

## African heritage and humanity

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### Introduction

Heritage can be defined as 'the history, traditions and qualities that a country or society has had for many years and that are regarded as important' (Hornby 2010). South Africa celebrates Heritage Day on 24 September, however, this is the only day in a year where black South Africans can actively express their heritage in a space that is extensively uplifting European heritage for 364 days in a year.

This article will be looking at how the heritage of Africans has been resilient through the periods of oppression and how African heritage changed due to apartheid and colonisation. The concept of humanity and the philosophy of ubuntu in the post-colonial apartheid period will also be explored in this article.

### African heritage through history

Africa is a continent of diverse heritage and Africans have to a large extent managed to retain their cultural practices, languages, rituals, and rites of passages, as practised by their ancestors. This includes initiation schools among the Ndebele, Xhosa, and Pedi boys and girls, where adolescent girls and boys are taught about their traditions, cultures, and lineage. The tribes such as the Maasai of Kenya and the Village of Ouri in Burkina Faso have celebrations where they summon their ancestors using the Winiamas Masks. The retention of African heritage has given African identity a new meaning in the post-colonial atmosphere. Black South African heritage subsisted through the colonial period and apartheid due to Africans asserting themselves in their culture. In the book *Things Fall Apart*, the protagonist Okonkwo kills himself for his Igbo culture, which was usurped by missionary schools. Chinua Achebe's (1958) statement on Okonkwo's rejection of colonial rule allows Africans to see themselves as the protagonist— which is a statement reasserting the fight and agency of Africans. A good example of the rejection of colonial

rule and usurping of African heritage is the Soweto Uprising in 1976, where a student-led movement rejected Afrikaans as a mode of instruction in predominately African township schools. Another example is the Mau rebellion where Africans defied the colonial government and fought for their ancestral lands (Thomas 2007).

### **The impact of colonisation on African heritage**

The histories of colonisation, imperialism, and apartheid aimed to strip Africans of their heritage, legacies, and humanity. The stripping of humanity away from Africans is evident in the book *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad and Armstrong 2006) where disassembled Africans are described as separate limbs. This removes any human-like features from Africans and it was further used as accountable reasoning for slavery and colonisation. The *Oxford Dictionary* has eloquently described heritage as being ‘histories or traditions and practices regarded as important’ (Hornby 2010). It is to be noted that the ‘histories or traditions and practices regarded as important’ of Africans during these oppressive periods were disregarded by the oppressors. Invasions such as the arrival of the Dutch in South Africa led to the alteration of African heritage through superimposing European law. For example, the Khoisan were stripped of their humanity after the arrival of the Dutch. The Bantu-Nguni tribes were invaded by Dutch and British settlers, challenging government systems and wars, such as the war at Isandlwana.

A recent example of the impact of colonisation in the current dispensation is the manhandling of Thando Mahlangu, a Ndebele activist who wore his traditional Ndebele attire and was escorted violently out of Clicks for violation of their dress code. They further rendered his traditional attire indecently (Shatz 2021). This example highlights the inconsistencies of Roman-Dutch Law in an African country where laws impose on indigenous people's heritage. It is important to acknowledge these inconsistencies, to give the post-apartheid legal system diversity.

### **Humanity**

Heritage grants humanity the incorporation of identity (Comaroff 2009). This incorporated identity, once established, can provide people with a sense of belonging. Identity can however also be used to subjugate different people of different identities into oppression. European heritage has managed to merge itself into African heritage. Granted, it was inevitable for the rainbow nation to have a merged culture, however, we see that the two have created an intricate new heritage that has more European features than African. In South Africa, Roman-Dutch common law is the default law, yet South African indigenous law is treated as the ‘other’ law (Maimela & Maithufi 2020). African heritage, whether it is African traditions or attire, is not widely celebrated regularly, which is the underlying problem.

## **Ubuntu: the community philosophy**

In the new dispensation, ubuntu has been incorporated into the law, which is a step forward in uplifting the indigenous African legal systems. Africans have always strived for unity and togetherness. Ubuntu is a Nguni axiom: 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu', which is directly translated into 'a person is a person because of or through others' (Tutu 2004). The elements of ubuntu are compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity, and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Tutu 1999). Ubuntu has survived post-colonial dispensation because it is an important element of heritage. The weakness of ubuntu is that European settlers took advantage of it and subsequently took control of African land and law (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 98). African heritage was disregarded by European settlers upon their arrival and we can rightfully say that European settlers considered Africa as 'empty' and undeveloped and imposed European lifestyles and traditions on those that did not look like them.

## **Conclusion**

African heritage remains diverse through years of resilience against oppressive systems. Although some strides have been taken to celebrate our diverse heritage by providing a day for our heritage, it is the lack of day-to-day acceptance of indigenous African heritage that illuminates the slow progression of Africanness. The policing of indigenous heritage on a day-to-day basis by denying Africans the right to walk into malls with their traditional attire or denying pupils with Afro hairstyles entrance to a classroom is an uncomfortable and real experience. It is important to have conversations and work on the amendment of laws and changes of attitudes because African heritage cannot only exist on 24 September every year, while European heritage exists without limitations.

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