

Heritage and how it shapes our humanity

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Introduction

Heritage reflects the relation between cultures and societies, which represent a rich source of information about human history. Due to the nature of its history, heritage can be traced back to traditional forms of humanity. In African thought, humanity is a force or energy that permeates individual and communal existence in an integrated and indistinguishable way. In Western thought, the personal choice to believe and act upon individual reasoning contains a distinctly human transcending energy (Du Plooy 2014: 93). For this reason, previous studies consulted about African Heritage will be utilised to reflect on its significance in South Africa. This article will provide the context of heritage in South Africa. In turn, the analysis that follows will stand as a metaphor for understanding how heritage shapes our humanity.

Heritage in the South African context

Economou (2015: 217) links heritage to past cultures and societies and states that it involves complex interrelationships and phenomena. These interrelationships can be made up of practices that are passed on from one generation to another, and heritage entails what has been passed on. The National Heritage Council (n.d.: 11) defines heritage as a collective memory of people, preserved not only to inform the present about the past but also to equip successive generations to fashion their future.

According to Faro (2021), Heritage Day in South Africa is a significant event that takes place annually on 24 September to commemorate the 1994 repeal of the apartheid racial segregation laws that limited cultural expression and association. The day promotes unity

and diversity in South Africa by encouraging people to celebrate their diverse cultures and customs. Since Heritage Day stands as a metaphor for our identity, its significance is reflected through the cultural diversity upon which our nation is based. Cultural heritage includes ‘tangible and intangible’ forms, some of which can be touched, felt or seen, while others cannot. While ‘tangible cultural heritage’ can be regarded as the practices, representations, knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces, ‘intangible cultural heritage’ includes oral traditions and expressions, languages, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events and traditional craftsmanship that people identify as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003).

How heritage shapes our humanity?

Heritage plays a significant role in shaping our humanity by promoting social cohesion. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (2020: 4) defines social cohesion as ‘the degree of social integration and inclusion in communities and society and the extent to which mutual solidarity finds expression among individuals and communities’. One crucial marker of social cohesion is the amount of social capital that societies and communities have. With this, people can access social networks, which are the foundation for social relationships. In the same way, social cohesion can be used interchangeably with nation-building. The Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (2020: 4) defines nation-building as ‘the process whereby a society of people with diverse origins, histories, languages, cultures and religions comes together within the boundaries of a sovereign state’.

Both social cohesion and nation-building offer a mutual understanding of our humanity. For instance, they convey how sport, arts and culture encourage the safeguarding of all that is indigenous about South African heritage. These concepts link with the African concept of ubuntu, which relates to the interests of building and preserving our communities with fairness and mutual caring. According to Nussbaum (2003: 21), our common humanity in South Africa is reflected in the following saying on the spirit of ubuntu:

umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (Nguni),

Motho ke motho ka batho babang (Sotho),

Muthu u bebelwa munwe (Venda)

(Translation, it is through others that one attains selfhood.)

As Cilliers (2008: 1) notes, ‘ubuntu is often traced back in time through the ideals and thoughts of twentieth-century African philosopher-leaders such as Kaunda (“African humanism”), Césaire and Senghor (“negritude”), Nyerere (“ujamaa”) and Nkrumah (“concientism”)’. Another scholar, Van Binsbergen (2001: 74), describes ubuntu as

'a lubricant of social relations at the globalized urban centre of contemporary South African society', while Broodryk (2010: 47) defines ubuntu as 'the art of being human'. Broodryk (2006: 21) reflects on the integral humanist values of ubuntu as 'dignity, safety, welfare, health, beauty, love, development, caring, sharing, respect and compassion.'

Heritage is wide-ranging and has aspects of conscious understanding. According to the Department of Arts and Culture (2009: 43), some of these aspects are based, and thrive, on secrecy and sacredness. In South Africa, these aspects can be understood as a living human treasure, since they bear on our indigenous knowledge that marks the sum of our living heritage. The Department of Arts and Culture (2009: 5) also states that 'living heritage allows for identity and a sense of belonging for people as well as an accumulation of intellectual capital for current and future generations in the context of mutual respect for human, social, and cultural rights'. Hence, we find that in every society or community, there are people who hold skills and history relating to aspects of diverse living heritage. In addition, these aspects are an inspirational description that shapes our humanity. Moreover, they afford us an opportunity to respect the role each individual plays in safeguarding our shared heritage so that subsequent generations can find pleasure in the treasure it presents.

Conclusion

Since heritage is traced back to its traditional forms of humanity, I conclude by stating that cultural diversity shapes our humanity. With South Africa's history of diverse cultural practices, the spirit of ubuntu marks our heritage. By bringing about this unity, our heritage serves not only the individual but everybody who regards themselves as a South African.

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