

Can Heritage Organisations Survive in South Africa?

By Dr Narissa Ramdhani, CEO Ifa Lethu Foundation

In the midst of human tragedies unfolding through strikes, poverty, crime and politics, we enter September – Heritage Month here in SA - a month which makes us acknowledge the value of our country's heritage and the challenges it faces. Heritage organizations such as Ifa Lethu find their ongoing existence a daily challenge. While we recognise the need for better health care, education, housing, jobs and many other pressing needs, it is essential that we also take great care to protect our heritage not only for our youth and our country today but for future generations to follow.

What constitutes our heritage? Is it the struggle for democracy, or the sacrifice thousands of South Africans made during the dark days of apartheid to make their voices heard? Is it the written word, our music, film, visual arts, crafts, fashion, news bites, and print that will form the record of what we achieved when future generations turn to books, the internet and other resources to discover what their forbears left as footprints in the sands of time? Or will it be the highly censored and even biased news footage available in both local and international film libraries? Whatever form it will take, it probably has been filtered through another's process to make it newsworthy – both good and bad.

A well-known fact that censorship existed for many years over the South African media – indeed, TV only started here as late as 1976 – much of it state-controlled with a few die-hard liberals such as the Rand Daily Mail. As with all censorship, it created an active, illegal community, driven to form not only political groups, but jazz evenings and, ultimately, artistic displays across the townships. Creativity continued - but in a hostile political climate. Museums did not support the work of black artists, considering them to be of lesser significance than that of foreign or white artists. Unsung at home, much of this art was recognised by foreign diplomats, executives and visitors, purchased almost clandestinely, and shipped away from our shores. Thousands of paintings, sculptures and art objects created by Black artists in the most turbulent time in our country's history - and depicting their pain and humiliation - were bought by these individuals who either had an eye for art, a sense of history, or out of altruism, and then taken home with them.

This heritage of visual arts, each depicting the artist's own intensely personal view of the apartheid state and its events, would have been lost to us as an important part of our heritage and history, were it not for the support then of foreigners, and their subsequent unselfish donations of these work to Ifa Lethu and to the people of South Africa.

But the ideal was never to bring these works home and lock them away in a dusty room or museum, it was always to show the world the talent, share the experiences, the will to record and survive even the worst conditions in which to be creative. It is a heritage that must prevail. Heritage was employed as a weapon by all sides during the apartheid years - as a weapon of oppression by the apartheid state and as a weapon of resistance by the liberation movements. Now South Africa can seize the initiative to use heritage again, but this time to inform, to empower all South Africans, to break down those cultural

barriers that have caused so much pain, and finally teach our people how to transcend adversity and heal the nation.

So where does that leave a non-profit heritage organization like Ifa Lethu Foundation? It necessitates raising funds in a climate of human need where so many need so much. Does it mean we should put our visions and strategies on hold 'until things get better' or do we press ahead with feeding and healing a nation's soul?

The past year or so could best be described as one of the most critical periods in the Ifa Lethu Foundation's history. Barely two years ago concerns were raised about whether organisations like Ifa Lethu Foundation could survive the effects of the global economic meltdown while also competing for corporate funding, and tourist and media attention during the Soccer World Cup.

It is during times like this that non-profit organisations sink or swim. At Ifa Lethu, realising that heritage was not a 'fashionable' area, we reviewed our strategic objectives and embarked on an innovative road, aggressively aligning the Foundation's work to national impact priorities of poverty alleviation and employment creation. In so doing, the Foundation, in its own modest way has succeeded in demonstrating how cultural heritage, or the creative sectors could play a significant role in addressing these priorities by contributing to economic growth. Ifa Lethu's success in this very trying time has proved true that only agile organisations cope better and are able to seize opportunities and move rapidly through changes. That we were able to run a sustainable organisation in this period of national and international crisis is evidence of our agility in relation to our business strategy. This recognition has ensured that our fundraising initiatives have resulted in numerous successes, our projects have yielded solid deliverables and our brand has grown.

So as we enter Heritage month, and having built a survival plan on our core business as a heritage organisation, we can only keep on working to remind the youth and people of South Africa that we have a heritage to be proud of; one that should not be forgotten; one that needs sustainable resources for the future. Art has a unique place in the heritage of our country. It is through these sometimes shocking images by artists who lived the daily struggle to survive, that we hope to play a role in healing a nation and reminding the world 'never again'.

As citizens of South Africa we have dreams, about our country and about our continent. Through the work of our heritage practitioners, we will be able to communicate these dreams to our youth. For the vision of a free South Africa is one in which our youth should be charged with the task of acting as agents of change and development. After all, young South Africans need to take ownership of the challenges the country faces as a first step in redressing past imbalances and building a nation.

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About Ifa Lethu Foundation: Empowering the Nation's Soul

Ifa Lethu, a nonprofit Foundation based in Tshwane, South Africa is devoted to the development and economic growth of the creative sectors in the country.

Ifa Lethu today manages the largest heritage repatriation effort in South Africa with collections having been repatriated from countries such as the United States of America, Canada, France, Australia, Spain, Holland, the United Kingdom and Germany. Further collections have been identified across the globe and every endeavour is made by Ifa Lethu to facilitate their repatriation to their home country.

Recent activities marked a rapid growth and an extension of our mandate, which has resulted in the Foundation focusing on the provision of skills for creative practitioners so they may become successful entrepreneurs. This extension has allowed the Foundation to align its work with the national priorities of poverty alleviation and community upliftment. Creative Entrepreneurship training initiatives are ongoing in the visual arts, fashion design and small business skills. In addition Ifa Lethu's is committed to its education of the public and specific local and international communities through their extensive programme of exhibitions, workshops and conferences.

Ifa Lethu is headed by CEO Dr. Narissa Ramdhani and Chaired by Amb Dr. Lindiwe Mabuza.

Contacts:

Bette Kun, Marcomms Consultant

Cell: +27 (0) 82 576 9739

Tel: +27 (0) 11 646 0821

bettekun@gmail.com

Dr Narissa Ramdhani, Chief Executive Officer

Ifa Lethu Foundation

Tel: +27 (0)12 346 2985

email: cshoeman@ifalethu.org.za

www.iflethu.org.za