

Culture as development of voice and self-articulation: *Keleketla!* after-school programme



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This text explores the role of the arts and media as tools in articulating independent voices. Descriptive and interjected by anecdotes, it shares some of the methodologies employed at Keleketla! Library, an independent and interdisciplinary library and media arts project based at the historic Drill Hall in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Background context: The Drill Hall

Built on the ruins of a 'native prison' in 1904, a military base buttressing British colonial power, the site of the 1956/7 Treason Trials and marshaling point of armed forces across the African continent over the course of a century, the Drill Hall has a remarkable history. It specifically reflects the story of Johannesburg within the larger narratives of South Africa's social, military and political shifts. Between 2002 and 2004 the Drill Hall was redeveloped as a historical site through the efforts of the City of Johannesburg and the South African Heritage and Resource Agency.



The public square used to be the hall that hosted the 1956 Treason Trial preliminary hearings

With the support of the City of Johannesburg, the independent artist organisation, the Joubert Park Project (JPP), has taken on the task of activating this multi-use space through arts, culture and heritage programming. Operating from the Point Blank gallery in the west block of the Drill Hall precinct, the JPP implemented groundbreaking cultural and arts programmes including exhibitions, interventions, residencies and workshops with local and international artists and cultural workers.



The Keleketla! Contemporary Dance group (seen here performing a piece titled Movement Mandela) consists of the longest standing members of the library, two of them members since 2008

In February 2008, the JPP ceased working on the site after the establishment of a new entity: *Keleketla!* Library. The JPP invested its time and resources to build the capacity of the new organisation. Part of this capacity building included the implementation of the Drill Hall Arts, Culture and Heritage Programme funded by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund, a highly successful project that brought together school learners, artists, historians, cultural workers and educators through dialogue and creation.

The *Keleketla!* After-School Programme

The *Keleketla!* After-School Programme (KASP) was established in 2008 as a youth learning space that relates history and contemporary issues to the lived experience. The point of departure is informed by the view of culture as a basic human right. It is through culture that true articulation of the self can occur. The programme aims to engage the youth in critical analysis of contemporary social, political and economic issues of the city, the country and the continent.

The programme's goals are achieved through dialogue over a period of approximately ten weeks. The dialogue is interactive and centres on heritage and real life experiences of the youth (high school learners and young practitioners). The dialogue also leads to creative output in the form of visual art, recordings, published texts, performance and other expressive mediums.

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The first point of entry is the library. The library has over 1800 members able to access the items. Members are then able to access the after-school programme, where they can participate in the projects on offer, including dance, music, writing and visual art. The dance group members have been consistent since 2008, while the music group has been recording since 2010. In this way the programme builds a community.

KASP contributes to high school education and develops young thinkers and problem-solvers. It builds talent and skills in arts methods and critical thinking. Our After School Programme contributes to not only the demands of high school education, but also develops ‘voices’ and self-articulation in a city of outsider representation.

KASP is realised through the following guidelines:

- The programme is ongoing, enabling scaffolding of information for returning and consistent members;
- Returning members assume responsibility due to familiarity and rapport, taking leadership roles. Some members volunteer shifts in the library and act as runners during events;
- The invited facilitators enjoy a fulfilling learning environment, leading to further collaborations;
- The project is attractive to undergraduate students and recent graduates who build profiles and enhance employment opportunities.

Not to be understood as a ‘social development’ or an after-care project, KASP is a programme that foregrounds arts and media processes as platforms for the youth to define contemporary experiences of the city, the country and the continent.

Keleketla! Library provides a space for experimental and independent thought that challenges and expands the notion of a library. The library is as much a space for knowledge resources as it is for knowledge creation and dissemination. In the context of youth education, the media arts provide a space for experimentation and self-assertion.

KASP is an arts and media space for learning through experimentation. Not to be understood as a ‘social development’ or an after-care project, KASP is a programme that foregrounds arts and media processes as platforms for the youth to define contemporary experiences of the city, the country and the continent. The recent project, *Teen Talk*, is a reference point for articulation of voice.

Teen Talk: Fun but not Funny

Teen Talk is a youth forum in the format of a talk show, produced by members of KASP. It was realised in partnership with Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), as a school workshop component of the anti-xenophobia campaign, ‘Solidarity for Survival’. *Keleketla!* developed a series of workshops in the form of a fictional youth magazine show as a build-up to a multi-disciplinary march. The ‘show’ took place at Constitution Hill on the 2nd, 9th, and 16th of June 2012.



Teen Talk hosts in conversation with (left) Marc Gbaffou of the African Diaspora Forum and Sharon Ekambaram of Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF). (Below) in front of a diverse audience

The nine-member strong crew worked under the guidance of experienced and energetic mentors from diverse fields including research, television and film production and visual arts. Furthermore, the show invited knowledgeable practitioners as guests, ranging from activists on Pan-African diaspora issues, to public health practitioners. The audience consisted of a diverse group of youth living in greater Johannesburg. As an appropriation of a youth magazine programme, the shows incorporated contemporary dance, poetry and music charged with fresh perspectives and powerful expressions. The combination produced a rich dialogue on migration through media processes and tools.



Esmay Masauso, a young poet who participated in the show, and Wesley Hlongwane, aKASP member and *Teen Talk* crew, reflect:

“...[T]he speakers brought into discussion the South African historical experiences under Apartheid. This surely took the audience into retrospection as many folks in the audience could connect with the country’s experiences. Interesting ideas such as how Nigerian folks helped set South Africa free were useful. The audience was given a kind of a serious historical lecture which surprised and even shocked some members of the audience.”



The march connected Constitution Hill and the Drill Hall on 23 June 2012

On Saturday 23 June, 2012, a multi-disciplinary march commenced from Constitution Hill and ended at the Drill Hall. The march's aim was to link two communities that were, and still are, greatly affected by the xenophobic attacks: Hillbrow and the inner city of Johannesburg. The areas are homes to foreign nationals from all parts of Africa. The march incorporated silk-screened posters and live music, concluding with a multi-media physical theatre performance at the Drill Hall. *Teen Talk* presenter, Trish Sibanda, speaks about the impact:

"I have been part of many workshops in the past but *Teen Talk* was a different workshop altogether. Why am I saying so? It is because other workshops were directed and led by adults and barely took into consideration the youth's perspectives on certain issues that were discussed. *Teen Talk* is the brainchild of a youth (Emma) and the team on its own consisted of mostly youths. We had adults amongst us, but whatever decision taken was made as a team, because

everyone's voice, no matter how small, mattered. In *Teen Talk* we basically discussed how the 2008 xenophobic attacks affected us and how as South Africans are learning from our mistakes, to try and avoid repeating the same mistakes again."

Tammy Trish Sibanda, *Teen Talk* crewmember and co-presenter

In the long term, we believe that the current KASP members are the future Keleketla! leadership. In the short and medium term, the programme enhances the learning experience of the members. Members indicate leadership qualities, which makes it easier for rotating facilitators to practice.

KASP believes in sustainability. A clear example is how members return year after year. Some have been members of the programme since its establishment in 2008. In the long term, we believe that the current KASP members are the future *Keleketla!* leadership.

In the short and medium term, the programme enhances the learning experience of the members. Members indicate leadership qualities, which makes it easier for rotating facilitators to practice. As a result, facilitators and learners develop a rapport that leads to meaningful exchanges, imagination and creation. Thus

Keleketla! simultaneously provides opportunities for emerging cultural practitioners and generate a platform for artistic excellence rooted on heritage education.

The Drill Hall as a physical heritage space is a living history. It occupies space and defines the lives of those around it, people of the city and society in general. It is both imagined and lived. It is contested, vandalized, used and abused. Arts programmes contribute to a sense of shared ownership.

Knowledge application and generative use of heritage

Keleketla! Library possesses historical material courtesy of the Mayibuye Archives and Museum Africa. We have secured rights to use the material for educational purposes within the programme. Furthermore, the JPP has produced remarkable amounts of artwork and research around the Drill Hall and the Treason Trial. The JPP has also granted *Keleketla!* full permission to use the art collection and publications towards the educational programmes.

The material referenced in the programme is used to enhance the experience of each project. The KASP members reflect on the value of selected material and imagine strategies to contribute new perspectives on historical artifacts and facts. History is seldom repeated in music and the dance productions that emerge out of the programme. The new short stories written by young learners explore issues such as teenage life, loyalty, ambition, religion, history and (dis)ability. The narratives found in the creative work are sophisticated, expressive, and not mere representations of history.

For example, Phomolo Sebopa's 'Bibi the Special Swimmer', a story of a person's disability, is handled with the utmost sophistication, sensitivity, critical awareness and pride. There is no victimhood or self-pity; it is full of voice and dignity. It is important for a people to assert their own reality in relation to the world and the arts enable such self-realisation.

When art is permitted to reflect on history people can imagine alternative histories, enabling fertile ground for discussion and reflection. Heritage thus initiates dialogue, allowing us to see heritage education as new form of knowledge production.

The outcomes of KASP are valuable as they provide insight into young people's perspectives, develop skills, expose new talent and nurture growth. We believe heritage can be used to evoke nostalgia, provoke anger, encourage healing, and avoid repetition. History is believed to be the story of the victor and as a result it leaves multiple perspectives out of the historical narrative. When art is permitted to reflect on history people can imagine alternative histories, enabling fertile ground for discussion and reflection. Heritage thus initiates dialogue, allowing us to see heritage education as new form of knowledge production.

Scientific Relevance

The programme uses the on-site library, the physical Drill Hall site and archival material as references in its activities and initiatives. For example, the 2011 Visual Art group painted a mural of people holding posters on the wall along De Villiers Street, referencing actual documentation of the Treason Trial. The mural site was selected because it is a high traffic zone, and an informal taxi rank for northbound commuters.



The 'We Stand By Our...' mural on De Villiers street combined historical and contemporary politics of the continent.

The mural site was also selected because of its political significance. De Villiers was one of the areas affected by the xenophobic violence in 2008. De Villiers was also an assembly point for the supporters of the Treason Trialists in 1956. The supporters lined up along De Villiers to enter the Drill Hall through Quartz Street, holding posters stating, "WE STAND BY OUR LEADERS". The mural incorporated various posters from The Chimurenga Chronic's public art intervention, with titles such as 'Are diplomats immune to xenophobia', 'Why are Kenyans running to work', and 'Introducing the South African Guilt Tax'.

'The Chronic', was a once off, one-day-only newspaper that goes back in time to the week of 18 May 2008, when xenophobic violence broke out in Alexandra and spread to other parts of this country. To accompany the launch, *Keleketla!* Library was commissioned to coordinate a six-week public art poster campaign in Johannesburg, of which the mural forms a part. The Chronic posters share an important conceptual link with the posters used by the supporters of the Treason Trialists in 1956. Thus the mural served as both a reminder of a historical event and as a canvas to express current socio-economic and political reality of our society.

In 2012, the Freedom Community College choir worked with a five piece band to re-imagine liberation era songs towards a public concert. Thus the programme explored history through the medium of music.

We believe that our programme contributes new knowledge based on the following strengths:



An interdisciplinary concert, the performance combined a choir, a five-piece band and dance

Access:

- The programme attracts undergraduate students, recent graduates and self-taught artists from Johannesburg and beyond.

Exchange:

- The programme design includes critical feedback sessions with inner city high schools. We invite a Grade 11 history class and a teacher to reflect on how our programme links to the school curriculum.

Share:

- Together we explore how art and media tools could enhance the learning experience of school learners. As a result we developed an innovative education supplement

Experience has taught us that new knowledge is valuable. Thus KASP aims to produce new knowledge on heritage through publications in print, performance and online media. We intend to share our processes and outcomes. We believe publishing is part of a cycle in the production of knowledge. Thus arts and media should be made accessible to people as a basic human right.

At the end of 2012, *Keleketla!* Library published a dense educational publication titled '56 Years to the Treason Trial'. The publication presents narratives, questions, answers and issues by historians and youths, side by side. In reaching towards



The 56 Years to the Treason Trial publication as a platform for multiple voices and perspectives on history and the living experience

opposite ends of the spectrum bringing together young and old, those who fought for democracy and those who live in a democracy, the diversity of personal lives that helped shape the struggle as well as those who shape the inner city today. The publication therefore suggests the role of individual agencies and strategies for change.

The publication is produced as a fragmented collection of voices; young and old, learners and graduates, artists and historians, archival and contemporary. It is ambitious as it speaks to a wide audience – it reads as a magazine and a textbook, a journal and a notebook.

Conclusion

Culture is a tool to imagine our worlds and represent them. It is recognition of self in relation to the world, as opposed to the world in relation to self. Culture provides tools for self-emancipation. To quote one of the long-standing members of KASP and founder of *Teen Talk*, Emma Ramashala,

“My vision is simple: reach out to teenagers all over. And I’m happy to say that we reached India. I want this message of ‘You are not alone’ to spread because parents can’t be there when we need them. They don’t understand us but our peers who go through what we go through can. So imagine the power of teenagers understanding each other and solving each other’s problems together, it will not only benefit individuals but South Africa as a whole because we’d have a brighter future.”

Keleketla! Library: A five-year reflection,
Rangoato Hlasane and Emma Ramashala,
56 Years to the Treason Trial, 2012

NOTES
All photographs by Rangoato Hlasane and courtesy of Keleketla! Library
To learn more about Keleketla! Library and to read the stories mentioned in this text please visit: www.keleketla.org
A new website to mark Keleketla! Library's five years of practice can be accessed here: www.call-response.org