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Using the Past to Forge a Future: Challenges of Uniting a Nation against Skeletal Odds

In April 1994 South Africa hosted its first multi-racial democratic elections successfully. The then new government immediately started a task of uniting different racial groups who were separated by years of structured racial segregation and apartheid laws. The new nation started to focus on reconciliation, nation building and social cohesion in order to unite its different racial groups with the aim of achieving a nonracial society. Diversity was seen as the new nation's strength and the motto, which is in Khoisan language of the !Xam people, *!ke e: !xarra !lke* which means 'diverse people unite' was enshrined in the new Country's national Coat of Arms.

To manifest its non racial stance a number of cultural projects were hosted under the auspices of then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. All these proved that the country was living its Khoisan inspired motto of diverse people united in pursuit of nation building and social cohesion. It is against this background that the call to repatriate the remains of Sarah Baartman resonated among many and thus the country rallied behind its president, Dr. Nelson Mandela, to persuade France to accede to this request. Baartman was a South African woman of Khoi extraction, who was used as a 'freak show' performer in Britain and France during the nineteenth century. After her death in 1815 her remains became the subject of 'scientific research' abroad and were displayed in Paris' Musée de l'Homme.

The call for the return of Baartman's remains culminated into the realisation that South African museums have collected, researched, exhibited and stored in their collection remains of Khoisan people. In addition, they 'illegally' acquired a number of other cultural items from black South Africans. This was soon linked to the politics of broader colonial dispossession that took its shape in cultural formations. Museums' authority

and ethical standards over human remains was questioned and museums were severely challenged for not giving indigenous people 'respect' they deserve.

This paper explores a number of challenges regarding the question of human remains in South African museums. It will pose the following questions: is it possible to align the past collection practices with social cohesion and nation building goal given the facts that in the past African cultures were subjects of the 'gaze', worthy to be collected and studied along with animals? To what extent could this hamper the realisation of social cohesion and nation building?

CV

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