

# CULTURE AGAINST APARTHEID

A UN SPONSORED SYMPOSIUM HELD IN ATHENS, GREECE

by Hein Willemse

Late last year more than 50 artists gathered for three days in Athens to discuss the implementation and redirection of the cultural boycott of South Africa, governed by UN General Assembly resolution 2396 of 1968.

secretaries-general at the UN, Mr Sotirious Mousouris. The presence of the diplomats gave a befitting sense of importance and value of the symposium to the Special Committee.

Wally Serote and the ANC Executive Committee member, Pallo Jordan.

The presence of the South Africans at the symposium was, in my assessment, quite important. At a basic information

Among those participating were such well-known personalities as Harry and Julie Belafonte, Glenda Jackson, Randy Weston, Little Steven, Michael

Cacoyannis, Joseph Papp and Wole Soyinka. Also present, with observer status, were the active anti-apartheid organisations in Africa and Europe.

High ranking diplomats were Major-general Joseph Garba, the chairman of the Special Committee against Apartheid, the Ghanaian Ambassador, Mr Victor Ghebo, chairman of the committee for the implementation of UN resolutions and one of the three assistant

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The South African participants were: Johnny Clegg, Donald Woods; COSAW members Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, Hein Willemse; AWA members Matsemele Manaka, Maisha Maponya; the SANROC president, Dennis Brutus; the PAC' representative to the UN, Ned Mzuzuma, the ANC cultural commissar,

level, material understanding of the South African situation has been lacking considerably. There has been quite a disparity between those who were informed and those who came to the symposium to 'learn' or to be 'informed'.

Usually at events like these the reaction against apartheid is a gut response manifesting itself in moral outrage. In a limited way the South African delegates informed, re-focused on the needs of the cur-

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conjunction in the liberation struggle. It was also left to the South Africans to draft the final appeal of the

symposium to all artists in the world.

The symposium was opened by Ms Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister of Culture and said inter alia that they in Greece 'have a long history with the concept of freedom. (They) contributed to its definition, (they) have suffered with its loss and (they) are a society, a people, who condemn this stigma, this disease, this tyranny called apartheid.'

The symposium, had no executive or decision-making powers, consequently the discussions, debates and deliberations were quantified as recommendations. It was, however, an important event as the UN and its Special Committee against Apartheid play a highly significant role in monitoring and implementing the boycott. In fact, the cultural, academic and sport boycotts formally came into being under UN General Assembly resolution 2396 of 1968.

The central purpose of the symposium was to discuss ways of tightening the cultural boycott. In this regard cultural exchange with the South African government or those bodies associated with the government should as a matter of priority be halted. Especially the film industry and more particularly the role and function of the Cannon distribution company, came under scrutiny - as this is an area where the boycott has had a limited impact.

Further to such discussions

the consciousness-raising role of individual artists, groups like Artists Against Apartheid and the anti-apartheid movements were talked through.

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Again no firm decisions were taken but ideas and recommendations included the popularisation of a Freedom Pledge and similar information ventures to be distributed to 'artists and cultural workers' world-wide.

Several recommendations regarding the tightening of the cultural boycott taken during the three-day-long event were presented to the Special Committee for consideration and implementation.

In terms of the old policy a nuanced description of the boycott has been absent. Advances in this regard have been made at the CASA festival in December 1987. Those advances may have impacted on the UN Special Committee in drafting their revised set of "policy guidelines", which included the following statement: 'The policy also recognises that a culture of the oppressed people exists in South Africa. Thus specific activities and contacts which, in the view of the Special Committee, have the intent and effect of expressing opposition to apartheid, enriching this culture and furthering the liberation struggle, do not come within the scope of the cultural boycott.'

The upshot of the symposium has been:

1. The reaffirmation of the central role of the exiled liberation movements in the implementation of the cultural boycott. These are the organisations who should take the responsibility of developing an infra-structure of consultation with internal organisations and liaison with international bodies. Consequently the role of external solidarity organisations in this process may decrease.
2. The necessity of developing a reliable network of consultation.
3. The recognition of an emergent 'culture of the oppressed'. Although scant attention was paid at the symposium to this facet, for us inside the country this 'recognition' presents an important nuance in our struggle as the boycott, in my own view, can now be seen as part of a dialectic: destruction of apartheid x development of a 'culture of the oppressed.' Consequently our determination on the extent and nature of the boycott may increasingly become important, depending on the position that we take to these dialectical poles.

In many regards facets of the boycott may still be unclear and vague to individuals. It is however only through internal and external organisational input in the processes of democratic consultation that we may arrive at a situation of greater satisfaction and clarity.



left:

*Anti-Botha demonstration in London in June 1982.  
(Photo by Paul Weinberg.)*

below:

*Anti-Apartheid march in Toronto, Canada, 31st May, 1986. (Photo by Paul Weinberg)*

