

Cultivating the culture of reading: an imperative for nation-building



SIPHIWO MAHALA

Deputy Director: Books and Publishing, National Department of Arts and Culture

Since I am accused of being a writer, I would like to preface my discussion with a short anecdote. After all, writers are not too different from the old men and women sitting around the fire and spinning tales throughout the night.

In 2008, during the period of continuous power blackouts known as 'load-shedding', I lit a candle in order to read a novel. A cousin of mine was amazed to find me doing this, arguing that the blackout gave me a valid excuse not to read. She wondered why I had to go out of my way to assault my eyes in that manner. She made this observation particularly because I was not enrolled in any academic institution and therefore I had no obligation to read. Let alone doing so with the help of a candle.

I am sharing this story precisely because I believe that my cousin's attitude, namely that reading is an activity you embark on only when you have to prepare for an exam, is prevalent in our society. The education sector is of course a reliable barometer to measure literacy levels but this does not mean that reading should be confined to the classroom. It is unfortunate that we often realise the horror of a lack of a culture of reading at a very advanced stage - when we see the matric results. In order to build a progressive society it is of paramount importance to promote the culture of reading even outside the education sector.

Perhaps at this stage it will be prudent for me to quantify my argument. The matric results for the 2009 academic year reflected a 60.7% pass rate nationally. Out of 551,940 matriculants who sat for examinations at the end of the year, only 334,716 were successful. These results show a decline from the 62.6% pass rate of 2008. What this means is that there are hundreds of thousands of young men and women who are now wandering the streets with no jobs or opportunities to pursue further studies. For, even among those who may have obtained the pass mark, the results may not be adequate for university entry or to guarantee them any bursaries. While the matric results are important

as a reference point, to deal with them exclusively will be to cure the symptom while the disease continues to ravage the nation.

Research shows that the problem is deeper than the low pass rates of matric exams. In fact, as long as there are no robust interventions to curb the root of the problem, the matric results will continue to deteriorate. In 2007, the National Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) commissioned the South African Book Development Council (SABDC) to conduct a study on the reading habits of adult South Africans from age sixteen. The findings of the study confirm the grim reality that South Africans are not a nation of readers. The study reveals that more than half of our households have no leisure books and that only one in seven South Africans regularly reads in his/her spare time.

The prevailing lack of a culture of reading manifests itself in various aspects of our lives, and especially on socio-economic issues such as poverty and unemployment. There is an obvious link between illiteracy and poverty on the one hand, and literacy and economic prosperity on the other. Literacy underpins development in all sectors of society and is central to economic prosperity. The cultivation of a culture of reading therefore becomes one of the key imperatives in our project of nation-building.

Various institutions including government, NGOs and other civil society movements have over the years embarked on a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the culture of reading and eradicating illiteracy in South Africa, but these have not yielded any demonstrable results. There are, of course, numerous contributing factors to this state of affairs but the most glaring to me are the following: (i) the initiatives tend to focus on certain sections of the society and negate others; (ii) they are often so far removed from the people on the ground that many of us only hear or read about them in the media, and; (iii) they are fragmented and not properly coordinated.

While the challenges are vast and diverse, I believe that there are simple interventions that can be made to cultivate the culture of reading in our society. These include:

- developing a consolidated national reading programme

- establishment of writers' groups and a national writers' association
- promotion of children's literature
- stocking local content in community and public libraries.

I omitted the promotion of writing in indigenous languages here because that subject will be discussed in another presentation. As you would notice in the suggestions above, all the stakeholders along the book value chain have a role to play. I will elucidate on the importance of these areas below.

If the cultivation of the culture of reading is a national imperative, then initiatives by various entities need to be harmonised and properly coordinated. Without an integrated national strategy our efforts to eradicate illiteracy and promote the culture of reading will prove fruitless. While efforts made by the various entities to promote the culture of reading are commendable, it is essential to have an overarching body that will continuously assess the effectiveness of the various projects and suggest corrective measures. Without a central structure and an integrated strategy, we run the risk of constant duplications and perpetual reinvention of the wheel.

One of the factors that impede development both in writing as well as reading is the absence of an active and all-inclusive national writers' association. Since the disbandment of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) in the early 1990s, there has not been regular dialogue among South African writers at a national level. The negative effect of this is that there is not enough interaction in a form of structured mentorship, workshops, or guidance taking place among writers on a regular basis. This situation renders writers, especially budding writers, vulnerable to exploitation. More devastatingly, the public as well as aspiring writers do not gain adequate exposure to the existing works of South African writers.

Good reading habits should start from an early age if it is our objective to create a nation of readers. In this regard children's literature is one of the fundamental building blocks in laying a strong foundation for creating a nation of readers. Mbulelo Mzamane puts it eloquently when he says, 'Mental dexterity, the love of learning, and the intellectual life of a nation depend on an early obsession for reading. Children's literature is a powerful vehicle for socialisation and accumulation.' We must promote children's literature as a gateway through which children develop intellectually.

However, children's literature is but one province of the broader reading campaign that we need to embark upon as a nation. One of the inspiring stories that I think would be relevant here is that of an old widow in my neighbourhood in Grahamstown. On hearing that her neighbour's son (yours truly) had written a book, she sacrificed her pension money to buy a copy of my novel, **When a man cries**. The trouble was that she couldn't read a word of English, so she got her children and other visitors to tell her what the book is all about. She also developed entrepreneurial skills in the process, and started charging R20 for anyone who wanted to read the book!

I am telling this story because it made me think seriously about my envisaged audience. The old woman is part of the community that I write about but the language in which I write systematically excludes her as a potential reader. This experience inspired me to translate my book into my mother tongue so that the people I write about are able to read the story in their own language. But most importantly, it revitalised the importance of the promotion of the culture of reading in our communities.

One of the most effective mechanisms of promoting reading in all sectors of society is through the establishment of book clubs. A robust book club campaign would add meaningful value in our endeavour to address the lack of a culture of reading, which is one of the pressing challenges that confronts us as a nation. In a fashion similar to what the old woman from Grahamstown was trying to do (except the R20 charge), book clubs are all about sharing knowledge. Reading is a solitary exercise and book clubs provide companionship and the opportunity for readers to share information and the pleasure of reading.

It is against this backdrop that the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) established a book club in 2007 as a way of encouraging the culture of reading among its employees. After two years of successfully convening regular book discussions, hosting guest authors and public lectures, the book club proved more than just a leisurely activity. It adds meaningful value in our endeavour to address the lack of a culture of reading, and contributes towards the attainment of the broader imperatives of developing a caring, democratic and cohesive society. Our members extend the book club phenomenon to their communities by encouraging their families, relatives and neighbours to start reading for leisure.

The DAC is now in the process of producing a book club information booklet which entails guidelines for establishing book clubs. The purpose of producing the booklet is to assist all potential users, including community groups, libraries, government departments and all relevant formations in establishing book clubs. The DAC is working closely with the library and information sector to develop a strategy for the promotion of book clubs and similar forms of reading circles in all our public libraries and related community centres across South Africa.

In addition to popularising the book club phenomenon, plans are in place to establish a National Book Week in September 2010. The purpose of National Book Week is to develop a dedicated programme for the promotion of reading nationally. The programme will focus on the promotion of South African literature in all languages recognised by our constitution. Activities will be organised around reading and all stakeholders are encouraged to support this initiative. The objective is to make books more appealing and easily accessible to the broader society through our library infrastructure.

In her address at the symposium on the cost of a culture of reading held at the Centre for the Book in 2004, Elinor Sisulu rightfully observed that 'A culture of reading is inextricably intertwined with the availability of books'. It is in this regard that our library and information sector is of strategic importance to the people of South Africa. One of the most common remarks cited as the reason for not reading in the *Reading habits* study is that 'books are expensive'. Libraries are there to ensure that no individual is deprived of the right to read. Most importantly, our library shelves should be filled with books written by South African writers.

In conclusion, I believe that we can model aspects of our reading promotion strategies on best practices from around the world. A few years ago I visited Cuba, a country that boasts a staggering 99.8% literacy rate. Cuba attained this milestone through dedicated programmes for the promotion of literacy and ensuring that everyone had access to education. The community was integral in the Cuban literacy campaign, with over 250,000 volunteers teaching citizens across all sectors of society, including the rural population.

Whatever forms our reading campaigns might take, it is essential for all role players to work together in pursuance of the vision of creating a reading nation.

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