Archaeologies of Materiality

Edited by Lynn Meskell
Archaeologies of Materiality
For My Students
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Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible without several very important supporters of the project. First, we would like to acknowledge the support of Richard Leventhal, then Director of the School of American Research in Santa Fe, who hosted us for this special symposium dedicated to the topic of materiality in archaeology. The staff of the school made our stay an unforgettable one and we are collectively very grateful. Second, we extend our warmest thanks to Jane Huber who has shepherded the project from the outset and went above and beyond the call of duty for us. Louise Spencely has also been a joy to work with, as usual, along with Emily Martin. We thank them for taking the project through to fruition. Danny Miller has also played a key role, as an inspiration for many of our projects and also as a generous commentator on the chapters. Lastly, I would like to thank the participants for all their hard work and professionalism. They have been incredibly smart and stimulating companions not only throughout this project, but also during my time at Columbia University. It is for these reasons, and others that the book is dedicated my students.

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Introduction: Object Orientations

Lynn Meskell

The invention or practice of the art of pottery, all things considered, is probably the most effective and conclusive test that can be selected to fix a boundary line, necessarily arbitrary, between savagery and barbarism.

Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*, 1877

It was said, not so very long ago that the “deeply integrated place of the artifact in constituting culture and human relations has made discussion of it one of the most difficult of all areas to include in abstract academic discourse” (Miller 1987:130). Yet within the last decade materiality has become a topic of increasing interest in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, architecture, and archaeology, as well as residing at the core of the new material culture studies (Attfield 2000; Buchli 2002; Meskell 2004; Miller 1998; 2005; Renfrew, et al. 2005). Yet as Daniel Miller has argued, we have been notably remiss in producing substantive accounts of materiality for archaeological contexts: this volume is one such attempt to remedy the situation. As archaeologists, we might profitably explore the underpinning philosophies of materiality for specific cultural moments across time and space. This is one of the major aims of this volume, to provide an array of object orientations in particular and varied contexts, indeed the first to showcase substantive archaeological case studies devoted to the exploration of materiality.

Archaeologists have been relatively slow to embrace theories of materiality: with the constitution of the material world in past contexts,
and the concomitant construction of selves and culture (but see Hodder 2006; Meskell 2004). As Miller has indirectly indicated, this project falls squarely within the disciplinary realm of archaeology since the “medium of objectification matters” (Miller 1987:129). Yet our theorization of materiality is a rather different project to that traditional within archaeology, namely contextual studies of objects and assemblages. We hope to demonstrate here that our understanding of the potentials of materiality diverges significantly from the conventional study of material culture in archaeology. Studies of material culture can be traditionally understood as oscillating between empirical studies and more theoretical and cultural expressions. The empirical trend is firmly devoted to object analyses – form, materials, and manufacture – and does not automatically engage with social relations. Curiously, as Miller would say, the same object can inhabit both domains, and thus we might do the work of both and interweave between technologies, meanings, practices, and histories. The theoretical perspective we advocate in this volume focuses more directly on the broader interpretive connotations around and beyond the object, on the unstable terrain of interrelationships between sociality, temporality, spatiality, and materiality (Meskell 2004:2). We hope to move beyond simplistic readings of things as either purely functional or deeply symbolic, as archaeologists have tended to taxonomize things previously. In a way this is similar to Geertz’s critique, and more recently the insightful work of Keane (2003a; 2003b): both warn of the false dichotomy between symbolic and materialist readings of the world. This is akin the discursive taxonomies we instantiate, of ideas and things, where things are too often read as expressions or communications of ideas: things have been treated as basically epiphenomenal. As Miller and Tilley cautioned almost a decade ago (1996), artifacts have particular properties and, in an age of rapidly burgeoning material culture, ought to be investigated in their own right. This has been the raison d’etre for the subfield of material culture studies, yet speaks equally to the refashioning of archaeology to embrace more nuanced studies of our object worlds. We might profitably explore the contours of our material lifeworld and its recursive shaping of human experience. In Miller’s case he saw these rich potentials through the lens of Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1977; 1980; 1998) whereby the physicality of the artifact is enmeshed in the work of praxis: cultural construction is achieved through action rather than simply conceptualization.
It is worth exploring the notion of a *material habitus*, a formulation that owes significant intellectual debts to Bourdieu and Miller, but perhaps with a genealogy that extends further back to Tylor. The idea of a material lifeworld that is conceived and constructed by us, yet equally shaping of human experience in daily praxis is a provocative one. Where the argument for *habitus* in the purely social realm can be seen as both constraining and generally restrictive toward societal change (Meskell 1999), it may have significant purchase in the grounded materiality of the object world since the duration of physical things have different and oftentimes longer individual histories... their residual force of matter has the ability to shape and influence the living. Tylor argued that any particular culture’s arts, customs, and ideas were shaped by the combined actions of many individuals, and their inventions, opinions, and ceremonies were the product of various histories of suggestion, modification, and encouragement or opposition. People act in accordance with their own motives, yet collective social action is embedded within a larger frame of society, and of those many individual actions and choices (Tylor 1977:14). However, where *habitus* is usually applied to a single cultural unit, he applied his construction cross-culturally on the basis of similarities in material culture. Cultural survival was the designation given by Tylor to these “processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit” (1977:16) to constantly refashion society, and from these older habits newer understandings were constituted. This material *habitus* or lifeworld is a compelling notion: an enmeshing that combines persons, objects, deities, and all manner of immaterial things together in ways that cannot easily be disentangled or separated taxonomically. One can see why the notion of the fetish has been such an evocative device for anthropological studies of material culture (Ellen 1988; Pels 1998), since fetishism arises from an organic unity between people and things, as opposed to the strongly contoured divide between persons and the things they produce to exchange in capitalist societies (Taussig 1980:37). Yet with this new move to a grounded understanding of things we must simultaneously consider immateriality, the need to objectify, to abstract, and our embodied practices in the spheres of magic and making. Fabrication is all about making the world while making ourselves, our quintessential subject making. All our endeavors in the world are about copying, whether in the domains of language or material culture, both are processes of replication, an objectification of the thought world.
Archaeologists have to move beyond the representational economy. Historically, it is important that we have advanced toward “meaning” after too long focusing upon environmental or economic motivations, yet we must also now consider the embodied realities of being in the world. Studies of materiality cannot simply focus upon the characteristics of objects but must engage in the dialectic of people and things. We might see this as a co-presence or co-mingling. Keane refers to it as *bundling* (2003b:414), the binding qualities that materiality allows, and in this way the concept harks back to Hegel, but also to anthropologists like Mauss, Munn, and Latour, and similarly connects to the project of object biography (Gosden and Marshall 1999). At a very simple level, the cultural constitution and understanding of objects remains a neglected area. Compelling research has been conducted by Latour on this hybrid terrain (1991; 1996; 2000). Archaeologists have not generally succeeded in embedding things, in creating accounts of embodied things or those that effectively blend with subjects, deities, entities, places, technologies and so on. Given that subjects and objects are collapsible in particular contexts, as Nakamura demonstrates in Chapter 2, so too our natural and cultural categories require rethinking, as Holmberg (ch. 8) and Lazzari (ch. 6) suggest. Recently, Latour (2004) has revisited Heidegger’s notion of the distinct world of objects and things. In his attempt to tease from the world of materiality the notion of objects and things, Heidegger reconstituted things as a *gathering* (perhaps like Keane’s *bundling*), what Latour describes as matters of fact and concern. This Heideggerian bifurcation sees objects as a lesser category and Latour’s example, a coke bottle, is devoid of true meaning and simply the physical result of modern science and technology. Like many of us, Latour finds this binary unhelpful and the dichotomy between *Gegenstand* and *Thing* “justified by nothing except the crassest of prejudices” (2004:234). He asks: what if ordinary objects had the rich and complicated qualities of things? This brings us back again to the fundamental issue of taxonomy.

Bruno Latour has been an outspoken critic of what we might call rational taxonomies. He wants to blur the categorical distinctions between objects and societies, cosmologies and sociologies. Past societies recognized this convergence, but the onslaught of terrifying revolutions
has to some degree severed the link, that mixture of rational constraints and the needs of their societies. We continue to identify with Enlightenment thinking, the separability of the human and nonhuman when in fact we need to reconfigure modernity in new ways, perhaps even a little like that of the distant past. Latour’s own neologism, *factishes*, reminds us that the dichotomy of facts and social constructions is near useless (2000:113). “And if religion, arts or styles are necessary to ‘reflect,’ ‘reify,’ ‘materialize,’ ‘embody’ society – to use some of the social theorists’ favorite verbs – then are objects not, in the end, its co-producers? Is society not built literally – not metaphorically – of gods, machines, sciences, arts and styles?” (Latour 1991:54). Going further, he asserts that as academics we too are guilty of this categorical blurring since we can embrace the seemingly contradictory modalities of antifetishism, positivism, and realism, because we apply them to different topics or strands of our being. We explain the objects we disapprove of as fetishes and concentrate only upon things we deem our passions and worthwhile matters of concern (Latour 2004:241). Using the words of Allan Turing, celebrated father of modern computers, he shows how Turing could not describe his “thinking machine” without recourse to god’s power to create souls and that we are simply instruments of his will, providing mansions for those souls. Gods and machines, intertwined from the outset and not so very different to the oracles and predictive technologies we see in ancient cultures (Meskell 2004:ch. 3). Both ancients and moderns have failed to master the things they have fabricated (see also Palus ch. 7).

When we objectify a god or the contours of a deity we usually need to materialize the immaterial, to give it form and visual presence. That can take a natural or manufactured form, or sometimes even both, as in the case of Egypt. Physical presence is the symbolic and experiential bridge that renders abstract thought and belief both tangible and efficacious. That material presence commands our attention. If we take the evocative case of statue-gods in Egypt, the god embodied in its material form (Meskell 2004:ch. 4; see also Nakamura ch. 2) they behave miraculously, they are agentic beings, fetishes that blur the taxonomies of subject and object. Ancient Egyptian oracles were just such statue-beings, fabricated by human hands while that authorship was stripped from the fetish: it became the embodiment of a deified pharaoh in some cases. Oracles could act independently, make proclamations, pass juridical verdicts and determine the fate of mere mortals. Egyptian gods in
statue form or manifest in natural places are a salient examples of what Latour describes as the work of translation, the creation and instantiation of new types of beings, hybrids blending nature, culture, things, deities, monsters, and so on. What we envisage as our distinctive nature as moderns is our ability to separate domains, in Latour’s terms an act of purification, that creates two discrete ontological zones (1991:10). As he provocatively goes on to demonstrate, however, this is a false dichotomy that privileges moderns in the sphere of rationality, whereas we too are guilty of similar ontological crossings and hybridities. Taking the example of an anthropologist, to bring this home, he shows how easily one can write a single book that defines the forces at play, incorporating the distribution of powers between gods, humans and non-humans, ancestors, cosmologies, natural taxonomies, property rights, and so on: separate books are unnecessary. It is the common locus that is crucial here, the constitution of a legible world and lifeworld. Matter is defined differently between these broad swathes of society and as interpreters we are constantly called upon to define matter in those particular settings.

Since materiality is not reducible to a set of given conditions or practices common to all cultures and all times, it is surely necessary to undertake study of specific cultural moments to understand particular contextual notions of the material world and its propensity to forge, shape, interpolate, and possibly even challenge and undermine social relations and experiences. What we aim for within the chapters is an understanding of the underlying philosophy of the material, as present in each of the cultural settings examined. Materiality is thus a set of cultural relationships (Pels 2002), as the individual chapters in the volume demonstrate. Imbued matter and embodied objects exist in relationship to the specificities of temporality, spatiality, and sociality, and we must be mindful of the flipping back and forward between ancient and contemporary situated understandings. Like all ethnographic writing (and I believe we are entering this sort of terrain), this impels us to reconsider our own understandings of materiality, its qualities and limitations, but also to eschew the easy promise of essentialism and naturalism.

The aim of the book is to uncover and examine the past and present lives of things, sometimes as objects, other times as active entities or didactic things, often as circulating cultural capital today, things that we have become accustomed to viewing unproblematically or residing in
intransigent taxonomies. It is crucial for archaeologists to interrogate the specific moments of crafting, forging, exchanging, installing, using, and discarding objects, their histories in a variety of contexts, whether the historic implementation of power that Palus (ch. 7) underscores, or the exchange relationships focused upon bodily regimes in Republican Colombia that Gaitán (ch. 4) uncovers. This is what the chapters individually examine and move on to consider their fundamental embedding in places, landscapes, fields of power and discourse, local and international arenas. In some contexts outlined here, we need to interrogate the tensions between material and immaterial political forces as Palus, Weiss (ch. 3), and Hasinoff (ch. 5) outline, shifting between traditional and contemporary understandings of those perhaps unnatural categories. Places and landscapes can be similarly modified into a blurring of encultured nature as Holmberg and Lazzari attempt to trace. How do we enculturate the world and make it our own, intrude into the natural “world” and mark that intrusion physically, materially?

As the chapters will outline, an archaeology of materiality can be achieved by looking at the object world in archaeological and ethno-historic contexts, by tracing the subsequent biographies of things, or examining the deployment of object worlds in historic and contemporary practice. The following section is a short consideration of the contemporary role of traditional, some might even claim ancient, forms of material culture and making in South Africa today, a nation itself going through one of the most visible and palpable periods of refashioning and remaking of itself in material, social, and spiritual arenas (Meskell 2005).

South African Detour

In this short case study I want to pursue a more ethnographic treatment of material culture in contemporary South Africa and the historic underpinnings of those constructions and sedimentations of identity (see also Weiss ch. 3). More generally, I am increasingly interested in the resonant notion of making culture “pay” in South Africa and the material substrate upon which this ethos rests. In post-Apartheid society indigenous groups, often territorialized in the ways colonialism and apartheid subdivided the nation (Mamdani 1996; Mbembe 2000; 2001), are being encouraged through government initiatives and development schemes to present
themselves as culturally distinctive through the making and selling of their ethnically respective cultural objects. Such artisan economies are typically supported by neoliberal policies (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002:113), often operating under the rubric of development. Craft making, with all the associations of “primitive” otherness and essential difference, coupled with tourist-oriented “tribal” performances are presented as a means of celebrating identity and simultaneously promoting a self-sustaining local economy. Craft is also inherently depicted as a worthy pursuit, albeit locked in tradition, a busy-work for people who are conceived as unskilled and also untainted by the mechanistic world of modernity (see Hasinoff ch. 5). To date there are over 150 groups in South Africa that have received governmental support. As the Department of Arts and Culture minister outlined recently:

> poor communities are in many instances, owners of assets – natural and material resources, human resources, cultural assets, indigenous knowledge, traditions and customs that can be the key agents for social and economic development. South Africa is blessed with a rich cultural tradition with artistic individuals and communities living in all corners of the country. Any poverty alleviation programme which aims at creating work opportunities must begin with these assets. We need to invest in people and their ability to make objects and artefacts, production and music. (Sack 2003:4)

Governmental interventions and NGO development strategies are thus seen as inherently positive moves that sediment and protect tribal culture and its material correlates, and it is the fabric of this constructed identity that lies at the center of these negotiations. It is this materiality that hardens identity in a premodern era, that stands as an unchanging hallmark of “black” and “colored” peoples, situated within the very tribal constituencies that the apartheid government sought to maintain for much of the 20th century. Ironically, there seems to have been little internal critique, apart from the challenge to neoliberal notions of development undertaken by a coterie of anthropologists. Archaeologists have yet to seriously engage with these debates. Anthropologist James Ferguson (1994:255) for one has shown effectively that development is not a machine for eliminating poverty that is imbricated with the state bureaucracy. Such interventions may have no effect whatsoever on poverty but do in fact have other concrete effects. Development work around
ethnic craft industries has the potential of formalizing identity categories and boundaries, marking them and relegating people to the material worlds created and instantiated in history. These contemporary “primitivisms” reflect the earlier, and much critiqued, reifications and fetishizations of a notionally simple way of life. More seriously, their distinctive character derives from the politics of identity in the present (Douglas 1997:63) and serves to reinforce the tribalisms of the colonial and then apartheid eras. While historical deconstruction may deprive ethnicity of its mythic sense of timelessness, to claim that ethnicity is artificially constructed does not enable us to dismiss it as inauthentic. This begs the question of what constitutes genuineness (Wilmsen et al. 1994:348)? And when is legitimate identity formation initiated and terminated? While archaeologists are increasingly interested in identity and ethnicity and its fluid formations, we are decreasingly able to confront the modalities of this same shifting terrain in the present.

Describing his oppressed hero Michael K, Nobel Prize-winning South African author J. M. Coetzee says “he ought to be in a protected environment weaving baskets or stringing beads, not in a rehabilitation camp” (Coetzee 1983:131). Such craftwork is seen as an exercise of charity, an “object lesson” (see Hasinoff ch. 5) for the impoverished who are both materially and spiritually in need. Despite this deficit, the indigenous South Africans are “rich” in tradition, and simply require channeling into proper physical works. Following this development ideology, the nostalgia and longing woven through such fabrications is the price we pay as outsiders for these objects, while the makers sublate their heritage and ancient identities for our collective wellbeing. Both sides need something from the exchange: one is the purchase of the embodied object of past tradition and ancestral culture; the other requires the commodity price to operate within the sphere of contemporary culture. One is a spiritual need, the other is material.

On National Heritage Day, September 24, 2004, Thabo Mbeki (2004) proclaimed that “the weavers of iHulzo and Isilulu, the baskets from Hlabisa woven with care by Reuben Ndwandwe and Beauty Ngxongo, the makers of Ntwana dolls, the Litema of the Basotho women, the iNcwala, the reed dance – these are only some of the traditions that have survived the passage of time.” One is reminded of E. B. Tylor’s (1977) famous (and now reductive) categories of objects as reflective of the hierarchical ordering of people, material cultures stand as signifiers for discrete ethnicized identities: the Zulu make telephone wire baskets, the
Khoi-San make ostrich egg shell jewelry and skin bags, and so on. Many of these material culture assemblages hark back to an archaeological or historic past, other, like the Zulu baskets (or izimbenge), speak to a very contemporary setting: they are literally the “arts of resistance” (see Scott 1990). The once-stolen telephone wire of the white administration’s apartheid infrastructure is turned into a saleable local product that objectifies inequality and persecution – modern and technological. Originating in the 1970s, artists took traditional basketry skills and applied them to the most modern of materials. They are highly aesthetic, desirable, internationally circulated objects which have been re-signified in the West as re-cycled or green art forms. Zulu wire basketry has been more recently identified with specific South African collectivities: runaway children, battered women, and so on, giving an emotional yet ultimately false sense of individual connection and patronage. In a recent exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA Zulu baskets became material indexes of the AIDS epidemic – KwaZulu Natal is the province with the

Figure 1.1  Photo of Zulu baskets at the Rosebank Markets, Johannesburg, July 2004 (photo by the author)
fastest growing number of HIV/AIDS victims – their motifs reflect a tragic materiality and a foreboding memorialization of the dying.

Why are these particular communities deemed to be trapped in the past, shot through with their particular materialities? Indeed why fossilize culture in such ways? As many interviewees have asked me directly: Why is it that Afrikaner culture is not historicized in this way, why is it not the subject of theme parks and craft stalls? White Afrikaners too claim to be African of course, some even desire to be considered “indigenous” (see Kuper 2003:389). Perhaps this inequity resides in the judgment that “Boer” culture is not deemed exotic, much less aesthetically appealing and lacks the necessary historical substrate of real tradition. And why this is of concern for anthropologists especially is the Durkheimian intonation that ethnicity and aesthetic style correlate, which itself grows out of the assumption that such “primitive” objects stem from the collective mind, rather than any individual artist (Steiner 1994:92).

What is it to know a people by their things? Why such unease on my part? As a social evolutionist, Tylor famously argued that a rough scale of civilization could be instigated on the basis of industrial arts, metalworking, manufacture of vessels and implements, scientific knowledge, social and political organization, and so on, leading to a definite basis of compared facts. The races could be arranged from the Australians, to the Tahitians, Aztec, Chinese, and Italian (Tylor 1977:27). He specifically pointed to South Africa as one context in which colonial forces have brought previously primitive people in line with European civilization (1977:53). In fact he went as far as imputing that the role of the ethnographer was to expose “crude old cultures . . . and to mark these out for destruction” which was “urgently needful for the good of humanity” (see Tambiah 1999:44). Tylor had his own hierarchy of substances (see Lazzari, ch. 6, Gaitán ch. 4), where certain practices and techniques were directly correlated to a primitive age. Stone, Bronze, and Iron are still the pertinent taxonomies. The technologies of contemporary peoples are also hierarchically ordered along the same schema, and correlated back into prehistoric time. This is worrisome since it is an idea that continues to hold sway in the modern mind, that technology equals progress and that material sophistication is an index of social complexity and, ultimately, worth. Impoverished material culture equals impoverished culture in general. A paucity of goods is a material shortfall, another index of the evolution of culture and society: we are fixated by material lack – especially in “under-developed” contexts such as the
African continent. The narrative of “under-development” only emerged after the Second World War when the world was being restructured and re-classified according largely to newly emergent American international interests. Discourses of development also fasten firmly onto this view of material impoverishment and technical backwardness, in a self-fulfilling and destructive cycle where anthropologists, governments, and international organizations affix social and cultural value to modern technologies, whereas other traditional industries are de-privileged (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; 1996; Hobart 1993). It would be a national shame for a post-apartheid black government to encourage the same rigid constructions of ethnicity and culture enforced by their now vilified predecessors.

One can also easily deconstruct the assumptions underlying the manufacture of static and historic Bushman crafts, using traditional processes and materials including skins, shells, beads, and so on. Skin bags decorated with worked ostrich shell, fragile and delicately made, are produced to be decorative rather than functional. While such bags may have served their hunter-gatherer owners well in the past, containing small and portable artifacts, they seem unlikely goods for the world of modern mass consumption. Their simplicity speaks to an earlier time, a time when people were less acquisitive and materialistic, and speaks of a culture considered by most to be extinct. The desire for an authentic, unmarked, and untainted, non-Bantu Southern African native, replete with click language and eco-conscious hunting and gathering subsistence has always been of paramount importance within Africa and perhaps more palpably, abroad (Blundell 2004; Gordon 1992; Skotnes 1996). Decades ago Fanon imputed that “the native artist who wishes at whatever cost to create a national work of art shuts himself up in a stereotyped reproduction of details,” and further that “the artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the castoffs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all” (Fanon 1963:224–5). Much could further be teased from the naturalist fabric of colonial desire for true and celebrated primitivism and the willing complicity entrenched within new forms of South African modernity, but I believe that to be a more obvious set of critiques.

Recently, there have been some efforts to take traditional African techniques and apply modern materials (Zulu wire baskets is an obvious example), tinwork, wire sculpture, beading, woodworking, and so on.
Several of these technologies have been raised to the status of “art,” or at least “high craft” and are available at expensive boutiques and art galleries in the metropoles of Cape Town and Johannesburg. Going global, it is nothing today to see a “South African pottery bowl or a Zulu milk pail . . . in a loft in New York or a home in New England:” ancient practices are thus transformed into “designer wares and one-of-a-kind craft objects” (Sellschop, et al. 2002:11). Certain objects are invoked as having a universal attraction that crosses cultural and geographic borders and “transcends time.” In *Craft South Africa* (2002) this “timeless/seamless” connection is reinforced by archaeologist Tom Huffman who goes on to provide the archaeological corollaries, and validate those cultural survivals (see again Tylor 1977).

So it is timely that we examine the products of their labor and ours; however, I do not wish to frame judgments about the rights and wrongs of encouraging local indigenous communities to conduct traditional craft production or to support themselves within the nation’s fragile economy. An alternative perspective, one perhaps that runs counter to the one outlined here, is that a significant degree of regional national pride is embedded within these objects, whether Ndebele dress designs worn at Cannes Film festival, township-styled fashion epitomized by the expensive *Stoned Cherry* label, or Venda ceramics adorning five star resorts and featured in global travel magazines, and so on. Of course there is a spectrum of designations from high art, to design, craft, and mere objects amongst the myriad things produced. Here we enter an immensely subjective world that requires a detailed ethnography of its own, conducted across broad social strata. However, we can say that such things are consumed in ways that are both celebratory and empowering for various constituencies in South Africa and that set of possibilities resides very much at the heart of the African Renaissance ethos and specifically the self-development policies of the ANC government (Bongmba 2004) – to make culture pay. In this postcolonial liberal state, the hallmark of which must surely be the instigation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Nuttall and Coetzee 1998), identity is constantly being recast in creative and healing ways, albeit with various degrees of success. It was Nelson Mandela who said that “culture should be the language that should heal and transform the nation.” In talking about the artistic traditions of South African people and their therapeutic role in the community today, the Chief Director of the Investing in Culture program reminds us that: