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IN SEARCH OF AN AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

An agenda for modernisation, neo-traditionalism or Africanisation?

Ineke van Kessel

A search for the African Renaissance, the present buzzword in South Africa, produces a wide variety of meanings. Searching the web results in several hits under Renaissance Incorporated: the African Renaissance as marketing device. Searching South African bookshops leads predictably to the section 'Politics' or 'Current Affairs', again to 'Business', but also to 'Religion': the African Renaissance as ideological and spiritual beacon, as a political programme for Thabo Mbeki's government, an instrument of foreign policy, Africa's response to globalisation, a marketing strategy and a 'back to roots' recipe for moral regeneration. African Renaissance conferences resonate with pan-African nostalgia and romanticised visions of Africa's heritage and lost empires. Traditional chiefs evoke the African Renaissance to safeguard their power and privilege: the African Renaissance as an instrument of neo-traditionalism.

So what's new? The African Renaissance has been proclaimed for more than a century. The most widespread wave of Renaissance announcements coincided with the decade of African independence in the 1960s. The latest Renaissance revival emerged when Nelson Mandela, newly elected as President of South Africa, addressed the Organisation of African Unity in 1994. Applauded by the gathered dignitaries in Tunis, he announced the advent of the African Renaissance. Subsequently, the African Renaissance has become the trademark of Thabo Mbeki's government. Many South African adepts of the Renaissance seem remarkably unaware of the long pedigree of the African Renaissance and previous debates among African intellectuals, demonstrating the continuing intellectual isolation of South Africa on the African continent.

What is the meaning and significance of the South African version of the African Renaissance? What is on the Renaissance agenda? And who is included or excluded in the notion 'African'? This chapter explores three interpretations of the African Renaissance: as an agenda for modernisation, an agenda for neo-traditionalism, and an agenda for Africanisation.

In all three cases, the African Renaissance is used to fill an ideological vacuum in the post-Cold War world. The African National Congress, as the ruling party in South Africa, is in need of a new legitimising ideology. As a liberation movement, the ANC-in-exile adopted a rather orthodox brand of Marxism, although it was officially never a socialist movement. Once in government, the

ANC elite underwent a rapid conversion to market economics. Thabo Mbeki allowed his membership of the South African Communist Party –formerly the hallmark of the chosen few in ANC ranks- to lapse quietly. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (a social-democratic type of government program focusing on basic needs) was quietly shelved after only two years in power. Under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, the proclaimed ideal for South Africa was the 'rainbow nation', a poetic image of unity in diversity, inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The New South Africa would be a model of racial harmony, culturally diverse yet jointly engaged in the great task of nation-building. Mandela's profile was that of the Great Conciliator. Particularly in the first half of his presidency, Mandela invested much time and energy in assuaging white fears. Among his more controversial gestures were the tea visits with Betsy Verwoerd, the widow of the architect of apartheid, and with the public prosecutor who had sought to have the death penalty imposed on him and his fellow activists in the 1960s. The West applauded in adoration but among black South Africans, grumbles of discontent gathered volume. After all, the liberation struggle was not fought to protect white privilege but to obtain a fair share for blacks. The time had come to shift priorities from white to black. Moreover, most whites showed little inclination to engage in the challenges of building a new society. Everybody was only too eager to be photographed with Mandela, as long as life could go on as before. The ideal of a rainbow nation stranded on a barrier of white egoism and black nationalism.

Addressing parliament in 1988, the then Deputy President Mbeki proclaimed that the project of reconciliation and nation-building had failed. South Africa, he stated, had not made the requisite progress towards nation-building and the construction of a non-racial society with a sense of common destiny. South Africa remained deeply divided, a country of two nations. According to Mbeki, one nation is white and prosperous, with ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational and communications infrastructure. The second and larger nation is black and poor, the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled. For this nation it is virtually impossible to exercise what in reality amounts to a theoretical right to equal opportunity, enshrined in the 1993 constitution. "And neither are we becoming one nation. Consequently, also, the objective of national reconciliation is not being realized."¹

According to Mbeki, white and rich South Africans are obviously not prepared to help underwrite the upliftment of black and poor South Africans. The call for the transformation of both public and private sector institutions and organisations, in particular to address the issue of racial representativity, has in many cases been resisted with determination. Whites doggedly oppose affirmative

action and proclaim that "black management in the public service equals inefficiency, corruption and a lowering of standards".²

The Mbeki government subsequently introduced equity legislation to promote affirmative actions policies in order to make both the public and the private sector representative of the South African population at large, in terms of race and gender. With hindsight, Mbeki's 'two nations' speech can be seen as landmark. It sealed the eclipse of the vision of a rainbow nation and announced a new, assertive black nationalism. Priorities have shifted from assuaging white fears to a forceful promotion of black advancement. The African Renaissance, adopted in 1997 as one of the fundamental pillars of the ANC's programme, resonates with an assertive black nationalism that was previously largely associated with the ideology of the rival Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).

Mbeki's Renaissance: A modernising mission

Mbeki's vision of Africa's rebirth was initially launched as a pan-African vision. In a speech to American businessmen in 1997, he stated that the continent was at last rising from depths of war, genocide, famine and bad government. "We see a new Zaire, perhaps with a new name, a new Zaire which shall be peaceful, democratic, prosperous, a defender of human rights, an exemplar of what the new Africa should be (...). But still, outside our continent, the perception persists that Africa remains as of old, torn by interminable conflict, unable to solve its problems, condemned to the netherworld."³ But when war flared up again in the Great Lakes region and Angola, Mbeki concentrated his efforts on his Renaissance mission within South Africa itself. He did not, however, lose his pan-African ambitions, as is evident from his Millennium Africa Renaissance Programme, which he presented to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2001. This programme, having won the support of the leaders of Nigeria and Algeria and having merged to some extent with a rival initiative from President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, was adopted by the newly launched African Union at its inaugural summit in Lusaka in July 2001.

Mbeki's Renaissance is a secular modernising programme that is political and economic in focus and that pays comparatively little attention to cultural dimensions. Among the priorities are democratisation, good governance, anti-corruption campaigns, economic growth, poverty reduction and foreign investment. Mbeki's vision of the African Renaissance includes joining the information superhighway, the emancipation of women, debt cancellation, improved access to international market for African products and sustainable development.

Mbeki's vision is inspired by a largely mythological interpretation of African history, by "the rediscovery of our soul, captured and made permanently available

in the great works of creativity represented by the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the stone buildings of Axum and ruins of Carthage and Zimbabwe, the rock paintings of the San, the Benin bronzes and the African masks, the carvings of the Makonde and the stone sculptures of the Shona.”⁴

That is a truly pan-African vision. But what is the message conveyed by this mixed bag of monuments and art works, spanning the whole continent and several millennia? Which elements of Africa’s past can be used as building blocks for the future?

Africa’s common experience in effect began in the era of European colonisation. The history of precolonial Africa tells of civilisations and empires (such as Ashanti, the Zulu empire or the merchant cities along the trans-Sahara route), but there is no notion of a common African civilisation with a sense of common destiny. Here Africa’s history differs substantially from Europe’s, where the Renaissance borrowed its inspiration from Greco-Roman civilisation, that had laid the infrastructure for the spread of Christianity. Europe’s Renaissance could draw on a common heritage. In the history of the African continent, the notion of ‘Africa’ and of Africans sharing a common destiny originates in the African diaspora.

Where can inspiration be found in Africa’s past for a programme focusing on democratisation, gender equality and accelerated economic development? Mbeki proclaims that “the way forward must be informed by what is, after all, common to all African traditions: that the people must govern”.⁵

This claim is hard to swallow. After all, the pyramids of Egypt were not built by workers with trade union rights; most African states practised slavery, just like pre-modern societies elsewhere; Shaka Zulu was a military genius but definitely not a democrat even though Mbeki praises his courage, vision and fearlessness.

Is it perhaps unfair to analyse Mbeki’s programme from a Eurocentric vantage point? Is his vision inspired by a unique African genius? However, Mbeki explicitly rejects “the long-held dogma of African exceptionalism”, the notion of Africa as a curiosity, an exotic theme park on the margins of world history. “My people are not a peculiar species of humanity!”⁶ Mbeki called on fellow Africans to discard the notion that democracy and human rights are uniquely western concepts. Speaking at an African Renaissance conference in 1998, he blasted African despots and selfish elites.⁷ And in another speech in the same year he said: “The call for Africa’s renewal, for an African Renaissance is a call to rebellion. We must rebel against the tyrants and the dictators, those who seek to corrupt our societies and steal the wealth that belongs to the people. To be a true African is to be a rebel in the cause of the African Renaissance, whose success in the new century and millennium is one of the great history challenges of our time.”⁸

Small wonder that many African rulers maintain a safe distance from Mbeki's Renaissance. In 1998, a number of African ambassadors declined invitations to attend the first high-profile African Renaissance conference in South Africa. "They ask 'what's this African renaissance nonsense?'" complained leading organiser Thami Mazwai.⁹ Mbeki's vision differs in at least two important aspects from previous Renaissance philosophies, developed by previous generations of African intellectuals over the past century. His focus is on accelerated economic development, on joining the global economy, not on culture or the spirituality of the African soul as was common in previous Renaissance waves. Secondly, unlike his predecessors, Mbeki does not invoke a unique African genius.

In a previous generation, Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere and Kaunda based their visions of an African personality, *Négritude*, *Ujamaa* or African humanism on a supposedly unique African soul. Mbeki is not interested in notions of African uniqueness but in obtaining Africa's full share of universal progress. Addressing the African-European summit in 2000 in Cairo, the South African president stated that a strategic partnership between Europe and Africa ought to be built on a system of common values.¹⁰ On the other hand, Mbeki is not a blind believer in the promised land of globalisation. He criticises the belief in "the market as a modern god, a supernatural phenomenon to whose dictates everything human must bow in a spirit of powerlessness."¹¹

The African Renaissance has become a crucial concept of South Africa's foreign policy. While Mbeki's speeches are not antagonistic to globalisation, provided that Africa can join in on equal terms, an ANC discussion document on foreign policy projects the African Renaissance as an antidote to globalisation. The document entitled "Developing a Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy" states unambiguously that "the concept of an African Renaissance provides a powerful vision not only for the African continent but for the development of a just and equitable world order. It is for this very reason that an African Renaissance poses a threat to the strategy of globalising capitalism. In fact, globalisation contradicts the very agenda of the Renaissance. Therefore, the success of the Renaissance depends on the depths of and extent to which it challenges globalisation."¹²

Mbeki's views of the African Renaissance, as explained to numerous audiences from New York to Tokyo and Davos, are neither anti-capitalist nor anti-globalisation *per se*. However, his universalist views are not universally shared in South Africa, neither within his own ANC nor in black intellectual circles, where most of the African Renaissance debates are taking place. Many African intellectuals do indeed invoke a specifically African soul, a mind set inscrutable for outsiders. This culturalist interpretation fits the agenda of traditionalists and neo-traditionalists as well as Africanists.

African Renaissance as a legitimization for neo-traditionalism

A widespread popular understanding of the African Renaissance is of a movement calling for a return to one's 'roots'. As Eddy Maloka notes, "there is more and more interest in the public sphere in what are believed to be traditional African practices and beliefs. One element of this perspective is the notion of *ubuntu*, a concept that has been around for some years but has recently resumed more popularity."¹³ In this traditionalist understanding -or as Maloka labels it, a culturalist perspective- the African Renaissance becomes an exclusivist notion. "At the heart of the African Renaissance beats the pulse of *ubuntu*", stated Professor Pitika Ntuli, Director of the African Renaissance Institute of the University of Durban-Westville.¹⁴

Ubuntu refers to traditional African values such as a sense of community, hospitality, sharing and consensus seeking. It is widely advocated that these values ought to be preserved in the process of Africa's rebirth. But these values are common to the romantic self-image which is fostered by rural communities all over the world, as Willem van Vuuren notes in his critical assessment.¹⁵ There is in fact, very little that is uniquely African in the notion of *ubuntu*. Yet *ubuntu* in its current usage - a traditional sense of community among Africans- serves as a mechanism of exclusion. It is something that Africans have, and that whites do not. It underpins a more exclusivist understanding of the African Renaissance, based on values shared by black South Africans only. The traditionalist or culturalist perspective is also popular among black religious leaders, looking to Africa's heritage to found spiritual sustenance for their campaigns for moral renewal.¹⁶

While Mbeki's renaissance is an agenda for modernisation, such a renaissance is also popular with traditionalists who invoke Africa's heritage to entrench vested interests or to regain power and privileges. Chiefs, posing as standard bearers of African heritage, have made particularly adroit use of the African Renaissance discourse. At the outset of the 1990s, chiefs were widely perceived in ANC circles as feudal relics of a past age. If they were to be retained in the New South Africa, it would be in a marginal, largely ceremonial role. However, since 1994 the chiefs have made a remarkable comeback, demanding and obtaining a restoration of privileges and vastly improving their own financial remuneration in the name of African tradition and dignity. African tradition can and has been used by hereditary chiefs in their resistance against elected local government, which was denounced as something 'un-African'.

Invoking African tradition rarely spells good news for gender equality. But the quest for gender equality is an explicit theme in Mbeki's renaissance.

African Renaissance as an agenda for Africanisation

Is an African Renaissance for Africans only? "Simple logic dictates that only Africans can understand, declare, initiate, implement, commit themselves and lead and African Renaissance", claimed Professor William Makgoba, a leading Renaissance pundit, at a high-profile Renaissance conference in 1998. He voiced his concern about the scepticism raised in the media, the business sector and universities, all unwilling "to rally behind these calls of being African".¹⁷

Who is an African? For Mbeki, 'African' is not a racial category. In a landmark speech marking the passing of the new constitution by parliament, Mbeki emphasised the constitutional principle that Africans are not defined by race, colour, gender or historical roots. In this speech, Mbeki's definition of an African is emphatically inclusive. 'Africans' are the descendants of the Khoi and the San, the Malay slaves, the European migrants, the African warriors, the victims of the concentration camps of the Boer War and the contract labourers recruited in India.¹⁸ But Mbeki's speech did not calm minorities who fear being excluded from the benefits of an African Renaissance. Prominent Afrikaners, including Frederik van Zyl Slabbert and Breyten Breytenbach, stated their concern that an African Renaissance promises a future for black South Africans only. They advocate a more inclusive ideology, in which Afrikaners can be defined as Africans as well. Mbeki's statement obviously cannot be taken as the final word on 'African-ness'.

That is not surprising. In popular discourse, the African Renaissance is often understood as a 'blacks only' thing. Moreover, current discourse has narrowed the meaning of 'blacks' to black Africans only, thus reverting a decades-old move towards a more inclusive notion of blacks. From the days of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement, African South Africans have largely accepted 'oppressed minorities', meaning Coloureds and Indians, as fellow blacks. Although current affirmative action policies recognise Coloureds and Indians as 'previously disadvantaged', many Africans no longer consider these minorities - who suffered disadvantage under apartheid, but to a lesser extent than Africans- as fellow blacks.

With the non-racial, colour-blind tradition of socialism on the decline and an assertive black nationalism on the rise, the African Renaissance can easily be harnessed as a vehicle for a thorough process of Africanisation and African advancement. The flagbearers of an outspoken black nationalism, inside and outside the ANC, see a future for whites, coloureds and Indians only if and when these minorities are prepared to accept a subordinate position under African leadership. An ANC discussion document entitled "Theses on the National Question" (1997) proclaimed the need for a "permanent struggle to ensure African hegemony, al be it in the context of a multicultural and non-racial society". This

document expresses doubts as to the usefulness of the image of a 'rainbow nation' in the struggle to ensure African hegemony.¹⁹

Prominent black intellectuals perceive national reconciliation and transformation no longer as supplementary but as contradictory notions: "reconciliation versus transformation".²⁰ Transformation no longer refers to a broad process of democratisation of state and society –including racial representativity– as it did at the beginning of the 1990s. Its current meaning is all too often narrowed down to a process of Africanisation. For leading Renaissance advocates such as Makgoba and Mazwai, 'African' means black, or at the very least, a total identification with 'blacks'. The African Renaissance can be filled with virtually any content and is therefore readily adaptable to suit the cause of black advancement and black empowerment. In itself, these are laudable and necessary causes after centuries of white advancement and white economic empowerment. But being black is insufficient merit when it comes to building a more just society. In spite of the eloquent rhetoric about development and nation-building, a substantial part of the new black elite has quickly forgotten previous ideals of equitable development, honest government and upliftment of the poor. Collective ideals of democracy, participatory government and poverty reduction have been overtaken by individual aspirations. Presently, members of the new elite and those desiring to join the club, have set their hearts on having a BMW, five credit cards and a white secretary. Invoking the African Renaissance, they lay claim to the same privileges previously the monopoly of the white elite. But this type of African Renaissance would be void of any meaningful content.

Post-Apartheid South Africa shows little evidence of developing a distinct cultural identity. African heritage is readily invoked to justify certain policies and practices but successful blacks tend to emulate American or Afro-American lifestyles. Black and white spend their leisure time and their money in the ever-increasing number of megalomaniac shopping malls, a secluded world of shops, restaurants, cinemas, discos and casinos, guarded by armies of private security guards. Privatisation of public space seems an unstoppable process. Conspicuous consumption has become the hallmark of much of the new black elite, most of whom express precious little interest in either the past or the present of the African continent. The new elite draws its inspiration not from the Benin bronzes, the learned tradition of Ethiopia or the political institutions of pre-colonial Africa, but from American-style consumerism.

However, criticism of the African Renaissance is not limited to non-blacks who worry whether South Africa holds a future for them. Leftwing black intellectuals denounce Mbeki's African Renaissance as a cover for a neo-liberal agenda, a Trojan horse for the Washington Consensus. Africans outside South Africa fear the implications of a Pax Pretoriana, if Africa's economic powerhouse

is serious about its vocation in Africa. References to an African Renaissance are conspicuously absent from the New Africa Initiative adopted by the newly established African Union, although the document abounds with calls for 'renewal'.²¹

Purists reproach Mbeki for turning to Europe's heritage to dig up the concept of a Renaissance, instead of exploring Africa's own rich heritage. Professor M.B. Ramose advocates the symbolism of *mokoko* (cock, in Sotho) and *hungwe* (the mythological Zimbabwe bird). He announces the "time of the birds", a time when the ancestral gods of Africa remind Africans that a remedy of historical injustice by historical justice is long overdue. This is the "season of the return of the land to its original rightful owners, the period of reversion to unmodified and unencumbered sovereignty. It is the age of restitution and reparation to Africa."²²

And from all sides came of course claims that the notion of an African Renaissance is hopelessly romantic, considering that the African continent seems to have been virtually written off by the rest of the world.²³ However, as Africa veteran Colin Legum argues, there is nothing wrong with romantic realism. Quoting the poet Shelley ("Without dreams there is no glimpse of the future"), he reminds us that the ideals of equality and liberty that inspired great revolutions in Europe were just as hopelessly romantic.²⁴

The problem is not that Mbeki's Renaissance lacks historical accuracy and a clear political programme. His vision of Africa's rebirth can play a constructive role as an antidote to widespread Afro-pessimism. The flipside is that the African Renaissance can mean all things to all people. Void of content, it can easily be filled by those in search of an ideology to justify their own selfish pursuit of power and privilege. The African Renaissance could easily be hijacked by that segment of the black intelligentsia, business and political class that seeks to impose its own version of renewal: a narrow, exclusivist black African nationalism. Examples of withdrawal into a bastion of Africanist chauvinism include black academics who argue that African mathematics or science need not be tested with the criteria of 'western' science; politicians who accuse the media of unpatriotic behaviour when they criticise the government; journalists who believe that the ideals of the African Renaissance require that the media consult black experts only; and state officials and entrepreneurs who amass fabulous wealth within years or even months, believing themselves invulnerable behind the shield of Black Empowerment.

Critics can easily be silenced. Those who voice criticism or scepticism must be Afro-pessimists beyond hope, opponents of the national interest, enemies of Africa. If that scenario unfolds, the African Renaissance will be nothing but the facile justification of the careerism of a new black elite, demonstrating the same selfish greed and absence of social responsibility as their white predecessors.

Notes:

- ¹ "South Africa: Two Nations", in: Thabo Mbeki, *Africa: The Time Has Come. Selected Speeches*. Cape Town/Johannesburg: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1998, p. 72
- ² *ibid.*, p. 75
- ³ "Africa's Time Has Come", in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 201
- ⁴ "The African Renaissance" in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 299
- ⁵ "Africa's Time Has Come", in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 201
- ⁶ "The African Renaissance, South Africa and the World", in Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 241
- ⁷ "Prologue" in M.W. Makgoba, ed., *African Renaissance*. Cape Town/Sandton: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1999, pp. xiii-xxi
- ⁸ "The African Renaissance" in: Mbeki, *Africa*, p. 300
- ⁹ F. Haffajee, "Midwives behind African Renaissance Incorporated", *Mail and Guardian*, 2-8 October 1998.)
- ¹⁰ Statement of the President of the Republic of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, at the Africa-EU summit, Cairo 3-4 April 2000.
- ¹¹ "Prologue", in Makgoba, *African Renaissance*, p. xviii
- ¹² ANC, Developing a Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy, 1997
- ¹³ Eddy Maloka, "The South African 'African Renaissance' Debate: A Critique", in: Eddy Maloka and Elizabeth le Roux, eds., *Problematising the African Renaissance*. Pretoria: Africa Institute of South Africa, 2000, p. 5
- ¹⁴ Pitika Ntuli, "Who's Afraid of the African Renaissance?", in: *Indicator South Africa*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 16
- ¹⁵ Willem van Vuuren, "African Renaissance: A Monochrome or Rainbow Vision?" in: *Politeia*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2000), pp. 62-80
- ¹⁶ See for example: Mukanda Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance*. Pretoria: Actua Press, 2000.
- ¹⁷ Inter Press Service, 28 September 1998
- ¹⁸ "I am an African", in Mbeki, *Africa*, pp. 31-36
- ¹⁹ ANC, Theses on the National Question, ANC discussion document
- ²⁰ "Introduction" in: M.W. Makgoba, ed., *African Renaissance*. Cape Town/Sandton: Tafelberg/Mafube, 1999, p. vii
- ²¹ A New African Initiative, merger of the millennium partnership for the African Recovery Programme (MAP) and Omega Plan, July 2001. This document was adopted by the African Union, the successor organisation to the Organisation of African Unity, at the summit in July 2001 in Lusaka. Largely based on South Africa's MAP initiative, it also incorporates elements from Senegal's Omega Plan.
- ²² M.B. Ramose, "African Renaissance"-A Northbound Gaze", in: *Politeia*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2000), pp. 47-61
- ²³ See for example the cover story of the *Economist* on 13-19 May 2000: "Africa -The Lost Continent".
- ²⁴ Colin Legum, "Renaissance - Romantic Realism", *Politeia*, vol. 19, no 1 (2000), pp. 67-77.