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African Renaissance:
The Politics of Return

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Abstract

On 8 May 1996, Thabo Mbeki made what, within the context of the politics of identity in South Africa, was regarded as a ground breaking speech in which he boldly declared: "I am an African." This predated a call for the 'African renaissance' in an address to the United States Corporation Council on Africa in 1997. Since then, the concept of the African renaissance has assumed a life of its own, not only within the borders of South Africa but throughout the African continent. The term and the idea of an African renaissance are not new. Neither is the pronouncement of an African identity an historic one since so many people have, over the centuries, publicly declared and identified themselves as Africans. This paper argues that the concept of the renaissance has since brought into sharp focus the post-Apartheid notion of the 'return'. Two conceptions about 'the return' are identified. The first is an Afro-pessimistic conception that construes the return as a regression to something similar to the Hobbesian 'state of nature' and thus retrogressive and oppressive and, the second, and opposite, conception interprets the return as necessary, and thus progressive, liberatory politics. It is argued that the former view smacks of distorted (apartheid's) representations, symptomatic of most western images of Africa and the African, a view driven by ideological and political motives desirous of halting and obstructing transformatory praxis. In defense of the libratory interpretation, an attempt is made to show, contra current views, that this interpretation is not conservative, nativist or essentialist but that, in line with Aime Cesaire's *Return to the Native Land* and Amilca Cabral's *Return to the Source* projects, it is directed at reconstructing and rehabilitating the African while forging an identity and authenticity thought to be appropriate to the exigencies of 'modern' existence.

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Introduction

On May 8 1996, President Nelson Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki made what, within the context of the politics of identity in South Africa, was regarded a ground breaking speech in which he boldly declared: "I am an African". This predated a call for the 'African renaissance' in an address to the United States Corporation Council on Africa in 1997.[1] Since then, the concept of the 'African renaissance' has captured the imagination of South Africa in particular and the African continent in general. The consequences have been several meetings, major conferences, newspaper debates, publications in academic journals, the establishment of a trust fund to encourage the renaissance spirit to flourish and, lately, a volume from the conference proceedings with the title: *African Renaissance: The New Struggle* (1999). Surely, the term and the idea of an African renaissance are not new. Neither is the pronouncement of an African identity historic since so many people have, over the centuries, publicly identified themselves as African. What makes Thabo Mbeki's articulations so important such that the parliamentary speech finds privileged space in academic journals, the media and even a book?[2]

The concept of the renaissance has since brought into sharp focus the post-apartheid notion of the 'return'. This concept was given symbolic, philosophical, political or moral articulation by the passing of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995. The Act prescribed the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the proceedings of which the TRC were dominated by the concept of the return: the return of exiles, the return of the thousands of missing bodies of people who were either murdered and disposed of by apartheid agents without the knowledge of families or mysteriously disappeared, or those who were buried in exile because their bodies were not allowed to enter the country even in death. Reconciliation, most people said, had the possibility to become a reality if and only if the dead bodies were returned to their proper home and to family for decent and dignified burial (Praeg, 1999)

Two conceptions about 'the return' are current. One construes 'the return' as a retrogression to something similar to the Hobbesian 'state of nature' and thus retrogressive and oppressive. The other interprets 'the return' as necessary and thus progressive, libratory politics. This paper argues that the former view smacks of distorted (apartheid) representations symptomatic of western images of Africa and the African, a view driven by ideological and political motives desirous of halting and obstructing transformatory praxis. In defense of the libratory interpretation, I shall attempt to show, contra current views, that this interpretation is not conservative nor nativist[3] but that, in line with Aime Cesaire's *Return to the Native Land*

and Amilca Cabral's *Return to the Source* projects, it represents the quest for and affirmation of African dignity. Contrary to the Hobbesian interpretation, I shall argue that the return represents a construal of Rousseau's state of innocence (nature), contentment and happiness. To achieve this, we shall first have to clear certain conceptual problems associated with the concept of African renaissance. The two constitutive terms in the phrase 'African renaissance' have each, in varying degrees, generated serious questions about their meanings and applicability. How do we understand these terms?

African

When one considers the broad idea of the African renaissance–African philosophy included–and the main point of emphasis in its articulation, it seems clear that one of the major problems that have so far dominated it is that of identity. But, identity is fundamentally a dialectical notion whose meaning makes sense only in the presence of an 'other' that is different from the self. Hence, identity politics invariably involves a bringing into being of difference. That is, identities are never achieved in isolation from other identities, but are always negotiated in relation to another. In Sartre's words, "it is by the very fact of being me that I exclude the Other. The Other is the one who excludes me by being himself, the one whom I exclude by being myself" (Sartre, 1956: 236). Identities, therefore, are directly supported by one another in relations of external reciprocity. The human condition occasions, as Lewis Gordon reminds us, two significant questions: "What are we?" and "what shall we do?" These are, of course, not merely questions of identity and morality but also questions with ontological as well as teleological significance. Ontologically, the question addresses being and teleologically it focuses on what to become, that is, 'purpose' (Gordon, 2000: 7).

When Mbeki delivered the "I am an African" speech in Parliament at the adoption of the new South African Constitution, he self consciously reiterated what one of the founders of the African National Congress (ANC), Pixie ka Seme, declared in 1906. Seme proclaimed: "I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion" and he called for the "regeneration" of the African continent. But, in the 'new' South Africa, the question has been posed: "Who and what is an African?" Put differently, what is 'African' in African renaissance, African philosophy, African humanism, African personality, and so on? Invariably, 'African' in the apartheid South African social, political and cultural context was a racialized category. It was, and sometimes continues to, be commonly used in contrast to one of the three other groups, namely, coloured, Indian and Europeans (whites). Consequently, as one is black to the degree that one is not white or brown, one is similarly African to the degree that one is not

coloured, Indian or European. Therefore, every assertion of identity involves a choice that affects not just us but others as well.

By declaring himself an African, Mbeki raised serious questions about his own identity and the identity of a post-apartheid South Africa as a whole. Does the word 'African' still operate within a racialized context? What forms of identities are possible and available in post-apartheid South Africa? How can these identities be negotiated? Who has the power to decide who assumes a particular identity and who does not? In response to Mbeki's declaration, for example, the former president of apartheid South Africa, F.W. de Klerk retorted: "I am an African". The other white members of the opposition parties joined in declaring themselves African. Indeed, the whites of Dutch and French descent who landed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 and after, call themselves 'Afrikaners', a term which loosely translates to 'African'. Since identity requires and demands the positing of the other, not everyone can thus be an African. As Kwesi Kwaa Prah correctly observes, if everyone is an African, then no one is an African.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the term 'African' assumed a new meaning of a racial, cultural, geographical, political or ideological dimension. It is this multi-dimensionality that renders the question: "Who or what is an African" problematic. Let us listen to Mbeki define his Africanness:

> I am an African.... I owe my being to the Koi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape–they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen.... I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain, still, part of me.... In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East.... I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom....I come of those who were transported from India and China.... Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that–I am an African (Mbeki: 1998: 31–32).

It is evident from the above that Mbeki's conception of an African is broader and much more inclusive than Seme's conception of his own identity. He moves beyond Seme by de-racializing and de-ethnicizing his African identity, by attempting to encompass within it the full range of South Africa's historical experience that includes whites, Indians, coloureds, and the Khoi. Indeed, Mbeki reiterates that "The constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender or historical origin" (Mbeki, 1998: 3).

The geopolitical and non racial inclusiveness of Mbeki's definition of African, I suggest, its intentions notwithstanding, fails to de-ethnicize his

identity. Multi-ethnic and multi-racial states are today global phenomena, and South Africa is certainly not an exception. The Constitution itself explicitly recognizes racial and cultural identities. Thus, at another level, when Mbeki asserts his Africaness, it comes out as an assertion of cultural identity in a multi-cultural society whose reality is expressed by the metaphors of a 'rainbow nation'. In this sense, he makes a claim to a distinct cultural identity that posits European, Indian, and coloured cultural identities as different and other. Referring to the national question, Mbeki identified the Africans as a group, as the motive force behind transformation that has to organize among the whites, Indians and coloureds. The continued predominance of the national question, Mbeki argued: "...points to the amount of work we [Africans] still have to do in organising among the white community. To a certain extent the same reality applies to the Indian and Coloured communities" (Corrigan, 1999: 59).

Mbeki's conception of an African is thus marked by ambivalence and often contradictions. His identity emerged out of struggle but a subsequent struggle is definitely emerging over identity. This struggle is: Who and what is an African? Within this question, the issue of African philosophy in post-apartheid South Africa raises its head. Is philosophy in South Africa, African philosophy or philosophy in, from or for Africa? Is the question about who is an African superfluous because the word resists every attempt at definition? If so, is the attempt to define the term an example of G.E. Moore's naturalistic fallacy?

What does the word 'renaissance' mean? Can it be legitimately used in contexts other than Europe where it presumably had its original usage? Can African self-understanding be explicated in terms of and using European categories such as 'renaissance'? We talk of a 'European renaissance' with particular contextual locations such as the 'Italian renaissance' or German, French, or Spanish renaissance. Does it make sense to talk of 'African renaissance' in general or should we rather talk of Nigerian, Kenyan, Ethiopian, Zimbabwean, or South Africa renaissance? What constitutes a renaissance? Does it refer to industrial and economic growth; political independence and stability; literary and artistic productions; cultural, spiritual or moral renewal? What is the term's class location in the African context and is it an African élitist construction? We talk of the 'Italian renaissance', 'Harlem renaissance' and 'African renaissance', but what is the underlying common factor, the 'essence' so to speak, that makes all of them identifiable as 'renaissance'?

A conceptual analysis of the word 'renaissance" indicates that, since such events or processes are characterized by a passion for the revival of lost, marginalized or forgotten culture, philosophy, literature and science, the term 'renaissance' has often been understood as a 'return'. The prefix 're'

in the notion of the (re)turn is the guiding principle which, among others means 'going back to', 'again', 'once more', in short, the past. The reference here is to a kind of return to a previous state of being or a repeat of something desirable. Hence, African 'renaissance' is conceptually associated and defined in terms of words that begin with the prefix re, as expressed in (re)birth, (re)member, (re)discover, (re)define, (re)dress, (re)generate (re)awaken, (re)invent, (re)present or (re)turn. In his presidential report to the African National Congress (ANC), President Nelson Mandela defined the word 'renaissance' as 'rebirth, renewal, springing up anew', a definition which Mbeki himself embraces.

Let me state that there is more to defining the challenge of African renaissance than a focus on the problems of meaning and identity allow. For both the above problematic of characterization and identification evidently point towards two serious philosophical problems commonly associated with questions of the type 'What is X', namely, essentialism or nativism or what Praeg (1999) calls 'the politics of return'. Is the African renaissance a search for African authenticity? Is it some form of essentialist mystification construing African essence as genetically determined, unified and transnational, thus fostering the universalizing idea of a unified African identity? Since everyone uses the words constantly and already understands what they mean by them, is an attempt at definitions nothing more than ideological or political manoeuvring? I now argue that this is the case.

The Hobbesian Pessimism

The "Afrenaissance" as Ali Mazrui calls it, and its attendant notion of the return, has evoked some forms of anti-African or Afro-pessimist responses in which neo-Hobbesian influences are evident. Since the early 1990s, there has been a perceptible change in the attitude of black people in South Africa towards the rest of the continent. For the first time most black South Africans began to experience themselves as Africans. Mbeki's declaration of his identity captures the mood of the majority of the people. The African renaissance, as an expression of the quest for African self pride, identity and dignity, as a return, or what Amilca Cabral calls "re-Africanization", is thus perceived as the return to old African traditional values reminiscent of the pre-colonial period, what Patrick Chabal calls the "re-traditionalisation of Africa". This tendency, described by Chabal as "the accounts given recently of the ways in which Africans appear to outside observers to have 'gone back' to some 'age-old traditions' and the consequences of such regression for African politics" (Chabal, 1996: 32), is simplistically interpreted as a return to the Hobbesian 'state of nature'. This neo-Hobbesian perception is, of course, not only confined to South Africans but covers the entire continent of Africa. As Gerhard Schutte indicates: "White self-identification is

around a Western type identity as contrasted with an African one. Fears are raised that an Afrocentric South Africa will slip into the 'backwardness', violence and 'corruption' of 'other' African states" (2000: 217). A classic example of such Afro-pessimism with a heavy dose of Hobbesian flavour is the now popular Robert Kaplan essay, "The Coming Anarchy" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1994) in which he presents an apocalyptic Armageddon portrait of Africa.

In *The Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes posits one of the most influential theories of human nature and political evolution in Western political philosophy. He argued that when human beings lived in a "state of nature" which is the condition of human existence in the absence of legal authority, prior to the emergence of political and social institutions, life was extremely uncomfortable. The reason for this discomfort is that conditions were characterized by conflict, uncertainty, fear, and violence in which the survival and wellbeing of each individual is constantly threatened. This situation, Hobbes argues, is the product of a certain characteristic which human beings possess by nature: the desire to satisfy their appetites. He identifies a number of causes for this conflict: (1) competition, the desire of individuals for the same objects; (2) diffidence, the fear of others invading one_s objects of possession and, thus the pre-emption of this invasion; (3) power; and (4) glory. In the state of nature, therefore, there is "continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" because it is a war of all against all.

Since Hobbes simply assumed the state of nature to be the condition of human beings without a sovereign power to maintain law and order, it is evident that the sovereign as the giver and upholder of the law is necessary for peace and stability. Without a strong sovereign, Hobbes is convinced, the situation could be described as anarchic, pagan and savage since there would also be no right or wrong, no justice or injustice; in short, no law or morality: "To this war of every man against every man...nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice, have no place" (*Leviathan*, 188). The thrust of his argument here is that injustice entails the presence of some sort of law, but for law to be law there has to be a law giver and a law enforcer. However, in the state of nature there is no law giver therefore no law and no justice. Thus, whenever there is no law enforcer, such as the sovereign or an effective government to protect the rights of its citizens, a state of nature exists.

Given this state of affairs, rational human beings would naturally come to the conclusion that intervention is necessary because such conditions are not conducive for peaceful existence. A contract is thus entered into to create a commonwealth that would guarantee each individual not only peace and security but also law and order. However, the contract becomes nothing

if there is no sovereign or power to guarantee obedience to it. This guarantee is, however, not absolute precisely because the threat to peace and therefore a return to the bestial state of nature characterized by war and violence is always extant, as Praeg (1999) aptly captures the notion of the 'return'.

When, according to Hobbes, civil society collapses, we are not confronted by a completely incomprehensible *otherness,* the *other* to civil society. In the *Leviathan* [the] return is always already made understandable as *a return to the state of nature* (p.xii).

There is, thus, always a threat to civil order and to the peace attained through the social covenant; a threat of a return to the bestial state of nature, a state of anarchy, lawlessness, immorality and total disregard for human life. Because of this constant fear, not only a government but *a strong government*, Hobbes argues, is therefore essential.

Four distinct moments in the Hobbesian social contract emerge, namely: (1) the moment of the original state of nature; (2) the moment of intervention, i.e. the moment of contract negotiation; (3) the moment of the formation of civil society; and (4) the moment of a constant threat of a return to the state of nature (Praeg, 1999). This last moment of the threat of a break down of civil society is regarded by those who have recently been called 'Afro-pessimists'[4] as a unique and inherent characteristic of Africans, and African governments in particular.

A corollary of the above Hobbesian four moments may be found in the revisionist colonialist argument. Pre-colonial Africa is supposed to be equivalent to the state of nature; colonial conquest or the civilizing moment is the moment of intervention; the formation of civil society is the colonial rule; and the last dreaded moment, the moment of a threat of a return to the state of nature constitutes the threat of African takeover, and thus the inevitable return to the state of nature (the return to the source). This revisionist argument holds that Africa benefited from colonization because African countries have been worse off since independence. Indeed, Hegel reproduced the idea of a pre-colonial African "state of nature" and thus the necessity of colonizing Africa in his depiction of Africans as not only lacking in rational thought but also lawless, cannibalistic, politically orderless and incapable of ethical conduct. European intervention (colonial conquest) is, therefore, necessary to insert reason, morality, culture, mores and law and order into Africa. A variant of this revisionist argument is that apartheid promised a rationally administered state. As such, it stands as a special form of modernism and modernization. Thus apartheid, both as an ideology and as administrative practice, was one of the most civilizing systems. Its collapse, as Robert Thornton suggests, signaled the end of modernity and therefore a "return to the past", to tradition, primitivism, and the Hobbesian state of nature (Thornton, 1996: 141). Colonialism *qua* racial project, therefore, consolidated an intellectual

world in which the savagery of the state of nature became a feature of the colonized while the colonizers, being on a civilizing mission, appear exonerated from savage, primitive or barbaric inclinations of the state of nature. Hence, as Charles Mills argues, *"The Racial Contract began to rewrite the social contract"* (1997: 67. Italics original).

The 'racial contract', according to Mills, is a set of formal or informal agreements among some human beings, in particular, white men, in terms of which black people are identified as 'subpersons' and treated accordingly. This racial contract, Mills argues, grounds and supplements the social contract and is meant to justify and legitimize the continued subordination, oppression and exploitation of supposedly subpersons (non whites), considered to be by nature inferior, by persons who considered themselves superior: "The racialization of the contractarian apparatus thus manifests itself in a pre-sociopolitical state of nature that is real and permanent for nonwhites but...hypothetical for whites" (Mills, 1998: 129). The link between the social contract and the racial contract, according to Mills, is the state of nature, whose role, especially in white settler states such as South Africa, is primarily to demarcate the permanently pre-political or nonpolitical state of nonwhite people. Hence:

> The *establishment* of society...implies the denial that a society already existed; the creation of society *requires* the intervention of white men, who are thereby positioned as *already* sociopolitical beings. White men who are (definitionally) already part of society encounter nonwhites who are not, who are "savage" residents of a state of nature characterized in terms of wilderness, jungle, wasteland.... In the colonial case, admittedly preexisting but...deficient societies (decadent, stagnant, corrupt) are taken over and run for the "benefit" of nonwhite natives, who are deemed childlike, incapable of self-rule and handling their own affairs, and thus...the state (1997: 13).

Mills' observations about white settler states, found ideological articulation in Jim Peron's book, *Die, the Beloved Country,* a text which cleverly utilizes the title of Alan Paton's famous liberal anti-apartheid book *Cry, the Beloved Country.* Peron paints a Hobbesian picture of life in post-apartheid South Africa. He argues that since the predominantly black government of the African National Congress (ANC) took power, life in South Africa is not only annoying but also frightening. It is 'annoying' when little things like electricity, streetlights or telephones are either off or deliberately cut off by the city administrators or government agencies. It is 'frightening' when you realize that "the standard of living has declined. People's attitudes have changed. Hope is gone; replaced by *fear, anxiety, even horror*" (Peron, 1999: 2, Italics mine). "Fear, anxiety, even horror" stem from the fact that "The streets are controlled by the criminals.... South Africa has the highest murder rate in the world....Hospitals in South Africa have turned into nightmares. You risk your

life going to a government hospital...the decline of health care, the destruction of education, and many more problems..." (Peron, 1999: 7,2,4, 49). Even Indian people, Peron claims, are nostalgic for the good old apartheid days. "This is new. It wasn't this way a few years ago. But the government says it's a 'legacy of apartheid'" (1999: 2), says one Indian woman.

The ANC government, Peron further claims, has no power, capacity or will to guarantee obedience to law and order. "The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice, have no place" because not only have "the confidence levels in the police to handle this problem ...been dropping" (Peron, 1999: 99), but also, "It is common knowledge that the police are corrupt and often in the pay of criminal gangs" (Peron, 1999:104). Whenever there is no law enforcer and no competent government, a state of nature exists. In short, life in South Africa since the take over by the mainly African government, is increasingly becoming "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". At this point, as Charles Mills warns, the racial contract began to rewrite the social contract. South Africa, Peron (1999:20) concludes, is on the same road as "the rest of Africa". One wonders whether Peron's Africa includes Africa north of the Sahara. Be that as it may, for him, this state of affairs calls for the moment of intervention. It is time to "Fight Back!", to intervene, as the mainly white Democratic Party's electioneering slogan proclaimed during the 1999 general elections, before a decline to the Hobbesian state of nature. The criminals are Africans, that is, black, and the victims are white. Hence, "in the northern [white] suburbs of Johannesburg citizens are trying to fight back but the criminals have help from the ANC" (1999: 107), which is "one of the most blatantly racist political parties in the world today" (1999: 2). What would save South Africa from facing the same fate as the rest of Africa, that is, from receding to the state of nature, is intervention from whites because the Africans, as Marthinus van Schalkwyk said, "just cannot govern on their own" (Peron, 1999: 45).

The concept of the African renaissance as 'the return', therefore, conjures up images, especially in liberal and conservative circles, of a return to 'age-old traditions' of magic, superstition, tribal wars, lawlessness, and "re-traditionalisation", presumably characteristic of the pre-colonial African state of nature. Christopher Hitchens captures this interpretation in his essay, "Africa Adrift": "Africa as a continent has been cut adrift.... And every now and then a people collapses into a Medusa-like spasm of Hobbesian war, the war of all against all" (Hitchen, 1996: 8). This, then, is the current Hobbesian interpretation not only of Africa as a whole but recently, of post-apartheid South Africa under the ANC government.

Much of the view expressed by the Afro-pessimists is without doubt a correct factual account of events and phenomena prevalent in some African societies and cannot be denied: violence, tribalism, corruption, nepotism,

and poverty. To be sure, most Africans such as Marcien Towa, Abiola Irele and especially Paulin Hountondji in his provocative "Daily Life in Black Africa: Elements for a Critique" (Mudimbe, 1992), are critical of the state of affairs in Africa. Even Mbeki himself acknowledges the problems besetting the African continent from Lesotho to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Guinea Bissau, Algeria, Rwanda, etc. The point is that it is precisely because of these problems that the call for an African renaissance is made: "It is because of these pitiful souls, who are the casualties of destructive force for whose birth they are not to blame, that Africa needs her renaissance. Were they alive and assured that the blight of human made death had passed forever, we would have less need to call for that renaissance" (Mbeki, 1998: 297).

But very few of such critiques propose historical and relational analyses to demonstrate the plurality and complexity of causes that maintain these phenomena. Further, such criticisms ignore historical experience worldwide. In other words, these events and phenomena are not *sui generis* to Africa; they also happen in other parts of the world. What, however, is the problem with such Afro-pessimistic interpretations is the manner in which simplistic causalities and explanations are almost always applied on African crises but not anywhere else where similar conditions exist. According to Chabal, there is probably one explanation for this differential interpretation of African crisis, "hypocritical or even racist basis for such simplistic explanations of [events] in Africa" (Chabal, 1996: 31–32). Hence interpretations of Africa are based on Western imagination rather than on objective facts about the African condition, a fact emphasized by Chabal, "It has always been true that the West's vision of Africa has been the product of its own imagination rather than of a serious interest in what actually happens on the continent" (Chabal,1996:36) blows up into open war.

Let us consider the following real scenario described by Chris Landsberg which I think, deserves lengthy citation:

> Ethnic conflict, civil war, outside intervention, and a spreading crisis which threatens to engulf a whole region. After years of mutual hostility, tribal tension tribe move into the area with force, they ransack villages, taking away the young men, burning houses and driving people from their homes at gun point. A regional force decides to intervene, despite misgivings by some of its members, as the intervention starts, refugees pour across the borders, threatening to destabilise neighbouring states. The roads are clogged with an endless stream of humanity: old persons, children, women clutching babies and whatever bundles they can manage to carry. Trucks and bicycles laden with food and medicine get bogged down in waist-deep mud as aid organisations struggle to reach the refugees (Landsberg, 1999).

This scenario does sound and look familiar to most people. The pattern is immediately recognizable to the viewers of CNN, BBC or readers of *Time*

magazine and most western newspapers. Alas Landsberg cautions, "I am not talking about Africa. No! I am referring to Europe: to the former Yugoslavia and to Albania, Kazakstan and Chetchnya, Georgia and of course, Kosovo" (1999).

Nativism

A variant of the Hobbesian Afro-pessimist critique is the usual criticism of any articulation of the return as 'nativism' or 'essentialism', in the words of Ali Mazrui, "romantic gloriana" of the past. Romantic gloriana is the belief that pre-colonial Africa was "a complex civilization...which produced great Kings, impressive empires and elaborate technological skills" (Mazrui, 2000: 89), that is, a celebration of Africa's achievements. Indeed, the renaissance, understood as a 'return', requires the positing of a past, a previous state of affairs (e.g. civilization) other than the present one, to which we now decide or desire to return in thought–positive preservation of memory. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mbeki insists that Africans must engage in a positive preservation of memory by recalling everything that is good and inspiring in our past.

> The Africans of Egypt were in some instances, two thousand years ahead of the Europeans of Greece in the mastery of such subjects as geometry, trigonometry, algebra and chemistry....The beginning of our rebirth as a continent must be our own rediscovery of our soul captured and made permanency available in the great works of creativity represented by the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt, the stone buildings of Axum and the ruins of Carthage and Zimbabwe, the rock painting of the San, the Benin bronze (Mbeki, 1998: 299).[5]

Let us take up Benita Parry's incisive question: "Does revisiting the repositories of memory and cultural survivals in the cause of postcolonial refashioning have a fixed retrograde valency?" To put it differently: Can Mbeki be faulted by those who deplore nativist nostalgia?[6] At least not by Fanon who, even though a vehement opponent of the nativism of Negritude,[7] however supports the return to pre-colonial histories and cultures that have been systematically distorted and devalued by racism and colonialism:

> It was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native (1968: 210).

As Mamdani points out, an interesting similarity exists between the positive preservation of memory of the African renaissance and the European renaissance. The latter also aimed to transcend its dark ages by reappropriating the dim past of ancient Greece and Rome, "a past that Europe reap-

propriated and mythologised" – as Martin Bernal would later point out – "so as to strike into the future" (Makgoba, 1999: 125). African renaissance is thus a remembering through a search for origins and roots. This return to the source is a necessary itinerary in the quest for African dignity and identity and to reclaim, as Serequeberhan asserts, "the historicity of African existence" (1994: 101).

The fundamental problem with the 'nativism' critique is that it can only be the consequence of the delusion that culture, in its different ramifications, is an ancient, traditional changeless and hermeneutically sealed heritage which can be preserved intact more or less forever and for a people's moral and social upliftment (Oluwole, 1997: 34). Indeed, as Gyekye argues, every modern society is simultaneously "traditional" to the extent that it "maintains and cherishes values, practices outlooks, and institutions bequeathed to it by previous generations and all or much of which on normative grounds it takes pride in, boasts of, and builds on" (Gyekye, 1997: 217). Accordingly, modernity cannot justifiably be antithetical to antiquity or be supposed to be a rejection of the past. Modernity and antiquity are thus not discontinuous but maintain a certain relationship of continuity.

Further, no traditions–values, beliefs and practices of cultural past–are completely and absolutely worthless to modern conditions or inapplicable to modern circumstances. Indeed, some practices, artifacts and beliefs of the past are antiquated and thus useless for the present and therefore deserve to be jettisoned. But this does not mean that modernity totally rejects the past, that everything from antiquity is a relic of the past without benefit for modern existence. Gyekye offers a critique of what he calls "extreme antirevivalist" by approvingly citing Dugald Campbell: "The social status of equality observed by the primitive peoples of mankind is now the aim and ambition of the most highly civilized communities; and in central Africa we have a complete object lesson before us of the result of life under conditions of equality" (1997: 238).

If the past contains values, beliefs, social practices, habits, behavioural patterns and institutions of society which are not only in harmony with the present but can also positively enhance life in the future, then there is absolutely no reason why they cannot be revived or returned to by later generations. If geometry, trigonometry, algebra, chemistry, democracy or philosophy were part and parcel of the practices and values of the African past, if by some force of historical circumstances Africans lost their cultural past, then to return to the source in search of these highly valued and sought after practices and institutions is definitely not an attempt to resuscitate a heritage of past values irrelevant to the modernizing preoccupation of contemporary Africa; an abstract affirmation or vindication of a pre-colonial culture or history; a mere backward looking nostalgia (nostalgic gloriana); or an antiquarian return to

tradition. On the contrary, as Mamdani correctly argues, it is a genuine attempt to transcend Africa's dark ages, "to dig deep into its own past, so as to sculpt it – even mythologise it, but creatively–in order to turn it into a resource for a forward movement so decisive as finally to cut itself adrift from the Dark Ages" (Mamdani, 1999: 125). The phenomenon that we call the 'renaissance' in Western historical narrative developed in a similar fashion.

In his "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in Africa", Wamba-dia-Wamba calls for an "emancipative politics" that would enable Africans to "move away from the process of *moving away* from traditional society and internalizing the colonial state" (1992: 32). In other words, Wamba argues for the return to African traditional society and away from the sham internalization of the colonial political paradigm. But, this does not in any way mean that Wamba's call for a return is an argument for a complete and total return to that tradition now. On the other hand, the reference to the return to tradition means that it must function as a source from which to extract elements that will help in the construction of a legitimate and liberatory epistemological paradigm, relevant to the conditions in Africa at this historical juncture. Wamba-dia-Wamba recognizes the fact and reality of colonial influence on indigenous Africans. Accordingly, he cannot just ignore it and call for a complete return to an uncontaminated and undiluted cultural or political past. This historical reality of Africa is recognized by Africans generally, for example, Nkrumah states:

> In the new African renaissance, we place great emphasis on the presentation of history. Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventures. African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity; its history must be a mirror of that society, and the European contact must find its place in the history only as an African experience, even if a crucial one. That is to say, the European contact needs to be assessed and judged from the point of view of the principles animating African society, and from the point of view of the harmony and progress of this society (Nkrumah, 1970: 63).

The 're' of the renaissance is therefore, a discourse of historicity. There can be no relation to the past without an intentional regress to it. Human beings reach into the past by examining and interpreting their present existence. Thus the 're' refers directly to the past in the present that points to a future. Nkrumah captures this historicity in the above quotation. Mbeki articulates the same sentiment when he says: "A[s] we speak of an African Renaissance, we project both the past and the future" and elsewhere Mbeki continues, "we have to undertake a voyage of discovery into our own antecedents, our own past – as African". This call for a rebirth or rediscovery is a call to bracket and transcend the entire epoch of apartheid, colonialism, imperialism, slavery and, hopefully, racism that preceded the pres-

ent. In its historicity, the renaissance constitutes the 'politics of return' reminiscent of Aime Cesaire's notion of the "return to the native land" and Amilcar Cabral's "return to the source". It is, indeed, this return to the source that informed the Harlem renaissance. In their quest for racial identity and cultural roots, the Harlem renaissance writers, such as Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, made the notion of the return to the source a necessary path in the quest for identity and for reconstruction of the past.

Apart from being an historical return to antiquity, the notion of a renaissance also signifies a return to, and rediscovery of, the African self, of African subjectivity – as Mbeki's "I am an African" speech demonstrates – the self that is released from racial domination and fear instilled in the minds of the African people. To perpetuate imperial domination, racism and colonialism, the colonizers, according to Mbeki, "sought to enslave the African mind and to destroy the African soul". For this reason, the African renaissance is necessarily what Nkrumah calls "the emancipation of thought", Cabral describes as "reconversion of minds", Mbeki depicts as "new ways of thinking" and Abiola Irele characterizes as "a significant revolution of thought".

African Renaissance is directed at reconstructing and rehabilitating the African while forging an identity and authenticity thought to be appropriate to the exigencies of 'modern' existence. It is definitely not "a 'return' to a primordial 'truth' or some uncontaminated 'African *arche*'" (Serequeberhan 1994: 126), but a reawakening of the vigor and vitality of African existence. As Amilcar Cabral in his *Return to the Source* correctly points out, African renaissance as the return means that "what is to be returned to and critically appropriated is the vigor, vitality and ebullience of African existence which is reawakened by the anti-colonial struggle" (Serequeberhan, 1994: 126). This vigor would express itself in the production of new concepts, such that "[i]n thinking the historicity out of which it is being secreted, [African Renaissance/Philosophy] is concretely engaged in...working out 'new concepts'" (Serequeberhan,1994: 9) and confronting new challenges.

African Political Philosophy

If, as Nkrumah proclaims, the African renaissance is the emancipation of thought, what possibilities does it open for the future direction of African political thought? The emancipation of thought constitutes an historical situatedness in which thinking frees itself of all social and other limiting shackles and returns to itself as free thinking. It signals the manner in which Africans perceive themselves within modernity and proclaims the emergence of a new perception and redefinition of African problems within

the context of (post)colonial and (post)apartheid realities. This emancipation also implies the possible transcendence of alienation and the upsurge of what Biko refers to as "the coming into consciousness". From this emancipated thought, a rebirth occurs, a new African with new thinking, self-consciousness and self-knowledge comes into being. As a coming to consciousness, African renaissance is a product of and successor to pan-Africanism.

Long before the term, the idea of African renaissance was strongly present in the struggle of Africans in Africa and the diaspora against slavery, colonialism and racism. Consequently, African renaissance cannot just be a single event or an identifiable object but should be seen as a process that is historically grounded. From Delany, Crumwell, Du Bois, Alain Locke and Garvey to Pixie ka Seme, Nkrumah, Kenyatta, Azikiwe, Nyerere; from Luther King Jr., Fanon, C. L. R. James, Malcolm X, and Kwame Toure (Stockely Carmicheal) to Luthuli, Lumumba, Cabral, Mandela, Sobukwe, Biko and now Mbeki, the idea and the process of the renaissance has been kept alive. Its spirit has been nurtured and developed through political philosophies such as 'pan-Africanism', 'Consciencism', 'Negritude', 'Ujamaa', 'African Humanism', 'Black Consciousness', 'Afrocentricity' and now 'Africana philosophy'.

The articulation of and the reclamation of pan-Africanism in the form of a return to the source seems to be a fertile ground for future African philosophy, especially African political philosophy. The conditions that made pan-Africanism possible in the 18th and the 19th centuries, have not disappeared but merely exist in different, sometimes disguised, forms. Racism, colonialism, imperialism and slavery, to which Africans and people of African descent were subjected, have not been eradicated. Instead they have taken on new forms: neo-slavery, neoimperialism, neocolonialism and the new racism. The recognition that this undignified treatment is continuing by other means, added to the fact of a constantly shrinking global space, necessitates the strategic importance of a united front and a resolve to work together, collectively as Africans and Africans in diaspora and, therefore, to develop an Africana philosophy that would interrogate and challenge the assumptions constitutive of Western philosophical thinking in relation to Africans and people of African descent.

Africana philosophy, in the words of Lucius Outlaw, is that "gathering" or umbrella notion under which the philosophizing endeavours of persons of African, African American, African Caribbean and Africans in diaspora collectively engage in dialogue around issues of common experience and unifying philosophical interests. Africana philosophy therefore, is that endeavour which is, to use Leonard Harris's phrase, "philosophy born of struggle", a philosophy which is a product of, and in contest against,

oppression. The concrete realization of an Africana philosophy as a discursive field is already underway, thanks to the efforts of dedicate philosophers of African descent such as Lucius Outlaw, Paget Henry and Lewis R. Gordon. Outlaw has been theorizing about Africana philosophy for a long time and is responsible for its popularization. Lewis Gordon has recently edited a book by Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason*, in the "Books in the African Thought" series. His own contribution in the series is: *Existentia Africana:Understanding Africana Existential Thought*.

Notes

1   See Thabo Mbeki, "On African Renaissance" *African Philosophy*, 12,1999, "I am an African" in Mbeki, T. *Africa, The Time has Come: Selected Speeches*, Tafelberg: Mafube, 1999, pp. 5–10.

2   A long debate on the African renaissance has been conducted in the South African national newspapers, especially *The Star, The Mail and Guardian, The Sunday Independent, The Sunday Times, City Press, Business Day, Sowetan*, etc., national magazines such as *Tribute, Indicator South Africa, Enterprise*, etc. A large number of articles in academic journals and monographs have been written. See for example: Kornegay, F.A. and Landsberg, C. "Mayivuke iAfrika!: Can South Africa Lead an African Renaissance?" *International Relations Series*, 11 (1) Centre for Policy Studies: Johannesburg, 1998; "Phaphama iAfrika! The African Renaissance and Corporate South Africa" *Africa Security Review*, 7,(4),1998; Maloka, E. "African renaissance Reactionary?" *African Communist*, 147 (4), 1997. Vale, P. and Maseko, S. "South Africa and the African Renaissance" *International Affairs*, 72 (2) 1998 p.271–287, Kgapola, M., Seepe, S., Mthembu, T. "(De)constructing the African Renaissance Conference" *Tribute*, 1999, p.66–63; Katongole, E.M. "'African Renaissance' and the Challenges of Narrative Theology in Africa: Which Story/Whose Renaissance?" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 102, 1998, p.29–39; Teffo, J. "An African Renaissance: Could it be realized?" *Word and Action*, 37,1997, p.19–21; Makgoba, W. "A Basis for the African Renaissance: African Renaissance" *Enterprise*, 120, 1998, p.85–86, Schafer, J. "The African Renaissance in Mozambique" *Indicator South Africa*.

3   "At its most basic and contentious, nativism is the belief in an authentic ethnic identity, or the desire to return, after the catastrophe of colonialism, to an unsullied indigenous cultural tradition, as in various forms of cultural nationalism" (Appiah). A nativist argument, therefore, would involve a parody (imitation/exaggeration) of nostalgia for lost origins.

4   This word, associated with Jean-Francois Bayart, has become the buzzword in South Africa and is used, according to Abiola Irele, "to designate a general mood of despondency that pervades current scholarship on and reporting about Africa....[T]he current language of western scholarship invites rather to an unremittingly bleak view of Africa, now perceived as a continent without a future, racked as it is thought to be through its length and breadth, by the twin demona of political instability and economic deprivation" (19, July, 2000 africahome.com).

5   Mandela in a speech at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Tunis, returns to the African past thus:

> In the distant days of antiquity, a Roman sentenced an African city to death. Carthage must be destroyed! *Carthage delenda eat!* And Carthage was destroyed. Today as we wonder among its ruins, only our imagination and historical records enable us to appreciate its magnificence....And yet we can say this, that all human civilisation rests on foundations such as the ruins of the African city of Carthage. Its architectural remains, like the pyramids of Egypt, the sculptures of ancient Kingdom of Ghana and Mali and Benin, like the temples of Ethiopia, the Zimbabwe ruins and the rock paintings of the Kgalahadi of the Namib desert; all speak of Africa's contribution to the formation of civilization (quoted by Magubane, in Makgoba, 1999: 10–11).

6   For a sustained response to Appiah's critique of nativism, see Mosley(1995: 216–235).

7   It should be noted that Fanon's position on the importance of history and identity is somewhat ambivalent. It straddles between a proclamation of particularism and universalism, between a volarization and a devolarization of the cultural past, between the importance and valuelessness of history in the struggle for liberation. As Benita Parry observes, there are "persistent instabilities in Fanon's writings where proclamations of a future beyond ethnicity continue to be intercepted by affirmations of the immediate need to construct an insurgent black subjectivity" (Parry, 1996: 97). She argues that Fanon's writings function at a point of tension between cultural nationalism and transnationality without privileging one against the other.

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