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FOUNDATION

WHOSE HERITAGE?

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Today is Heritage Day. This day was placed on the calendar after the 1994 negotiated settlement. The celebrations differ from South African to South African, but on the first commemoration of Heritage Day in 1995, President Nelson Mandela said the day was introduced because the government realised that “our rich and diverse cultural heritage has the power to help us build our new nation”. Heritage is therefore not only intended to celebrate diversity, but also to help build unity.

It is interesting that 24 September was initially not on the list of public holidays when the *Public Holidays Bill* was presented in Parliament in 1995. The Inkatha Freedom Party insisted that this day, upon which the Zulu nation traditionally celebrated Shaka Day (commemorating the Zulu King’s conciliatory role between the different Zulu tribes), be added to the list of public holidays. The compromise accepted was that the day would be called Heritage Day - and would apply to all South Africans, and not just to the Zulus.

It is also interesting to note that due to the influence of Jan Schanell (also called “Jan Braai”), the day is known as “National Braai Day” and actively celebrated by a large portion of the population (not just Afrikaans-speakers). As far back as 2007, Archbishop Desmond Tutu proclaimed 24 September National Braai Day, precisely because it provides an easy way for all South Africans to celebrate their heritage and also their common patriotism around a braai fire. Not everyone liked this, but the idea grew and today some black South Africans even speak of the day as *Chisa Nyama* (literally “braai meat”).

The word “heritage” has a wide field of application. Elements of it can include culture (one’s way of life, the way one does things, including ethical conduct), as well as many forms of art. It can include history: written and oral, with monuments and historic sites as a central element. Heritage is also physical things, like our natural environment, mountains, rivers, vegetation and animals. Our languages and religions are also part of our heritage.

It is significant that the “forgotten” section 235 of the Constitution is the only one where the word “heritage” is used. It is said that “any community that shares a common cultural and language heritage” has the right to self-determination within the Republic of South Africa.

This confirms that certain communities share a linguistic and cultural heritage that is not necessarily shared by all South Africans - and that’s fine. It highlights the diversity in South African society. However, several other sections of the Constitution (41, 83 and 185) also confirm the unity of the country and of all South Africans.

Answering the core question - whose heritage are we celebrating on 24 September - is not easy, especially in a country with such a complex present and complicated future.

Firstly, the problem is that the current ANC rulers, who regard and portray themselves as the victors of the 1994 political transition, have a particular view of history and the concept of



FW de Klerk
FOUNDATION

“national unity”. As far as history before 1994 is concerned, it is completely vilified, in all facets. It is as if everything that happened in South Africa was ideologically tossed into the dustbin of history (as Constitutional Court Judge Chris Jafta in fact stated of Pretoria's non-political street names). As a result, some South Africans' heritage is being thrown away like trash. This view, therefore, seems to be that South Africa's history began in 1994 and that there was an evil void before that time. It reminds one of the short-sighted view of the North-West University, that celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Potchefstroom Campus (and formerly the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education) would be tantamount to living in the past. A senior office bearer of NWU even stated that this was no time for celebration, but for repentance and confession. With such a pronouncement, decades of heritage that is important and valuable for thousands of alumni, was trashed. It also ignores the critical role played by that university in the last 150 years. What does Heritage Day mean if that heritage is thrown away?

Second, the problem is the ANC's view of national unity and social cohesion. It is a combination of the American “melting pot” idea, where the variety should actually go up and disappear in the unit, and where language and cultural diversity are only paid lip service. Social cohesion means that everyone must join the largest (read: black) group to become part of the majority. It is a fundamental disregard for the rights and importance of minorities.

On the other hand, and largely in reaction to the above interpretation and intolerance, there are many Afrikaners and Afrikaans speakers who reduce Heritage Day to “our group” and “our history” alone - only the diversity (and separation) of one group is emphasised. We retreat into our camp and to hell with the rest. Such a view is also not limited to the celebration of Heritage Day, but is simply passed over to all facets of society. And that just causes further polarisation and alienation.

In order to genuinely do Heritage Day justice, we need to keep the constitutional principles of unity and diversity in mind. Afrikaners, Zulus, black South Africans, coloured South Africans or whatever group you choose to associate with, do not inhabit this country alone. The problems of the country are ours to deal with and help solve. And it is patriotic and makes sense to do your part.

But then leaders such as Ace Magashule (“rather make whites the targets in xenophobic attacks”) and Panyaza Lesufi (“If anyone wants to learn in Afrikaans, it is racist”) need to be taken to task by their leaders for their own intolerance and racism. Heritage Day cannot be celebrated with an open mind if one’s language is labelled as inherently racist and your white skin is made a target. It is ironic that it seems to have escaped Lesufi’s attention that the theme of this year's Heritage Day was set down by the government as “To celebrate South Africa’s literary classical writings in the year of indigenous languages.” And Afrikaans is also an indigenous language ...

All South Africans (including minorities who are not black) should be granted the freedom and enjoy the tolerance to celebrate and commemorate what is precious from their past - and not against the principles of the current Constitution. The Preamble of the



FW de Klerk
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Constitution doesn't just ask that we "honour [people] who suffered for justice and freedom in our country", but also that we honour those "who have worked to build and develop our country" (and that happened before 1994!).

If our political and other leaders have that attitude, in our celebration of Heritage Day we can emulate the last sentence of that paragraph of the Preamble to the Constitution:

"(We) Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity".

But as loyal South Africans and proud members of minority groups, we must not allow our celebration of Heritage Day to be determined or even influenced by the distorted and ideological views of the Magashules and Lesufis of the world. So: when you toss that meat on the coals with members your own group, also think with compassion of all the other groups that look and speak differently in their diversity than your group, but that are united with you as proud South Africans. That is a true Heritage Day ...

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