

# *South Africa's National Anthem: A Reflection of Ethnic Relations and a Symbol of Reconciliation*

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**Abstract:** To South Africa is a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. The lyrics and melody of its national anthem integrate multiple ethnic languages and cultural elements, reflecting the complexity and diversity of South African society. It not only carries the historical memory of the nation, but also expresses the emotions of different ethnic groups. This paper, by introducing the historical evolution process of South Africa's national anthem as a national cultural symbol, analyzes how the process of rearrangement and selection of elements demonstrates the country's pursuit of reconciliation and unity, and reveals the unique function of the national anthem in enhancing national cohesion and promoting ethnic reconciliation. This study helps to understand the voices of different ethnic groups in the course of historical development, to better recognize the challenges and opportunities South Africa faces regarding race, to provide reference for other multi-ethnic countries in promoting social unity through cultural symbols, and to deepen the understanding of the function of national anthems in the context of globalization.

## **1. Introduction**

South Africa is a country with significant ethnic diversity. Historically, it was ruled for several decades by European colonizers who implemented racial segregation as a method of governance. The colonizers divided South Africans into four major racial groups—Black, White, Coloured, and Indian—and in 1948 established a series of systematic legal policies to further intensify racial segregation, which led to opposition and inequality among different ethnic groups [1]. In 1994, in the post-apartheid period, South Africa faced the arduous task of racial reconciliation. As a cultural symbol, the national anthem is an important carrier in the construction of national identity and became a key force in advancing the reconciliation process. This paper, through analyzing the historical evolution, linguistic composition, cultural connotations, and social functions of South Africa's national anthem, explores its role in promoting national identity and ethnic reconciliation. On the theoretical level, it focuses on the role mechanism of cultural symbols in the reconstruction of national identity and expands the interdisciplinary perspective between cultural symbols and ethnic reconciliation studies. On the practical level, this study holds important reference value for other countries facing ethnic divisions and multicultural challenges, demonstrating how inclusive cultural policies can transform ethnic differences into resources for national identity.

## 2. The Historical Evolution of South Africa's National Anthem

### 2.1 The National Anthem During the Apartheid Period

Under the apartheid system, different ethnic groups had their own national anthems. One was “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika”(The Call of South Africa), representing the white ethnic group, and the other was “Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika”(God Bless Africa), representing the Black ethnic group [2].As the only official national anthem of South Africa at that time, “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika” was mainly circulated among local white people who spoke Afrikaans. This anthem originally derived from the Dutch poem “Die Stem” written by the South African poet C.J. Langenhoven. Later, it was set to music. The lyrics emphasized the Afrikaners’(White people who speak Afrikaans) praise and attachment to the land of South Africa, while ignoring the history and rights of African ethnic groups.“Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika” was a song circulated among the Black ethnic group. It originated from a hymn composed by Enoch Sontonga, a Xhosa missionary from a local South African tribe. Later, through the influence of the church, it became widely popular among Black communities and turned into a spiritual banner opposing apartheid and striving for ethnic equality [3].In summary, the existence of two independent and separately recognized “national anthem” to a certain extent reflected the unfair treatment between different racial groups and the disorder of internal governance at that time. It profoundly reflected the reality of ethnic confrontation in South African society. The White ethnic group and the Black ethnic group each possessed national symbols representing their own interests and identities, and there was a lack of recognition and connection between them.

### 2.2 The National Anthem After the Democratic Transition

After Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa in 1994, the country entered the era of democratic transition. In order to attach as much importance as possible to the interests and identity recognition of different ethnic groups, from 1994 to 1997 South Africa adopted a dual-national-anthem system. “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika”, representing the white community, and “Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika”, representing the Black community, officially became the formal national anthems of South Africa [4].In 1997, in order to embody the spirit of ethnic inclusion and reconciliation, the South African government decided to merge the two anthems to form a new national anthem of South Africa. In order to minimize the negative impact brought about by apartheid to the greatest extent possible, the new national anthem adopted five different languages: Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho representing local Black tribes, as well as Afrikaans and English representing white South Africans, thereby narrowing the emotional distance between different races [5].The creation and merging of the new national anthem broke the symbolic monopoly of the apartheid period, incorporated the historical memories and cultural elements of different ethnic groups into the national symbolic system, and marked the transformation of South Africa's ethnic relations from confrontation to integration.

## 3. Multilingualism and Multiculturalism

### 3.1 Linguistic Inclusiveness

South Africa's national anthem incorporates five languages: Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Afrikaans, and English. Each language embodies the culture and historical heritage of a specific ethnic group. Its linguistic diversity symbolizes the equality of different ethnic identities and demonstrates South Africa's respect for and recognition of diverse ethnic groups [6].Xhosa and Zulu are among the

most widely spoken indigenous Bantu languages in South Africa. They respectively represent the cultural traditions and historical memories of the Xhosa and Zulu communities. Together, they form the opening section of the national anthem, reflecting respect for and a return to indigenous African culture. Sotho represents the culture and social values of the Sotho community. The retention of this section reflects recognition of the cultural values of the Sotho ethnic group. Afrikaans is an important language for Afrikaners and some Coloured communities, reflecting the linguistic and cultural heritage shaped by South Africa's colonial history among the White population. English, as an internationally used language, carries the vision of communication and dialogue among different ethnic groups, as well as the aspiration for joint nation-building and integration into the global arena. The use of multiple languages in the national anthem breaks the monopoly of a single language over national symbols, enabling different ethnic groups to find a sense of identification within it. It is the most direct embodiment of the inclusive ideal of the "Rainbow Nation."

### **3.2 The Interweaving of the Meanings of the Lyrics**

The lyrics of South Africa's national anthem represent a profound interweaving of the historical memories and shared aspirations of different ethnic groups. It integrates two originally independent hymns: one is the spiritual symbol of the Black ethnic group, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", and the other is "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika", in which Afrikaners express their love for the land of South Africa. "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" carries the collective memory of the Black ethnic group's resistance against apartheid, opposition to colonial oppression, and pursuit of liberation. The lyric "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika" (Lord bless Africa) embodies the spiritual tradition of African religion and expresses the Black ethnic group's longing for freedom, equality, and dignity. The line "Maluphakanyisw'uphondo lwayo" (Let it's horn be raised) conveys the people's hope for the revival of the nation [7]. In "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika", the line "Uit die blou van onse hemel, Uit die diepte van ons see" (Ringing out from our blue heavens, from our deep seas breaking round) reflects the most sincere affection of the South African people toward the country's landscapes, expressing praise and love for the land of South Africa as well as a sense of belonging to the African continent. This sentiment transcends ethnic boundaries and becomes a shared spiritual bond among South Africans [7]. The interweaving and integration of the lyrics facilitate a dialogue between different historical memories. It acknowledges the history of struggle of Black communities while also incorporating the cultural traditions of White communities, providing a cultural foundation for South Africa to move from division toward reconciliation and to build a diverse and inclusive nation.

## **4. The Social Functions of the National Anthem**

### **4.1 Constructing National Identity**

As one of the symbolic cultural markers of the state, the national anthem not only reflects South Africa's rich multicultural background but also serves as an important carrier for constructing national identity, uniting the strength of different ethnic groups. Through ritualized dissemination and the stimulation of emotional resonance, it transcends the boundaries of ethnicity, race, and language, integrating dispersed individuals and ethnic communities into a collective entity with a shared sense of identity. Whether at sporting events, national celebrations, or other ceremonial occasions, when different ethnic groups sing this multilingual national anthem together, individual identities are temporarily placed beneath national identity. They transcend differences in ethnic identity and connect with one another as South Africans. For example, during the 2010 FIFA World Cup hosted by South Africa, the national anthem functioned as a highly representative spiritual

symbol. Whether Black, White, or members of other ethnic groups, when the anthem was played in the stadium, people set aside historical divisions and cheered for the nation under a shared South African identity. Spectators from different communities waved the national flag and sang the anthem together, demonstrating nationwide unity and collective cohesion. Research indicates that national anthems represent a nation's dignity and beliefs on the international stage while embodying the spiritual strength of the people. In the hearts of those who pursue freedom and peace, they cultivate patriotic sentiment, thereby enabling individuals of different races, languages, and cultures within a country to maintain unified conviction when facing external forces [8]. In summary, through its cross-ethnic cultural symbolism, South Africa's national anthem consolidates dispersed ethnic forces, enabling all South Africans to possess a higher-level national identity and providing spiritual support for national unity and harmonious development.

## 4.2 Promoting Ethnic Dialogue

South Africa's national anthem provides an equal platform for dialogue among different ethnic groups. It breaks down the cultural barriers and communicative estrangements formed during the apartheid period and becomes an important medium for mutual understanding and acceptance among communities. After the end of apartheid, South Africa faced the challenge of restructuring ethnic relations. As one of the country's representative cultural symbols, the creation and reconstruction of the national anthem became an important means of dismantling cultural barriers among different ethnic groups. The national anthem belongs neither exclusively to the Black ethnic group nor to the White ethnic group. By integrating elements from both communities, it functions as a state-led "symbol of the entire nation," enabling every ethnic group to find cultural belonging within it and gradually set aside feelings of confrontation and resistance. Different ethnic groups hold divergent narratives of history. By preserving the core melodies of both "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" and "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika", the national anthem presents these two historical memories equally within a single symbol. This encourages White communities to understand the cultural emotions of Black communities and also enables White communities to confront the historical experiences of Black South Africans, thereby alleviating the tensions of ethnic confrontation [9]. The core values conveyed by the national anthem guide deeper communication among ethnic groups, enabling South Africans of different generations gradually to set aside prejudice and hostility toward one another. In doing so, it promotes greater understanding of diverse national spirits and cultural meanings, exerting a positive influence on interethnic dialogue in South Africa. To sum up, the national anthem of South Africa, by integrating the historical memories and demonstrating the equality of cultural symbols, guides ethnic groups move from "confrontation" toward "communication," enabling them to understand and respect mutually, laying a solid cultural foundation for ethnic reconciliation.

## 5. Conclusion

As a national cultural symbol, South Africa's national anthem reflects the historical process through which ethnic relations shifted from division to integration. During the apartheid period, South Africa had separate "national anthems" recognized by different ethnic groups. Following democratic transformation, both "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" and "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" were officially adopted as official national anthem, and in 1997 they were merged to form the current national anthem. The national anthem of South Africa has undergone the process of integration and amalgamation, evolving into a form that encompasses multiple languages and cultures, providing a foundation for ethnic reconciliation. In terms of languages, the national anthem uses five different languages, enabling South Africa's citizens from various ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds to

find their own identities and cultural recognition within it. In terms of lyrics, the new national anthem of South Africa divides “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” which represents the spirits of the Black community, and “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika” which represents the love of the white community for the country’s mountains, rivers, and integrates them into the lyrics as separate sections. It equally respects the cultures and beliefs of each ethnic group, promoting the repair and acceleration of ethnic relations’ restoration, and becomes an important cultural support for national stability and development. The musical fusion embodied in South Africa’s national anthem is not merely a reconciliation with history but also shows that the cultural traditions of different ethnic groups are common assets for constructing a unified national identity instead of a barriers of opposition. It has build a bridge for dialouge and communication among different ethnic groups. The historical memories and future expectations carried by the national anthem will continue to witness South Africa’s exploration and progress on the path of ethnic reconciliation.

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