

WRITERS, musicians and artists should use their typewriters, pianos and paintbrushes as weapons in the struggle for change in South Africa.

This message emerged from the symposium on "Culture and Resistance" which took place at the University of Botswana in Gaborone last week.

Over 500 artists — writers, musicians, photographers, painters and film-makers — came to the symposium from as far afield as Nairobi and Guguletu. Mostly South Africans of a variety of cultures, colours and creeds, they ranged from the famous to the unknown, from Nadine Gordimer and Dollar Brand to a little-known Cape Town mime group.

The theme of the week-long symposium was the duty of artists to ally themselves with the forces opposing discrimination and exploitation in South Africa, a society in conflict. Much of the debate centred around how artists could use their talents and skills to work for change and to promote an alternative culture.

The "ivory tower" artist, removed from society and dabbling in "art for art's sake", was scorned. Artists, at the very least, should use their paintbrushes, typewriters and cameras to reflect the social and political fabric of their communities, whether they be black or white.

Some felt artists, who were constantly referred to as "cultural workers", should actively involve themselves in political campaigns, using their skills to write pamphlets and draw posters.

A strong feature was that it was a conference in exile — South Africans discussing South African culture beyond South Africa's borders.

This meant discussion could proceed uninhibited by South Africa's censorship and security laws and exiled artists could participate. And some of these exiles — such as writer Mongane Wally Serote, musicians Dollar Brand and Hugh Masekela and artist Gavin Jantjies — embody some of the most remarkable talent South Africa has produced.

Painting a political picture . . .

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Over 500 artists in different fields converged on Gaborone in Botswana last week for a symposium on "Culture and Resistance" in South Africa — a historic gathering of skilled people drawn together by a common purpose. LIZ MCGREGOR reports.

The pathos of the exile's position was strongly brought home. South Africa was continually referred to as "home" by people who haven't been here for over 20 years and songs and poems about being exiled were sung and recited.

Although various speakers echoed a range of political positions, the only clear line coming from most delegates was an interest in art and a keen political awareness. The few who were there for the "joll" — to hear the music, to meet new people and to bask in the Botswana sun — seemed rather daunted by the seriousness of it all.

One of the major political divisions was between a group espousing a Black Consciousness philosophy and those who believed in non-racialism. Some of the speakers who live in exile openly identified themselves with the banned African National Congress and the ANC policy of non-racialism.

The prevailing view was

that although race should not count, black writers, musicians and photographers should reflect their own experiences and their own communities. This inevitably meant black artists would express what it means to be black in South Africa.

However, at least one panelist rejected the idea of any form of co-operation with whites and at the last session, several Black Consciousness exponents walked out rather than vote on a resolution together with whites.

Some black speakers invited debate with whites. During a session on poetry, Cape Town poet James Matthews asked whites in the audience how they reacted to "militant black poetry".

Whites replied that they accepted that blacks should reflect their experience of racial discrimination, although adding the rider that they feared the anger and violence which characterised such work.

Culture was very broadly

defined as being all the forces in society which mould people. Thus a black mother bringing up her child to accept that he or she would be discriminated against because of race was part of our culture. As was the type of music fed to people from radio stations and television, the films they watched and the way they danced.

Part of this culture was the portrayal of women as "passengers in the struggle". Several speakers said the main function of women as reflected in literature was to nurture and support men, who were the main protagonists of the "struggle".

Another constant theme was that an African culture should replace the "Western imperialist culture imposed on the people of Africa by the European colonisers".

One young black speaker told the symposium: "Gone are the days for writing about birds singing and walking through the daffodils — the times just don't allow it".

This was met by an appeal from one of the panelists, Ms Lindiwe Mabuza, that the works of European writers not be rejected "just because we as blacks were rejected in South Africa".

"Let us write about our blackness, affirm our identities, but let us also extract the best from other cultures and merge it with the best of our own," she said to loud applause.

Evaluating the symposium, exiled South African poet Mongane Wally Serote said its significance lay in the fact that artists had aligned themselves with the struggle for change.

There is an immense energy in South Africa, he said, and it is ready to be used creatively.