

poetry in business

empowerment (BEE), they now act as cultural attaches for leadership. Another strong trend is the rise of poetry amongst the country's youth.

"South African businesses should be asking themselves what their role will be in the evolution of our collective culture, and therefore in the evolution of the market," says youth marketing specialist Andrew Miller. He is also a founding member of the spoken word poetry collective, Reunited Siblings. "South Africa's youth are shaping a modern, urban identity that is only partially informed by

When politicians impose censorship and interfere with the ability to be truthful or critical, freedom of speech is eroded

Western or liberal democratic values. South African businesses are not operating in a strictly Western culture or economy, although the majority of them are geared solely around this culture. Those who become literate and conversant in urban, Africanised poetry and culture will stay on top of the evolution of the South African market and will therefore be better positioned to make more money," he says, adding that underground and commercial hip-hop poets in this country frequently take aim at capitalism.

He quotes lyrics from all-female hip hop group, Godessa, as a case in point:

"it's like a multi-corporation wants complete invasion of my senses

i sense this game of rands and cents complain when brands can lend their name and space

to setting up new trends

campaigns offend public and individual expression again..."

The need to understand an emerging new culture is a sentiment echoed by Kaschula: "The problem with marketers is that they are monolingual and they are not culturally aware. They aren't aware of societal issues outside of their own demographic."

Kaschula advocates that the ideal marketing person in South Africa should be multi-lingual with a strong appreciation of the cultural diversity of this country. He adds that poetry and culture are considerations in BEE

where new philosophies and leadership styles will shape the way business is done in this country.

"I saw a great cartoon the other day which paints the picture of an office where white people gawk from behind desks when the black director walks in with a praise poet in traditional garb. In the cartoon, the white people look scared and perplexed, which is a strong commentary on black empowerment, affirmative action and the fear white people have of the cultural aspects that come with this.

"Praise poetry is considered the highest form of verbal art and people who can produce this are often found in close proximity to people in power or important positions."

He believes praise poets will become a bigger part of business and cites the example of Sasol, who hired a praise poet to persuade the workers to come back to work. "Business can manipulate this, once they realise the emotional sway between workers and the poets," he says adding that this wouldn't be sustainable in the long term. "Authenticity is an important facet of poetry because the poet represents the middle ground between people in power and the people on the ground. If people cotton onto the fact that a poet has been bought over, then the poet will lose his credibility and be displaced."

Both Kaschula and Miller believe poets have a powerful role to play in business in terms of creating cultural understanding. They say poets are the voice of the people and can be used to influence people and convey messages to people in power about how workers feel about issues as disparate as working conditions or products.

They say poetry can bridge a gap between business, workers and consumers, as long as poets play the role of mediators and not propagandists.

One poet who has become a mainstay of corporate life and is entrenching himself with business leaders is Irish-born David Whyte. In an industrial conversation that largely centres on bottom-line performance, funding growth and increasing turnover, Whyte has introduced a new lexicon that speaks to the heart and soul. Using poetry to bring understanding to the process of change, he has helped clients such as Bristol-Myers Squibb, American Express, Boeing, Kodak, Toyota and Nedcor to understand individual and organisational creativity, and apply that understanding to vitalise and transform the workplace.