Traditions is an annual ‘travelling event’ that brings together scholars, writers, artists, activists, business people, policy makers, and others interested in traditions. Traditions is part of the University of South Africa’s Institute for Social and Health Sciences’ Changing Traditions Project which is a transdisciplinary, international, and Africa-centred undertaking that intends to turn around the areas of wealth, identity, peace, and equality. Changing Traditions, in turn, is part of the Programme on Traditions and Transformation (POTT).

This project conceives ‘tradition’ as the transmission of ideas, conventions, and practices across generations. While traditions are commonly understood as stable and fixed social practices, this project chooses to recognise traditions as dynamically interpreted over time, according to the context. This view allows for a better understanding of traditions in the context of modernity which is both dynamic and unstable. This said, traditions are usually attached to highly contested values and practices and often regarded as unquestionable and legitimate practices. Some traditions may result in unfavourable effects while others may lead to positive outcomes for oneself and others. As such, traditions are highly influential and pervasive and, in turn, powerful. Thus, it is important to both understand and acknowledge how traditions shape individual lives, societies and more broadly the world. Such an acknowledgement allows for negative consequences of traditions to be challenged and altered and for positive consequences to be promoted and enhanced. Moreover, understanding the historical foundations of traditions leads to a deeper understanding of traditions as they are in the present.
As part of the process of unpacking some of these issues, Traditions 1 aimed to elicit thinking and dialogue on a number of matters, including addressing questions such as:

What African traditions exist around wealth-building in families, communities, societies, and nations; and if none exist how can we build them?

What African traditions are available regarding making positive identities for persons, families, communities, societies, and nations; and if none are available how can we develop them?

What African traditions are there in respect of making and building peace, safety and non-violence for persons, dyadic relationships, families, communities, societies, and nations; and if such traditions are unavailable, is it possible to create them?

What do African traditions have to say about sexual and gender equality between persons and in families, communities, societies, and nations; and if there are positive traditions, can they be built?

Traditions 1 was hosted on the 18th and 19th of November 2009 at the Soweto Hotel/Johannesburg Tourism in Kliptown, Soweto. Soweto is possibly the best well-known black urban conurbation in the world. It is the largest black township in South Africa and it is also the place where two Nobel Peace Prize winners, the first and former President of South Africa Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and the former Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Mpilo Tutu, used to live. Soweto is a space where many traditions still continue to be produced, reproduced and sustained. It is also a place marked by a history of racial dispossession, oppression, inequality and violence. These issues evident in Soweto are integral to the Changing Traditions Project and thus it was a particularly poignant space to host the first pitso.

Participants at Traditions 1. Right to Left: Shahnaaz Suffla, Yaba Badoe, Muff Anderson, Kgamadi Kometsi, Mohamed Seedat, Tholene Sodi, Mbuyiselo Botha, Kopano Ratele, Tom Sengani. Front Row Sitting: Umesh Bawa, Cedric Nunn
The two-day event brought together a diverse range of individuals from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds, including filmmakers, scholars, activists, researchers, journalists, actors, and theatre directors. The event was opened by the Dean of the College of Human Sciences at Unisa, Professor Rosemary Moeketsi, who delivered a powerful and heartfelt opening address. She was followed by Professor Kopano Ratele, the project leader of the Changing Traditions Project, who gave the introductory presentation to the pitso which established the importance of traditions and the necessity of continually engaging with them. Thereafter, Yabba Badoe, a Ghanaian filmmaker based in England, spoke about the journey of making her stirring film titled The Witches of Gambaga. The short version of the film was screened at the pitso and this generated discussion, debate and critical engagement from the attendees. Other speakers included Professor Bhekizizwe Peterson of the University of Witwatersrand, Dr Kgamadi Kometsi of the South African Human Rights Commission, Willy Nel of North West University, Vuyelwa Mtikulu of Setshaba Research Centre, and Dr Tom Sengani of Unisa.

The event culminated in the performance of a play titled ID Pending that was directed by Warren Nebe and performed by Atandwa Kani and Nat Ramavhulana. This was highly effective in relaying the issues around identity, culture and tradition. This play also proved to be a humorous and entertaining finale to the proceedings.

Post-conference discussions and forums have demonstrated that Traditions 1 has tapped into a current that is both deep and strong. There is a definite need to continue to challenge, build and enhance social, economic, political and cultural traditions in South Africa. Traditions 1 can and should be used as a foundation for future meaningful engagements concerned with traditions. It also lays the groundwork
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for important academic, social, and political discussion that has meaning for South Africa as well as for Africa more broadly.

Kopano Ratele (left), ISHS, UNISA, and Mbuyiselo Botha (right), Sonke Gender Justice at Traditions 1.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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