

# South Africa and the African Renaissance

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On 8 May 1996, immediately prior to the adoption of South Africa's new constitution, Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela's chosen successor, opened his address to the country's Constitutional Assembly with the words 'I am an African!'. In an inclusionary speech,<sup>1</sup> symptomatic of post-apartheid South Africa, Mbeki drew strands of the country's many histories together. His words evoked great emotion within the assembly chamber,<sup>2</sup> and later throughout the country: across the political spectrum, South Africans strongly associated themselves with the spirit of reconciliation and outreach caught in his words.

South Africa's reunification with the rest of the continent had been a significant sub-narrative within the processes which led to negotiation over the ending of apartheid. That South Africa would become part of the African community was, of course, beyond doubt; what was at issue was both the sequence of events by which this would happen and the conditionalities attached to its happening. The continent's enthusiasm for the peace process in South Africa was initially uneven: the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit in June 1991 decided to retain sanctions against South Africa although the Nigerian leader, General Ibrahim Babingida, expressed an interest in meeting South Africa's then President, F.W. de Klerk, if such an occasion 'would help bring about majority rule.'<sup>3</sup>

The political prize attached to uniting South Africa with the rest of the continent explains why South Africa's outgoing minority government, despite energetic and expensive diplomatic effort, was unable to deliver its own version of South Africa in Africa. The stumbling block was the reversibility of the negotiation process, an issue which was finally sealed early in October 1992 by the acceptance of the principle of a government of national unity.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>1</sup> *Debates of the Constitutional Assembly*, no. 1, 29 March–8 May, 1996, cols 422–7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, cols 427–47.

<sup>3</sup> *Race Relations Survey*, 1991/92 (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1992), pp. 415, 458.

<sup>4</sup> T. R. H. Davenport, *The transfer of power in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), p. 16.

important links, especially in the business, financial and industrial sectors,<sup>5</sup> were developed with Africa during the interregnum. Once the constitutional transition had been completed, and the country had gone to the polls on 27 April 1994, the prospects for South Africa's relations with the rest of Africa were different.

Given Thabo Mbeki's understanding of the continent—he was the chief representative of the African National Congress (ANC) in Swaziland and later in Nigeria—and his pivotal role in the country's search for new international relationships, it was obvious that he should become the architect of its African policy. His thinking on the issue was slow to emerge. For two years, South Africa's new government was cautious, even coy, in articulating a policy line on Africa, although with its near neighbours, Botswana and Zimbabwe, it intervened to stem a domestic crisis in Lesotho under the aegis of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). In these early days, South Africa appeared content to play on some familiar themes of multilateralism under the auspices of the OAU, supporting the viability of politically independent and economically sustainable nation-states which were able to protect their interests.

### African Renaissance

As events on the continent unfolded, however, South Africa's diplomacy became with mixed outcomes, more adventurous: for instance, successive diplomatic initiatives in Nigeria and the former Zaire brought, respectively, disfavour and confusion. In the crisis over the slaying of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni activists, few African countries supported Pretoria's initiative;<sup>6</sup> and the OAU rejected South Africa's call for an international boycott against the Abacha regime, describing it as 'not an African way to deal with an African problem.'<sup>7</sup> Eighteen months later, with the crisis over Zaire in its final stages, South Africa initiated an exercise at building peace which appeared to be almost entirely unilateral. This culminated in talks held on a South African warship off Congo-Brazzaville. South Africa's policy objectives were quite unclear. Was this initiative intended to favour Laurent Kabila, whose long march to victory was nearly over—the preferred African position? Or did Pretoria support a soft landing for the embattled Mobutu Sese Seko—the option favoured by the United States?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A South African delegation attended a meeting of the African Development Bank in May 1992. Although they lobbied for membership, they were told that the country would first have to become a member of the OAU. See *South Africa's foreign relations in transition 1985–1992*, compiled by Elna Schoeman (Johannesburg: SAIIA Bibliographic Series, no. 24, 1992), p. 453.

<sup>6</sup> An analysis of this episode is to be found in Maxi van Aardt, 'A foreign policy to die for: South Africa's response to the Nigeria crisis', *Africa Insight* 26: 2, 1996, pp. 107–19.

<sup>7</sup> See Denis Venter, 'South Africa and Africa: relations in a time of change', in Walter Carlsnaes and Marie Muller, eds, *Change and South African external relations* (Johannesburg: International Thomson Publishing (southern Africa), 1997).

<sup>8</sup> On this point see 'Naive SA must not adopt missionary position', *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), 23 May 1997.

Elsewhere on the continent, scattered involvement generated further confusion. For example, South African weapons found their way into the hands of both the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudanese government. This particular incident was said to be responsible for the temporary derailment of the Sudanese peace talks, with the SPLA leader John Garang questioning the integrity of the South Africans who were involved in brokering the talks.<sup>9</sup>

This discord did not go unnoticed on the continent, although African leaders were careful to distance South Africa's President, Nelson Mandela, from the reversals suffered by the country's diplomats. The exception was Nigeria's minister of information, Walter Ofonagoro, who called Nelson Mandela the black president of a white state.<sup>10</sup> This slight aside, South Africa did become a full partner in Africa's formal diplomacy. It established diplomatic missions in 23 African countries and took up membership of the OAU and the SADC. Leaving alone these formalities, the issue of how it would make its presence felt on the continent was very much on the domestic agenda.<sup>11</sup>

There was, however, another—almost omnipresent—pressure upon South Africa to engage with the continent: this has been exerted by the international community. The 1990s opened with some international optimism over the prospects of a third wave of democracy in Africa, but this was quickly dissipated after the débâcle in Somalia and the genocide in Rwanda. In addition, there seemed no prospect, outside of South Africa, of linking the continent with the rapidly developing economies of the world.<sup>12</sup> Yet, on a more positive note, the success of South Africa's transition and the country's geographical location suggested, in quite obvious ways, that it should be involved in helping to secure the continent.

Amid deepening Afro-pessimism, South African commentators went to some lengths to remind the government that Mandela had promised that 'South Africa...[could not]...escape its African destiny'.<sup>13</sup> From late 1996 onwards, South African thinking on its African policy began to coalesce around the notion of an 'African Renaissance',<sup>14</sup> although the idea was first formally used in an address to a US audience in April 1997.<sup>15</sup> The strong response awakened by Mbeki's 'I am an African' speech resonated with the wider idea of an

<sup>9</sup> 'South African arms used by Sudanese rebels', AF Press Clips, 2 March 1997; 'Sudan peace talk on, rebel chief postpones Mandela meeting', AF Press Clips, 26 August 1997.

<sup>10</sup> 'South Africa, a white country with a black head...Nigerian minister', AF Press Clips, 14 July 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Venter, 'South Africa and Africa', pp. 77–82.

<sup>12</sup> On this aspect see A. Adedeji, ed., *Africa within the world: beyond dispossession and dependence* (London: Zed in association with the African Centre for Development and Strategic Studies, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Mandela, 'South Africa's future foreign policy', *Foreign Affairs* 72: 5, 1993, p. 89.

<sup>14</sup> The use of the term was not original: it was the title of a book written by Leonard Barnes in 1969 and published in London by Victor Gollancz. The term has however attracted wider currency, for example, the distinguished African historian Basil Davidson suggested that 'an African Renaissance has dawned' in an interview with the Dutch publication *Internationale Samenwerking* (The Hague, 1997), 12: 11, pp. 22–5.

<sup>15</sup> Thabo Mbeki, address to the Corporate Council on Africa's 'Attracting capital to Africa' summit, 19–22 April 1997, Chantilly, Virginia, USA.

'African Renaissance', and the two themes appeared to reinforce South Africa's unambiguous commitment to the continent.

Despite—or perhaps because of—earlier policy reversals, the visionary language of the African Renaissance was underscored by five suggested areas of engagement: the encouragement of cultural exchange; the 'emancipation of African woman from patriarchy'; the mobilization of youth; the broadening, deepening and sustenance of democracy; and the initiation of sustainable economic development.<sup>16</sup>

This article is not primarily concerned with the unfolding story of South Africa's relations with Africa. We focus, rather, on revealing the various interpretations of the idea of an African Renaissance, and with locating their place in South Africa's emerging diplomatic practice. Our discursive goal is, however, the emancipatory potential offered by an African Renaissance as the millennium approaches. We are also interested in theory; which is why we begin with history.

### South Africa's destiny

The notion that their presence should feature in African affairs seems to have been a constant thread in the rhetoric of successive South African leaders, irrespective of colour or ideological hue. Each epoch has appeared to offer exciting possibilities of engagement across the continent's spatial divides. On each occasion, it has seemed possible that the developed South Africa could join—indeed, much more, lead—Africa's people in the common cause of modernization. The logic of this belief was unassailable, resting, as it did, on geography. This made South Africa's African destiny—even its continental leadership—appear natural to racial minorities who were accorded exclusive citizenship by dint of their skin colour.

In a speech to the country's premier agricultural and industrial show in April 1940, South Africa's then prime minister, Jan Smuts pointed out the benefits to the country of its geographic position:

If we wish to take our rightful place as leader in Pan-African development and in the shaping of future policies and events in this vast continent, we must face the realities and the facts of the present and seize the opportunities which these offer. All Africa may be our proper market if we will but have the vision, and far-sighted policy will be necessary if that is to be realised.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Outlined in a document entitled 'The African Renaissance: a workable dream', said to have been written by an aide—probably Vusi Mavimbela (see note 23 below)—and issued by the Office of South Africa's Deputy President.

<sup>17</sup> J. C. Smuts, *Plans for a better world: speeches of Field Marshall the Rt Hon. J. C. Smuts* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1942), p. 250.

Caught in the early months of the Second World War, the prime minister's concerns were both to stake out Allied interest in a nervous subcontinent, and to deal with domestic resistance to South Africa's declaration of war. But there was more: the same speech announced the creation of the Industrial Development Corporation which built the country's wartime economy and, in the decades that followed, anchored South Africa's industrialization. This development reinforced the argument, now increasingly economic in tone, for an assertive Africa policy in which South Africa's spare capacity might be made available to benefit the less well endowed polities with which it shared the continent. This goal required a mercantile trade-off, however: South African economic interests, particularly its industry and trading sectors, would be amply rewarded by the potential which the continent has always promised.

It was, however, to become increasingly clear that the privileges accorded by race stood in the way of South Africa achieving its goal of leadership. It was certainly true that in the first decades of independence politics in Africa were taken up with the idea that both development and nationalism would enable the continent to emerge as an equal global partner. The continent's leaders always insisted that South Africa could be part of an African revolution, as some called it, but to do so, it had to abandon apartheid.

The thread of South Africa's African destiny, with its themes of modernization and leadership, reappeared several times during the apartheid years. In the middle and late 1960s, South Africa's minority government initiated two linked forays into Africa. Known successively as dialogue and detente, these sought continental approval for South Africa's racial policy and diplomatic recognition of its soon-to-be-independent homelands.<sup>18</sup> But, as was invariably the case with apartheid South Africa, more was involved: this was the heyday of modernization theory, and the idea of South Africa developing Africa was held within the hand of South Africa's diplomatic outreach.<sup>19</sup> Equally importantly, the rhetoric which accompanied these successive diplomatic initiatives was premised on substantial returns for South African business. Both dialogue and detente failed—victims of the Cold War divide and the minority's blind faith in apartheid.<sup>20</sup>

Then, in the late 1970s, South Africa once again launched an African initiative, this one confined to the subcontinent, especially the immediate neighbours. The proposal sought the creation of a Constellation of Southern African States (CONSAS) which, it was hoped, would diplomatically link South Africa to the states of the region.<sup>21</sup> At its base were more immediate security con-

<sup>18</sup> Both are discussed in James Barber and John Barratt, *South African foreign policy: the search for status and security, 1945–1988* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> For an example of thinking on this see John Barratt, Simon Brand, David S. Collier and Kurt Glaser, eds, *Accelerated development in southern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> The dilemmas are analysed in Sam Nolutshungu, *South Africa in Africa: a study in ideology and foreign policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975).

<sup>21</sup> See Deon Geldenhuys, *The constellation of southern African states and the South African Development Co-ordination Council: towards a new regional stalemate?* (Johannesburg: SAIIA, 1981).

cerns, however: the anti-apartheid threat and a deteriorating regional situation—the latter driven, ironically, by apartheid's destruction of its immediate neighbourhood. Beyond these considerations, the regime's rhetoric on South Africa's African destiny, especially on the mercantile benefits of CONSAS,<sup>22</sup> was not far removed from the exhortations of Jan Smuts in the 1940s.

This patterning suggests why commonsensical policy outcomes invariably appear to flow from structural readings of South Africa's relations with the continent. Moulded by geography and drawn by the progress promised by development, minority-ruled South Africa perceived its 'hinterland' (to mimic a phrase attributed to Cecil John Rhodes) as lying towards the north, and its own natural role as primarily to lead the continent's people towards modernization—and to tap their market and other potential. As the 1990s have progressed, it has appeared obvious that the same structural circumstances and the same possible outcomes have suggested themselves.

### An empty vessel

With apartheid ended and South Africa no longer isolated, the country seems to be standing on the threshold of fulfilment of its African destiny—its time finally at hand. Moreover, the country's capacity to offer leadership has been enhanced by the role model which its successful transition offers to the continent. The international standing of Nelson Mandela—one of few Africans to have captured and retained the attention of the world—added to the allure of South Africa's enhanced role in Africa. If these circumstances fostered the notion of African Renaissance, it was the lyrical appeal of Mbeki's imagery which turned the obvious, the commonsensical, into a tryst with history. And yet, when analysts and commentators searched the idea of the African Renaissance for policy content, there appeared very little to anchor what was obviously a fine idea.<sup>23</sup>

This suggests that, although rooted in structure and buoyed by modernization theory, South Africa's idea of an African Renaissance is abstruse—more promise than policy. This explanation fits revisionist interpretations of some major policy initiatives in the twentieth century, which argue for example, that Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' and Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society' were little more than openings around which, with goodwill and energy on the part of governments and citizens, significant policy initiatives might eventually take

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. the contributions to Willie Breytenbach, ed., *The constellation of states: a consideration* (Johannesburg: South Africa Foundation, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> A meeting on the African Renaissance held by the Foundation for Dialogue, a South African NGO concerned with international relations questions, on 31 July 1997, addressed by Vusi Mavimbela, an aide to Thabo Mbeki, generated much confusion. Operating under the Chatham House Rule, some participants reported that there was little real policy substance. Mavimbela's views on the African Renaissance are thought to be the most comprehensive and to reflect most closely Mbeki's own; for an account of these see 'An African Renaissance could be far more than a dream', *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 15 June 1997.

form or social movements develop.<sup>24</sup> There is, indeed, a social contractual reading of the African Renaissance: a double-edged agreement, as it were, which commits the South African state to democratic concord with its own people, and binds South Africa to the cause of peace and democracy in Africa.

Seen through this frame, some important policy developments have, indeed, followed. A good example is peacekeeping, where South Africa has been encouraged to accept international responsibilities,<sup>25</sup> especially in Africa.<sup>26</sup> Under this rubric, the country's military and its foreign ministry have developed a comprehensive white paper on peacekeeping which commits them to the central tenets of liberal internationalism. This has parenthetically been the most successful encounter between the policy community and South Africa's government on a major issue of foreign or security policy. There have been unforeseen repercussions: conservatively inclined think-tanks and commentators have turned peacekeeping into a vehicle for mobilizing support for the maintenance of Africa's arms industry.<sup>27</sup> This in turn has led to South Africa's controversial sale of arms to the strife-torn countries of the Great Lakes region and surveillance equipment to Algeria.

But more creative ideas have also filled, as it were, the empty policy vessel represented by the African Renaissance. Clearly, South Africa's government is committed to the development of democracy in Africa: indeed, Mbeki's statements on the 'African Renaissance' have insisted that 'the people must govern', and Mandela has been vocal on the need to protect human rights on the continent.<sup>28</sup>

These examples suggest that despite its alleged lack of content, the idea of the African Renaissance can influence—indeed, has influenced—policy and its making. Nevertheless, the essential features remain, we believe, high on sentiment, low on substance. Like the New Deal and the Great Society, the African Renaissance exists as an undetermined policy goal propounded by a political leadership which faces a particular set of challenges, both domestically and internationally. It seems that the historical roll-call of successive South African initiatives in Africa, though perhaps not the immediate inspiration for current

<sup>24</sup> This analogy was suggested to us by Professor Richard Joseph of Emory University, Atlanta.

<sup>25</sup> An interpretation of this is to be found in Peter Vale, 'Peace in southern Africa: time for questions', in Gunnar Sorbo and Peter Vale, eds, *Out of conflict: from war to peace in Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1997), pp. 39–53.

<sup>26</sup> Actually, Mbeki first raised the question of South Africa contributing to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa in a speech to the General Assembly in June 1994: *Race relations survey 1994/95* (Johannesburg: South Africa Institute of Race Relations, 1996), p. 422.

<sup>27</sup> As an example of this kind of thinking see Jakkie Celliers and Greg Mills, eds, *Peacekeeping in Africa*, vol. 2 (Johannesburg: IDP and SAIIA, 1995). On the opportunism presented by the idea of the African Renaissance see *The SA Navy and an African Renaissance: selected conference papers of the Annual Naval Conference, 23 October 1997*, ISS Papers, no. 27 (November 1997). On the view of commentators, see 'Regional security: SA needs a power-projection capability', *Finance Week* (Johannesburg), 15 January 1998, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> See statement by President Nelson Mandela speaking as chairperson of SADC at the official opening of the summit of the SADC heads of state or government, Blantyre, Malawi, 8 September 1997.

policy-makers, offers the only reliable guide for future government policy. Simply put, the African Renaissance seeks to maximize South Africa's foreign policy options in Africa—including continental support for the country's search for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.

But is there more than this to the African Renaissance? To answer this question, we briefly turn to exegesis. In drawing upon the distinctive image of Renaissance, the intention seems not to pronounce or deliberately proclaim a renewal; to do this would be plainly absurd. The resonance of the term 'Renaissance', however, is patent: an 'outburst of mental energy'<sup>29</sup> to promote a spirit of awakening in Africa in the late twentieth century. With this in mind, Mbeki's rhetoric has drawn attention to the significance of new technologies—computers, the Internet, the World Wide Web—for African development, in much the same way as printing contributed to the transition from medieval to modern times. The desire for progress, an ending of old ways, a freeing of the creative spirit.

## Two contrasting views

By casting the African Renaissance in these expansive terms, political space has been opened up within which two distinct and contesting interpretations of South Africa in Africa have emerged. Both deserve scrutiny because they reveal continuing cleavages in the social and economic fabric of post-apartheid South Africa, and the kinds of tensions which may follow South Africa's efforts to exercise its options in Africa.

Cast in the modernist tradition, the first links South Africa's economic interest to Africa through the logic of globalization. We call this the globalist interpretation. The second uses the African Renaissance to unlock a series of complex social constructions around African identity:<sup>30</sup> this we call the Africanist interpretation. While the former fits comfortably within accepted frameworks in contemporary international relations, the latter is less familiar, although we will argue that it offers footholds on wider forms of emancipation.

In the globalist response, the African Renaissance suggests a continental effort led by South Africa to advance the familiar 'end-of-history' thesis upon which—on one controversial reading,<sup>31</sup>—South Africa's own transformation has rested. Economic globalization—for which read the mix of free markets, privatization, exchange control relaxation and cuts in public expenditure—will erode the power of authoritarian governments to 'free' bedevilled polities from the restrictions of ideologically based control and the resulting conflict.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ingrid D. Rowland, 'The Renaissance revealed', *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1997, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the wider debates around this are to be found in Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture* (London: Methuen, 1992), p. 284.

<sup>31</sup> See the contribution made by South African business to the hearings of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Johannesburg, November 1997.

<sup>32</sup> In July 1997, the business-funded South African Institute of International Affairs ran a conference entitled 'South and southern Africa: lessons from emerging markets' which reinforced globalist perspectives on the success of the Asian experience.



On this reading, South Africa's African Renaissance (this choice of words is important) is anchored in a chain of economies which, with time, might become the African equivalent of the Asian Tigers. Mbeki's aides have favoured this interpretation by suggesting that 'the advent of the East Asia economic miracle is one of the most important socio-economic developments of the twentieth century...This miracle has offered hope to the people of Africa that economic development can be rapid and can be achievable without the annexation of foreign markets through imperial physical force.'<sup>33</sup> In this rendition, the African Renaissance posits Africa as an expanding and prosperous market alongside Asia, Europe and North America in which South African capital is destined to play a special role through the development of trade, strategic partnerships and the like. In exchange for acting as the agent of globalization, the continent will offer South Africa a preferential option on its traditionally promised largesse of oil,<sup>34</sup> minerals and mining.

The globalist interpretation of the African Renaissance has been enthusiastically embraced by monied elites (from across the racial spectrum) in South Africa who understand modernization (to draw upon François Léotard) in terms of the generation of wealth, and who look towards 'a world in which trade and global competitiveness are as important as the political dimensions of diplomacy', as one South African banker has put it.<sup>35</sup> South Africa's direct investment in Africa was approximately R3.7 billion before the 1994 election, and increased to about R13 billion thereafter, while trade during 1994–5 has increased by 52.6 per cent to R16,771 billion.<sup>36</sup> Business confidence in Africa's globalization has been reflected on the financial markets, where South African companies trading in Africa have shown impressive growth. Seen from this perspective, there seems no end to the material benefits of the African Renaissance. As one South African entrepreneur has remarked, 'Africa is a huge market; it may be turbulent sometimes, but it eats and uses toiletries every day.'<sup>37</sup>

The enthusiasm with which South African capital has embraced this African Renaissance may locate the deepening nervousness on the continent over the country's goals, and does help to explain the reversals in early policy initiatives. The idea that 'what is good for South Africa is good for Africa' echoes a series of uncomfortable historical encounters between Africa and South Africa's traditionally powerful establishment: encounters which, despite the miracle attached to South Africa's transformation, have scarred Africa's political psyche. Moletsi Mbeki, a former journalist and brother of the deputy president, has captured this disquiet by suggesting 'that an increasing number of African countries would prefer us not to play a...[leadership]...role'.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> 'The African Renaissance: a workable dream'.

<sup>34</sup> 'Fuelling a renaissance for a new Africa', *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), 19–25 September 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Conrad Strauss, preface, in Greg Mills, Alan Begg and Anthonie van Nieuwerk, eds, *South Africa in the global economy* (Johannesburg: SAIIA with Standard Bank, 1995), p. v.

<sup>36</sup> Gail Leftwich, 'An African Renaissance?', *South Africa: The Journal of Trade, Industry and Investment*, Summer 1997, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> 'Mother Africa, Mother Niche', *Financial Mail* (Johannesburg), 16 January 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Moletsi Mbeki, 'The African Renaissance: myth or reality', address to the SAIIA, Jan Smuts House, Johannesburg, 21 October 1997.

Wider experience suggests the wisdom of Africa's misgivings: as the United Nations Development Programme annually reports, the solutions offered by the market widen, rather than narrowing, divides between rich and poor. Although the idea of the African Renaissance is rooted in the need to develop and sustain an African middle class, market solutions appear to exaggerate political and economic tension within countries. More immediately, there is no evidence to suggest that for all the growing trade across the continent, there is no prospect of an end to history in Africa.

Then, a slew of reversals in the continent's 'third wave of democracy'—recent events in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe make the point—suggest that transitions underpinned by the market, the military and mainly the ballot box have done little to dislodge traditional patterns of post-colonial control. Africa's uncaptured peasantry (in Goran Hyden's phrase) remain outside, and alienated from, the state system. And in some places—Somalia, where there is no state to speak of, and Rwanda and Burundi, where embers still simmer, remain close to self-destruction—the future of peasantry, people and politics is wholly uncertain.

In contrast, the Africanist reading of the Renaissance is post-structural. Africanists argue that globalist outcomes will 'amount to nothing more than an externally driven consumerist movement' that will leave Africans continuing to be 'valued' only for an ability to 'absorb and popularize foreign ideas, trinkets and junk'.<sup>39</sup> Africanists' primary aim is to lay to rest 'the image of the perpetually dancing, skin-clad African who is always smiling through ridicule and pain'; they are intent on developing a condition that would help Africans 'contribute meaningfully to rescuing the world from barbarism that masquerades as civilisation'. These concerns explain why Africanists call for a reinterpretation both of their history and culture, away from its colonial construction towards a consolidation of the 'wealth of knowledge that Africans are carrying around in their heads'. Seen within this framework, the idea of the African Renaissance draws on different strands of social theory and cultural history from those that run through theories such as globalization which are readily presented as common sense in conventional explanations of international relations.

Inspired by the legacy of Marcus Garvey, Africanists eschew the modernizing tendency represented by Africa's encounter with Europe—what one commentator has called the 'chasing of scientific glory and money'.<sup>40</sup> In their search, Africanists believe that 'identity is still in the making. There isn't a final identity that is African. But, at the same time, there *is* an identity coming into existence. And it has a certain context and a certain meaning.'<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See 'African Renaissance: teaching the past to find the future', *Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), 1–7 April 1997.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Appiah, *In my father's house*, p. 117.

From South Africa's perspective, this understanding of the African Renaissance is rooted in largely unexplored and hidden links—in culture, in literature, in folklore—across the continent. This alone is not enough: to take root and produce results, these shared elements will have to be turned into policies which will have to touch the lives of people. The powerful appeal of Black Consciousness in South Africa, captured in the inspiring life and tragic death of Steve Biko, exposed the rich undergrowth of relationships—personal, social and political—that lie within the Africanist framing; but it did not turn these relationships into tangible benefits. In short, it did not produce viable policy outcomes.

The Africanist interpretation fundamentally challenges the dominant narratives of international relations, and opens space in which alternative views of Africa's future may be advanced. In this post-structural reading, the African Renaissance underscores an increasingly powerful appeal, strongly articulated by intellectuals, for a new future for Africa. This touches parts of the Afro-American experience, in which a Black Renaissance refers to the insertion of the voice of the African diaspora into changing international circumstances. So, for instance, in late 1996, the journal *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir* invited the 'Black genius to apply itself to the realities of the 21st Century with uncompromising, thoughtful, generous...commentary'.<sup>42</sup> In the arena provided by these overlapping interpretations of the spirit which carried Black Consciousness in South Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, the African Renaissance offers multiple—and as yet wholly unexplored—interpretations of South Africa's place on the continent.

South African understandings of the continent have been enriched by the migration of African from the rest of the continent.<sup>43</sup> But their challenge remains to turn their commitment to African into something more than the rituals associated with continental unity and African brotherhood. As Njabulo Ndebele, a leading South African intellectual, has argued,

the return to mythical roots ceases to be a compelling factor of mobilization in the face of the sheer weight of existing socio-cultural realities that demand to be addressed on their own terms...the call for black roots has less effect than the provision of water and sanitation, electricity, telephones, houses, clinics, transport, schools and jobs.<sup>44</sup>

The majority of Africans consider themselves marginalized from the affairs of their countries, the continent and the world. Unless this is changed, there will be no renewal. The inscrutable and unsettled nature of the African Renaissance can permit a plethora of alternative interpretations of the future. To succeed, an African Renaissance must end the discriminatory economic position the

<sup>42</sup> See Manthia Diawara, 'To Toni Cade Bambrara', *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir* 1: 1, Fall 1996, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> See Kole Omotoso, *Season of migration to the south: Africa's crises reconsidered* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> 'The debate on Eurocentrism risks degenerating into name-calling', *Sunday Independent* (Johannesburg), 28 September 1997.

continent faces in the late twentieth century, and blunt the anger which people of colour, not only in Africa but all over the world, experience in an emerging international system which reinforces global apartheid.

The keys to this may be found in a profound epistemological shift,<sup>45</sup> involving the search for an understanding of human relations beyond the limits represented by racial politics, both domestic and international, which these have engendered. It must simultaneously recognize both human worth and the diversity of cultural values it represents: the market cannot do this. To play this role, a renaissance must, however, represent both discipline and liberation.

Are there lasting opportunities for Africans which lie beyond the 'real game of international relations which has three basic rules: trade, trade and trade'?<sup>46</sup> Can the idea of Renaissance work in the lives of ordinary Africans as they seek to come to grips with a globalizing world? Can the African Renaissance draw the daily life of politics closer to the productive energy of African literature, oral narratives, poetry, dance, music and visual arts?

To avoid these questions, as structural theorist might, misses the emancipatory moment which Mbeki has caught, and avoids a deliberate consideration of deliberate nomenclature, in particular the 'renaissance' metaphor within which South Africa's African destiny now seems to be cast. What's to be done?

A beginning can be made with mother-tongue education. In South Africa, this remains an important arena for transformation; elsewhere on the continent, much has been achieved. Another beginning is agriculture. There can be no African revival, let alone an epistemological change, unless and until Africa can feed itself. The discriminatory conditionalities provided by the World Trade Organization have diminished the continent's capacity to take advantage of the one commodity it has in abundance: land. As Yosh Tandon recently argued, power relations, not the neutrality of the market or technology, determine the daily diet of Africans.<sup>47</sup> A third beginning can draw Africanist perspectives closer to the policy world so loved by international relations scholarship. The limitations of the vision offered by neo-realism—as South Africa's destabilization of its neighbourhood tragically demonstrated—are clear. The same logic suggests why neo-liberal economics offer no hope—Africa's great majority will be forced to live on the margins of its own and the global society.

To carry the day, in policy terms, the African Renaissance will have to evince both a capacity to deliver the stuff of politics and a consciousness of the pain and humiliation of African people in a continent, and a world, which remains entirely dominated by the cultural values of people who are not black. The search for an emancipatory democracy which will carry an African

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> 'Winning both ways in the inscrutable game of Chinese diplomatic checkers', *Business Report* (Johannesburg), 15 January 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Yosh Tandon, 'Globalization and the South: the logic of exploitation', *International Politics and Society*, 4, 1997, pp. 389–98.

Renaissance will begin with the affirmation that minorities and the values they hold are important. In small but significant ways this process has begun in Africa; and South Africa has followed the lead of other countries in incorporating modes of traditional authority at the third and second tiers of government. There are important parallel threads, too: could the African Renaissance help to wrest the debate over women away from the control of patriarchal governments?

### **Leaders and followers**

South Africa's search for an African home in the aftermath of the ending of apartheid was to be expected. What kind of a home—an imagined, real or constructed community—Africa might become for South Africa, lies immediately beyond the bounds of this argument.<sup>48</sup> But, given the emotional barrier which apartheid erected between South Africa and the continent, and the resulting sense of expectation now that it has been lowered, the question of who leads is central.

In structural understandings of politics, it appears natural—perhaps even predestined, as we have been at pains to note—that South Africa should provide leadership. This being so, South African commentators have been odious in their belief that their country, their experience (at political transformation and in market economics, in particular) has everything to teach Africa; and, by implication, that Africa had nothing to teach South Africa. They have, to be fair, been encouraged to believe this by distinguished African figures, notably the former president of Tanzania Julius Nyerere, who have called upon South Africans to take up their responsibilities in Africa.<sup>49</sup> These impulses have certainly fed wider international perceptions that South Africa is the only country which can offer leadership to the countries south of the Sahara—a point, incidentally, enthusiastically embraced by the United States as it seeks to implement a version of the theory of pivotal states.<sup>50</sup>

The central paradox of leadership—that it requires followership—explains why, however desirable it might appear for South Africa to lead an African Renaissance, it cannot: indeed, it dare not. This conclusion follows from a recognition that traditional understandings of international relations remain 'largely the game of the powerful...the strong extract what they will, the weak must surrender what they cannot protect'.<sup>51</sup> South Africa's leadership of Africa is also condemned by its unhappy past. As South Africa's neighbours have pointed out, the country's residual power, particularly its economic muscle and military strength, skew rather than balance the prospects for sustainable and

<sup>48</sup> On this question see Emanuel Adler, 'Imagined (security) communities: cognitive regions in international relations', *Millennium* 26: 2, 1998, pp. 249–77.

<sup>49</sup> Speech by Dr Julius Nyerere at the South Africa Parliament on 16 October 1997.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Chase, Emily Hill and Paul Kennedy, 'Pivotal states and US strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 75: 1 (January–February, 1996), pp. 33–51.

<sup>51</sup> Tandon, 'Globalization and the South', pp. 390–91.

equitable development in southern Africa.<sup>52</sup> Given this favourable weighting, they ask, why is it that South African political and business leaders insist that their country's national interest should enjoy priority above community considerations? Without equity, followership can only be reluctant and forced. There are countless examples of this in southern Africa: perhaps the most tangible is the tension felt between Zimbabwe and South Africa over the latter's use of its economic muscle in trade negotiations—a tension which is all too often portrayed as a simple personality clash between Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's president, and Nelson Mandela.

The most important example of Africa's hesitancy to follow South Africa was the unsuccessful effort by Cape Town to become the host city for the 2004 Olympic Games. Although the campaign was called the 'African Bid', and was promoted as Africa's turn to stage the Olympic Games (which have been held on all four of the other continents), it seems that Cape Town lost the bid—to Athens—because, in the first round of voting, African delegates failed to support South Africa.<sup>53</sup> It is important to make this further point: Cape Town's Olympic bid was frequently said to be integral to the African Renaissance; indeed, Mbeki argued that 'the time has come for the rest of the world to demonstrate its commitment to the African Renaissance by awarding the Games in the year 2004 to the African Continent'.<sup>54</sup> But was it truly an African endeavour? Or was it solely South Africa's effort to appropriate the image of Africa for its own purposes?

There is a danger that this discussion of the African Renaissance has relied too much on the perspectives offered by one politician, Thabo Mbeki. There is a long and unsatisfactory history of foreign policy scholarship in South Africa which has rested on the role of personality in constructing interpretations of policy. And yet, the distinguishing feature of South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy is how obviously policy has moved from the ministry of foreign affairs into the president's office—particularly, it seems, into the hands of Mbeki. The unfolding of the African Renaissance and its use as a potential instrument of policy, confirms the consolidation of South Africa's foreign policy in Mbeki's hands. It seems, therefore, that no appreciation of the place of the African Renaissance in current policy can be formed without considering Mbeki's standing in the country's politics and his goals for South Africa.

Mbeki's succession to the South African presidency was sealed at the December 1997 meeting of its ruling African National Congress (ANC), held in Mafeking, where he was elected leader of the party; from this position he will, *pro forma*, succeed Mandela when South Africa's president retires in 1999. One view of the African Renaissance is that it is integral to Thabo Mbeki's

<sup>52</sup> 'Heavy load for SADC', *Sowetan* (Johannesburg), 15 September 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Moletsi Mbeki, 'The African Renaissance: myth or reality'.

<sup>54</sup> Thabo Mbeki, address to the Corporate Council on Africa's, 'Attracting capital to Africa' summit, pp.

search for presidential status. A shrewd politician,<sup>55</sup> he faces an unenviable task: the South Africa he will come to govern may well have shown a quite remarkable propensity for reconciliation—quite out of proportion to the horror of apartheid's long and crippling hold over the country's majority—but the challenges of transformation remain daunting.<sup>56</sup> Prospects for continued international interest—essential for economic growth to secure transformation in a modern state—will wane after the retirement of Mandela. Faced with this outlook, is Mbeki using the African Renaissance as little more than an effort to develop a presidential vocabulary which resonates with his perceived strength, international affairs? Or is it simply an effort to cultivate his image as a Renaissance man? To use these questions to dismiss the idea of the African Renaissance, we believe, is to misread the historical moment which Mbeki has caught and to close off the political space that his initiative has secured. Notwithstanding the ideas that have been put forward to develop a coherent national interest in South Africa, there are, if truth be told, as many interests as there are South African nationals. The challenge is to use the fluidity presented by the new South Africa to make the idea of the African Renaissance larger than Mbeki and the immediate prospects for his presidency—because, as we have suggested, the idea he has evoked must live beyond the narrow confines represented by South Africa's politicians and their interests.

From a policy perspective, however, the important question seems to be whether Mbeki is an Africanist or a globalist. An astute observer of South African affairs, Vincent Maphai, who is said to be close to the deputy president, is reported as saying that Mbeki 'takes Africa seriously and he is emotionally and intellectually committed to prove Afro-pessimism wrong'.<sup>57</sup> And yet a study of Mbeki's speeches, not only those which deal with the African Renaissance, suggests a strong commitment to the central tenets of globalization. More significantly, his engineering of South Africa's neo-liberal macro-economic policy, called GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), in the face of strong opposition from within his party, has marked him out as a modernizer among the South African business community,<sup>58</sup> much to the chagrin of the ANC's alliance partners, the Communist Party of South Africa and COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

One question therefore remains to be answered: who will benefit from the African Renaissance?

<sup>55</sup> 'The Mbeki enigma', *Southern African Report* 13: 1, November 1997, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Some of these issues are discussed in 'The end of the miracle', *The Economist* (London), 13 December 1997.

<sup>57</sup> 'The African Renaissance', p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> On this see Hein Marias, 'The Mbeki enigma', *Southern African Report* 13: 1, November 1997, pp. 6–11.

## **Whose Renaissance?**

In a globalizing world, the need for Africa to shed its Hobbesian image remains pressing. The success of a negotiated political settlement followed by the democratic election of a black-led government has seen an African country, South Africa, elevated to an unprecedented status in the eyes of the world's powerful. This opinion rests on South Africa's successful political transition, as well as the sound economic organization—at least, as seen by those in the international financial institutions—bequeathed to the new South African government.

These perceptions explain why the idea of the African Renaissance has carried some weight outside Africa. But to believe that South Africa, alone, should assume the responsibility for the next wave of democratization and economic liberalization in the rest of the continent is absurd. Nevertheless, on a structural reading, South Africa is undoubtedly well positioned as a key player in these areas because it appears to be the natural leader in political and economic affairs; a condition overwhelmingly confirmed by its military power.

This same reading of South Africa's African destiny explains why many believe that the African Renaissance is no more than an effort to secure non-African (particularly US) interests on the African continent.

For Mbeki's vision to gain support within the continent, South Africa cannot afford to allow its policy to be influenced by American or other external imperatives. But much more will be needed. The idea of an African Renaissance must primarily be raised in African, not foreign, forums. South Africans, too, need to be more Africa literate. To make their country's experience part of a larger African history and reality,<sup>59</sup> they will have to twist Pliny's dictum that there can, indeed, be something new out of Africa, something that is not made in South Africa. To succeed, South Africa's African Renaissance will have to draw together widely divergent ideas on what it is to be an African on the eve of the twenty-first century.

Suggestions like these, which aim to improve the prospects for South Africa's African policy, rest, however, on conventional interpretations of interstate relations, on structuralist understandings of power which, particularly in Africa, depend on the permanence of international boundaries. We believe that there is much more at stake in the African Renaissance than the scissors and paste of policy formulation. It is a striking image with an appeal beyond the mundane business of politics, or the politics of business. For the first time since the minority stepped on to African soil, the African Renaissance has delivered to South Africa the prospects for an African destiny, and raised the possibility of a partnership which will secure the continent in the new millennium.

<sup>59</sup> An attitude of indifference towards Africa was illustrated by reports that South African black diplomats do not want postings in Africa, preferring postings to Western capitals: 'Black South African diplomats do not want African postings', *AF Press Clips*, 3 August 1997.



If the African Renaissance is to help the continent slip the bonds of servitude, structural paradigms must be traded for post-structural ones and Africanist perspectives preferred to globalist ones. If the Renaissance serves the narrow purpose, as many believe it should, the machete which the market invariably delivers will be Africa's fate. But this hopeful image of the Renaissance must not be permitted to mutilate the continent and its people.