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OPINION | The Afrikaans language monument and museum are not just about protecting Afrikaans

news24

Michael Jonas and Jean Meiring



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been on the path of exploring all the richness of Afrikaans, an indigenous language that through a process of creolisation emerged on African soil.

The ATM has lived longer in a democratic South Africa than it did under apartheid. Although it has been wholly different to its early youth for many years, ignorance about and misunderstandings over the ATM abound, even among some of its supporters.

The public response to the news that the minister of sports, arts and culture, Nathi Mthethwa, expects it to change focus has again brought this to light. It often seems that people forget the denotation of the word "Afrikaans", namely *of, concerning, belonging to Africa*, according to the Dictionary of the Afrikaans Language (the WAT).

In itself, the name Afrikaans is, therefore, an inclusive recognition of and tribute to this continent and its people, the cradle in which the language has evolved since the 1500s, in a singular process of creolisation. It is precisely that historical process – which happened on Africa's soil – that the ATM unashamedly celebrates.

A controversial history

One might first dwell briefly on the monument's founding, which certainly wasn't devoid of

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The department of public works still owns and maintains the land, while the department of sport, arts and culture is largely responsible for its day-to-day operations.

Much-needed money is also obtained from entrance fees, annual permits and events.

Even at the ATM's inception, the architect was left in no doubt that the monument had to be designed in honour of all the population groups that had a share and an interest in the development of Afrikaans. Hence, it recognises Afrikaans' European, Southeast Asian and African roots.

While the regime of that time tried to hijack the monument's opening – for them it was largely a white Afrikaner nationalist celebration – there were angry objections from the ranks of Afrikaans writers.

Nevertheless, the ATM saw a multiracial inauguration with, among others, the reading of an Afrikaans poem by Adam Small, entitled "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika".

Given that "God bless Africa" at the time was the unofficial national anthem of the banned anti-apartheid movements, it was quite a daring piece of programming.

Also, no segregation was ever enforced at the museum or monument, although the original staff

Roberts.

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Yet, even before that important milestone, the AIM's management had endeavoured to counteract negative perceptions of the language.

Today, the ATM's vision is to be a dynamic and radically inclusive institution that records and celebrates the linguistic kaleidoscope of Afrikaans, within the framework of a multicultural society. Indeed, the speakers of Afrikaans that are of colour far outnumber white speakers!

Interaction from all corners

This involves, among other things, creating an environment where role players from all corners of Afrikaans interact with one another – to bring about social cohesion, to reach out to other language communities and institutions through educational programmes and cultural activities, to research ignored histories of Afrikaans, and to place a sharpened focus on African knowledge learning systems as part of a larger decolonisation process.

In practice, this means that we offer a range of events that attract a wide audience, including non-native speakers; that we reach out to especially the disabled, to rural schools and to the local community, offering where we can free transport, access, sponsorships and literacy projects.

We commemorate the country's national days and Africa Month with empowering, innovative

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building blocks of the language.

We also celebrate the mutual influences of Afrikaans (Southern Africa's most multiracial mother tongue and other African languages on one another.

In May, for example, the ATM celebrated Africa Month; on our social media pages, as in previous years, we published daily snippets of information from elsewhere on this continent, of which the ATM and Afrikaans are an integral part.

This has resulted in previously marginalised Afrikaans speakers beginning to reclaim *their* language and *their* monument. Attend any of our lively panel discussions or poetry and rap/hip hop workshops, and see how Afrikaanses from all quarters play with one of the surely most expressive languages.

A living monument

Ours is a living monument. It hosts an outdoor gallery mainly dedicated to emerging writers; play areas where outdoor games are offered for children; sporting events; Christmas celebrations; and choir performances. Guests are often entertained with fireworks, meditation classes, hip hop, riel, Xhosa dances and ballet performances.

In recent years, the artists Lungi, Ramon Alexander, Nosipho H, Chadleigh Gowar, Diana Ferrus, Christine

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The AIM's programme is focused on drawing those who would perhaps not otherwise visit it to experience and enjoy this unique sculptural achievement – which recently has started appearing internationally as the backdrop in futuristic TV series and films.

The ATM also reaches out nationally and internationally through a growing online presence and by presenting events with other museums in the country. Our Neville Alexander Prestige Awards (named after this activist) honour the unsung heroes and heroines who promote Afrikaans at grassroots level by awarding cash prizes for their projects. Previous winners include Suzie Matlholo, Sabina Dumas, Susan Smith, Elizabeth Dennise van Schalkwyk and Woord Open Wêreld. Recent projects have honoured, among others, the Afrikaans- and isiXhosa-speaking builders of the monument and granted them lifelong free access.

The council and staff manage the ATM on sound financial and administrative principles that have established it as a respected role player in the heritage sector – our annual reports accepted by Parliament are on our website for the sake of transparency.

Environmental conservation

Not only do we protect Afrikaans' diverse language heritage, cultural-historical buildings and heritage

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groups – local and international – to the fact that online one hardly reads any negative criticism of the ATM.

One cannot say it better than Mariana Kuphiso did, who visited the ATM with learners during Mother Tongue Month earlier this year, aimed at fostering an appreciation of mother-tongue education and multilingualism:

Herewith the principal and the staff as well as the learners, especially the grade 6 classes, of Nieuwe Drift Primary would like to show our gratitude towards the fruitful educational session you and your staff had with our learners. The learners learned so much about the Afrikaans language, but most of all our Afrikaans-speaking learners learned how to interact with their fellow learners, who's home language is not Afrikaans. We as teachers were so excited to hear the Shona (Zimbabwe) and isiXhosa speaking learners read and pronounced the Afrikaans words that you discussed during the session. For the first time I heard our English class learners try to speak Afrikaans. That was really amazing. With sessions like these we can keep Afrikaans alive. Thank you so much.

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management, and delivery of services to previously disadvantaged communities within the mentioned sectors.

Owing to our dependence on state funding, amounting to more than 75% of our budget, we expected to express the national imperatives and strategic objectives set out in Chapter 15 of the National Development Plan 2030.

However, these types of challenges and the prospects of being able to serve a diverse South African landscape strengthen our commitment to fulfil the vision and mission of the ATM - we regard the Afrikaans Language Monument as an inclusive beacon of hope for the development and appreciation of all African languages.

- Michael Jonas is the director of the ATM

- Jean Meiring is chair of ATM.

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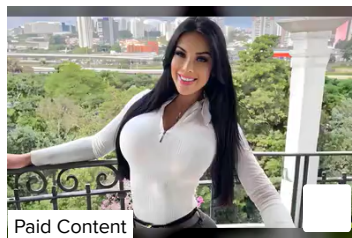
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