

INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu and African Renaissance share a resonance of being weighty subjects which address fundamental and often ignored aspects of African development. At the same time, these concepts seem hopelessly vague, being used by everybody in a way that fits him or her best. So, seemingly, it would be advisable for academics to rather ignore such concepts altogether. Relevance and academic acceptability seem to be at odds here. However, academics should not be too parochial. Vague and ambiguous notions are widely and profitably used in many areas of social and professional life. Vagueness may even be an asset for key focalising and mobilising notions. A non-parochial approach would suggest that we take a serious look at the roles that the ideas of Ubuntu and African Renaissance fulfil in various fields of human activity. Concepts receive their meaning in practical use, as Wittgenstein taught us; these concepts may have diverse and inspiring uses. An open, broadminded but nevertheless critical approach is called for.

An attempt at such critical openness was the international seminar on "African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy" at the University of Groningen in May 2001. The present collection of papers results from this event. The seminar tried to relate a philosophical explication of the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu to the practical uses of these concepts in some real-life situations, ranging from South Africa's international activism for a plan to develop the African continent, via public life in South Africa and African business management innovation, to slum-dwellers' self-organisation in home-town associations and credit groups.

The result of this 'reflective inventory', as presented in the papers of this collection, will not be summarised in this introduction. Rather, it is attempted to put forward some provisional conclusions; conclusions not about the value of African Renaissance and Ubuntu philosophy as such, but about different strands in the discussion, key dilemma's and blind spots, as well as promises embodied in these ideas.

To begin with, the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu seem to function in at least two quite distinct worlds. One is political and administrative, where they are explicitly forward-looking ideas to inspire and legitimate the bold development efforts of the new South Africa. The other is cultural and philosophical, where these concepts refer to past and present African life-forms as a foundation for not just development, but African development. The meaning, the users, the contexts of application and the 'politics' of these concepts in both worlds are so different that there often seems to be only a thin line connecting them.

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The political use of the concepts focuses on issues of modernisation and liberation of the continent rather than on 'deep' cultural issues. For instance, when Mbeki states "I am an African" then he tries to avoid references to racial and cultural essences (although his listeners may pick up a different message). And the word "renaissance" itself is hardly made to refer to the rebirth of so-called traditional Africa, i.e. to a particularly African heritage that needs to be revived. It rather refers to a new Africa to be built upon the various heritages that come together in African reality today.

The most direct complications of the political concept of African Renaissance are political themselves. Two such complications stand out. Firstly, the self-appointed role of South Africa as vanguard and spokesperson for the whole continent. Such a role may be logical for the country that is strongest on the continent in many respects, but is it justified, is it appreciated, and can it be expected to succeed? Secondly, Mbeki may replicate mistakes made by African leaders in the 1970s who formulated 'national philosophies'. Such philosophies consistently turned out to be a legitimating ideology for the new ruling elite rather than philosophies that could survive the leaders who formulated them. How can the idea of an African Renaissance avoid such a fate?

The pages of the present collection trace some interesting aspects of this 'politics' of African Renaissance and Ubuntu. Thabo Mbeki's "I am an African" and Pricilla Jana's spirited introduction to the Millennium Action Plan show the strong humanitarian and progressive inspiration of African Renaissance. As a political project for the collective uplift of the continent it compares with the determined strivings of the first leaders of African independence in the 1960s, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah, for what they called a "New Africa". The article in this collection "Discourse of African Renaissance in African Intellectual History" retraces some of these connections and delves into the problem of spokespersonship of mission-statements for Africa. One can ask: Who speaks? On behalf of whom? And with whose's mandate? Even in the specific case of South Africa these questions are not misplaced. The actual resonance of the concepts of African Renaissance and Ubuntu in daily communication in South Africa seems to be limited. As the contribution to this collection "The Agenda of African Renaissance – Modernisation, Traditionalisation or Africanisation" notes, the idea of African Renaissance fares much better at the higher levels of national and international politics - and that of Ubuntu in business management circles – than in the public sphere, in pubs and in debates among friends. They fail, as yet, to raise the heated debates that questions of class, race or revolution raised twenty years ago.

The value within South Africa of the ideas of African Renaissance and Ubuntu may lie especially at the national level, in reconfirming the identity and

overall ambitions of the post-Apartheid state as focussed upon African emancipation, non-racialism, humanism and social justice. They can be considered examples of time-tested African ‘technologies of sociability’, as is noted in the article in this collection "Ubuntu and the Globalisation of African Thought". Such notions, then, function as instruments to overcome differences, and reconcile by creative redefinitions of identity; they can create a new moral community.

It is as yet unclear if the ‘technology of sociability’ will actually work in the case of present-day South Africa. From the point of view of the national leadership, the situation may command something like an ‘obligation to be optimistic’ in this regard. However, such may also have been the inspiration of Julius Nyerere when he implemented his idea of Ujamaa. Looking back at the Tanzanian experience, as is done in this collection in the article "Ujamaa, a Phantom", shows the possible pitfalls of such a view. Among these pitfalls are overestimating the possible impact of the proclaimed philosophy on the actual life of the people, and the legitimising role of the philosophy for the emerging new elite. Whatever lessons there may be learned from these experiences, a prominent one must be the need for continued open and critical assessments of ideas, and actual results of policies; the need for a political culture that is able to raise vital questions, expose where necessary, and correct. Particularly at this point South Africa may be taking a different course from most of its African predecessors. In these countries political leaders choose for (and effectively enforced) a political closure and control by the state of the public space. South Africa's open political culture is a vital asset for the success of an African Renaissance.

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The second, cultural use of the concepts African Renaissance and Ubuntu is especially challenging from an academic point of view. On the one hand, the concepts here highlight valuable aspects of African ways of life, principles and ideas that are often overlooked or ignored. Such indigenous cultural resources may be essential to build a solid development in Africa from indigenous 'roots'. Moreover, the message of the concepts goes far beyond utilitarian issues of "development" and touches on the very question of what it is to be an African. African Renaissance and Ubuntu are here a praise song, so to say, affirming an African identity in today's world. On the other hand, the cultural use of African Renaissance and Ubuntu carries a deeply critical message; it is also a battle cry. The simple act of putting forward these African ideas is an act of defining a counter-position to dominant 'Western' conceptions of development, of modernity, and of life as such.

As a battle cry, African Renaissance and Ubuntu hold all the promises of a non-western tradition that has been misread and marginalised in history, but that reclaims its place. The idea of a universal “modernity”, as the predefined horizon

for all of humanity, has lost most of its self-evidence over the past decades. The playing ground is in principle open now for other traditions to conceive of their modernity and to reassess their history and cultural resources in view of the historical challenges that they are confronted with. Ubuntu and African Renaissance represent the self-conscious African player on this post-modernity playing field. In this field they are not simply present in a neutral way. They are positioned, and position themselves, relative to others, in particular relative to dominant ideas from the West. The texts themselves tend to be structured in a bipolar way, namely by explaining what WE are by making a contrast with how THEY are. The bipolar order has its sociological aspects as well. The battle cry is most prominent where it serves identity politics in situations of social, cultural or racial polarisation. South Africa itself, as well as the USA, can serve as examples here.

As a praise song African Renaissance and Ubuntu are somewhat less situation-bound than in their role as critic. They connect to a history of over a century of intellectual and artistic endeavours to put Africa on a global cultural map dominated by Europe. Africans were not alone in such endeavours. Europeans in the tradition of the Romantic, from Mary Kingsley and the “Friends of Africa” in the early twentieth century till present-day critics of modernity and Enlightenment, share this urge to go back to the true African sources.

African Philosophy is one of the fields in which Ubuntu and African Renaissance are important instruments of cultural self-assertion. The classical debate in African philosophy between ‘academic’ or ‘modern’ philosophy and ‘ethnophilosophy’ is not so much about whether African philosophy should have roots in Africa; both sides agree on this. The contested question is whether the roots of African philosophy should consist of a direct cultural continuation of indigenous African traditions or consist of critical work concerned with Africa issues and practised by Africans. A number of African philosophers, such as Henry Odera Oruka, Kwasi Wiredu, and in this volume Dirk Louw, show that interesting intermediate courses can be followed between these two extremes. However, the pitfalls of one of the extremes, that of ethnophilosophy, are not easily avoided by a cultural discourse on African Renaissance or Ubuntu. This is shown by even a quick reading of the average text on Ubuntu that one finds when entering this term in the Google internet search machine (or a reading of texts in the tradition of Afrocentrism, for that matter). The pitfalls include the making of many empirical statements about African cultures without reference to empirical data, a lack of attention to the diversity of African cultures and processes of cultural change, and a tendency to table superficial stereotypes of both Africa and of its ‘other’ – Europe.

When such weaknesses are avoided, then the most interesting discussions of African Renaissance and Ubuntu emerge. This is often the case when the agenda of

a study is not simply to present the African culture to the reader, but when the agenda is to deal with contemporary problems from an African point of view. An excellent example of such a text is Kwasi Wiredu's defence of the basic principles of African consensus democracy for democracy today in his article "Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity."¹ In this collection, the article "Ubuntu as a Management Concept" represents the same open-minded focus on contemporary problems.

In short, whether it concerns the 'political' or the 'cultural' discourses on African Renaissance and Ubuntu, the key to fruitful use of these concepts seems to lie in critical debate and creative elaboration of African traditions. Here a "renaissance" is called for in a specific sense. In the European renaissance period the ambition of culture-makers was not to simply reinstate classical values, classical themes and classical ideals, but to surpass them. The promise of an African Renaissance may lie not in a fixation on African heritages as such, but in the ambition to re-appropriate them critically and creatively and so surpass them.

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Pieter Boele van Hensbroek
Editor

¹ Kwasi Wiredu, "Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity" in K. Wiredu, *Cultural universals and particulars*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1996)

I AM AN AFRICAN

Thabo Mbeki

Statement on behalf of the African National Congress on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill 1996, Cape Town, 8 May 1996

ON AN OCCASION such as this we should, perhaps, start from the beginning.

So let me begin.

I am an African.

I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the everchanging seasons that define the face of our native land.

My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter-day snows. It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine and melted in the heat of the midday sun.

The crack and the rumble of the summer thunders, lashed by startling lightning, have been causes both of trembling and of hope.

The fragrances of nature have been as pleasant to us as the sight of the wild blooms of the citizens of the veld.

The dramatic shapes of the Drakensberg, the soil-coloured waters of the Lekoa, iGqili noThukela, and the sands of the Kgalagadi have all been panels of the set on the natural stage on which we act out the foolish deeds of the theatre of our day.

At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.

A human presence among all these, a feature on the face of our native land thus defined, I know that none dare challenge me when I say: I am an African!

I owe my being to the Khoi 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, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result.

Today, as a country, we keep an audible silence about these ancestors of the generations that live, fearful to admit the horror of a former deed, seeking to obliterate from our memories a cruel occurrence which, in its remembering, should teach us not and never to be inhuman again.

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. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence. The stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slavemaster are a reminder embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done.

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 Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom.

My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert.

I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boer graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eye and suffers the suffering of a simple peasant folk: death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, a dream in ruins.

I am the child of Nongause. I am he who made it possible to trade in the world markets in diamonds, in gold, in the same food for which my stomach yearns.

I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence.

Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion, I shall claim that I am an African!

I have seen our country torn asunder as these, all of whom are my people, engaged one another in a titanic battle, the one to redress a wrong that had been caused by one to another, and the other to defend the indefensible.

I have seen what happens when one person has superiority of force over another, when the stronger appropriate to themselves the prerogative even to annul the injunction that God created all men and women in His image.

I know what it signifies when race and colour are used to determine who is human and who subhuman.

I have seen the destruction of all sense of self-esteem, the consequent striving to be what one is not, simply to acquire some of the benefits which those who had imposed themselves as masters had ensured that they enjoy.

I have experience of the situation in which race and colour is used to enrich some and impoverish the rest.

I have seen the corruption of minds and souls as a result of the pursuit of an ignoble effort to perpetrate a veritable crime against humanity.

I have seen concrete expression of the denial of the dignity of a human being emanating from the conscious, systemic and systematic oppressive and repressive activities of other human beings.

There the victims parade with no mask to hide the brutish reality - the beggars, the prostitutes, the street children, those who seek solace in substance abuse, those who have to steal to assuage hunger, those who have to lose their sanity because to be sane is to invite pain.

Perhaps the worst among these who are my people are those who have learnt to kill for a wage. To these the extent of death is directly proportional to their personal welfare.

And so, like pawns in the service of demented souls, they kill in furtherance of the political violence in KwaZulu-Natal. They murder the innocent in the taxi wars. They kill slowly or quickly in order to make profits from the illegal trade in narcotics. They are available for hire when husband wants to murder wife and wife, husband.

Among us prowl the products of our immoral and amoral past - killers who have no sense of the worth of human life; rapists who have absolute disdain for the women of our country; animals who would seek to benefit from the vulnerability of the children, the disabled and the old; the rapacious who brook no obstacle in their quest for self-enrichment.

All this I know and know to be true because I am an African!

Because of that, I am also able to state this fundamental truth: that I am born of a people who are heroes and heroines.

I am born of a people who would not tolerate oppression.

I am of a nation that would not allow that fear of death, torture, imprisonment, exile or persecution should result in the perpetuation of injustice.

The great masses who are our mother and father will not permit that the behaviour of the few results in the description of our country and people as barbaric. Patient because history is on their side, these masses do not despair because today the weather is bad. Nor do they turn triumphalist when, tomorrow, the sun shines. Whatever the circumstances they have lived through - and because of that experience - they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be.

We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African.

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 origins.

It is a firm assertion made by ourselves that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

It gives concrete expression to the sentiment we share as Africans, and will defend to the death, that the people shall govern.

It recognises the fact that the dignity of the individual is both an objective which society must pursue, and is a goal which cannot be separated from the material wellbeing of that individual.

It seeks to create the situation in which all our people shall be free from fear, including the fear of the oppression of one national group by another, the fear of the disempowerment of one social echelon by another, the fear of the use of state power to deny anybody their fundamental human rights, and the fear of tyranny.

It aims to open the doors so that those who were disadvantaged can assume their place in society as equals with their fellow human beings without regard to colour, race, gender, age or geographic dispersal.

It provides the opportunity to enable each one and all to state their views, promote them, strive for their implementation in the process of governance without fear that a contrary view will be met with repression.

It creates a law-governed society which shall be inimical to arbitrary rule.

It enables the resolution of conflicts by peaceful means rather than resort to force.

It rejoices in the diversity of our people and creates the space for all of us voluntarily to define ourselves as one people.

As an African, this is an achievement of which I am proud, proud without reservation and proud without any feeling of conceit.

Our sense of elevation at this moment also derives from the fact that this magnificent product is the unique creation of African hands and African minds. But it also constitutes a tribute to our loss of vanity that we could, despite the temptation to treat ourselves as an exceptional fragment of humanity, draw on the accumulated experience and wisdom of all humankind to define for ourselves what we want to be.

Together with the best in the world, we too are prone to pettiness, petulance, selfishness and short-sightedness. But it seems to have happened that we looked at ourselves and said the time had come that we made a superhuman effort to be other than human, to respond to the call to create for ourselves a glorious future, to remind ourselves of the Latin saying: *Gloria est conse9uenda* - *Glory* must be sought after!

Today it feels good to be an African.

It feels good that I can stand here as a South African and as a foot soldier of a titanic African army, the African National Congress, to say to all It feels good that I can stand here as a South African and as a foot soldier of a titanic African army, the African National Congress, to say to all processes we are concluding, to our outstanding compatriots who have presided over the birth of our founding document, to the negotiators who pitted their wits one against the other, to the stars who shone unseen as the management and administration of the Constitutional

Assembly, the advisers, experts and publicists, to the mass communication media, to our friends across the globe: Congratulations and well done!

I am an African.

I am born of the peoples of the continent of Africa.

The pain of the violent conflict that the peoples of Liberia, Somalia, the Sudan, Burundi and Algeria experience is a pain I also bear.

The dismal shame of poverty, suffering and human degradation of my continent is a blight that we share.

The blight on our happiness that derives from this and from our drift to the periphery of the ordering of human affairs leaves us in a persistent shadow of despair.

This is a savage road to which nobody should be condemned.

This thing that we have done today, in this small corner of a great continent that has contributed so decisively to the evolution of humanity, says that Africa rearms that she is continuing her rise from the ashes.

Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now!

Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace!

However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!

Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us say today: Nothing can stop us now!