

# The Struggle for African Identity: Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines South African President Thabo Mbeki's notion of the African Renaissance. Representations of Africa have been challenged in the past by movements such as negritude and pan-Africanism. Thabo Mbeki's proclamation of the African Renaissance can be seen as another attempt to fight and challenge prevailing representations of Africa. An African Renaissance that does not degenerate into essentialism (particularism) has the potential to transform the lives of the many Africans who have been ravaged by the continuing legacy of colonialism. The author argues that if the call for an African Renaissance is to have any lasting impact on the African condition, it must be careful to avoid taking the essentialist positions advocated by earlier ideological movements such as negritude. The essay contends that the call for an African Renaissance is an important effort which needs to be adopted by Africans beyond the borders of South Africa.

And no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of force, and there is a place for all at the rendez-vous of victory.

Aimé Césaire

The idea of Africa as a place of humanity, a home of people rather than Safari, wild life and escape from the hyperreal, is beginning to take centre stage. In a public debate on the visit of President Bill Clinton to Africa, Chinua Achebe remarked that if Africa's humanity was challenged by the slave trade, it nevertheless managed to hang on through the centuries

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of domination, pillage and misrepresentation. The part Africa must now play, he continued, lies in challenging stock images and fanciful symbols through which the "dark continent" tends to be seen. Ngugi wa Thiong'o went farther afield than Achebe in the argument about how the West impoverished Africa. "There's a tendency of seeing Africa as a beggar," he noted, "when in reality, in the economic relationship between the West and Africa, Africa has always been the giver." We should stop, wa Thiong'o goes on to say, thinking of Africa as bushland ready to be milked for its wild scenery and mineral resources. However, neither Achebe's nor wa Thiong'o's defense of Africa have prevented the Western media from stereotyping Africa as it had done for centuries (Ahluwalia 1996). Nevertheless, the liberation of South Africa has resulted in a new-found optimism about Africa's future with calls for an African Renaissance. This paper seeks to interrogate the notion of an African Renaissance by situating it within other attempts at forging African identities such as negritude and pan-Africanism.

### **Africanism and the Politics of Representation**

It is important to begin by examining the manner in which Africa has been represented and to that end my task is to examine the hegemonic role that the discipline of African Studies has played in the invention of Africanism. Edward Said's pioneering work on representing and, or, mis-representing the Other is an important backdrop to my discussion of Africanism. In his analysis of the idea of the stereotype, who cannot rest, always impelled to further action, Said establishes that the discipline of Oriental Studies is indebted to the traditional representations about the nature of the Third World (especially the Middle East) which were forged in the Occident (historically, Western Europe). For Said (1978:3), Orientalism means three things, all of which are interdependent: an academic discipline, a style of thought and a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. He argues:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.

Examining Orientalism as a discourse, Said argues that Western academia is responsible for the creation of the "Other," that is Orientals, who are significantly different from those in the Occident. Hence, through this process, they are able to "Orientalize" the region. This construction, however, has a distinctly political dimension in that Western knowledge inevitably entails political significance. This is nowhere better exemplified

than in the rise of the discipline of Oriental Studies and the emergence of Western Imperialism. Said (1978:11) expounds:

I doubt that it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the latter nineteenth century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact — and yet that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism. For it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances.

There is, then, a power imbalance that exists not only in the most obvious characteristics of imperialism — “brute political, economic, and military rationales” — but also in terms of culture. It is in the cultural sphere that the dominant hegemonic project of Orientalist Studies, used to propagate the imperial project, can be discerned. Said's methodology is embedded therefore in what he terms textualism. This allows him to envisage the Orient as a textual creation. Textuality entails concern with authority and positioning. In Orientalist discourse, this produces the West as a locality of power and a centre distinctly demarcated from the Other as the subject of knowledge and inevitably subordination. Said's project is designed not to reify the past but rather to focus on the establishment of the Orient as a textual construct (see Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 1999).

Orientalism, then, is a Eurocentric discourse that constructs the “Orient” by the accumulated knowledge of generations of scholars and writers who are secure in the power of their “superior” wisdom. The charge that Said levels against Orientalist discourse applies just as well to Area Studies, which have tended to treat non-Western societies as “alien” entities. From this perspective, they have revolved around a central juxtaposition of “us” and “them,” where knowledge about “them” is accumulated by and reported to “us.” This juxtaposition, central to Said's work, is instructive when we examine African Studies and the manner in which the discipline has chosen to identify, describe, characterise and represent a continent that has been marginalised particularly in the last century.

Much like Orientalism, Africanism needs to be viewed in the right context — after all, the so-called century of the Enlightenment gave birth to domination of lesser races, slavery and inhumanity. For between 1492 and about 1870, ten million or more black slaves were carried from Africa to one port or another in the Americas. They were taken to work on tobacco, sugar, coffee and cotton plantations, in gold and silver mines, in rice fields or in houses as servants (Ahluwalia, Ashcroft and Knight 1999). The shippers were, in order of scale, the Portuguese (or Brazilians), the

English, the French, the Dutch, the Spaniards and the North Americans. At the height of the traffic, in the 1780s, the English and French both were carrying about forty thousand slaves a year. These captives usually were procured by barter with African monarchs or merchants, established on the estuaries of nearly all the great African rivers which flow into the Atlantic (Blackburn 1998).

As Africa was opened up, constructed and linked to European discourses, changes as a result of the industrial revolution and the advent of European expansionism brought about new theoretical referents influenced by the Enlightenment. Rapid changes in Europe altered Western self-image and heightened its sense of superiority. As Curtin (1974) points out: "the new rate of European change altered the Western concept of history: if history is the study of change, then societies are thought to be static had no history worth speaking of." The dominance of this form of representation was encapsulated by the philosophical discourses of that time. Critical rationalism underpinned Enlightenment thought and enshrined within it notions of progress. The means to attain such progress was based upon secular rational "man," technology and science. The nineteenth century ushered in significant advances in the natural sciences, and the scientific method was not only emulated but also viewed as the only legitimate form of knowledge in the human sciences. Consider, for example, Hegel's representation of Africa in his 1830-1831 Jena lectures, which must be quoted at length so that we may appreciate his intent and purpose (Hegel 1944:93-94):

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas — the category of Universality. In Negro life the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence — as, for example, God, or Law — in which the interest of man's violation is involved and in which he realizes his own being... The Negro exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality — all that we call feeling — if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character... At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit... What we properly understand by Africa is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's history.

Hegel was not alone in drawing this portrait of the "Negro." He was influenced by the Enlightenment and a tradition that sought to explain the question of race. Critically, when this methodology was linked to the

evolutionary theory of Darwin, history itself became evolutionary, seen on a unilinear continuum. Europeans thought that they had civilisation whilst other people were "barbarians." It was taken for granted that race and culture were interconnected and that humanity progressed through stages. As a result, colonial ideology as a civilising mission justified to a large extent cultural imperialism which sought to take these societies from an inferior to a superior stage. As Marx (1983:51) asserted: "the country that is more developed shows to the less developed the image of its own future." The colonisers who had the best opportunity to investigate the African past, assumed as a by-product of their racial attitudes, that Africa could have no history worth investigating. European historians writing about Africa usually confined their study to the activity of their own people. Thus, what passed for African history was really only the history of Europeans in Africa.

Africanism is similar to Edward Said's Orientalism and needs to be viewed as a textual construction which portrays Africa and the African negatively and ensures that they continue to be marginalised. The popular representations of Africa, therefore, should not be too surprising. They are merely reinforcing images acquired through Western knowledge of the "dark continent." The African response to these representations has been through the articulation of notions such as negritude, pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance. It is to these that we now turn.

### Negritude

Negritude as a movement emerged in Paris in the early 1930s amongst African and West Indian students under the leadership of Léopold Sédar Senghor, from Senegal, Aimé Césaire, a Martiniquian, and the Guyanese, Léon Damas. The three established a newspaper, *L'Étudiant noir* (*The Black Student*), in which they voiced their problems, stressing commonalities amongst all Black people around the world. Negritude needs to be contextualised against the general background of colonisation and the manner in which the African's very being was denigrated. As Irele Abiola (1971:26) has observed, this was "not simply a rationalisation of white domination but ... a direct and crushing attack upon his subjectivity." It is perhaps not surprising that negritude took shape in Paris, given the French system of colonisation. French colonies were seen as an extension of France and their subjects were considered citizens. In theory, this form of colonialism was based on assimilation but, in reality, the rights of citizenship were extended to only the white French settlers in the colonies. When these African and West Indian students arrived in Paris, far from the theory of assimilation, they were isolated because of their colour. In France, they discovered that they were not "French." This realisation led

them to undertake a journey to rediscover their past, their black roots and African heritage. Through negritude, the colonised sought to reverse the representations ascribed to them, to turn those negative identities into positive images.

An important paradox of negritude was that the very people who were urging for a return to authenticity and renewal were thoroughly imbued themselves with the values of the coloniser. It was their alienation in both cultures, their sense of not belonging in either their own culture or that of the colonisers, that became problematic. It was their "preoccupation with the black experience" which "developed into a passionate exaltation of the black race, associated with a romantic myth of Africa" (Abiola 1981:91). The negritude writers not only celebrated Africa by paying tribute to the "African love of life, the African joy of love and the African dream of death" (Dathorne 1988:59), but also challenged the colonisers in a way that they never before had experienced. Césaire (in Abiola 1981:87) described negritude as "the simple recognition of the fact of being black and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history and our culture."

Although the term negritude was first coined by Aimé Césaire in the newspaper *L'Étudiant noir*, its development was the result of a partnership between Césaire and Senghor. Senghor (in Washington 1973:12) describes the manner in which they developed the term:

In what circumstances did Aimé Césaire and I launch the word negritude between 1933 and 1935? At that time, along with several other black students we were plunged into a panic-stricken despair. The horizon was blocked. No reform was in sight and the colonizers were justifying our political and economic dependence by the theory of the *tabula rasa*. . . In order to establish an effective revolution, our revolution, we had first to divest ourselves of our borrowed attire — that of assimilation — and assert our being, that is to say our negritude.

Although the publication, *L'Étudiant noir*, folded after a few issues and was succeeded by several other publications where the ideas of negritude were elaborated, it was not until the establishment of *Présence Africaine* that the movement had a permanent voice to propagate its ideas. Nevertheless, the success of the movement in its formative days needs to be located in its favourable reception amongst the French intelligentsia. This was helped in part by the American Black Renaissance movement of the 1920s, the impact of which was being felt in Paris, particularly in music and entertainment (see Gates 1998 and Jules-Rosette 1998). This acceptance was in no small way the result of Senghor being able to convince Jean-Paul Sartre to write a preface to an anthology of Black writers which he had edited. Sartre's essay, titled "Orphée noir," not only gave the negritude

movement a boost but at the same time embroiled it in controversy which persists until today.

### **Critiques of Negritude**

Negritude has perhaps come under the most vitriolic attack from the South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, on the grounds that it portrays the African much like the Europeans who he criticises for perpetuating the myth of the noble savage. Mphahlele (1974) rejects, in particular, Senghor's philosophy as a basis for African literature on the grounds that all African writers do not write in the same way. Fanon also rejects a negritude which grounds itself on a historical black heritage because "the emphasis placed by the African 'bourgeois' writer on conserving traditional values eventually causes his literature to become less representative of African life, not more, because African society is caught up in a process of irreversible change" (cited in Spelth 1985). In short, as Anyinefa (1996:64) notes, "the writers of Negritude locked (Black) African identity into a racial essentialism, which presents itself in opposition to a Western discourse on Africa, yet partakes of the dualistic structure and the same discourse it seeks to negate."

What Mphahlele (1974:67) finds particularly disturbing is the exoticism which is replicated by negritude. However, for him, whilst it may well be useful in the Francophone context, it is not so in the case of South Africa:

I personally cannot think of the future of my people in South Africa as something in which the white man does not feature. Whether he likes it or not, our destinies are inseparable. I have seen too much that is good in western culture — for example, its music, literature and theatre — to want to repudiate it.

For Mphahlele, cultural renewal and revival is no longer possible, for a new culture has emerged and a longing to return to the past is ineffectual at the very time that the focus should be on the colonial subject. In short, Mphahlele sees negritude in its traditional manifestation as too simplistic, as unable to meet the challenges of the African continent. Negritude, he argues, "needs to confront modern Africa with a sense of revolution" (1974:84). In this regard, he articulates a position very similar to Fanon, for whom the purpose of literature was to act as a conduit for direct action. As Wauthier (1978:179) has noted, for both of them, "when the blood ran in Sharpeville and Algeria, an academic pilgrimage back to their Negro origins was less indispensable than efficiency in the fight and in the field of protest."

One of the most scathing attacks on negritude has been mounted by Ayi Kwei Armah who, in 1967, wrote that Senghor's negritude, as an artistic statement was symptomatic of his inferiority complex and slave mentality.

Armah (1967:19) describes it as "the flight from the classical Cartesian big white father France into the warm, dark, sensuous embrace of Africa, into the receiving uterus of despised Africa." This attack on negritude is one that Armah has maintained consistently. But it is not only Armah who has condemned negritude. Other writers from the former British colonies, such as Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi and Mphahlele, all equally have been dismissive. The Nobel prize winning author, Wole Soyinka (1976:134), in his *Myth, Literature and the African World*, criticises negritude for merely reinforcing the ideas of white supremacy which it sought to challenge. He notes:

Négritude, having laid the cornerstone on a European intellectual tradition, however bravely it tried to reverse its concepts (leaving its tenets untouched), was a founding deserving to be drawn into, nay, even considered a case for benign adoption by European ideological interests.

Edward Said recently has made a particularly incisive critique of negritude by portraying it as part of a general trend in reclaiming one's past, naming such a process, nativism. Nativism, for Said (1993:275), is the enterprise which involves reassessing the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. This reassessment results in the quest for delving into one's past, and is a "narrative or actuality that stands free from worldly time itself." By deploying a contrapuntal reading, Said illustrates how William Butler Yeats, the great Irish poet, has much in common with the poets of the colonized world. He views Yeats as an "exacerbated example of the *nativist* phenomenon which flourished elsewhere (e.g. *négritude*) as a result of the colonial encounter" (*Ibid.*). For Said, it is important to move beyond the confines of such local identities which claim, for example, that only the Irish are Irish or the Africans Africans.<sup>1</sup>

### **Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance**

Ali Mazrui (1967:3) noted that the very idea of Pan-Africanism is one that grew out of the connection between Africans in Africa and those in the diaspora. He wrote that, "Pan-Africanism as an allegiance to the African continent was born out of Pan-Negroism as a commitment to the Negro race." Edward Blyden (1832-1912), originally from the Danish island of St. Thomas, who settled in West Africa, was an exemplary "new" African who embraced pan-Africanism and was convinced that, "only the

<sup>1</sup> Marion O'Callaghan (1995:34) has noted that "not only did neo-*négritude* pose no threat to the category of race, it reinforced this category... Moreover, neo-*négritude* refused and eliminated the real questions of today and the passage to today's technological conquest by the very nature of its return to a mythical yesterday."

Negro will be able to explain the Negro to the rest of mankind" (Blyden 1967:263). He argued for the resettlement of American blacks as the best means of spreading "civilization" in Africa. Blyden argued for an "African regeneration" which was much like the British colonial civilising mission which was based on the ideas of progress and development. To this end, he argued that the role of the recaptive free slaves was crucial. He wrote:

There are fifteen thousand civilized and Christianized Africans striving to accomplish the twofold work of establishing and maintaining an independent nationality, and of introducing the Gospel among untold millions of evangelized and barbarous men. (Blyden 1862:19)

Blyden's notion and call for an "African regeneration" is one that is much like later pan-Africanist movements. It has a fundamental tendency towards essentialism. Pan-Africanism has, of course, played an important role in the liberation struggles of Africans everywhere. However, the euphoria generated by the Pan-Africanism of such leaders as Kwame Nkrumah in the 1960s waned rapidly as one African nation was pitted against another in the monumental task of building nations which had been ravaged by colonialism.

The liberation of South Africa in the 1990s signalled a new beginning not only for that nation but for the entire continent. It is in this context that Thabo Mbeki's speech to the Constitutional Assembly on May 8, 1996 proclaiming that "I am an African" needs to be viewed. It inaugurated a new commitment which was aimed at launching South Africa and the rest of Africa in to the new millennium through a sort of renewal which seeks to transform the lives of Africans who have been disparaged by the colonial condition. The renewal is necessary, it is believed, to ensure Africa's participation in the highly globalised world. It is aimed at ending the marginalisation of Africa whilst at the same time staking a claim for the recognition of Africa's progress and development in cultural, economic, social and political spheres.

It is important to consider Thabo Mbeki's notion of African Renaissance closely. Is it, as some critics have suggested, a strategy that was aimed at gaining electoral success and in reality was nothing more than an election slogan? In a perceptive paper, Graham Evans has suggested that Mbeki's African Renaissance can be summarised and examined under three rubrics. First, there is the cynical view which suggests that this is no more than a political card aimed at consolidating Mbeki's position in the post-Mandela South Africa. The broader implications are that it is suggestive of a romanticised pre-colonial era which is a counterpoint to the current Afro-pessimism which pervades Western relations with Africa. A less flattering interpretation is that Mbeki is articulating a particular brand

of pan-Africanism in order to reject Western liberal values and so consolidate his rule. The implications of this strategy are that it is not compatible with notions of liberal democracy.

Second, there is the portrayal of Mbeki as the modernist. Here, the Renaissance is seen as a call for modernisation aimed at making Africa competitive globally and part of the processes of globalisation. It is in this context that South Africa, with its capital resources and infrastructure, is well-placed to serve a leading role. This notion of the African Renaissance has been embraced rapidly by the business community in South Africa but has been met with a great deal of suspicion by the neighbouring countries who are increasingly fearful of a South African economic dominance. Third, there is the reading of Mbeki as the radical or "Africanist" who seeks to reconstruct African identity in order to give it its rightful place on the global map. To this end, it is suggested that Mbeki is picking up from where Nkrumah left off and that the African Renaissance is the necessary conclusion to earlier pan-Africanist movements that failed (Evans 1999).

It is too early in President Mbeki's Presidency to establish what meaning he will ascribe to his notion of the African Renaissance. The very word Renaissance, however, evokes images of an European awakening, renewal or rebirth. The European Renaissance emerged in the aftermath of war, pestilence and disease between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hence, the idea of an African Renaissance appears in an uncannily similar context. The calls for transformation and renewal are certainly not new with previous movements such as negritude, Pan-Africanism and Black Consciousness advocating similar messages. Thus, the idea of an African Renaissance on the surface appears fraught with difficulty. It appears to be locked into an unquestionably European epistemology which renders the idea of a uniquely African renewal problematic. It is also perilously close to being essentialist much like the negritude movement (Ahluwalia, 1999).

If the call for an African Renaissance is to have any lasting impact on the African condition, it is important to be careful not to replicate the essentialist positions advocated by movements such as negritude. As Afro-pessimists with a great deal of accuracy point out, Africa is in crisis (Leys 1994; Leys 1996). The call for an African Renaissance therefore is an important one which needs to be owned beyond the borders of South Africa. It is a call which must be heeded and it is call which cannot afford to become an empty slogan. Despite the Europeaness of the idea of a renaissance, it is one that Africans must come to own or else the implications for Africa in the new millennium are potentially disastrous. It is an opportunity for Africa to move forward and realise its true potential. It is a call and notion that is far bigger than Mbeki himself, albeit that he

is an important cog in the wheel of progress in which South Africa, given all of its advantages, has to play the leading role.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to consider whether the representations of Africa by disciplines such as African Studies and Anthropology actually concern themselves with Africa, as Africa, or do they instead use and abuse it — use it as the means to a metaphor rather than treat it as an end in itself and abuse it as a field of study? Africa has come to be seen as a nullity which makes it uniquely available as a site of whatever fantasy one cares to propose. Such a discourse even takes the darkness of African skin as the absence of light, a sign that there is something missing, an emptiness that is to be written on by others, that can be filled with wonder or with horror, with anything but the specifics of actual African lives. As Kadiatu Kanneh (1998:192) has argued:

Exploring 'African-ness' from the late eighteenth century to the present, from the historical moment when ideas and productions of Africa were fomenting in lasting, violent and traumatic ways, reveals the peculiar tensions and fantasies of the modern world. 'Africa,' in this enduring historical period, has never been a mere geographical location of a variety of cultures and languages. The immense textual and political energies that have produced 'Africa' as knowledge and meaning have also, inextricably, formed the discourses of race, sexuality, culture and time that dominate contemporary thought.

These representations of Africa have been challenged by movements such as negritude and pan-Africanism. Thabo Mbeki's proclamation of the African Renaissance can be seen as another attempt to fight and challenge prevailing representations of Africa. An African Renaissance which does not degenerate into essentialism has the potential to transform the lives of the many Africans who have been ravaged by the continuing legacy of colonialism. This could be another way of dealing with Africa, a territory effaced in the process of building another society, both inside the classroom and outside of it, and one that could be restored as an act of political and cultural resistance to injustice, oblivion and misrepresentation. It is this notion which the African renaissance must embody. That at bottom is a critical attitude worthy of Africa not as a site of contention but as a land with people(s), culture(s) and pride(s).

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