

WHERE THERE IS NO VISION THE PEOPLE PERISH

Reflections on the African Renaissance



The African renaissance, like the European renaissance before it – a phenomenon that took upward of three centuries to spread across and benefit all of Europe – will lie in the realisation of each African country's potential.

By Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane

'One of the most important challenges facing Africa today is to achieve a comprehensive and sustained peace and ensure that we arrive at an enduring *Pax Africana*, for democracy and sustained development are possible only in conditions of peace and stability.' (Thabo Mbeki,

Democracy and Renaissance in Africa: In Search of an Enduring Pax Africana, Nigeria Institute of International Affairs, Abuja, 3 October 2000.)

An essential pursuit of any liberation struggle is the integration of the downtrodden and oppressed to their culture, language, history and

heritage. This aspect of liberation often takes a back seat to the attainment of political independence that can be little more than 'flag' independence. As theoreticians of the African Revolution such as Franz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Steve Bantu Biko point out, the most potent weapon in the armoury of the oppressor is the

mind of the oppressed. The realisation of political and even economic ends remains elusive without first decolonising the minds of the oppressed.

African renaissance: myth or reality?

One of the earliest references to the African renaissance by a South African leader, following the demise of Apartheid, appears in a speech by then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki to the Summit on attracting capital to Africa organised by the Corporate Council on Africa, held in Chantilly, Virginia, in the United States of America, from 19 to 22 April 1997, in which he said:

Those who have eyes to see let them see. The African renaissance is upon us. As we peer through the looking glass darkly, this may not be obvious. But it is upon us.¹

Since Mbeki first made the concept popular and raised the clarion call, there have been several gatherings and deliberations held in South Africa; and many articles and books have been written, all devoted to the subject. The African renaissance is ANC policy that informs its activities in government. In his report to the 50th National Conference of the ANC, December 1997, President Mandela summarised the principal aims of the African renaissance as follows:

The establishment of democratic political systems to ensure the accomplishment of the goal that 'the people shall govern';

Ensuring that these systems take into account African specifics so that, while being truly democratic and protective of human rights, they are nevertheless designed in ways which really ensure that political means can be used to address the competing interests of different social groups in each country;

Establishing the institutions and procedures which would enable the continent collectively to deal with questions of democracy, peace and stability;

Achieving sustainable economic development which results in the continuous improvement of the standards of living and the quality of life of the masses of the people;

Qualitatively changing Africa's

place in the world economy, so that it is free of the yoke of the international debt burden and no longer a supplier of raw materials and an importer of food and manufactured goods;

A rediscovery of Africa's creative past to recapture the people's cultures, encourage artistic creativity and restore popular involvement in both accessing and advancing science and technology;

Advancing in practical ways the objective of African unity; and

Strengthening the genuine independence of African countries and the continent in our relations with the major powers, and enhancing our collective role in the determination of the global

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system of governance in all fields, including politics, the economy, security, information and intellectual property, the environment and science and technology.

An African Renaissance Institute has been established and the concept has become a rallying point for numerous South Africans in many spheres of life, invoked and offered as the *raison d'être* for engaging in most activities of a social, cultural, economic, and political nature. It also underpins state policy. The expression reflects in some quarters a new orthodoxy that is embraced by politicians, academics and clerics, established business people and the *nouveau riche*, the new African elite. The bandwagon effect has been truly remarkable.

An exceedingly vexing series of questions, however, for exponents of the African renaissance is: What is African about the African renaissance; what constitutes its African essence? What are Africa's unique

characteristics, which are identical from one African country to the next and are not replicated elsewhere in the world? What are the distinguishing features of the African condition; and is there a single, formulaic Africa-centred response to the challenges identified?

Problems of war and peace and statehood in Algeria, Liberia, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Sudan are also problems of the breakaway republics of the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, Latin America, Europe, Asia etc. From China to Chile to Chechnya, from Peru to the Pacific islands, secessionist and pro-democracy movements litter the world's stage, along with the instability and the volatility that go with the terrain. One tally of wars around the world since Hiroshima and Nagasaki until the end of the millennium lists no fewer than 175, from Afghanistan to Zululand. In 2000, there were no less than 30 conflicts going on, in four continents. Poverty may be more acute in Africa; but poverty characterises most of the former colonised world in the Latin American, Caribbean, African, Asian, and Pacific (LACAAP) countries. Bad governance, corruption, autocracy, and demagoguery are found everywhere. Backwardness and underdevelopment may be especially acute in Africa; but similar conditions are found in most of the LACAAP world.

There is undoubtedly a shared colonial history in all of Africa; but again the experience of colonialism is shared with most of the LACAAP world and the Balkan nations and the Irish and many others beside. Within Africa itself, there are variations on the colonial theme, arising from different stresses in the colonial policies and practices of Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and other 'scramblers' for African colonies. Many African countries would never have been separate countries but for the partitioning exercise undertaken by European powers at the Berlin Conferences in 1884/85. Most African states have internalised their colonial legacies to a point where they identify themselves as Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone etc. and sometimes create alliances based on those divisions. There are also

ideological differences foisted upon most African states by alliances with one super-power or the other during the Cold War era. There may be common aspirations among African nations, arising from the common aspirations of all human beings, but there are also competing and contending interests.

We must not be construed to mean that African solidarity and recovery are undesirable or unattainable goals. This is not an anthem to Afro-pessimism. No people deserve to wallow in perpetual poverty, ignorance, disease, and strife. Africa's destiny undoubtedly lies with the African people themselves. For the first time since Africa's anti-colonial struggle, we see the emergence of visionary leadership that seeks to be equal to the challenges of the 'second revolution' and the new millennium, none of which are insurmountable. We must cure the myopia of essentialising and romanticising Africa, before we can grapple in some sane manner with contemporary African reality. Africa is not a country but a culturally diverse and complex continent.

A new awakening can only come about when issues are problematised less sentimentally and more scientifically. The African renaissance can only have meaning if it moves beyond the realm of fictionality – if it moves, that is, beyond the realm of magical realism – to grapple with the intricate problem and reality of Africa's complexity and polarity. We suggest a need to re-conceptualise the African renaissance, first, and situate the movement within its proper historical context and chart a way forward to a true new world order in which we will find, as Aimé Césaire says, 'room for us all at the rendezvous of victory'.

The African renaissance revisited

The African renaissance in proper historical perspective is essentially the rise of Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora from slavery, colonialism, segregation, Apartheid, and neo-colonialism. In reflecting on the African renaissance, therefore, mere episodes must not be mistaken for the totality of the phenomenon. The African renaissance is not a single event but a process long begun but far from finished. There have been many

episodes, spanning several generations, in the rise of Africans universally from the forces that put them down, many episodes in their unfolding culture of liberation. A collocation of events has been building up to a *grand finale* yet to be realised.

The rebellion of slaves imported from Africa marked the earliest episode in the rise of people of African descent in the Americas and the Caribbean: Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, John Brown, Sojourner Truth and many heroes and heroines of that phase in the struggle constitute an early chapter in that book yet to be completed. The Haitian Revolution claims several paragraphs in that chapter of the slave's epic journey in the New World. Booker T Washington, much maligned

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in some quarters as the quintessential Uncle Tom figure (as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*), nonetheless sounds an apt triumphal note in his celebrated book on the subject, *Up From Slavery*.

Another early chapter depicts the struggles of Africans on the continent against colonial invaders from Europe. Examples of these struggles, from the southernmost tip of Africa, include the 17th century resistance of the Khoikhoi to Dutch occupation and the 100 years' war (1770-1880 *circum*) that pitted amaXhosa against the British and the Boers. These valiant but largely unsuccessful armed struggles on the continent laid the foundations for 20th century anti-colonial struggles such as the 1920s struggle of Igbo women in West Africa against British forces; the

Maji-Maji rebellion against German encroachment in East Africa; the Algerian, the *Mau-Mau* (Kenyan) and the *Chimurenga* (Rhodesian) wars of liberation; and the Soweto Uprising. Far from being hapless, helpless victims, these struggling masses were what the South African poet, Mongane Wally Serote, describes in his epic poem, *No More Strangers*, as 'creative fighters'.

The 20th century witnessed an acceleration and intensification of the unfolding culture of liberation among Africans the world over, including African-Americans and their counterparts in the Caribbean – from the Pan African Congress of 1900 to the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) in the 1990s.

In 1900, African-American academic-activist WEB Dubois, the Trinidadian lawyer H. Sylvester Williams and others convened the first Pan African Congress in London to raise consciousness and forge solidarity in struggle.

The immediate off-shoot of the first Pan African Congress was the formation on 12 February 1909 of the National Negro Committee (later the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People – NAACP) in the US and on 8 January 1912 the South African Native National Congress (renamed in 1923 the African National Congress – ANC). Both the NAACP and the ANC remain the African people's oldest organisations of Pan African persuasion. Pan African solidarity facilitated cultural, political, economic, and social regeneration.

In the US the Harlem renaissance that blossomed in the 1920s was largely a cultural manifestation of the spirit engendered by Pan Africanism. It was a coming-out party, in America's heartland, of the descendants of African slaves. Although its concerns were largely local – with emphasis on being black/Negro in America – its reverberations came to be felt throughout the African world and on the international scene.

The gallery of writers released by the Harlem Renaissance – from Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, to Zora Neal Hurston – had a profound and lasting impact on Pan Africanism and cultural affirmation.

Africa was the touchstone of their poetry, as in Langston Hughes's *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*:

*I bathed in the Euphrates when
dawns were young.*

*I built my hut in the Congo and it
lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised
the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi
when Abe Lincoln*

*went down to New Orleans,
and I've seen its muddy*

*bosom turn all golden in the
sunset.*

I've known rivers:

Ancient rivers.

My soul has grown deep like rivers

Or in Countee Cullen's *Heritage*:

What is Africa to me:

Copper sun or scarlet sea,

Jungle star or jungle track,

Strong bronzed men, or regal black

Women from whose loins I sprang

When the birds of Eden sang?

Whether for inspiration or validation, the poets of the Harlem renaissance invariably turn to Africa. At the same time, collectively, they make the point James Weldon Johnson makes in the introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that 'the Negro is a contributor to American life not only of material but of artistic, cultural, and spiritual values; that in the making and shaping of American civilisation he is an active force, a giver as well as a receiver, a creator as well as a creature'.

After the Harlem renaissance, Africans throughout the modern world, whose physical and cultural space had been invaded by the West which had largely superimposed its own cultural norms, now had models of creative self-expression they could emulate developed from inside the energy system of the culture with which they identified. The new awakening engendered by the Harlem renaissance inspired writers from the Caribbean to the Congo, from Senegal to South Africa. The rise in the 1930s of Peter Abrahams in South Africa, which he documents in his autobiography *Tell Freedom*, owed its inspiration to writers of the Harlem renaissance; in his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele, a

student at St Peter's High School with Peter Abrahams, tells the same story about his literary awakening. Their counterparts of the *Drum* generation in the 1950s and early 1960s and of the Black Consciousness/Black Power era in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Siphosiphiso Sepamla and Keorapetse Kgositsile, testify to similar influences in their work.

From storytelling, to Negro spirituals, to blues, to jazz, Negroes wove their African heritage with their American experience to create new and distinctive art forms. 'The Uncle Remus stories constitute the greatest body of folk lore that America has produced, and the "spirituals" the greatest body of folk song,' James Weldon Johnson further notes. Some South African readers will recognise in these stories their African antecedents, the *mmutlanyana* or *chakijana* (Brer Rabbit) stories. Johnson is, indeed,

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correct to point out that 'in the "spirituals", or slave songs, the Negro has given America not only its only folk songs, but a mass of noble music'.

Jazz, the 20th century's most distinctive sound and dominant form of musical expression, emerged as the classical form of African musical expression. The flowering of local 'jazz' forms in countries such as South Africa – from *marabi* in the 1930s to *kwela* in the 1950s to *mbaqanga* in the 1960s to *kwaito* in the 1990s – was made possible by the rise of the Negro in America. In this respect, the African renaissance is an interconnected phenomenon, with variations the size of the continent and its Diaspora.

In the 1930s, the scene shifts from Harlem to Paris, with the emergence of Negritude. Negritude demonstrates both the enduring themes of the African renaissance and its changing emphases.

Negritude was double rebellion by people of African descent, first, against physical alienation (from Africa to the Caribbean to France) and, simultaneously, against cultural estrangement foisted by the French colonial policy of assimilation.

Aimé Césaire from Martinique, a co-founder of Negritude and its chief spokesman, along with Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, set the tone for literary expression by adherents of Negritude in his famous epic poem that was first published in 1938, *Return to My Native Land*, in which he reflects on the significance of his heritage and celebrates his spirituality thus:

*Heia for those who have never
invented anything*

those who never explored anything

those who never tamed anything

*those who give themselves to the
essence of all things*

*Ignorant of surfaces but struck by the
movement of all things*

*free of the desire to tame but familiar
with the play of the world.*

Césaire laments the devastation wrought by colonialism upon people of African origin. He sets vivid images of exploitation and aggression beside images that reflect serenity and nature. He is at one with Negritude, as participant and observer.

There are various strands in Negritude and several impulses co-exist within the movement, which are essentially a result of the functions it was designed to serve. In its anti-colonial struggle form, it can be aggressive and exclusive. But in its reconciling mood, it is inclusive and synthesises. Senghor's poem, *New York*, exhibits Negritude at its most serene and syncretic state. Juxtaposing Manhattan and Harlem, he writes first of Manhattan, in its state of alienation from nature:

*New York! At first your beauty
confused me, and your great long-
legged golden girls.*

*I was so timid at first under your blue
metallic eyes, your frosty smiles.*

*So timid. And the disquiet in the
depth of your skyscraper streets*

*Lifting up owl eyes in the sun's
eclipse*

Your sulphurous light and the livid

shafts (their heads dumbfounding the sky)
 Skyscrapers defying cyclones on their muscles of steel and their weathered stone skins.

Senghor conveys the distance from the natural state that characterises Manhattan by employing alluring but alloyed images of 'golden girls', 'blue metallic eyes', and 'frosty smiles'. There is, admittedly, beauty in the wonders of modern technology (skyscrapers, neon lights, etc.). But there is also a great deal of artificiality and pollution that are both disquieting and deadly – as if the culture is locked in deadly combat with nature. 'All the birds of the air/fall suddenly dead below the high ashes of the terraces,' he writes. In due course, he starts to long for proximity to nature and for unfettered human intercourse, typified in his culture by the carefree laughter of children and mothers breastfeeding their babies without inhibitions.

By comparison, in Harlem, despite the admittedly squalid surroundings, there is vibrancy and closeness to un-spoilt and unvarnished nature that are not otherwise found in Manhattan. The products sold from stalls along Harlem's sidewalks, from tropical foods (mangoes, corn) to African art (masks), connect the culture (bare feet dancers) of the African-American to nature and to the ancestral lands of Africa:

I have seen Harlem humming with sounds and solemn colour and flamboyant smells...

Harlem Harlem! I have seen Harlem Harlem! A breeze green with corn springing from the pavements ploughed by the bare feet of dancers in

Crests and waves of silk and breasts of spearheads, ballets of lilies and fabulous masks.

The mangoes all love to roll from the low houses under the police horses' hooves

I have seen the sky at evening snowing cotton flowers and wings of seraphim and wizards' plumes

Parallels can be drawn with William Wordsworth's poems that contrast uncontaminated nature with polluting industrial culture. As in European romanticism, romance with an

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idealised state of nature and the exotic underlies the Negritude quest for Africa's renewal. Yet in this particular poem Senghor's ideal lies neither in Manhattan nor Harlem. Neither is sufficient unto itself any more than the body is but an empty shell without the soul. It is the vitality of Harlem and the grandeur of Manhattan together that lend unique and dynamic features to New York City:

*New York, I say to New York, let the black blood flow into your blood
 Cleaning the rust from your steel articulation, like an oil of life
 Giving your bridges the curve of the hills, the liana's suppleness.*

The black person is portrayed in the poem as the soul of the white person in America. Complementarity, rather than chauvinism, marks the symbiotic nature of the ideal relationship Senghor recommends. People of European ancestry can revitalise their culture

“People of European ancestry can revitalise their culture by opening it to other influences, as happened in America with the new cultural forms that African-Americans evolved. Those who reject the relationship, however, do so to the detriment of their own souls.”

by opening it to other influences, as happened in America with the new cultural forms that African-Americans evolved. Those who reject the relationship, however, do so to the detriment of their own souls. Senghor's poem asserts interdependence. Cultures and civilisations survive and thrive only in inter-relationship with one another, when they find synergies with all of humanity. The renaissance sought is, in the final analysis, a continuum, elevating to greater heights still those Creation has bound together. The poem has implications for all multicultural societies.

With considerable lyricism, Senghor's poetry, like Césaire's, scales the various intensities of Negritude, from its aggressive to its serene variations. They champion African customs and traditions that have been ridiculed by Europeans. They glorify the past, implying that Africa, which was great in the past, will be great again. Their discourse is anti-colonial and critical of Western culture's cold, impersonal, and inhibited ways. Their full vision, however, portrays an accommodating world enriched by values from all places.

Every movement to advance the cause of African peoples has invariably plugged into these themes that the Negritude movement developed.

Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor and their counterparts from the French colonies championed the creation of a distinctively African poetics. They seized upon and passed on the preoccupations of writers of the Harlem renaissance with the rise of people of African descent globally. Their verse sang the splendours, as they saw them, of Africa. Senghor's famous *Black Woman* valorises Africa's pristine beauty; David Diop's equally famous *Africa* celebrates Africa's resilience. Criticised for romanticising and often over-lauding Africa – Wole Soyinka dismissively states that 'a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude; it pounces' and Es'kia Mphahlele saw in it idealisation verging on distortion – Negritude, nonetheless, laid the foundation for intellectual, cultural, and political rebellion among French subjects in the African colonies and the Caribbean.

Despite their publicised



disagreements, Césaire and Senghor share with Soyinka and Mphahlele a view of the African renaissance that does not imply a rejection of the benefits of the technological civilisation developed in the West. They all caution, however, against uncritical acceptance of everything emanating from the West – what Thabo Mbeki describes as ‘Coca-Cola’ culture – and seek a meaningful fusion between Africa and the West. These are also the preoccupations of the current phase of the African renaissance that Mbeki champions. Beyond the limited concerns with cultural awakening and political emancipation that marked Negritude in the 1930s, he has added questions of economic development and technological advancement.

The post-War period unleashed some of the most tremendous struggles by people of African descent on the continent and in the New World.

Two events, within a year of each other, sounded what Thomas Gray would have described as the ‘knell of passing day’ for rampant colonialism and dominance by people of European ancestry. These were the formation in

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1944 of the African National Congress Youth League (ANC-YL) in South Africa and the 5th Pan African Congress held in 1945 in Manchester, England. The moving spirit behind the ANC-YL was Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, who was steeped in Pan Africanism. The ANC-YL catapulted Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe and other ‘Young Turks’ of the African struggle into leadership roles within the organisation. Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and others who were to lead their respective countries

to independence from European rule attended the 5th Pan African Congress. George Padmore, widely regarded as the father of African nationalism, and Peter Abrahams were the co-secretaries at this momentous event that moved the African renaissance to yet another phase.

Africa and the US benefited from the political legacy released by the ANC-YL, who in 1949 spearheaded the adoption by the ANC of the Programme of Action that was to become the blueprint for non-violent, passive resistance against racial oppression. Although Martin Luther King never visited South Africa, from his visit to India in 1957, he learnt of the efficacy of passive resistance – Satyagraha – first developed earlier in the century by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa.

The Programme of Action led to the Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws in South Africa in 1951/2 and to the Civil Rights movement in the US in the mid-1950s. The Civil Rights campaign employed strategies and means culled from the Indian struggle against British colonialism and the South African



Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park in, Accra, Ghana

struggle against segregation and Apartheid.

Sifting through papers at the Martin Luther King Centre in Atlanta, Georgia, one Saturday afternoon in 1988, I picked up a small exercise book the janitor was about to sweep away. Paging through the book and straining to read the faint writing, I came across minutes of meetings of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1955/6. The minutes make reference to the Defiance Campaign in South Africa, four years earlier, whose passive resistance tactics the Civil Rights movement was to adopt.

Parallel struggles in the rest of Africa – and the Caribbean – saw, in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana become the first country in Sub-Saharan Africa to attain independence from European colonial rule. The 'winds of change' that British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was to speak of during his 1960 visit to Cape Town had started to blow across the rest of the continent. The chapter would end with South Africa almost the last country to breathe the air of freedom and attain majority rule in 1994.

The Civil Rights and Black Power movements, from the 1950s to the 1970s, unleashed African potential in the US. These struggles also invigorated other struggles for emancipation in the US – such as the feminist struggle, the gay and lesbian struggle, and opposition to American imperialism in Vietnam – and in South Africa, with the rise of Black Consciousness. All these

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struggles fed off each other.

The struggle for the rise of people of African descent in the US continues into the 21st century, as the tarnished 2000 US presidential elections in Florida demonstrated when African-Americans complained of being disenfranchised to make the Republican Party candidate of 'white power' George W Bush win.

From the foregoing overview, the inescapable conclusion is that with the long eye of history we are able to see the African renaissance in proper perspective, not as a single event or some once-off occasion. It is an episodic and cumulative epic story of the rise of a once enslaved people across the globe. It is a continuing revolution that unfolds toward the total liberation of people of African origin in the political, economic, cultural, educational, technological, and social spheres. In its wake, it liberates all those Frantz Fanon describes as the 'wretched of the earth', wherever they may be and in every sphere of life.

Our final position, which we could motivate at great length but the cardinal points are well known, is as

follows: The African renaissance, like the European renaissance before it – a phenomenon that took upward of three centuries to spread across and benefit all of Europe – will lie in the realisation of each African country's potential. In most African countries, this potential has been stifled for now by a combination of external and internal forces, both man-made and self-induced (war, graft, corruption, etc.) and due to adverse natural conditions (famine, drought, floods, disease, etc.). The problem lends features of classical tragedy to the modern African tale.

Faced with the African reality today, one is inclined to agree with Wole Soyinka, when he says:

*A wave of anomies, even a breakdown of humanity, is sweeping across the continent that must be particularly galling to those who so confidently trumpeted an 'African renaissance'. What we see today is the opposite: a reversal of the progress that seemed to have been signalled by the end of Apartheid. At the heart of this reversal is the power syndrome. And it is destroying Africa country by country. Certainly in Africa today the terrible suffering is not caused by external enemies, but from within. African leaders have created one another as their own worst enemies. And they are dragging their populations down into the abyss as they seek to establish their own individual domination*².

No one is so daft as not to see the validity of such an assertion. There is light, however, at the end of the tunnel. The assassination in January 2001 of the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Laurent Kabila – seen in some quarters as an assassination that was waiting to happen – was a lamentable event that, nonetheless, occurred at the same time as the transfer of power to a new government in Ghana. The latter process was smoother by far than the January 2001 transition in US politics – seen from abroad as a subtle coup d'état, aborted democracy, and disenfranchisement.

We need to reiterate the following point: The post-independence era

in Africa – we dare not call it 'post-colonial' yet, any more than we can speak meaningfully at this stage of the post-Apartheid state that is still in the making – is littered with renaissance efforts that, at best, succeeded partially and, at worst, failed miserably. Once upon a midnight clear flags were lowered and new ones raised but by morning little else had changed. The story of Africa since independence is, in its main outline, a story of false starts that failed to sustain social, cultural, political, and economic reforms. The champion of Negritude and one of its chief architects, Leopold Senghor, on becoming Senegal's first president, touted some brand of African socialism, but promptly threatened to arrest dedicated Marxists of the calibre of Sembene Ousmane, who went into exile. Kwame Nkrumah rode to power on the slogan 'seek ye first the political kingdom and all else shall be given unto thee', but missed the economic boat that would have brought Ghana to the shore of success. Jomo Kenyatta's *Harambe* ('let's pull together') efforts, Kenneth Kaunda's African socialism, and Julius Nyerere's more earnest *Ujamaa* (village collectivisation) schemes saw productivity in Kenya, Zambia, and Tanzania, respectively, and the GDP in those countries plummet below their levels in the colonial era. Joseph Mobutu changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa Zabanga and the name of his country to Zaire, but proceeded to loot the impoverished Central African state as few leaders anywhere in the world have done to their countries and in a way that would have elicited the envy of Belgium's King Leopold I. Nigeria is a sorry tale of state profligacy, corruption, graft, and squandered opportunity on a monumental scale. Socialism in Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, and Mozambique produced the same miserable results as capitalism in Cote d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Malawi, and Zaire. The litany of Africa's social, political and economic woes is, indeed, endless. Stagnation is everywhere a monument to mismanagement of Africa's vast natural and human resources. All this raises the most significant question for

exponents of the African renaissance: What must be different about current efforts to re-ignite the African renaissance? What must be tackled differently to make the 21st century truly 'the African century'?

The most intractable problem in most African countries today – and, therefore, the precondition for their resuscitation – is how to effect reconciliation and reconstruction, the twin pillars on which the stability and prosperity of all nations rest. Thabo Mbeki, who has emerged as one of the most significant leaders in Africa in the laboratory of modern times, says: 'Reconciliation and transformation should be viewed as interdependent parts of one unique process of building a new society.'³

The most meaningful renaissance in Africa will thus be the renaissance of individual countries. Continentally perceived, the African renaissance will be an aggregation of the success of each and every country. Such a renaissance will be predicated upon how individual countries tackle *reconciliation* – reconciling perennially warring factions within each country's borders as well as resolving territorial disputes and other conflicts of interest between neighbouring African states – and *reconstruction* – the recovery of each country's ailing economy. Any renaissance must take on both challenges and succeed on both scores. The principles are as African as they are global.

This discussion has attempted to provide a context within which to understand the true import of Mbeki's clarion call, when he says: 'Those with eyes to see, let them see. The African renaissance is upon us. As we peer through the looking glass darkly, this may not be obvious. But it is upon us.' It has, indeed, been upon us for a while. ■

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² Wole Soyinka, 'New monsters born in Africa', *Mail & Guardian*, 9 June 2000, p.27.

³ Thabo Mbeki quoted in Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*. London: Vintage, 1999, p.167

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