Arts development and promotion in Namibia: 
The role of the government since independence

Retha-Louise Hofmeyr*

Abstract
The final item of the official programme of Namibia’s 25th independence anniversary was a choreographed tableau showcasing ‘unity in diversity’. Hundreds of professional and amateur artists participated in a mass display of traditional and contemporary music and dance styles, accompanied by a procession of giant animated animals, birds and replicas of toy wire-cars made by the students of the College of the Arts (COTA). It illustrated the competencies that have been acquired in the arts industry over two and a half decades of arts development. It was also a celebration of the freedom of expression which Namibians have enjoyed alongside peace and stability for a quarter of a century. This was made possible through ongoing support by the Government of Namibia through the line ministries for Arts and Culture, i.e. the Ministry of Education and Culture (1990–1995), the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture (1995–2005) and the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture (2005–2015). This article gives an overview of the role of the Government of Namibia in the development and promotion of arts over the last 25 years, and outlines how the arts contribute to sustained socio-economic development in Namibia.

When Namibia attained independence creative artists immediately began to play a key role in nation-building through their participation in the official events, by collaborating in the design of the coat of arms and the Namibian national flag, and by composing the Namibian anthem. In recognition of the importance of the arts provision was made for the establishment of a Directorate of Arts in the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). This small administrative unit was activated in December 1990 and placed in the Department of Culture and Lifelong Learning (CALL), alongside the Directorates of Culture, Libraries, Archives and Adult Basic Education. The Directorate of Arts inherited

* Retha-Louise Hofmeyr was the Director of Arts in the Ministry of Education (1990–2005) and Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture (2005–2015) in Namibia. She has served as a board member of the National Theatre of Namibia and The National Art Gallery of Namibia, as Director of the College of the Arts, and as Vice President of the Franco Namibian Culture Centre. She has been a speaker and jury member at many international conferences and competitions. She is an accomplished pianist, a music examiner for the University of South Africa (UNISA) and holds a BMus and MPhil in Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development. She was the recipient of the Chevalier dans l’ordre palmes académique (2002), and the Officier dans l’ordre des arts et des lettres (2015) awards from the French Government. E-mail: rethalouise@gmail.com
the staff and structure of the Windhoek Conservatoire from the former Administration of Whites, and the responsibility for securing annual grants-in-aid for two visual and performing arts institutions, the National Theatre of Namibia and the Arts Association of Namibia. The Directorate of Culture became responsible for preserving, developing and promoting traditional cultural heritage and supporting the National Museum, while the Arts Directorate was tasked with developing and promoting arts education and the arts industry, with the programmes of the two bodies overlapping in some areas.

In 1990, the MEC adopted the slogan ‘One Namibia, One Nation’ and the goal of ‘Unity in Diversity’, successfully incorporating 11 former second tier authorities into a single national education system. English was introduced as the new official language. All directorates were required to adhere to the principles of access, equity, quality and democracy as articulated in the policy brief Education for All, and to implement Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution, i.e. to ensure that all citizens can exercise their right to education.1 ‘Arts Education for All’ became the main goal of the Arts Directorate for the first decade following independence, and government sponsored services were rolled out free of charge to schools and communities in the form of workshops for artists, in-service training for teachers and officers, promotional visits, theme-based arts competitions, and the supply and maintenance of materials, instruments and equipment. The Directorate of Arts also sought to implement Article 19 of the Namibian Constitution, which states that: “Every person shall be entitled to enjoy, practise, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the terms of this Constitution”; and Article 21, which secures Namibians’ fundamental freedoms. All modes of arts and cultural expressions are therefore embraced so that Namibians can express themselves in the universal language of the visual, performing and media arts, for individual and national identity. This development of a conducive environment for the Namibian creative arts sector was initially guided by existing principles published by UNESCO, the (O)AU and SADC(C).2

Prior to independence government-supported arts practices were predominantly western theory-based and hence there was a paucity of African and local arts content in the libraries of schools and arts institutions. The Directorate therefore initiated and/or supported the publication of teachers’ manuals for visual art and drama, and anthologies of poems, plays and songs in all Namibian languages. The MEC also published a Cultural Overview with funding from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and Kalabash, a magazine which featured the arts and culture programmes of the MEC, other government institutions, and non-governmental organisations. With the

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help of ‘Visiting Arts UK’, a *Namibian Arts Directory* was compiled which mapped the contacts and facilities of arts organisations throughout the country. Renowned scholars such as Dr Minette Mans, Dr Sabine Zinke, Dr Gerhard Kubik, Dr Sakari Löytty and Prof Andrew Tracey have made important contributions to the documentation and development of appropriate notation of Namibian traditional music and dance styles.

Soon after taking office, staff members of the Directorates of Arts and of Culture undertook a national tour to consult traditional, political and church leaders, school principals, artists and cultural practitioners to reflect on the connection between traditional and contemporary art forms. In the early days it was necessary to assure people that the arts were not necessarily western-based forms of expression, and to allay fears that arts practices would corrupt local traditional cultural practices. Celebrated artists were contracted to give presentations at schools and to inform principals and students about the arts and potential career paths. School interventions continued until these functions, together with the development of arts curricula for schools, were taken over by the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED).

Although the focus was on the rolling out of educational services, the aims of the new directorate also included the provision of public platforms for previously marginalised artists, and encouraging broad public participation. All supported institutions were also encouraged to explore the social, informative, persuasive and educative roles of the arts. After independence, donor funding was easily sourced for projects related to important national causes, such as reconciliation, gender equality, literacy (taking into consideration that there was a 38% illiteracy rate at the time of independence), the combating of HIV/AIDS, while funding for the arts was harder to come by. Namibian artists benefited from participating in and applying their skills to awareness campaigns which generated an extensive repertoire of development theme art works, and consolidated the role of the arts as an agent for communication and nation-building. It also generated income and enhanced the status of the artist in Namibian society.

The transformation of the Windhoek Conservatoire was regarded as urgent and by 1991 the College of the Arts (COTA) had been established with a new mandate which changed it from a predominantly classical music, ballet and drama school into a multi-disciplinary arts school, offering training in genres such as African and contemporary performing arts, jazz and popular music, visual art product development, fashion design, and media arts (radio, television, sound engineering, photography and journalism). This also changed the demographics of the students, with active recruitment in previously marginalised areas. By 2008, 81% of the students enrolled for diploma studies were from outside the Khomas Region, in which the capital, Windhoek, lies. Today, COTA still continues to offer general arts tuition for children of all ages, and has gained recognition as Namibia’s leading tertiary arts institution, with all its Applied Arts Diploma courses being accredited by the National Qualifications Authority since December 2014. Entrepreneurship is offered as a compulsory core subject to enable graduates to start up their own enterprises. COTA has three campuses: the Fidel Castro Campus and the Theatre School in central Windhoek, and the Katutura Community Arts Centre, which
occupies the renovated buildings of the kitchen and boiler room of the former migrant
labour hostel complex in Katutura.

COTA, as a Windhoek-based institution, recognised its limited national outreach and
therefore initiated an Annual Arts Academy, which offers graded tuition in a number of
arts disciplines during school vacations, suitable for both in-service training for arts
teachers in schools and for the general public. Namibia Choral and Brass Networks,
established through the Directorate of Arts, make use of the Arts Academy as well as
other platforms to offer workshops for choristers, instrumentalists, composers and
conductors, often reaching more than a thousand participants annually.

In the formal school sector, Arts Subject and Curriculum Panels were constituted by
NIED. Syllabi were developed for compulsory, non-promotional Core Arts in Lower- and
Upper-Primary schools, and Arts-in-Culture at Junior Secondary level. The Arts electives
(Pre-Vocational Visual Arts; Pre-Vocational Integrated Performing Arts; and Visual Arts —
at Cambridge International General Certificate Senior Education (IGCSE) and Higher
IGCSE levels — were supposed to be widely offered, but this is still not the case. The
Colleges of Education took the lead in preparing teachers to embrace the new arts
educational dispensation by skilfully crafting the Arts components of the Basic Education
Teachers Diploma (BETD) programme. Well rounded graduates specialising in arts
struggled to find arts teaching jobs in schools, however, because other subjects enjoyed
priority. Since the incorporation of teacher training into the Education Department of the
University of Namibia (UNAM) the time allocated to the arts has diminished, and the
status of arts in schools has consequently declined even further.

The ongoing demand for arts educational services increased, and by 1994 the
Directorate of Arts had successfully petitioned the Office of the Prime Minister to secure
the ‘farming out’ of services, i.e. the longer-term procurement of the part-time services
of artists. This also resulted in the Directorate of Arts piloting the Recognition of Prior
Learning (RPL) system for the public service, and the establishment of the National Arts
Extension Programme (NAEP), with training centres in all regions. Arts education in the
formal education sector suffered a serious blow when the MEC through its Department of
Formal Education downgraded arts in schools by abolishing 67 arts teacher posts at the
end of 1996. Arts advisory and inspectorate services in formal education were also
discontinued upon the retirement of the Visual Art and Music subject advisors. In an
attempt to fill this vacuum and to decentralise arts education the Directorate of Arts
contracted practising artists through the NAEP to offer arts training in schools as part of
the extra-curricular programme.

The NAEP was eventually incorporated into COTA to form its biggest department, having
grown from 15 to 75 part-time lecturers. The incorporation also increased COTA student
numbers from six hundred in 1990, to more than four thousand in 2015. Many of the
lecturers in the NAEP programme upgraded their qualifications through the directorate’s
staff development programme and are now permanent COTA staff members.

The Arts Association of Namibia (AAN) and the National Theatre of Namibia (NTN), a
non-profit company which had been administered as the South West African Performing
Arts Council (SWAPAC) until shortly before independence, also required transformation and therefore new programmes, legislation, policy and institutional frameworks had to be developed to ensure that the arts would contribute to sustainable socio-economic development of Namibia.

Soon after independence proposals were solicited for the creation of a national art gallery, and the AAN’s proposal was found to be the most feasible. The transformation of the AAN into the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAGN) began and by 1993 the AAN was operating as the NAGN even though the constituting act was only passed in 2000. The NAGN provides many opportunities for local artists to develop their portfolios, to sell in the gallery shop and to exhibit in group or solo exhibitions. The NAGN offers educational programmes, regular group exhibition platforms (such as the annual “Independence: Namibia Today” exhibition), competitions (such as the Standard Bank Biennale and the Bank Windhoek Triennial) and exchange programmes. It also publishes resource materials in the form of newsletters, catalogues and reference books on Namibian arts. The NAGN is tasked with the acquisition and curation of artworks for both the permanent and government collections, and has enjoyed support from the Netherlands for the development of a mobile arts museum service. The NAGN has hosted many thought-provoking exhibitions with scheduled talks and debates around featured themes, such as heritage, land matters, housing, human rights, gender equality etc.

The NTN has continued to function as a non-profit organisation, and the former board’s request for it to become a state-owned enterprise is still being scrutinised by the office of the Attorney General. The NTN has always served as a platform for local and imported drama and music productions, offering a healthy mix of intimate theatre and larger productions. The latter have only been affordable in collaboration with either the Directorate of Arts, COTA, the Namibia National Symphony Orchestra (NNSO) or other supporting agencies, such as the FNCC or embassies. The NTN offers Artbeat, an annual talent development programme for schools, and for many years ran the Youth Theatre Development Programme to expand its scope in the regions and develop theatre in indigenous languages. It promotes live music and dance through programmes like the Last Band Standing, and regular music and dance festivals. New dramatic works are solicited through competitions such as the Theatre Zone, Golden Pen Award, and artists’ works and contributions have been acknowledged through the annual National Theatre and Film Awards. The NTN has also offered regular training in technical theatre skills and has therefore contributed significantly to the development of the entertainment business in the private sector.

The Directorate of Arts implemented Community and School Support Programmes, and the Namibia Choral and Brass Networks to expand its reach, and took on board the full sponsorship of the NNSO. Many causes such as Arts for Differently Abled People (ADDAP), the Namibian Children’s Book Forum (NCBF), the Southern African Theatre Initiative (SATI), and civil society organisations such as Committed Artists of Namibia (CAN), were supported by the directorate in the early years, until the National Arts Fund (NAF) and National Arts Council of Namibia (NACN) were established as funding
The Directorate regularly collaborated with the private sector, for example SANTAM, SANLAM and Shell, to present Child Arts and Environmental Arts Competitions, and with Bank Windhoek, the City of Windhoek and other local authorities for the presentation of arts festivals which increased the number of communities and individuals reached.

Collaboration with the international community has also resulted in the implementation of projects such as the Namibia Oral Tradition Project (NOTP) with the assistance of the Norwegian Agency for Development Corporation (NORAD), and the Culture in the Neighbourhood and Culture Curriculum Coordination Projects, both supported by UNESCO and Finnish aid agencies. Tulipamwe, an international artist residency programme was initiated with the assistance of various diplomatic missions. The groundwork was also laid for the establishment of the bi-national Franco-Namibian Cultural Centre (FNCC), and for the Goethe Zentrum, which have become the strongest arts development partners and facilitators of Namibian artistic contact with the rest of Africa and further afield. In its report in 1999 the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training celebrated the multi-cultural nature of the Namibian arts institutions and called for the recognition of the positive effects of arts education at all levels, i.e. cabinet, national councils, local and traditional authorities.3

Several recommendations contained in the report were incorporated in the Namibian Policy for Arts and Culture, adopted in principle by Cabinet in 2001 after approval by a national conference. The Namibian policy objectives were also informed by the Stockholm Plan of Action adopted at the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in 1998, which suggested inter-alia that cultural policy should be a key component of development strategy; that creativity and participation in cultural life should be promoted; that policy and practice to safeguard and enhance the cultural heritage, tangible and intangible, moveable and immovable should be reinforced; that cultural industries should be promoted; and that cultural and linguistic diversity should be promoted in and for the information society.4 The commission’s report and the policy paved the way for the formation of the National Heritage Council of Namibia (NHCN), and the National Arts Council of Namibia (NACN), established in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

Namibia has ratified many UNESCO conventions, including those that ensure the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) and the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005), and was described as “one of UNESCO’s great champions, in action and values” by the Director General of UNESCO, Ms Irina Bokova, during her visit to Namibia in 2013.5 On 3 November 2015 Namibia’s

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5 UNESCO Media Services, 6 June 2013, “‘Namibia is one of UNESCO’s great champions, in action and values,’ declared the Director-General in Windhoek”, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/>
candidate, Deputy Minister of Information and Communication Technology Stanley Simataa, was elected General Conference President of 38th UNESCO General Conference at its headquarters in France, and at the end of November 2015, Namibia’s Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture will be hosting the 10th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, in collaboration with the Namibian UNESCO office. Namibia has also performed well in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and has made good progress along the UNESCO Road Map for Arts Education, adopted in Lisbon in 2006, measured against the key indicators, notably the development of human capacity; the improvement of quality education; materials to support teachers in their training; and the promotion of cultural diversity.

In terms of the human capacity development, progress is evident in the vast number of students who have graduated in the arts, and the number of artists in the NAEP who have upgraded their skills through mature entry enrolment in diploma and undergraduate courses at UNAM. Many staff members are currently enrolled in post-graduate programmes, and are contributing to the body of knowledge on Namibian arts through their research. Institutions supported by Government grants offer ongoing skills and professional development, internships, seed funding, mentorship and incubation. The arts industry has therefore significantly contributed to job creation and poverty alleviation, especially through project support to arts organisations and individuals via the National Arts Fund (NAF), which is controlled by the NACN. Bodies such as the Rössing Foundation, the Omba Arts Trust, and the Community Skills Development Foundation (COSDEF) have also contributed to personal and economic growth.

Namibians can obtain relevant degrees in Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Namibia, and in Architecture and Media studies at the Namibian University of Science and Technology (NUST), the former Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN). Over the last decade, at least 10 tertiary arts scholarships have been awarded annually. Namibians have continued to make names for themselves on international stages. The PoN’s new Architecture Faculty won the First Prize at the International Architecture and Design Showcase in London, during London’s hosting of the 2012 Olympics, and two Namibian artists, Elemotho and Shishani were identified as candidates for Radio France International’s New Discovery programme, with Elemotho winning the competition. Several awards have been won in international choral and music festivals, and many of our visual artists’ works are featured in exhibitions and collections abroad. Namibian fashion designers, film-makers and photographers have had their works showcased worldwide.

Most institutions also have committed themselves to documenting and disseminating information. Apart from study guides and course materials in all arts subjects, there is regular documentation of arts events on the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation’s (NBCs) television and radio services, and there are dedicated arts pages in the press and on social media. Manuals and anthologies exist for visual arts, school plays, arts

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entrepreneurial studies, community drama, Namibian songs and poems, etc. Through regular initiatives such as the Youth Theatre Development Programme, Stand-Up Comedy, Song Night, Spoken Word, a repertoire of creative performance work is being created and recorded as important social commentary. The NAGN meticulously documents exhibitions and initiatives such as Art Inside, Land Matters in Arts, the Art Biennales and Triennials, and the Heritage Collection Exhibition of the Arts Association Heritage Trust, through elaborate catalogues with technical descriptions of works. These efforts also assist in developing discerning audiences who create a demand for relevant, quality home-grown arts products.

The biggest growth in the arts structure, budget and programmes was achieved when the Arts Directorate was moved to the Ministry of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture. Through this move it gained access to the regional Multi-Purpose Youth Centres, which saw the emphasis shift to youth empowerment, employment creation and poverty alleviation through the arts in both urban and rural communities.

The structure, approved by the Office of the Prime Minister in 2006, made provision for the appointment of two Deputy Directors to head the two divisions, namely Arts Education and Training, and Creative Arts Industry Development. The directorate used different phases of the cultural production cycle and value chain as a checklist for balanced and integrated development and developed an organogram to support programmes which would include the provision of arts education and training, the development of an enabling environment for creation, production, distribution, audience-building, marketing, promotion and exposure of Namibian art and artists’ works through exhibitions, performances and festivals.

The new structure also provided an administrative division for the NAF, established by Act in 2005 as a funding mechanism for arts enterprises, and controlled by the NACN, an advisory council. Regular proposals were made by the directorate to obtain support from the ministry and the Office of the Prime Minister to secure full-time status for all the lecturers in the NAEP, but remained on hold due to a lack of political will or the disruption caused by the fact that there were four different ministers and three different permanent secretaries in office in the ministry during the period.

The general trend that has prevailed since the setting of the UN’s 1993 Agenda 21 has been for arts and culture to be written into sustainable economic development agendas. The arts sector has embraced this. However, there is reason for concern as Namibia’s 4th National Development Plan (NDP4) has no reference to the arts, and the only reference to culture is in the context of cultural tourism. The National Policy on Tourism for Namibia only devotes one paragraph (6.2) to cultural tourism, describing how government will “aggressively promote the attraction of Namibia’s varied cultures and heritage as part of the Namibian tourism product”, and how it will increase the “sense of

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place”. It acknowledges the role of artists, and singles out “those related to graphic and the performing arts”, with the emphasis remaining on commercialisation.7

In 2011 the Directorate of Arts commissioned a study to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the arts sector in preparation for the National Conference on Arts and Culture, which eventually took place in April 2015. During the conference obstacles to progress were identified and policy recommendations were made to strengthen the arts and culture sector. The policy remains in draft form. One of the challenges is the paucity of statistics on the actual return on government investment in the arts and culture sector. This weakens the bargaining power of the ministry in terms of budgeting. The National Planning Commission, through its Income and Household Expenditure Census, should be encouraged to develop a mechanism for measuring the actual contribution of the creative arts to GDP because contributions made by the creative cultural industries are currently hidden in the tourism, manufacturing, retail and service sectors.

The arts and culture sectors currently lack the manpower and instruments to monitor and assess the return on investment, and should be capacitated to research, monitor, measure and publish findings on the contributions made by the arts to priority development areas and GDP. Tourism, film, media and advertising sectors, which are the main avenues for promoting Namibia, rely heavily on the skills of artists such as authors, actors, filmmakers, photographers, graphic artists, dancers, musicians and choreographers. Therefore more funding should also be made available for training in these skills.

The disconnection between the film sector and the arts and culture sector has been noted with concern and deemed to be a hindrance to arts and culture development in Namibia. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology is responsible for the National Film Commission (established by Act in 2000), the Namibian Society of Composers and Authors of Music (NASCAM) and the office that controls intellectual property rights through the implementation of the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Protection Act (passed in 1994). Neither of the Arts and Culture directorates are represented on the their boards, and without a mechanism for cooperation, there is no guarantee that profits will be ploughed back into the development of arts skills, despite the fundamental importance of such skills for the creation of value within the film sector.

The most urgent intervention needed remains the implementation of arts in the formal education sector, i.e. in schools, in order to strengthen the foundation for arts at pre-vocational and vocational levels. Like all other forms of literacy, arts literacy is best learnt at an early age. The arts are known to develop self-discipline, concentration, memory and balanced emotional and cognitive skills. Emotional, mental, and physical development correlates positively with drawing, dancing, drama performance, the playing of a musical instrument, etc. These practices are known to build confidence, self-

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esteem and self-efficacy. Denying children this basic right to self-development and creativity is short-sighted and irresponsible.

The NDP4 is an essential stepping stone on the road map to Vision 2030, and it is therefore essential to make the three overall goals mainstream, i.e. sustainable economic growth, employment creation, and employment creation in the arts sector. On introducing NDP4, the former President, H.E. Hifikepunye Pohamba, stated:

If we succeed in achieving these goals, we will have put our country on a sustainable development trajectory that will serve us well in addressing other equally pressing development challenges in subsequent development plans.

He cautioned that we need to invest in research and create industries if we want to be a fully-fledged industrial nation by 2030, and that we should not make “a mockery of our vision to create a knowledge-based society”. According to him, this will need an optimistic mindset that sees opportunities and possibilities rather than obstacles, inclusive participation of all Namibians, true partnerships with all stakeholders and a collective desire to prosper as a nation.

Opportunity recognition, creativity and innovation are core skills and characteristics for the attainment of Vision 2030. These happen to lie at the heart of the creative arts, and indeed of arts entrepreneurship. Many arts practices are collective and inclusive, relying on networking, cooperation and partnerships with stakeholders, thus contributing to citizenship and the weaving of social fabric. The creative arts both embrace advanced technologies and recycle or add value to existing resources. If given its rightful place on the national agenda, the arts will contribute profoundly to the development of the optimistic mindset called for in Vision 2030. The role of the arts in achieving the social change and transformation needed for Namibia to become a knowledge-based and industrialised nation by 2030 should therefore not be underestimated.

Bibliography


9 Republic of Namibia, NDP4: vii.

10 Ibid.


UNESCO Media Services, 6 June 2013, “‘Namibia is one of UNESCO’s great champions, in action and values,’ declared the Director-General in Windhoek’”, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/namibia_is_one_of_unescos_great_champions_in_action_and_values_declared_the_director_general_in_windhoek/>.