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A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

Since the last number of this journal there has been an extraordinary change in the political climate in South Africa. To the many South Africans who thought they would live and die under apartheid it has brought hope for the first time in nearly half a century. "The new South Africa" — still not here, but now at least imaginable — is a phrase on many lips.

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Pretoria, recently sent around a questionnaire to artists and musicians in South Africa to canvas their views on the future of the arts in the "new South Africa". It included questions on matters such as artistic liberty, artists' rights, censorship, and government sponsorship of the arts. It is on the latter that I wish to comment.

Government does indeed have a distinct responsibility to encourage the development of art and culture, for two reasons. One is that 'art and culture' have always needed patronage in order to release the artist to some extent from the labour of living and allow him to create. Since the disruptions of colonial and post-colonial times the traditional African patrons of the arts (rulers, religious leaders and so on) have lost their ability to patronise, or do not even exist, and virtually no new patrons of the African arts have appeared to take their place.

Popular urban African music, on the other hand, is doing well. One reason for its enormous development, particularly in the last decade in South Africa, must be the patronage bestowed on it by the media, the record companies, commerce, world interest, the educational system, the churches and otherwise well-meaning elites who patronise only what they can understand. The converse of this enormous outpouring of support has been the stagnation of traditional music almost everywhere. The traditional arts are expected to get along on their own. As we have seen over the few hundred years of Western impact many, perhaps most, art forms simply disappear over time.

The second reason for government's responsibility to support art and culture is that the traditional arts have an inherent, intrinsic value in themselves.

Despite the fact that they are only known to isolated groups of rural people, and despite the urban view — "everyone prefers the popular music" — they need to be supported. Why?

... because it is to the traditional arts that creative artists, whatever cultural world they live in, are continually looking for the deepest kind of cultural inspiration.

... because these arts represent the refinement of centuries of artistic growth, inspiration and development.

... because they represent a people's history, religion, character, symbolism and self-awareness. They belong to a people as nothing else can. They are irreplaceable. Any African government that has the deepest cultural aspirations of its people at heart should take significant steps towards counterbalancing the overwhelmingly lop-sided arts patronage situation, which has only been exacerbated in recent decades by the growing Western interest in African music and arts.

Patronage should not impose Western moulds which have the effect of distancing the traditional arts from their social matrix, their source of inspiration, their standards of judgement. It should not impose pressures or control. On the contrary, it should work within the social framework from which the art springs, by supporting, for instance, the artists themselves and their families, the instrument makers, the costume makers, the composers, the dancers and, not least, the local sponsors themselves. Perhaps the idea developed in some oriental countries such as Korea and Japan should be looked into for Africa: certain artists are declared to be 'national treasures', and receive lifetime support.

Government patronage is not easy, because it has to break through the bourgeois lace curtain of the people who make up governments. But do we want to save the traditional African arts, in the forms in which we still have them, or not?