Nelson Mandela in traditionele kledij.

THE POLITICS OF TRADITION IN AFRICA

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There is a very famous photograph, taken sometime in the late 1950s, of Nelson Mandela in the costume of a member of the Thembu aristocracy. Draped in a toga-like cloth which leaves much of his chest exposed - the photo is essentially a bust - he is wearing various arm rings and a necklace made of shells. It was widely distributed with the apparent approval of the ANC. Clearly it was saying two things. First it was announcing the fact that Mandela was a man whose background gave him the right to rule. He is, after all, a member of the Thembu royal family, as high an aristocrat as it is possible to be in South Africa without being a monarch. Thus by inheritance and by training during his youth he comes from the governing circles of the societies in the Transkei where he was brought up. Secondly, though, the photo probably was meant to make clear to those of conservative disposition that Mandela, and by extension the ANC, had not lost contact with their values, and that he was thus a man of both worlds, the old and the new.[1]

Such a photo would not be taken today, even though the messages are still apposite. The problem is that very much the same symbols are being used by Chief Mangosutho Buthelezi, of the Inkatha Freedom party and KwaZulu, the ANC's most dangerous African opponent. As aristocratic as Mandela, Buthelezi has been frequently seen and photographed in the leopard skins of the Zulu chiefs. His appeal is no longer to all South Africans but rather only to those who claim to be Zulu. While Mandela used the symbols of chieftainship as something universal within black South Africa, for Buthelezi those same symbols are becoming part of his ethnic message.[2] They are thus divisive, not inclusive.

This contrast is symbolic far beyond South Africa alone. Indeed it epitomises the problems which many African states have had confront in the past thirty years or so. One basic problem that they all faced at independence was the very fact that they had been dependent. They were new states. Their extents were the result of the colonial partition of the continent at the end of the last century, and often bore relatively little relationship to power relations or

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1   Fatima Meer, *Higher than Hope: a biography of Nelson Mandela* (London 1990) chs. 1 & 2.

2   Paul Forsyth, 'The past in the service of the present: the political use of history by Chief A.N.M.G. Buthelezi, 1951-1991', *South African Historical Journal* 26 (1992) 74-92; Gerhard Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood: Politics and ethnicity in South Africa* (Johannesburg 1992).

cultural divisions which had preceded the European conquest. Thus they had no history as coherent units, except for that which they may have developed during the nationalist struggle against the British, the French, the Portuguese or the Belgians. These struggles moreover had often been perfunctory, or in themselves divisive. In any case once the struggles had achieved their aim, the unity which they sometimes created needed other sources if it was to be maintained.

As always one of the most potent sources of symbolic unity was to be history. The states of modern Africa were to be the nations of the future. They were of course orientated towards the future. The state would become a nation by constructing a prosperous, just and developed society, in which all its citizens would share under the benevolent guidance of whoever happened to be its leader. As was so often stressed in the 1960s and 1970s, both by African politicians and by European and American academics, the nations of Africa were being built. But while a nation must perhaps take its legitimation outside the present, at least in part, that legitimation cannot only be in what is to come. That would require a collective act of faith beyond the reasonable. Such euphoric suspension of reason might be possible for a few months, even a few years, but would never survive the disappointments which even the most unrealistic of politicians knew would follow independence. The ties to bind the inhabitants of Africa's new states to each other - and, the cynic would say, to bind them in thraldom to their new leaders - had to be those of the past. As Ernest Renan wrote a century ago,

> La nation ... est l'aboutissant d'un long passé d'effors, de sacrifinces et de dévouements. Le culte des ancêtres est de tous le plus légitimes; les ancêtres nous ont faits ce que nous sommes. Un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire (j'entends de la véritable), voilà le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale.[3]

Renan wrote more. Nations not only need a history. They also need to get it wrong. "L'oubli, et je diraie même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation, et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger."[4] In the rest of this paper, I will examine a few of the creatively wrong ways in which the leaders of independent Africa have presented the history of the continent.

One word of caution is nevertheless in order. Living as he did at the end of the nineteenth century, Renan would have believed that it was possible to have a history that was not wrong. We now know otherwise, although we at least ought to know - *pace* vulgar postmodernism - that some histories are less wrong than others. In this, of course, there is a necessary tension between the academic historian and the politician. Professional historians, whether in Europe or in Africa, see part of their role as debunking myths, as showing how that which

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3   Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?', *Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan* (Paris n.d.)
     Vol. I, 904.
4   Ibidem, 891.

'Chief' Gatsha Buthelezi tijdens de 'Shaka herdenking'

was taken for granted was simply not true. In the process, they may end up making new myths, usually, and not coincidentally, consistent with their own political position. That, as they say, is another story. It is not usually part of their brief to make such myths, except when for reasons of self-preservation they announce themselves as keepers of the nation's memory. Politicians, on the other hand, are in the business of making myths. It is their part to construct the narratives by which their countries may live. If they succeed, then for a time, perhaps a generation, the myths they have made about the past and the present, and indeed about the future, will turn out to be thought true, even if they are known to be factually inaccurate.[5] In the early days of independence in Africa there were many myths to be made.

The contents of those myths varied greatly from country to country, of course. Some of them were concerned to heal the wounds which the independence process had caused. The classic example was the statement made by Jomo Kenyatta, first president of Kenya, that "we *all* fought for freedom."[6] This was only the case by the widest possible definition of 'fought', as Kenyatta well knew. There were many, both among Kenyatta's own closest colleagues and among his opponents, who owed their pre-eminence to the fact that they had *not* fought the British, but had collaborated with them against the Mau Mau guerillas, or had taken up the space from which Mau Mau and those associated with it had been cleared.

In general, though, there were two sorts of myths about the past which the leaders of the new states of Africa attempted to forge. The first was the myth of the glorious past. Europeans had so often told Africans that they had no history. Until the coming of the Europeans, it was said, Africa had known only the "unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes", to use once again the famous denigration made by the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, which hundreds of historians of Africa have used as a *pispaaltje*.[7] When there were unequivocal signs of an African past which could not be ignored, such as the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, European colonists did all they could to annex them, in this case by proclaiming that the ruins had been built by earlier colonists, Phoenicians for instance, and that the ruin of the civilisation that had built them had been caused by the intermingling of the colonists with degenera-

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5   In any case, critics should remember Francis Crick's comment that any theory which accounts for all the facts cannot be correct, since some of the facts themselves are bound to be wrong.

6   Cited in John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: the Problem' in: Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London 1992) 265.

7   Hugh Trevor Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London 1965) 9.

te Africans.[8] It was against this sort of denigration that both the first generation of historians of Africa and the nationalist politicians had to contend.

Politicians were hungry if selective consumers of historians' discoveries about the African past. They were of course not interested in the revelations about the African role in the slave trade to the New World, nor in stories about African collaboration with the colonisers. What they needed, and what they found, were heroes and examples. The heroes would be the heroes of African resistance to colonial conquest. The link from Samori Touré, who led the attempts to keep the French out of much of West Africa, to his descendant Sekou Touré, the first president of the Republic of Guinea, was repeatedly stressed. Maji Maji, the revolt against the Germans in early colonial Tanganyika, was seen as a forerunner of TANU, the new nationalist party, although at the same time people were careful to stress the differences, and to make clear that adherence to TANU would not end in a massacre as Maji Maji had done.[9] Much the same sort of process went on in what was then Rhodesia, where a close connection was made between the uprising against the British South Africa Company in 1896-7 and that against the Smith regime after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence. The two wars are still known as the first and the second Chimurenga, respectively. There was perhaps a shadow side to this particular episode, however. The same lessons were being drawn by the colonial security forces. Terence Ranger's classic nationalist history of the first Chimurenga, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia 1896 - 7: A study in African Resistance*,[10] could not be reprinted until after independence because it was being used as a text-book in counter-insurgency by the Rhodesian Army.

The examples which the new states could stress were of course the old states. Kwame Nkrumah is said to have based his dislike of anthropology on the famous collection of essays edited by Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard entitled *African Political Systems*.[11] This book, once the staple of all those who read about African politics, does not place its emphasis on the centralised politics of pre-colonial Africa, but rather on the stateless societies, and indeed in various of its contributions the statishness of even those states which are discussed is played down. For Nkrumah, this was one more example of Europeans denying the African past its glory. What was needed, then, was to stress that Africans had indeed created powerful states in the past, that these had contribu-

8   Henrika Kuklick, 'Contested Monuments: the politics of Archeology in Southern Africa' in: George W. Stocking (ed.), *Colonial situations: essays on the contextualization of ethnographic knowledge* (Madison, London 1991); Peter Garlake 'Prehistory and ideology in Zimbabwe' in: J.D.Y. Peel and Terence Ranger (eds.), *Past and Present in Zimbabwe* (Manchester 1983).

9   Terence Ranger, 'Connections between "primary resistance" movements and modern mass nationalism in East and Central Africa', *Journal of African History* 9 (1968).

10   (London 1967).

11   (London 1940).

ted to the wealth and status of their subjects, and thus that the new states of post-colonial Africa would also do so.

This was to create problems. It was all very well to stress the glories of pre-colonial states in the abstract. For a nationalist in the Gold Coast, the prime example of a flourishing pre-colonial state was Asante, which in the nineteenth century had dominated an area which was more or less equivalent to that of the British colony in the twentieth century. The problem, for Nkrumah, was that his main political adversaries were closely associated with Asante. The old kingdom had not disappeared into historical limbo, to be resurrected as a symbol as and when it was convenient. It was still a living political entity, with a specific ruling elite and an economic structure all of its own. To have placed too much emphasis on Asante in the myth construction for the new state would have had two undesired consequences. First, it would have privileged those who happened to be the opponents of the group of politicians who were achieving power in the 1950s. Secondly, it would have exacerbated sectional conflict within the country.

The answer which was found to this dilemma was to stress the country's connections with an ancient Africa which preceded the rise of Asante and could in no way cause problems for what was happening in the Gold Coast of the time. The result was the renaming of the country as Ghana. This referred to one of the ancient kingdoms of West Africa, which had flourished at the end of the first millennium A.D. and was regularly reported in Arabic sources. It was apparently not important for the new country that its name derived from a kingdom which was situated some thousands of kilometres to the north-west, with its capital probably in modern Mauritania, and which would not have had control over a single square metre of the modern country. Ghana was both glorious and neutral. A more suitable symbol can scarcely be imagined.

Analogous dilemmas faced many of the rulers of new African states, and can often be seen, as was the case with Ghana, in the names which were chosen for the new country. Thus the new rulers of Dahomey did not wish to have their subjects reminded of the old kingdom of that name. They thus adopted the designation of Bénin, which refers to the gulf of sea on which the country lies, and ultimately to the state now best known for the magnificent bronze sculpture which the British looted from it in 1897. That Benin city is several hundred kilometres east of Bénin (country), and in fact now a fairly minor place in Nigeria is really of no account. Dahomey had been a military monarchy which had waged war on many other inhabitants of the present territory and often had exported them as slaves. It was not a propitious symbol of the country's unity.

Again, Congo was too Belgian a name to Mobuto to tolerate when he came to power in that vast country, and perhaps more importantly, it referred to easily to the Bakongo, the people living between Kinshasa (as he also renamed Leopoldville) and the coast. The Bakongo, too, formed the power base of one of his opponents, Kasavubu. The Congo was thus to be renamed Zaire after what was thought to be the original name of the great river (but was in fact a Portugese designation.) Mobuto's counterparts to the north of the river appa-

rently had no such hang-ups, and maintained the colonial name of both river and country - they also most unusually retained the name of the capital city, Brazzaville, which glorifies the founder of the French colonialism in the region; perhaps, any alternative would have been too divisive so that it was better to leave well alone.

In essence, then, all these attempts to legitimate new African states on the basis of a heroic or glorious past had to face similar problems. Whenever the past was still alive, it did not vote for the nationality of the new state, but for that of some other group, usually one denigrated as a tribe. To the extent to which the nation and the tribe were in conflict for the adherence of the people, and to which 'tribalism' was seen as an enemy - and many African countries did fall apart along ethnic fault lines - then such could not be tolerated. Indeed, it was often claimed that the new states' leaders were national, or indeed Pan-African in orientation, and their opponents were mere tribalists. Other myths would have to be found.

The most frequent choice was to fall back on the myth of merrie Africa.[12] This is the claim that the values that a particular individual may wish to propagate are those of African tradition, and as such inviolate. It might seem that tradition could only be used as a justification of conservative policies, but this is not the case. It was always possible to claim that the values in question had been submerged during the colonial period, and that their restoration, albeit in a new form, can provide for the guidance of Africa along the desired lines. Thus, to give one example, Julius Nyerere defended the policies of *Ujamaa*, as Tanzanian socialism was known, in these terms:

> By the use of the word 'ujamaa' [...] we state that for us socialism involves building on the foundation of our past, and building also to our own design, We are not importing a foreign ideology into Tanzania and trying to smother out distinctive social patterns with it. We have deliberately decided to grow, as a society, out of our own roots, but in a particular direction and towards a particular kind of objective. We are doing this by emphasizing certain characteristics of our traditional organization, and extending them so that they can embrace the possibilities of modern technology and enable us to meet the challenge of life in the twentieth century world.[13]

Ujamaa, as he explains, actually means 'family-hood'. Thus Nyerere was claiming that the ideals of the African family and those of the socialist society which he wished to create were one. It was his hope - it turned out to be an illusion - that in Tanzania socialism would be created on the basis of the family values of rural African society. It was a clear use of a version of the African past in order to justify a version of the present and the future.

There have been a whole variety of variations on this theme. Some have been relatively benign. Africans, we have often been told, are "traditionally

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12   So called by A.G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London 1973) 10.
13   Julius K. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism/Uhuru na Ujamaa: a selection for writings and*

democratic" and believe in talking everything through until they have reached a compromise acceptable to all.[14] The scarcity of democratic governments, at least according to Western standards, would seem to prove the falsity of such a concept, but of course it could always be argued (probably no longer) that Western party structures can only give rise to confrontational politics, and that within one-party regimes discussion to a compromise was possible in a way which would be precluded by the clashes of open disputes.

Other uses of tradition have been less innocuous. The idea that African tradition does not permit "two bulls in a single kraal" has far too often led to the sanctioning of dictatorships and one-party government. More widely, African tradition has been used to justify the sexism of most modern African states. Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, expressed the matter very clearly.

> Custom and tradition have tended more to favour men than women, to promote men and their status and demote women in status, to erect men as masters of the home, village, clan and nation. [...] The general principle governing relationships between men and women has, in our traditional society, always been that of superiors and inferiors. Our society has consistently stood on the principle of masculine dominance - the principle that the man is the ruler and the woman his dependant and subject.[15]

From the context of this speech, at the opening of the First Zimbabwe Women's Seminar in 1979, it would seem as if Mugabe was here deploring tradition and stressing his government's commitment to doing away with it and giving women their rightful role in society and political life. This, though, has been a rare reaction. The same arguments can be used, and often have been used, to ridicule and denigrate those women who would challenge male exclusivity in the public sphere.

In this context, a detailed criticism of the historical basis of these claims is not in order. It is only necessary to state that Africa was always one of the main loci for the argument that 'tradition', as we now see it, is not something which has been there since time immemorial, but rather was 'invented' at some particular moment in the usually recent past.[16] In particular tribes, more widely ethnicities, and systems of customary law have been seen as colonial creations.[17] The inventors, of course, were those who came to profit by their

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14 For an example, see Randolphe Vigne, 'Past Personal', *South African Review of Books* 5, 2 (1993).

15 Cited in Stephanie Urdang, 'Women in national liberation movements' in: Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter (eds.), *African Women South of the Sahara* (London, New York 1984) 157.

16 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983), especially Terence Ranger 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa'.

17 E.g. John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanzania* (Cambridge 1979), especially the chapter entitled 'The creation of tribes'; Leroy Vail (ed.), *The creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London 1989); Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom and Social Order: The colonial experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge 1985).

creations, notably elderly men, who would make clear to those codifying their law that all power 'traditionally' was in the hands of elderly men.

For all that, the politics of tradition remain vitally intertwined with the politics of modern states. The classic recent example concerns Kenya. For six months in 1987, the country was convulsed by the question as where a leading lawyer, S.M. Otieno, should be buried, at the farm he shared with his wife outside Nairobi or at the place of his birth in Siaya in Western Kenya. In such bald terms, the question seems trivial, but in fact the matter at issue was whether a man could abdicate from the customs of his ethnic origin. Otieno had been born a Luo, but was married to a Kikuyu. His widow and his patrilineal clan both claimed him, and eventually the highest court in Kenya decided that African customs had to be upheld, and that the body belonged to his natal relatives. This was applauded - and had perhaps been orchestrated - by the President, Daniel Arap Moi. In part he was here playing the Luo and the Kikuyu off against each other, but at a deeper level he and the Kenyan courts were announcing that Kenya is a nation of tribes, just as once there was an 'Europe des patries'. There could be no supratribal elite, and thus also no multi-tribal coalition to bring down Arap Moi himself.[18]

It is possible to exaggerate. The next major debate in Kenya was apparently about Daniel, Darius and the Lions' den.[19] The ways in which this biblical episode allowed slightly coded discussion of the position of a tyrannical president should be clear. Nevertheless, whereas history was once seen as dangerous, precisely because it would fan the flames of tribal animosity, now, in some contexts at least, history and tradition - the two are after all inseparable - is used to maintain ethnic divisions. Kenya is not alone in this acceptance of ethnic divisions as constituting the essential building blocks of political life. Nigeria, among many others, had increasingly become a nation of tribes. The specific courses of politics over the last half-century have produced many different constellations to attack or to justify. History never provides easy predictions, in Africa as elsewhere. It can be used to provide the basis for a very wide range of expectations about the future.

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18 On the whole matter, see David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying SM: the politics of knowledge and the sociology of power in Africa* (Portsmouth, London 1992).
19 John Lonsdale in: Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying SM*, 110-111.