

*Singing Against Apartheid: ANC Cultural Groups and the International Anti-Apartheid Struggle**

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This article explores the ways in which music, together with cultural forms such as poetry, theatre and dance, was used to garner international support for the struggle against apartheid. It focuses on two of the African National Congress's most significant projects in this realm: Mayibuye, an agitprop group that achieved considerable success in Europe in the 1970s; and Amandla, which travelled widely as a party ambassador during the 1980s, offering large-scale performances incorporating music, theatre and dance. A central motivation for the article was documenting the work of these two ensembles, both of which made significant contributions to the development of cultural activity and yet remain virtually undocumented in the history of the movement and the struggle. The article's primary analytical interest is in how black South African popular culture came to play a role in the movement's work in exile, how it was recruited and re-packaged in order to appeal to foreign audiences, and the relationship between this and cultural activity that was more internally focused. The distinction between culture's role in external propaganda work as opposed to internally-focused nation-building – although not often clearly made in ANC discourse – helps to situate the contributions of these two groups within the larger context of culture and the struggle. Further, it helps to explain the difficulties faced by those trying to revive Amandla in post-apartheid South Africa, an initiative that ultimately has not come to fruition. In exploring how music was mobilised by the ANC in the international arena, the article seeks to understand the importance and distinctive value of propaganda-focused cultural activity to the movement, as well as its necessary and inevitable limitations.

Introduction

In 1989, an in-house African National Congress (ANC) seminar in Lusaka heard Albie Sachs's thoughts on 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom', beginning with his famously controversial proposition that the phrase 'culture is a weapon of struggle' be banned.¹

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1 The word 'culture' occupies an important place in ANC vocabulary. While in a wider intellectual context the term bears multiple and contested meanings, within the movement its usage indicates a fairly clear conceptualisation of culture, in the words of Raymond Williams, as 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity'. The word was used to refer to music, literature and poetry, graphic arts, theatre, dance, as well as beadwork, crafts and other popular 'people's' arts. The widespread use of terms like 'cultural journal', 'cultural ensemble' and particularly 'cultural workers', as well as the ANC's conceptualisation of art more generally as a 'weapon of struggle', derives from Soviet ideas about art and the rhetoric of socialist realism. While I have attempted to minimise my use of more outdated terminology in the article (preferring in particular the more neutral 'cultural activity'), my use of the word 'culture' parallels its connotations within the movement itself, and is used interchangeably with the word 'art'.

The phrase was ‘not only banal and devoid of real content’, Sachs claimed, ‘but actually wrong and potentially harmful’. In explanation, he gave his impressions of the current state of ANC art: it confined itself to a narrow range of politically acceptable themes (‘fists and spears and guns’), portrayed the anti-apartheid struggle in simplistic terms of good and evil, and shunned nuance and ambiguity for ‘solemn formulas of commitment’. He insisted, however, that the very power of art lay in its capacity to expose complexity and contradiction; furthermore, the ideal art ‘is that which bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space’. As the promise of national liberation neared in the late 1980s, Sachs argued that art needed to be able to express not only the formulae of struggle, but also the richness and diversity of the newly emergent South African nation.²

Sachs – a highly respected lawyer and ANC activist whose pronouncements at this time carried particular weight, given his survival of an assassination attempt in 1988 – openly acknowledged that he had himself long endorsed the very conception of art as a ‘weapon of struggle’ that he now repudiated. A decade earlier, it had been legitimate and necessary to mobilise artists in service of the struggle, and this conception of culture had constituted an important focus for ANC thinking on the subject.³ But the 1980s had seen the rise of an increasingly sophisticated discourse within the movement about the ways in which culture might contribute to the process of national liberation, as well as a steady increase in the number of publications, events and institutions devoted to the issue. By the time Sachs delivered his call, culture occupied a firm place on the ANC’s agenda. What he was emphasising was that the changing context of the struggle required a corresponding shift in how cultural activity was conceived and implemented.

This article takes its starting point approximately 15 years earlier than the famed moment of Sachs’s proclamation, when cultural life was still largely regarded within the ANC as peripheral to organised political activity. Through the lens of two of the ANC’s most significant projects in exile, it explores the ways in which culture was actively recruited to promote the anti-apartheid struggle internationally. First, it chronicles the work of the Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble, a London-based ANC grouping that achieved considerable success in Europe with its agitprop performances incorporating narrative, poetry and song. Mayibuye was established in early 1975, and despite its rapidly shifting and amateur membership, functioned successfully for approximately five years, raising international awareness about the anti-apartheid cause, and simultaneously raising consciousness within the movement about the practical ways in which cultural activity could further the project of national liberation. The article then considers the work of the Amandla Cultural Ensemble, which originated in the late 1970s amongst ANC exiles based largely in *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK)⁴ training camps in southern Africa, principally Angola. Led for much of its existence by trombonist Jonas Gwangwa, Amandla became, during the decade that followed, a popular ambassador for the ANC throughout Africa and further afield in Europe, South America, the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Unlike Mayibuye, it offered large-scale, increasingly professionalised performances incorporating choral singing, jazz, theatre and dance. Its performances were intended not only to raise international awareness about apartheid, but also to present an alternative vision of a more dynamic, inclusive South African culture.

An initial motivation for this article was documenting the work of these two ensembles, both of which made significant contributions to the development of cultural activity and yet

2 A. Sachs, ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’, in D. Attridge and R. Jolly (eds), *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 239–48. Sachs did not attend the seminar in person; his paper was read out to the group by another party member.

3 M. Langa, ‘Interview with Albie Sachs’, *Rixaka*, 1 (1990), p. 30.

4 *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation), popularly known as MK, was the ANC’s military wing.

remain virtually undocumented in the history of the movement and the struggle.⁵ The article's primary analytical focus is on how culture came to play a role in the movement's work in exile, the ways in which representations of 'fists and spears and guns' were used to appeal to the international community, and the relationship between this and cultural activity that was more internally focused. While a significant body of scholarship exists on the broader subject of black South African music, there has as yet been little investigation of how music was used by political movements during the struggle, either within the country or in exile.⁶ In addition, little detailed research has been conducted on freedom songs, the ubiquitous but largely informal and un-professionalised genre that was (and still is) probably the dominant musical medium of popular political expression.⁷ Given the indispensable presence of freedom songs at mass gatherings, celebrations, funerals, protests and myriad public events in South Africa, this is a significant gap. This examination of the ANC's two professional ensembles thus represents an initial contribution towards understanding a significant dimension of South African cultural and political life, namely the deliberate and focused role that music was mobilised to play in the struggle. The development and activities of these two groups also shed some light on the ANC itself, its changing attitudes towards culture, and its broader diplomatic strategies in exile.

Two qualifications should be stated at the outset. First, Sachs's comments mark the end-point of this discussion, rather than its focus: the article does not engage with the larger debate that erupted from his paper.⁸ While his observations affirmed the increasingly valuable role that cultural activity had played until that time, he was primarily concerned with the ways in which art could address itself to the demands of a new era in the process of national liberation. Second, beyond the Sachs debate, the role of culture in the struggle was always a contested

5 In addition to several oral interviews and a collection of private papers, my documentation is based primarily on archival materials held at the UWC-Robben Island Mayibuye Archives. These materials are surprisingly extensive, and include sound and video recordings of performances; recordings broadcast by the ANC's underground radio station, Radio Freedom; performance scripts, programmes and reviews; photographs; ANC newspapers and journals; interviews with group members and ANC representatives, many conducted in exile; and other miscellaneous documentation.

6 Major works on the broad subject of black South African music include, among others, D.B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1985); V. Erlmann, *African Stars: Studies in Black South African Performance* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1991); V. Erlmann, *Nightsong: Performance, Power, and Practice in South Africa* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1996); C. Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1993); M. Andersson, *Music in the Mix* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1981); D. James, *Songs of the Women Migrants: Performance and Identity in South Africa* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999); and C.A. Muller, *Rituals of Fertility and the Sacrifice of Desire: Nazarite Women's Performance in South Africa* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1999). For a useful overview of thematic trends, see D. James, 'Musical Form and Social History: Research Perspectives on Black South African Music', in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro *et al.* (eds), *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 309–318. For reflections on more recent developments, see D.B. Coplan, 'God Rock Africa: Thoughts on Politics in Popular Black Performance in South Africa', *African Studies*, 64, 1 (2005), pp. 9–27.

7 The existing literature on freedom songs is sparse and variable. See, for example, H.Q. Kivnick, *Where is the Way: Song and Struggle in South Africa* (New York, Penguin, 1990); A.B. Pollard, 'Rhythms of Resistance: The Role of Freedom Song in South Africa', in A.M.S. Nelson (ed.), *This is How we Flow: Rhythm in Black Cultures* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 98–124; M. Hamilton (ed.), *Sing Freedom! Songs of South African Life* (London, Novello, 1993) for a song collection with some commentary; and more recently D.B. Coplan with B. Jules-Rosette, 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika: From Independent Spirit to Political Mobilization', *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, 173–4 (2004). More general writing includes J. Sherman, 'Songs of Chimurenga', *Africa Perspective*, 16 (1980); L. Vail and L. White, 'Plantation Protest: The History of a Mozambican Song', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (hereafter JSAS), 5, 1 (1978); L. Vail and L. White, 'Forms of Resistance: Songs and Perceptions of Power in Colonial Mozambique', *The American Historical Review*, 88, 4 (1983), pp. 883–919.

8 For a range of early responses to Sachs's paper, see I. de Kok and K. Press (eds), *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom* (Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1990).

one: perspectives and priorities within the movement varied, and the complicated, shifting dynamics that characterised the broader discussion on this issue are a topic for another article.

Sachs's generalised comments, as well as the debate that they sparked, nonetheless help to illuminate some of the larger dynamics shaping ANC cultural endeavours during the 1980s, and thus constitute a useful frame for this discussion. In particular, they suggest that the movement had indistinct and sometimes conflicting conceptions of what culture's role should be in external propaganda work as opposed to the internally-focused work of nation-building. ANC discourse on the subject often did not distinguish clearly between these roles. Initially, this was probably in part because the crucial task was moving culture into the mainstream of the movement's work, an initiative in which both Mayibuye and Amandla played a significant part. As debate and activity on the cultural front intensified and deepened during the 1980s, however, and increasingly as transition neared, culture's manifold potential roles began to be examined more carefully, as exemplified in the Sachs debate. The distinction between internal and external roles, although seldom consciously made by the movement, helps to situate the particular contributions of these two groups in the larger context of culture and the struggle. Further, it helps to explain the difficulties faced by those trying to revive Amandla in post-apartheid South Africa, an initiative that ultimately has not come to fruition. In exploring how culture was mobilised by the ANC in the international arena, this article seeks to understand the importance and distinctive value of propaganda-focused cultural activity to the movement, as well as its necessary and inevitable limitations.

The Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble, 1975–1980

On Sunday 10 November 1974, the Mermaid Theatre in London staged *Poets to the People*, billed as 'a dramatic presentation of South African freedom poems'.⁹ The event was a book launch for a poetry anthology of the same title, edited by ANC activist Barry Feinberg and published earlier that year.¹⁰ The performance consisted of dramatic readings of 31 poems, including works by Mongane Wally Serote, Dennis Brutus, Cosmo Pieterse, Oswald Mtshali, Mazisi Kunene, Arthur Nortje and Feinberg himself. Interspersed with these poems were a variety of political and traditional songs, as well as rhetorical segments where British actors explained various aspects of the apartheid state – separate amenities, racial classification, Bantu education and so on – in a dramatised conversational style. These dramatic sections were arranged thematically so as to illuminate the meaning of the poems and any allusions that might have been unclear to a British audience.¹¹

Poets to the People was to become one of the central impetuses for the gradual integration of culture into the organised activities of the ANC in exile. The potential role of culture in the struggle had been a topic of discussion within the movement long before the 1974 event, and had informed the work of individual artists, writers and musicians who devoted their work to the anti-apartheid cause. In addition, cultural activities, particularly spontaneous group singing, had always played an integral role at celebrations, funerals and most other mass gatherings. According to Feinberg, however, despite their tangible significance in these contexts there had been little attempt to incorporate them more systematically into the

9 Barry Feinberg's private materials: Mermaid Theatre Programme for *Poets to the People*.

10 B. Feinberg (ed.), *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1974).

11 University of the Western Cape, Robben Island-Mayibuye Archives [hereafter MA], Historical Papers, MCH89: Script for Mermaid Theatre *Poets to the People* production. Further references to this performance and to Mayibuye's activities more generally are drawn from the same archival source (MCH89), which consists of hundreds of uncatalogued documents: correspondence, press clippings, programmes and flyers, scripts and other miscellaneous materials relating to Mayibuye.

movement's mainstream political work, as a medium for raising consciousness and achieving change. As the concept of *Mayibuye* was beginning to take root in England, a growing number of activists across the diaspora of exile were similarly arguing that culture should play a more active and important role, although perspectives varied widely as to how this might be practically achieved. Living in exile in London, Feinberg and his friend, Ronnie Kasrils,¹² had come into contact with other liberation movements that were making use of culture to promote their cause. Increasingly feeling the need for action, they began to make contact with other like-minded ANC activists.¹³

Feinberg's book, promoting itself as the first of its kind to make a direct link between poetry and revolution in South Africa, was faulted by some for its propagandistic nature.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the collection was on the whole enthusiastically received, and the launch-performance of *Poets to the People* was an enormous success. This was partly due to the high-profile nature of the production, which included well-known British theatre personalities like director Peter Coe and actors Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Janet Suzman, Joss Ackland and Edward Bond. The production also included an eight-member 'freedom choir', a makeshift group of South African singers who, though not particularly politicised, were willing to lend their voices to the cause.

Based on the success of this performance, Feinberg and Kasrils decided to establish a more permanent ensemble. They named the group *Mayibuye*, echoing the familiar liberation slogan '*Mayibuye iAfrika*' (Let Africa return). According to an internal report, the initial motivation for the group was to integrate artists into the struggle, particularly in the realm of international solidarity; in addition, it was seen as an opportunity for engaging younger South Africans who might otherwise have remained uninvolved in ANC activities. In January 1975, Feinberg and Kasrils recruited two members with whom to launch the initiative: John Matshikiza, a young South African studying drama in London, and Billy Nannan, a former leading member of the South African Indian Congress. The four engaged in vigorous debate about the envisaged nature of the group: some endorsed a more inclusive approach to membership, while others argued that only a professional approach would achieve the desired political results.¹⁵

The group's beginnings were modest. Although passionate and enthusiastic, the four performers were inexperienced, and their early performances were – by their own account – amateurish and unsophisticated.¹⁶ In addition, lacking confidence in their singing ability, they initially relied on gramophone recordings of freedom songs, which suffered from repeated technical hitches. Nonetheless, they enjoyed encouraging responses from British audiences, and through a combination of training in basic performance skills and continued discussion, gradually refined their presentation. They also soon began to recruit new members.¹⁷

Mayibuye's presentation was based on the structure of the original *Poets to the People* performance, incorporating poetry, narrative and freedom songs. In place of British actors, it comprised a cast of between six and eight South African performers¹⁸ telling a moving story

12 At that time, Kasrils was writing and performing under the pseudonym A.N.C. Kumalo.

13 Author interview with Barry Feinberg, Cape Town, 28 April 2004.

14 Barry Feinberg's private materials: *Poets to the People* promotional pamphlet; author interview with Barry Feinberg.

15 MA, Historical Papers, MCH89: B. Feinberg, *Mayibuye Report*. The struggle between these positions persisted for much of *Mayibuye*'s existence, although professionalisation came increasingly to be recognised as the only viable option as the group experienced increasing demand in the late 1970s.

16 B. Feinberg, 'Mayibuye – Cultural Weapon of the ANC', *Sechaba* (Third Quarter 1977), p. 41.

17 Those who came to play principal roles in the group included Godfrey Motsepe, Zarina Chiba, Melody Mancube, James Madhlope Phillips, Pallo Jordan, Bongsi Dhlomo and Poppy Nokwe.

18 As *Mayibuye* was a voluntary organisation, the size of the group depended on where the performance was to take place, the funds available and which members were available to travel.

of life under apartheid and the struggle for liberation under the banner of the ANC. The agitprop-style narrative marked a noticeable shift in kind from the 1974 production, where poems and songs had been interspersed with lengthy, rather dry narrative interludes detailing specific aspects of the apartheid state. The Mayibuye version was fast-paced and emotive, clearly intended to inspire sympathy and support for apartheid's victims. The poetic content of the performance remained largely the same, drawn from the *Poets to the People* anthology. A.N.C. Kumalo's 'Red our colour', for example, was frequently used as an opening:

Let's have poems
blood-red in colour
ringing like damn bells.

Poems
that tear at the oppressor's face
and smash his grip.

Poems that awaken man:
Life not death
Hope not despair
Dawn not dusk
New not old
Struggle not submission.¹⁹

Many of the poems used were similarly combative and rebellious in tone, and made explicit references to life under apartheid and the potential power of poetry in the struggle.

For its musical repertoire, Mayibuye drew largely on freedom songs. While the term 'freedom songs' has a long history, particularly in the United States – where it has been used to refer to protest songs from the abolitionist, civil rights and labour movements – its usage in the South African context refers to a distinct local repertoire associated with the struggle for racial equality in the twentieth century, preceding as well as during apartheid.²⁰ Freedom songs have their stylistic origins in *makwaya* (choir), a syncretic and widely popular genre that combined southern African singing traditions with Christian hymnody.²¹ They are perhaps more accurately described as short slogans – in indigenous languages (primarily isiZulu and isiXhosa) and/or English – set to simple melodic phrases, sung *a cappella* (unaccompanied), and repeated over and over in a call-and-response style. They are created and sung collectively, are frequently modified as politics, attitudes and circumstances change, and are almost exclusively non-commercial.

From the enormous repertoire of freedom songs in circulation both at home and in exile, Mayibuye drew particularly on those that were popular in South Africa at the time – in contrast, as we shall see, with what Amandla was later to do. Some of the favourites among these were '*Naants'indod'emnyama Vorster*' (Here is the black man, Vorster), '*Thina sizwe*' (We African people) and '*Dubula ngembayimbayi*' (We will shoot them with cannons):²²

19 A.N.C. Kumalo [Ronnie Kasrils], 'Red our Colour', in Feinberg (ed.), *Poets to the People*, p. 58; MA, Historical Papers, MCH89: various performance scripts.

20 In the US context see, for example, S. Clark, 'Freedom Songs and the Folk Process', *Sing Out!*, 14, 1 (1964), pp. 13–14; P. Seeger, 'You Can't Write Down Freedom Songs', *Sing Out!*, 15, 3 (1965), p. 11; D. C. Hsiung, 'Freedom Songs and the Modern Civil Rights Movement', *Magazine of History*, 19 (2005), pp. 23–6.

21 James, *Songs of the Women Migrants*, p. 155.

22 MA, Historical Papers, MCH89: various performance scripts; MA, Oral History & Sound, RF 491. Thanks to Brenda Mhlambi (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg) for these and subsequent translations.

Thina sizwe*Thina sizwe esimnyama sikalela izwe lethu**Elathathwa ngaba mhlophe**Sithi mabayeke umhlaba wethu*

~

We African people are crying for our land

Which was taken by white people

We say they must leave our land

Dubula ngembayimbayi*Bazobaleka soba dubula we mama**Sizoba dubula ngembayimbayi*

~

They will run away, we will shoot them

We will shoot them with cannons

After 1976, the group also incorporated many additional songs that had grown out of the Soweto uprising.²³

The freedom songs were performed in three- or four-part harmony by the small group of performers, an approximation (albeit unlikely) of how they would be sung by large crowds at mass gatherings inside South Africa. The stage set-up for these performances was basic. The performers would stand in formation on the platform, generally clustered in groups of two or three behind microphone stands; there was no theatrical element to the performance, although a minor dance component was introduced in the latter years of the group's existence, and apart from simple banners or posters, there were no stage sets.²⁴

Mayibuye's narrative was regularly adapted to incorporate recent news and events, and was tightly interwoven with poems and freedom songs, arranged thematically so as to produce a coherent 'plot'. In the following example, the spoken introduction exposes the brutality of the apartheid state and the resistance actions of MK, while the song '*Abantu Bakithi*' (Our people) asserts confidence in the revolutionary movement's ultimate success and urges further action:²⁵

Speaker 1. In the wake of the Soweto uprising, an ANC leaflet was distributed by leaflet bombs in the major city centres of South Africa. The leaflet included the following declaration:

'We shall harass the enemy, his police, soldiers, officials and spies wherever we can. Above all we shall arm ourselves with modern weapons and hit back through our organised fighting force, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*.'

These racist murderers, who slaughter unarmed children and women, fled in panic when they came face to face with the armed freedom fighters of *Umkhonto* in Zimbabwe in 1967 and 1968. Their racist arrogance shrank when our MPLA comrades thrashed them in Angola, and now the time is coming when *Umkhonto* will punish the racists on our own soil. The mass struggle of our people helps to bring that day nearer.

23 Personal communication with Barry Feinberg, 4 July 2005.

24 MA, Film & Video, M5 and M6; MA, Photographs, A24-3-4 and uncatalogued print.

25 MA, Oral History & Sound, RF 491.

Speaker 2. These are not empty phrases. Since the leaflet, a number of sabotage and guerrilla actions have indeed taken place within South Africa. Our song calls on our people to rise up and fight for our country. We will destroy Smith and Vorster with grenades and bazookas.

Abantu bakithi bahluphekile

Vukani madoda silwelwe ilizwe lethu elathathwa

Siqale ngoSmith, sigcine ngoVorster, baphele bonke

Vukani madoda silwelwe ilizwe lethu elathathwa

Siphons' igraned', sishaya ibhazuk',

bulala amabhunu baphele bonke

Vukani madoda silwelwe ilizwe lethu elathathwa

~

Our people are suffering

Wake up men and fight for our land that was taken from us

We will begin with Smith, and end with Vorster

Wake up men and fight for our land that was taken from us

We will throw in a grenade, we will hit with a bazooka,

kill all the Boers until they are finished

Wake up men and fight for our land that was taken from us

Although Mayibuye's more mature performances progressed away from the wordiness of this early excerpt, the quote nonetheless illustrates the group's characteristic style in two primary regards: the agitprop tone of the narrative, which condemns the actions of the 'racist murderers' and confidently asserts the growing successes of the struggle; and the use of song to mark the narrative's emotional climax and rouse support for the revolutionary cause.

Mayibuye initially performed primarily in England, and soon elicited interest from anti-apartheid groups throughout Britain and more widely in Europe. Its practice from the outset was to make adjustments (often substantial) to its performance in order to optimise its relevance for different audiences. For its first Amsterdam performances in March 1975, for example, it included special sections on Afrikaans poets like Breyten Breytenbach who had opposed apartheid, and made specific references to Dutch trade figures and to Dutch businessmen or politicians who had tried to justify their involvement with apartheid South Africa. In addition, a renowned Dutch writer, Jan Wolkers, was recruited both to translate the script, and to read the translation alongside Mayibuye's performance.²⁶ The use of popular local personalities as translators and co-performers became a standard technique in the group's performances. Where translators could not be found, simultaneous translations would be projected on a screen, or provided in booklets.

Mayibuye was first and foremost an agitprop group, intended to raise awareness about apartheid, strengthen international solidarity, and obtain financial support for the ANC. Organisations that hosted the group were required to cover transport, accommodation and maintenance costs, and all additional money raised went to the ANC. Through its travels, the

26 MA, Historical Papers, MCH89.

group was able to consolidate existing relationships with Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) representatives across Europe, and to build new political friendships. An important objective was also to make contact with exiled South Africans dispersed in Europe, and to reinvigorate their connection with the liberation movement. Mayibuye's work was generally conducted in association with political organisations, anti-apartheid and anti-racist groups, trade unions and minority groups, and it was frequently invited to perform on university campuses. On occasion it performed in conjunction with similar groups from other countries, and participated in solidarity events with southern African liberation movements like ZAPU (Zimbabwe), MPLA (Angola) and FRELIMO (Mozambique), all movements with which the ANC had ongoing diplomatic friendships. Its work was not limited to its performances: members consistently engaged audiences and organisers in political dialogue and gave interviews to the press. They also travelled with a photography exhibition exposing some of the injustices of apartheid.

The Mayibuye Cultural Ensemble gave almost 200 performances throughout Europe during its approximately five years of activity. Through its numerous live, television and radio performances, as well as a record released in the Netherlands in 1978, the group secured a reputation as the cultural voice of the ANC.²⁷ Within the first few years of its existence, however, Mayibuye began to strain under mounting personal and organisational pressures. Membership posed practical difficulties from the outset, as most people had full-time jobs elsewhere and performed on a voluntary and unpaid basis. As a result, membership was constantly shifting: people came and went as political, personal and career circumstances dictated, and stand-in performers frequently needed to be called in on short notice. As the group's work became increasingly demanding, fewer and fewer individuals were left to shoulder the bulk of the responsibilities. This reached critical point when a substantial number of experienced performers left the group in order to focus on their careers or engage more directly in political work. Although they were gradually replaced, few new members were able to acquire the skills and commitment necessary to cope with increasing demand.

By 1978, requests for performances were pouring in, but organisational problems were intensifying. Feinberg, who in addition to his work at the International Defence and Aid Fund acted as the group's formal leader, made repeated appeals to the ANC leadership in London that 'younger people from down South' – a reference primarily to the MK camps – be sent in order to assist in Mayibuye's administrative and performing work. In several reports and letters drafted in 1978–9, he indicated that the current part-time arrangement could no longer work. He advised that the optimal response would be to set up a professional group, preferably made up of young comrades from southern Africa, who would take over on a full-time basis the 'tried and tested vehicle' that they had built in London.²⁸

The Amandla Cultural Ensemble, c.1978–1990

As previously suggested, when Mayibuye began its work in the mid-1970s, culture was not yet on the ANC's mainstream agenda. As the decade progressed, however, culture gained increasing presence in the movement's formal discourse, and the 1980s saw a dramatic upsurge in the amount of airtime and energy devoted to the issue. Mayibuye was an important contributing factor to these developments, together with the cumulative efforts of groups and individuals elsewhere, particularly inside South Africa. Indeed, one of the key objectives that

²⁷ The record, titled *Spear of the Nation*, was produced in Hilversum, Holland as Varagram ET44.

²⁸ MA, Historical Papers, MCH89: Feinberg, various drafts of report, c.1978–9.

emerged at this time was the need to start organising these dispersed forces, and to encourage them to direct their activities in a more unified manner in the service of the struggle.²⁹

As these diverse efforts built up momentum, the issue of culture began to rise steadily in prominence within the movement. In July 1982, the watershed Culture and Resistance conference was held in Gaborone, Botswana under the auspices of the Medu Art Ensemble, an organisation formally unaffiliated but whose members were, at least by the early 1980s, largely ANC.³⁰ Later the same year, the Department of Arts and Culture was established,³¹ and in 1985, following a National Executive Committee (NEC) address in which ANC president Oliver Tambo made prominent reference to the role of 'cultural workers', the movement launched its own in-house cultural journal, named *Rixaka*.³² This intensifying interest in culture saw rising numbers of workshops, festivals and seminars devoted to the issue, interviews and public pronouncements by leading ANC figures, and the high-profile Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference held in Amsterdam in December 1987. The Amandla Cultural Ensemble undoubtedly grew out of, and participated in, this burgeoning interest in culture, and it came to be considered within the ANC as one of its greatest achievements in this realm.

As Mayibuye struggled to cope with rising pressure in the late 1970s, the conception of Amandla was slowly beginning to take root 'down South'. Although Feinberg's 1978–9 reports explicitly suggested an ensemble in the Amandla mould, there was no direct connection between the two groups: more precisely, there were no formal meetings between Mayibuye and prospective members of a new group, and members of Amandla rarely mentioned Mayibuye when describing the origins of their group. At the same time, a large consignment of Mayibuye's records was sent to ANC headquarters in Lusaka, which increased awareness of the group's work. In addition, one of Mayibuye's leading members, Ronnie Kasrils, had been relocated from London to Angola to play a commanding role in MK in 1977.³³ Although Kasrils' attention was focused on other matters, his experiences of cultural activity probably filtered through to those around him, even if only through occasional conversations.

Mayibuye was also an important conceptual precedent. It had established itself as an active representative of the ANC abroad, and was successfully winning support and funds. The movement, in turn, acknowledged the value and importance of the initiative, and encouraged its continued existence. Initially, however, there was little support for the idea of a more permanent, professional touring ensemble made up of younger activists. Ironically, one of the reasons for this early reluctance to support professional cultural activity was precisely the ubiquitousness of culture (particularly freedom songs) at mass gatherings and political events – also a key factor underlying Mayibuye's difficulties in sustaining commitment from its members. As Feinberg observed, 'it was difficult to elevate [this commonplace political culture] into Art, with all the organisation and discipline that implies, in the consciousness of people'.³⁴ In addition, in the late 1970s there were more pressing priorities: in the MK camps in particular, daily life was focused primarily on military training and organisation. Although the camps were home to an active and abundant cultural life,³⁵ many saw this merely as recreational activity that took second place to the more important

29 Author interview with Barry Feinberg; T. Moema, 'Editorial', *Medu Newsletter*, 2, 1 (March 1980), pp. 1–3; Feinberg, 'Mayibuye', pp. 41–5.

30 Author interview with Judy Seidman, Johannesburg, 21 July 2004.

31 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA6-312: Interview with Barbara Masekela.

32 <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/or/or85-1.html>: 'Render South Africa Ungovernable! Message of the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress on the 73rd Anniversary of ANC' (8 January 1985), accessed 27 May 2004.

33 S. Gastrow, *Who's Who in South African Politics, Number 5* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press 1995), p. 109.

34 Personal communication with Barry Feinberg, 4 July 2005.

35 See, for example, Jack Simons cited in G. Ansell, *Soweto Blues: Jazz, Popular Music, and Politics in South Africa* (New York and London, Continuum, 2004), p. 247.

task of getting back into South Africa. When Amandla finally took root, it did so independently, without any direct relation to Mayibuye.³⁶

Amandla's conceptual origins date back to the World Black Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. Participating in the festival were artists, poets and musicians from all over Africa, Europe and the United States, many appearing under the banner of the ANC. Inspired by the diversity of talent represented at the festival, exiled musician Jonas Gwangwa was motivated to put together a temporary ensemble that he called 'Amandla' (meaning 'power', drawing on another popular liberation slogan), which included musicians such as Dudu Pukwana and Julian Bahula.³⁷ A popular musician who rocketed to success as a young trombonist in 1950s' Sophiatown, Gwangwa had left South Africa in 1961 with the touring *King Kong* ensemble, and by the time of FESTAC had established a successful career in the United States alongside South African contemporaries Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba and Caiphus Semanya.³⁸ His impromptu ensemble's concerts were successful, and after the festival it accepted invitations to tour Tanzania and Zambia. According to Gwangwa, this was where the *idea* of Amandla was born; it should be stressed, however, that most of those who performed in the temporary FESTAC ensemble did not participate in the later establishment of Amandla itself. Key figures in the ANC – among them Thabo Mbeki, who was then Head of Information and Publicity – supported the idea of a permanent cultural group, and Gwangwa was called on to draft a memorandum for the formation of a cultural department.³⁹

It took some time before either of these initiatives materialised. The core of what was later to become the Amandla Cultural Ensemble itself was established at the 11th World Festival of Youth and Students, a meeting of the World Federation of Democratic Youth held in Havana, Cuba in 1978.⁴⁰ During the festival, a small group of ANC representatives put together a performance, which turned out to be an enormous hit with the young international audience. On the basis of this success, a decision was taken to establish the group more formally and maintain its activities. In the months that followed, formal cultural activities under the banner of Amandla were enthusiastically developed in MK training camps in Angola. Much work was required to get the group on its feet: it was initially inexperienced and disorganised, and although there were many talented musicians, dancers and actors among the soldiers (both male and female), most were not professional performers, and needed to be trained. Many of the prospective recruits had never even seen a professional stage show, let alone performed in one.⁴¹

Added to this was the pressure of the surrounding context: these performers were for the most part young soldiers in training camps, political activists for whom engaging in military activity took top priority. Some, like Man (Santana) Ntombela – one of Amandla's principal members in both performance and organisation – made forthright requests, with the support of MK commanders, to leave the group in order to go to the frontline. Ntombela was emphatically turned down by the ANC leadership, who he explains emphasised Amandla's importance in mobilising the international community.⁴² At the outset, young women and men like Ntombela struggled to balance their activities as cultural workers and

36 Author interview with Barry Feinberg.

37 For more on these performers see Ansell, *Soweto Blues*.

38 C. Szymczak, 'Music as a Cultural Weapon in the Life of Jonas Gwangwa' (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2003); 'Gwangwa Blows in from Exile to Excellence', *Weekly Mail*, 25 (1988); Ansell, *Soweto Blues*.

39 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-153 and MCA7-1511: Interviews with Jonas Gwangwa.

40 www.wfdy.org, accessed 4 June 2004.

41 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-161: Interview with Ndonda Khuze.

42 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA6-343: Interview with Man (Santana) Ntombela.

soldiers. Their primary duties were in Amandla, but when problems arose they would be called on to assist in military activities. Some performers, including Nomkhosi Mini (daughter of activist and composer Vuyisile Mini), were killed in the course of these activities.⁴³

Certain locations, generally large halls, were designated as both residential and rehearsal spaces, where the group could practise and perform for regional audiences. In the first few years of Amandla's existence, performances were limited to the local scene around Luanda and in the camps. Its first international exposure came in 1980, when a 32-member group embarked on a tour of the Scandinavian countries, after three months' intensive preparation.⁴⁴ It was at this point that Gwangwa – who had not been present at the 1978 Youth and Students' festival in Cuba, and had until now not been formally involved with the group – was called to Luanda to assist with the instrumental component of the performance.⁴⁵ Excited by the range of undeveloped talent he found, he set to work with the performers, planning choreographic routines, shaping a plot line, developing the show's instrumental and vocal components, and introducing traditional dances. With his arrival, the show that was to earn the group an international reputation began to be developed in earnest. Gwangwa became the group's artistic director, and Ndonda Khuze its 'political commissar'.⁴⁶

Mayibuye's performances, as mentioned earlier, were often substantially modified: choices of poems and songs varied widely, narrative was changed dramatically depending on where the group was performing, and performance length could range from 20 minutes to two hours. Amandla's presentation, by contrast, was a theatrical production of around three hours' length, carefully crafted and staged, with a segment towards the end devoted to a regularly updated discussion of current events in South Africa. It also involved a much larger cast of around 35 members, who trained on a full-time basis and became increasingly professionalised. It incorporated dramatic segments, a variety of vocal pieces, a medley of traditional dances with elaborate costumes and an instrumental jazz band that eventually grew to 14 members. It also boasted its own Amandla stage backdrop created by the well-known activist and graphic artist Thami Mnyele, displaying the words 'Amandla: Cultural Ensemble of the African National Congress' alongside an image of a raised fist clenching a spear.⁴⁷

Amandla's musical repertoire also differed substantially from that of its precursor. While Mayibuye drew primarily on freedom songs and produced no original musical material,⁴⁸ much of Amandla's music was newly composed or arranged by Gwangwa and other ensemble members. The group's repertoire drew additionally on the culture of exile and the MK camps, including freedom songs like '*Umkhonto*' and '*Sobashiy'abazali*' (We will leave our parents), one of the most popular songs in the camps at the time.⁴⁹

43 'Obituary' [Nomkhosi Mini], *Rixaka*, 3 (1986), p. 25; interview with Santana Ntombela.

44 Interview with Santana Ntombela. The funding for Amandla's travels generally came from solidarity groups in the countries where they performed. ANC representatives in those countries would co-ordinate expenditure and part of the funds raised would be left there to support further solidarity work. Some funds were also devoted to supporting the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (Somafo) in Tanzania. Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa, 13 August 2004, Johannesburg.

45 Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-153: Interview with Jonas Gwangwa.

46 Interview with Santana Ntombela.

47 These and further references to Amandla's activities are drawn from a range of archival sources: MA, Film & Video, VA11, VA30 and VA31; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-1333, MCA5-1351, MCA5-041, MCA5-042, MCA5-043, MCA5-045, MCA5-156, MCA5-158, MCA5-159, MCA5-160, MCA5-161, MCA5-162, MCA5-163.

48 Mayibuye did, however, produce new musical arrangements for many of the freedom songs it performed.

49 MA, Film & Video, VA30, VA31; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-1333.

Sobashiy'abazal'ekhaya
Saphuma sangena kwamany'amazwe
Lapho kungazi khon'ubaba no mama
silandel'inkululeko
 Sithi salan, salan, salan'ekhaya
 Sesingena kwamany'amazwe
 Lapho kungazi khon'ubaba no mama
 silandel'inkululeko
Sobashiy'abafowethu
Saphuma sangena kwamany'amazwe
Lapho kungazi khon'ubaba no mama
silandel'inkululeko

~

We will leave our parents at home
 We go in and out of foreign countries
 To places our fathers and mothers don't know
 Following freedom
 We say goodbye, goodbye, goodbye home
 We are going in to foreign countries
 To places our fathers and mothers don't know
 Following freedom
 We will leave our siblings
 We go in and out of foreign countries
 To places our fathers and mothers don't know
 Following freedom

'*Sobashiy'abazali*', like many of the songs popular in the camps, projected a markedly different character to those that were popular inside South Africa. Particularly in its *Amandla* incarnation, the music itself was faster, more upbeat and energetic, and its militaristic rhythm – with accompanying marching actions – was a gesture towards the marching step of the soldiers. The lyrics, too, avoided the more powerless and despairing sense of songs like '*Senzenina*' (What have we done) and '*Thina sizwe*' (We African people) – two of the most popular songs in South Africa at the time – preferring a more positive, encouraging and affirmative outlook: the idea of 'following freedom' despite the difficulty of leaving home. *Amandla* also sang favourites like '*Sikhokhele Tambo*' (Lead us, Tambo) and '*Rolihlahla Mandela*' – songs that were also included in Mayibuye's performances, but sung by *Amandla* at a faster tempo, with a distinctively more militaristic and optimistic flavour.⁵⁰ The difference in character between the two ensembles was also partly the result of Mayibuye being a small amateur group, as opposed to the increasingly polished, professional production that was *Amandla*.

50 MA, Oral History & Sound, RF267, RF163, RF 356, MCA5-1333.

The dramatic segments of Amandla's performance offered a potted history of racial oppression in South Africa. The show opened with the idyllic depiction of life in a peaceful precolonial village, followed by the arrival of the white colonists, the formation of the ANC, the advent of industrialisation and the destructive effects of forced migration to the cities. The dramatic action was accompanied by a live onstage band, and interspersed with songs like 'Ekhaya lam' (My home) and 'Before they came', lamenting the effects of colonialism on South Africa's indigenous peoples. These songs were not the unaccompanied call-and-response style freedom songs, but Gwangwa's frequently sentimental offerings sung by swaying vocalists behind microphones with backing singers, dressed in attractively co-ordinated outfits. The show continued with more historical vignettes of South Africa under apartheid, interspersed with scenes about women, the Freedom Charter,⁵¹ some dramatised conversations with current political content (about the ANC, the UDF,⁵² and particularly MK) and a portrayal of the 1976 Soweto uprising.⁵³ One of the most prominent scenes was a dance medley incorporating Zulu, Venda, Xhosa, Shangaan, Sotho and other traditional dances; former members emphasised that these dances were deliberately intended to assert the value of indigenous South African cultures as part of a larger, shared conception of national identity, and to refuse apartheid's distorted notions of ethnic particularity and separate development.⁵⁴

On one level Amandla was, as Gwangwa put it, a 'highly political show'.⁵⁵ It contained some echoes of Mayibuye's agitprop style, including rousing declamations against apartheid and the use of popular political slogans, such as 'an injury to one is an injury to all', and sections of the Freedom Charter; it also included several freedom songs and a *toyi-toyi*.⁵⁶ The primary elements and aims of the liberation struggle were plainly portrayed, as were the conditions of life under apartheid. The overriding spirit, however, was affirmative rather than angry, forward-looking rather than vengeful. With Amandla, the open antagonism and sarcasm that characterised Mayibuye were toned down, and channelled into a more positive, dynamic representation of black South African culture.

In addition to freedom songs and new compositions, for example, the group's musical repertoire featured popular township music, including instrumental pennywhistle *kwela*⁵⁷ and

51 The Freedom Charter was the historic manifesto adopted at the Congress of the People at Kliptown on 26 June 1955. In this scene, around 20 performers stood in formation on the stage, one by one declaiming key phrases from the Freedom Charter: 'The people shall govern!', 'All national groups shall have equal rights!', 'The people shall share in the country's wealth!', 'All shall be equal before the law' and so on.

52 The United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed in 1983 as an umbrella organisation to co-ordinate resistance activities inside South Africa. See J. Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983–1991* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000).

53 MA, Film & Video, VA30.

54 Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-161: interview with Ndonda Khuze. The refusal of apartheid notions of 'tribalism' was widespread in ANC discourse, particularly on the subject of culture; see for example 'Interview with Ruth Mompati', p. 20. Tambo also explicitly articulated this idea in an interview for the launch issue of *Rixaka*, arguing that while the apartheid government tried to separate non-whites into 'ancient "tribal" entities', the ANC conceived of a single people with a rich, diverse cultural heritage, and saw these diverse cultural forms as the possession of the people, rather than divisive forms of tribal identification. 'Interview with O.R. Tambo', p. 22.

55 Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa.

56 The *toyi-toyi* is a militant dance that ANC exiles probably learned from Zimbabwean guerrillas when they joined forces with ZAPU in the late 1960s. A *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* defines the *toyi-toyi* as 'A quasi-military dance-step characterized by high-stepping movements, performed either on the spot or while moving slowly forwards, usu. by participants in (predominantly black) protest gatherings or marches, and accompanied by chanting, singing [of freedom songs], and the shouting of slogans.' (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 730.

57 *Kwela* is an extremely popular improvisational style that developed on township streets during the 1950s and 1960s, its primary instrument being the cheap and portable pennywhistle. As Louise Meintjes has suggested in a different context, the *kwela* sound brings with it particular associations as one of the most important expressive forms in the black townships during one of the most repressive decades of apartheid. L. Meintjes, 'Paul Simon's *Graceland*, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning', *Ethnomusicology*, 34, 1 (1990), pp. 43–4.

mbaqanga, also referred to as African jazz.⁵⁸ This fitted with the goal of exposing ‘indigenous South African culture’, or at least the kind of music that was popular amongst ordinary black South Africans.⁵⁹ The show also echoed some of the theatrical ideas that had gained prominence at home. The 1970s had witnessed a flourishing of theatrical initiatives amongst urban black populations within South Africa, including the development of radical Black Consciousness theatre (which became influential particularly amongst the youth) and popular township musicals by Gibson Kente and others. Gwen Ansell has written that Amandla had clandestine contact with this ‘flowering new theatre scene’;⁶⁰ even if direct interaction was not extensive, the large influx of youths into the MK camps after the 1976 uprising, many of whom themselves joined Amandla, undoubtedly meant that the group was in touch with current cultural trends in South Africa.⁶¹

Amandla was well regarded within the ANC, and its work was considered a valuable contribution to the project of national liberation. This contribution was seen to consist of two key elements: first, increasing international awareness about apartheid and raising funds; and second, presenting an alternative vision of culture in a future democratic South Africa. Raising international awareness was of course a crucial part of the ANC’s wider mission, and a cultural ensemble was – as the experience of Mayibuye had shown – an effective medium for rousing emotions and mobilising support. Amandla became a successful ambassador for the ANC, travelling throughout Africa and as far afield as South America, Canada, Europe, Southeast Asia, Australia and the Soviet Union. The group also produced two records during its Soviet trips in 1982 and 1987.⁶² NEC member Ruth Mompati claimed that Amandla educated international audiences more successfully than many conferences and seminars were able to do.⁶³ The group also distributed informational literature at its shows and directed interested persons to the local ANC offices, where representatives could provide further information and organise volunteer work. Where they had occasion to address their audiences after performances, Amandla members were vocal in calling on individuals and governments to boycott South Africa and cut all ties with the apartheid regime.

It is worth noting that although Mayibuye and Amandla were official representatives of the ANC, there was little formal intervention from the movement regarding the kind of material they could present. However, both were closely engaged with broader trends that defined cultural activity within the movement, and stood at the helm of efforts to establish culture’s role in the larger process of national liberation. A considerable number of their songs made reference to ANC leaders like Luthuli, Tambo, Sisulu and especially Mandela, honouring their leadership and calling for political guidance. They also regularly updated their performances in response to shifting political circumstances, and Mayibuye in particular took pains to align its efforts ‘in accordance with the political needs of solidarity work’.⁶⁴

58 *Mbaqanga* is a distinctively South African hybrid, composed of a blend of American swing, *marabi* (popular music that developed in shebeens during the 1930s) and a syncretic melodic style more closely related to ‘neo-traditional South African music’ than American jazz. Lara Allen explains that the term *mbaqanga* (Zulu for stiff maize porridge) was used disparagingly by musicians to refer to African jazz, particularly in its recorded form, because they played it in order to earn quick ‘bread money’. C. Ballantine, ‘Music and Emancipation: The Social Role of Black Jazz and Vaudeville in South Africa Between the 1920s and the Early 1940s’, *JSAS*, 17, 1 (1991), p. 150; L. Allen, ‘Commerce, Politics, and Musical Hybridity: Vocalizing Urban Black South African Identity During the 1950s’, *Ethnomusicology*, 47, 2 (Spring/Summer 2003), p. 240.

59 Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa.

60 Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, p. 247. Ansell does not provide further details regarding these contacts.

61 At least one of the group’s most prominent members, Ndonda Khuze, had been actively involved with Black Consciousness cultural activities inside South Africa; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-161: interview with Ndonda Khuze.

62 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-1351 and MCA5-1333.

63 ‘Interview with Ruth Mompati’, *Rixaka*, 2 (1986), p. 19.

64 Feinberg, ‘Mayibuye’, p. 43.

In turn, they were enthusiastically supported by the ANC leadership. ANC president Tambo himself, in addition to assisting Amandla with the acquisition of costumes and instruments, wrote the lyrics to some of the choral items in the show.⁶⁵

A second, equally important part of Amandla's objective was projecting an affirmative image of culture in the envisaged united, democratic South Africa. Official ANC discourse regarding the group emphasised that the imposed culture of the coloniser, and the concomitant devaluation and neglect of 'inferior' indigenous culture, needed to be actively resisted. Speaking on the British documentary *Song of the Spear*, Thabo Mbeki, as Head of Information and Publicity, stressed that affirming black South African culture was integral to the process of liberation, since what was necessary was not only eliminating the outward manifestations of oppression, but also its attendant individual and collective psychological effects. Asserting culture was a rebellious act of asserting national identity and refusing colonised status. A democratic and expressive 'people's culture', in other words, was not something that would come after liberation, but was an essential psychological requirement for *achieving* liberation.⁶⁶ Barbara Masekela, who served as head of the Department of Arts and Culture from shortly after its establishment in 1982, similarly stressed that in addition to international mobilisation, the conscious intention behind Amandla was to counteract perceptions of black South Africans as mere victims of apartheid. Through Amandla's performances, she argued, the humanity of black South Africa in all its richness and diversity became more palpable, and audiences were presented with an affirmative, dynamic vision of an alternative South African culture.⁶⁷

A Vision for Whom?

During the time that Amandla was functioning, an increasingly coherent conception of culture and its role in the struggle was emerging across a wide range of forums within the ANC, including conferences, journal articles, speeches and interviews with both artists and leadership. It was widely agreed that the ideal art was not elitist or exclusive, but was intimately connected with 'the people'. Its purpose was not only to portray their plight – according to artist Thami Mnyele, this in isolation was the theme of 'defeatist' township art – but to articulate their 'hopes and aspirations', to encourage commitment to the struggle and to promote the affirmative values of a democratic South Africa. The kind of art that provided mere entertainment for the masses was also considered unacceptable: truly revolutionary art served to educate, awaken political consciousness and galvanise people to action. Finally, art was a vehicle for condemning the regime and informing the world about apartheid.⁶⁸ In short, culture was emphatically promoted as 'a weapon in the struggle for national liberation and democracy in our country'.⁶⁹

65 Author interview with Jonas Gwangwa; MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-166: Interview with Thabo Mbeki for *Song of the Spear*.

66 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-164: Interview with Thabo Mbeki for *Song of the Spear*. *Song of the Spear* was produced by the London-based International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF) in 1986, was jointly sponsored by the ANC and IDAF, and was directed by Barry Feinberg.

67 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA5-168: Interview with Barbara Masekela for *Song of the Spear*.

68 These ideas appeared increasingly frequently, often almost verbatim, in a wide range of contexts. See, for example, B. Mooki, 'Popular Theatre and Struggle', *Rixaka*, 2 (1986), pp. 4–7; T. Williams, 'An interview with Thamsanqa Mnyele', *Medu Newsletter*, 2, 1 (March 1980), pp. 23–40; 'Interview with O. R. Tambo', *Rixaka*, 1 (1985), pp. 21–2; 'Message of the National Executive Committee of the ANC' (8 January 1985); B. Masekela, 'Isolate Apartheid Culture', *Rixaka*, 3 (1986), pp. 7–9; 'Interview with Ruth Mompati', pp. 19–22.

69 M. Langa, 'The Quiet Thunder: Report on the Amsterdam Cultural Conference', *Sechaba* (March 1988), 26–7.

Amandla's performance echoed these conceptions to a certain extent, and the official discourse around it promoted it as the epitome of 'the emerging culture of liberation'.⁷⁰ At the same time, however, this discourse existed in tension with a simultaneous emphasis on producing a show that would first and foremost appeal to international audiences. As suggested at the outset, the tension relates primarily to a lack of conscious distinction in the movement's conception between culture's roles in the internal nation-building process and international solidarity work – in short, between its internal and external roles. Amandla's declared intention was to promote an affirmative vision of an alternative South African culture: but a vision for whom?

In order to untangle this issue it is worth considering briefly how these questions about culture relate to the ANC's broader political strategy in exile. Underlying the movement's attitude towards cultural activity there seems to have been an inability or unwillingness to recognise that what was common practice on the diplomatic front – recognising the distinctive requirements of internal and external strategy – should have been equally applicable to culture. The political scientist Tom Lodge has shown, for example, that the nature of ANC political rhetoric in internal forums like the journal *Sechaba* or the underground station Radio Freedom was markedly different from the rhetoric that characterised the movement's diplomatic work abroad.⁷¹ Examining the multiple ideological and organisational strands that constituted the liberation movement, Raymond Suttner has similarly argued that, particularly in the context of exile, '[w]hat was made public tended to conceal what diversity there may have been, behind official statements presenting a face of unity to the public'.⁷² It seems obvious and inevitable that internally- and externally-focused strategy had distinct functions: while there was ongoing discussion within the movement about a range of tactical and organisational issues, the intricacies of these internal debates were entirely separate from the public face of the movement's campaign for international support. For international audiences, the struggle needed to be kept on simple and translatable terms.⁷³

On the subject of culture, however, such distinctions were less clearly articulated. In the case of Mayibuye, agitprop was the unashamed and open agenda: culture was primarily a vehicle for conscientising the international community and raising funds. Amandla was more complicated, because although it was designed primarily for international audiences, it was conceived and promoted with the same rhetoric used to describe culture's internal role in the struggle.⁷⁴

Both the content and character of Amandla's shows reflected the increasing shift during the 1980s towards 'people's art' and connection with the 'broad masses'. The group travelled

70 MA, Film & Video, S9: *Song of the Spear*.

71 T. Lodge, 'State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976–86' in P. Frankel, N. Pines and M. Swilling (eds), *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (London, Croon Helm, 1988), pp. 229–58.

72 R. Suttner, 'Culture(s) of the African National Congress of South Africa: Imprint of Exile Experiences', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 21, 2 (May 2003), p. 306.

73 Further analysis of this issue lies beyond the scope of this article, particularly given the range of contexts in which the ANC was operating outside South Africa for over three decades. For more on exile and internal-external relations, see Suttner, 'Culture(s) of the African National Congress'; Lodge, 'State of Exile'; T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London and New York, Longman, 1983), Chapter 12; and Seekings, *The UDF*.

74 In an interesting parallel, a similar conceptual blurriness seems to have characterised the cultural boycott, probably the most visible dimension of culture in the international arena. Rob Nixon has argued that while the internal movement advocated using culture to reshape social life and institutions inside South Africa (in anticipation of transition), international representatives were focused on maintaining support for anti-apartheid abroad – a persistent conflict of approach that rendered the boycott 'symbolically powerful but strategically vexing'. R. Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond* (New York and London, Routledge, 1994), p. 157.

widely in Africa and frequently performed for South African exiles in Angola, Zambia and elsewhere;⁷⁵ its records were also available (albeit illegally) within South Africa,⁷⁶ and were frequently broadcast on Radio Freedom. The language of protest, the militaristic culture of the MK camps and the depiction of life under apartheid were important components of the show, as we have seen, and parts of the performance deliberately resonated with the musical and theatrical ideas that defined 'people's culture' back home.

At the same time, considering Amandla in comparison with cultural trends within South Africa helps to situate it more clearly in terms of the internal-external paradigm. Black music theatre flourished in 1970s South Africa, as previously mentioned, but it was far from a monolithic phenomenon – by contrast, it was a terrain of not only commercial but also political and ideological rivalry. Government-sanctioned 'tribal musicals' like *uMabatha* (1973), *Meropa* (1973), *Ipi Tombi* (1975) and *King Africa* (1987) effectively celebrated the apartheid *status quo*.⁷⁷ There were several more genuinely collaborative interracial ventures, such as Ian Bernhardt and Barney Simon's Phoenix Players, Athol Fugard and the Serpent Players in Port Elizabeth and Workshop '71, as well as a thriving black commercial theatre dominated by Gibson Kente and Sam Mhangwani. Black Consciousness cultural organisations rejected both collaboration with whites and the theatre of Kente and Mhangwani; they advocated 'serious' political theatre, and became influential amongst the increasingly politicised and militant youth.⁷⁸

Although these developments emerged in the repressive context of apartheid, the paradoxical distinction is that while such diversity was possible in the broader social setting of South Africa, Amandla – as an official political vehicle – was more constrained as far as cultural expression was concerned. Ultimately, Amandla's most important objective was to create a polished, entertaining piece of musical theatre that would educate and win over foreign audiences – a priority that came with its own obstacles and implications. Writing about local South African 'adversarial' theatre that was marketed abroad during the 1980s, Ian Steadman points to the problems of theatre that 'is made out of the struggles of the people but not consumed by the people'. In particular, the image of the country presented to foreign audiences is necessarily a selective one, which as a result sometimes 'reinforces the very stereotypes that it seeks to undermine'.⁷⁹ With regard to film, Rob Nixon similarly argues that popular representations intended to deepen outrage over apartheid and mobilise foreign

75 The questions of how Amandla might have modified its performance for different audiences, particularly South African versus foreign audiences, and to what extent its historical narrative changed over the ten years of its existence, are difficult to answer precisely. Recorded evidence (both video and audio) of the performances themselves is sparse, and only fragmentary details emerge from interviews with former members. A fuller reception history of the group's international performances would enrich this research in important ways, but lies beyond the scope of this article.

76 *Rixaka*, 2 (1986), p. 29 reports, for example, that one Derek Tsietsi Makomoreng received five years' imprisonment earlier that year for possessing a cassette of Amandla's music.

77 B. Peterson, 'Apartheid and the Political Imagination in Black South African Theatre', *JSAS*, 16, 2 (1990), p. 234.

78 On theatrical trends inside South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s, see R.M. Kavanagh, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa* (London, Zed Press, 1985); D. Kerr, *African Popular Theatre* (London, James Currey, 1995); M. Orkin, *Drama and the South African State* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1991); Peterson, 'Apartheid and the Political Imagination'; I. Steadman, 'Towards Popular Theatre in South Africa', *JSAS*, 16, 2 (1990), pp. 208–28; and B. Peterson, 'Performing History off the Stage: Notes on Working-Class Theater', in J. Brown, P. Manning, K. Shapiro *et al.* (eds), *History from South Africa: Alternative Visions and Practices* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 319–27. On Kente and township musical theatre see also Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, pp. 207–15.

79 Steadman, 'Towards Popular Theatre', pp. 227–8. Steadman argues that plays that toured overseas, like *Woza Albert!*, *Bopha* and *Sarafina*, presented a simplified, 'marketed' image of political struggle, using familiar images like the *toyitoyi*, the 'necklace' and freedom songs. For more on how South African musicians and shows were 'Africanised' for foreign audiences, see also Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, pp. 225–6.

audiences needed to make certain modifications in order to render the struggle not only accessible, but also acceptable, to those audiences.⁸⁰

An evocative example of Amandla's focus on affirmative representations of South Africa for international audiences, and the sublimation of more violent or radical expressions, can be found in the discrepancy between its music and lyrics. The song texts – primarily in Xhosa and Zulu – often express defiance, vengeance and commitment to the armed struggle, as in the example of 'Kulonyaka' (In this year):⁸¹

Kulonyaka sizimisele

Ukugwaza lamabhunu

ngoMkhonto we Sizwe

Asikhathali noma sibulawa

Sizolilwela ilizwe lomzantsi

Hlanganani nina ma-Afrika

Sowanqoba simunye wona lamabhunu

~

This year we are prepared

To stab Boers

With MK [spear of the nation]

We do not care even if we are killed

We are going to fight for the land of the South

Unite you Africans

We will be victorious over the Boers when we are one

The accompanying music, however, projects a rather different character: upbeat and melodious, with no signs of the aggression or combativeness suggested in the lyrics. Many of Amandla's songs reflect a similar dynamic. 'Mogosi wala' (The call has been made), for example, combines revolutionary lyrics in the verses – the 'Wathint'abafazi wathint'imbokodo' (You strike a woman, you strike a rock) slogan famously chanted by women demonstrators at the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956⁸² – with the somewhat sentimental English-language refrain 'Side by side, women of the world, side by side, fight for freedom', on a similarly light-hearted, melodious musical background.⁸³ For listeners unable to understand the lyrics – the bulk of international audiences, in other words – Amandla might conceivably be described as an entertaining musical with a clear but not overly heavy-handed political message, beautiful costumes, compelling dances and memorable tunes. For all its legitimate emphasis on people's culture, the image that it presented of black South Africa was in parts

80 Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood*, pp. 78–9.

81 MA, Oral History & Sound, RF541.

82 9 August 1956 marked the apex of the women's anti-pass campaign, when some 20,000 women converged to demonstrate at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. Among the freedom songs sung at the event was the chant 'Wathint'abafazi, wathint'imbokodo, uzakufa' (You strike a woman, you strike a rock, you will be crushed), which was quickly appropriated in popular discourse, and become a powerful symbol of women's involvement in the struggle.

83 MA, Oral History & Sound, RF349 and RF433.

a somewhat superficial one: for example, the idyllic precolonial life; the women fighting 'side by side' for freedom; even the traditional dances, which despite intentions might have served to perpetuate western conceptions of unsophisticated 'tribal' Africa. Although its motivations were entirely antithetical to apartheid propaganda creations like *Ipi Tombi* and others, this distinction might not always have been clear to uninformed international audiences.⁸⁴ The show was an upbeat, energetic, toe-tapping, full-of-life musical that was partly about the struggle against apartheid, but perhaps more importantly about exposing and celebrating the vitality of South African culture and having audiences rocking in their seats.

Such tendencies are unsurprising and unavoidable in a popular musical of this kind. As Nixon concedes, in order for a popular representation to be politically useful, 'authenticity' cannot be the only criterion.⁸⁵ International awareness-raising and internal nation-building are largely distinct tasks. While it took pains to present some of the most vibrant current elements of black South African culture, and genuinely affirmed many of the movement's most important cultural ideals, Amandla's primary function was ultimately mobilising international support. It was this objective, necessarily and inevitably, that surely governed the bulk of its artistic and narrative choices.

The difference between culture's internal and external functions – more precisely, the frequent lack of distinction between them within the movement – perhaps offers some insight into why, despite ample interest, the initiative to revive Amandla in early 1990s', and post-apartheid, South Africa was unsuccessful. A host of potential factors inform this issue, including probable financial limitations, and a more general difficulty in promoting the history and culture of the liberation struggle through the media (which was still, in the early post-apartheid years, largely controlled by the old establishment).⁸⁶ It also seems possible, however, that it was in part because Amandla did not resonate with the emerging identity and culture of the new South Africa, or that once liberation had been achieved it could speak very little to the complexity that followed in the wake of transition. It seems understandable, given the purpose for which it was created, that Amandla would have a limited contribution to make to the process of nation-building. Nonetheless, the frustration of those who hoped to resume its work seems to have stemmed from the unrealistic expectation that it could do both: dazzle international audiences and win their support; and simultaneously project a vision that expressed the deepest hopes and aspirations of the movement and the masses, in the momentous transition from struggle against apartheid to the birth of a new nation.

Reflections on Culture at the Threshold of a New Era

By 1989, at the height of a decade in which culture was promoted, debated and celebrated with increasing intensity, Albie Sachs declared that a shift was necessary. His comments sparked a lengthy debate that was, as Ingrid de Kok has suggested, probably on the threshold of expression anyway.⁸⁷ In several interviews and writings in 1990 clarifying his position,

84 For discussion of *Ipi Tombi* and similar productions see Peterson, 'Apartheid and the Political Imagination', p. 234. See also Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, p. 181.

85 Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood*, pp. 94–5.

86 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA6-343: Interview with Man (Santana) Ntombela; personal communication with Barry Feinberg, 4 July 2005.

87 I. de Kok, 'Introduction', in de Kok and Press (eds), *Spring is Rebellious*, p. 11.

Sachs referred to the political transition that was in progress, arguing that culture needed to move in tandem with the shift from struggle to nation-building. His intention was to open up debate within the movement and encourage members to move beyond the 'tight, defensive posture' that had been necessary to survive repression and exile, towards considering how culture might perform the more complex, affirmative role of envisioning the emergent new South Africa.⁸⁸

Although Sachs's paper focused on culture's role in the context of transition, the debate that exploded around it repeatedly returned to the division between culture's internal and external roles. Several of his critics drew attention to Sachs' status as an exile, arguing that he was out of touch with what was happening in South Africa, and defending the vitality and diversity of cultural developments inside the country. Some made a clear distinction between the latter and work geared towards the international community, which was more likely to tend towards the shallow and formulaic.⁸⁹ Their concerns were later echoed by Barbara Masekela, who in a 1993 interview claimed that while the ANC had used culture successfully 'as a kind of showpiece or slogan', it ultimately did not recognise the value of culture as an internally-focused medium for strengthening community and building national self-esteem.⁹⁰ Was Sachs basing his remarks about slogans and formulae primarily on the cultural activity with which he had come into contact in exile? Was he thinking about art geared towards the international community rather than that being produced by the oppressed masses at home, as some of his critics implied? These issues remain open to debate, but nevertheless illuminate how the internal-external dynamic affects the way in which the role of culture in the struggle might be conceived and understood. The cases of Mayibuye and Amandla reaffirm that while diversity and inconsistency were possible (and even desirable) within South Africa, political and cultural work in exile necessarily had distinct priorities and aims.

As ambassadors for the ANC, Mayibuye and Amandla made valuable contributions to the movement's work and successfully brought the anti-apartheid struggle to international audiences. Although the differences between them on the levels of form, content, approach and presentation were dramatic, their shared, overriding objective was diplomatic – projecting an image of South Africa that would encourage the international community to lend its political and financial support. Sachs's comments offer a valuable point of reflection regarding the larger context of culture's relationship to the struggle and point towards a new phase in that relationship: the process, beginning in the late 1980s, of 'preparing ourselves for freedom'. To what degree did cultural activity adapt itself to the changing needs of this nascent era? Was culture primarily conceived as a vehicle for externally-focused propaganda, or was there substantive recognition of its value to the internal struggle for liberation? Further, did culture ever achieve equal status with 'real' political work? The extent to which cultural activity contributed to the political transition of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the ongoing process of nation-building in South Africa, is an area ripe for further discussion and research.

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88 Langa, 'Interview with Albie Sachs', pp. 30–1; A. Sachs, 'Afterword: The Taste of an Avocado Pear', in de Kok and Press (eds), *Spring is Rebellious*, pp. 146–7.

89 See in particular R. Siers, 'Vampire Bats of Ambiguous Metaphors'; G. Younge, 'Running in the Sackrace'; and F. Meintjies, 'Albie Sachs and the Art of Protest'; all in de Kok and Press (eds), *Spring is Rebellious*, respectively pp. 57–67; pp. 80–84; pp. 30–35.

90 MA, Oral History & Sound, MCA6-312: Interview with Barbara Masekela.