobic and we have opted for democracy.

So even though we may dream of an African Renaissance, we have already knocked that dream in the head with a democratic constitution that reflects a Western understanding and implementation of democracy, Our colonial and racist legacies should not make us squirm in admitting that.

Instead, we should look at our aspirations and accept that we are a new people, an African people moving in a new direction with a global outlook on life.
The return to traditional values represents an attempt to turn back the clock and we cannot do that. When you look at which people are involved in expressions of an African Renaissance, it is generally the rural poor, who have not lost their indigenous culture. They are not the rulers in our society. Those who have adopted Western norms and values, and with it the culture of acquisition, are our leaders today. And ubuntu is simply a catchword in their vocabulary.

As long as we do not recognise that culture is a way of life and that food, dress, dance, music and religious rituals are flamboyant expressions of culture, we will never overcome our racism. It hurts to admit that our culture for all practical purposes is still the culture of separate development. But as long as we remain in denial we will not move forward.

In the modern world, one cannot adequately express a sense of dignity and self worth simply by returning to traditional behaviours. All those assertions of who the first people were to develop this or that are feeble attempts to depose Western cultural hegemony.

We live in a world controlled by Western technology. And major changes occur, not through legislation, but through technology - the most powerful agent of transformation. And that is where our focus on cultural change should lie.

If we are ever to alleviate the problems of the disempowered majority, we have to give them access to technology.

Our system of education with its impossible demands will not do it. We need to provide people with opportunities for a hands-on approach to learning without cluttering their lives with SETA
and SAQA requirements, especially not in a country in which mother tongue instruction is not available to the majority.

Perhaps in this instance we need to take an old-fashioned approach and allow people to be apprenticed to various practitioners, not on the basis of certificates and educational qualifications but on the basis of interest. Those who have aptitude will develop and educate themselves.

Those who have little aptitude will still have basic skills that should help them to survive.