

" Towards a Cultural Charter"

Freedom of speech and censorship :

Input by Nise Malange

Before we can talk about the freedom of speech, we need to first look into the broader issue of freedom generally. (Declaration of Human Rights - article 19 - Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression : this includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek; receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. Article 13,20 and 27 they deal with freedom of a human being) There is also the ANC Bill of Rights, we need to discuss and it could be our protector in a new South Africa. And in terms of our cultural demands we can look at the basic needs/demands of the cultural workers.

Censorship in S.A. is used as a weapon to curb ideas which make people to think and act against apartheid laws. S.A. today is known as a country that has abolished all apartheid laws and we all know that is not true.

We need to understand the laws such as the Publications Act of 1974 which superseded the Publications and Entertainment Act of 1963. The 1974 law is aimed at all nonnewspaper publications including films, records, stage shows, artwork and photographs. There other laws such as the Suppression of Communism Act, The Public Safety Act, the Terrorism Act, the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act, University Education Act and many more on which artist were detained or banned under. Either you are or not a communist it did not matter at all. All these have provisions which interfere with the artist's freedom to write, paint or draw, read etc.

The younger generation may wonder why writers such as Wally Serote, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Alex La Guma, Todd Matshikiza, Nat Nakasa and many more went into exile. Some died there, some survived. These writers and other cultural workers went into exile to pursue their creativity. I won't talk about what we have missed in all these decades because since February 2,1990 we have at least had opportunities of meeting our artist who were forced into exile.

During the state of emergency culture played a very important role in passing the message from one region to another and from nationally to international. Culture was or still used as a weapon for liberation. The Afrikaners have done that through many forms of repression and we don't have to feel bad about that. At the same time, as we move from resistance culture to nation-building there are many issues to be taken into consideration especially the topic we are dealing with today i.e. freedom of speech and censorship. I am saying this because of our involvement in political organisation and the fact that we are seen as mouth-piece of political organisation - we have done so because of the apartheid regime and we wanted to liberate our minds and that of our people. For us is to re-look into our role as cultural workers and what we want to do.

In Natal cultural workers experienced censorship not from the government but from the movement itself. This, okay, happen because people are tired of the killings and everyone is desperate - We want peace now. Myself and other artist who were organising the Mandela Rally, February 25 1990, were asked to talk to the artist like Mzwakhe Mbuli and all participants not to sing or recite any poem or song that attacks or any negative things about Mangosuthu Buthelezi or any of the Bantustan leaders. This is what today we had to look at. Freedom when it suite you or freedom for everyone. Another example is of Mbongeni Ngema's Township Fever - his interpretation of railway strike was a crime to us - I'm sure there are many examples of censorship within progressive structures that some people here are thinking about. In a conference that was organise by Idasa in 1988 'The right to speak' someone from KwaZulu Government structures asked a question whether abusive language against their leader should not be censored because the result are more than the banning orders.

We need to look into gender, ethnic divisions racism etc and see how we can deal with artforms that still promotes divisions. I am raising all these issues for discussion that will build a new culture of tolerance in a post apartheid S.A. We need to discuss all areas that could lead to conflict within a code conduct. Educational workshop on Freedom of speech and censorship and what it means should be organised to educate our grassroots structures as well as political organisations. The demand for freedom of speech and end to censorship should be a genuine one. It will only be genuine when we understand each others culture and address the political aspect of our works. This is an area for discussion and input from all areas, politically and culturally.