

THE SOUTH AFRICAN “AFRICAN RENAISSANCE” DEBATE : A CRITIQUE

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The “African Renaissance”, as a concept, has captured the imagination of many South Africans. A week hardly goes by without a talk or debate of some sort on this in the radios, television, newspaper or magazines. This concept is not only a source of inspiration for the South Africa; but has also been elevated to such a status that its mention or omission can render one either relevant or irrelevant. The concept is also a popular brand in the corporate sector; while some companies use it to promote their products and mission, others use it to name themselves. For example, the popular corporate magazine, the *Professional Managing Review (PMR)*, has introduced an “African Renaissance Award” to recognize those business that contribute to black economic empowerment in the country.

Beyond the popular usage of the concept, “African Renaissance” features prominently in the outlook of the African National Congress (ANC)-led government. Since the concept was first employed in the official ANC discourse in 1997 by President Thabo Mbeki in particular, an “African Renaissance” conference was organised, with the active support of the President’s Office, in September 1998, and this resulted in the publication of the edited collection, *African Renaissance : The New Struggle*¹. This conference prepared ground for the launch of the African Renaissance Institute (ARI) in 1999 and, recently, the South African Chapter of the African Renaissance (SACAR) which is supposed to spearhead a social movement for the “reawakening” of the African continent. ARI, in terms of this process, will be a coordinating body of country-based chapters of this movement. Parallel to these developments, President Thabo Mbeki, thanks to the passion with which he continues to advocate for the concept and its meaning, has attracted a lot of interest, thus earning himself the name “The Renaissance Man”. Subsequently, books are coming out of the publishing houses, aimed at unpacking the Mbeki idea of the “African Renaissance”².

As for the ANC, the 50th National Conference of the organization adopted the “African Renaissance” as a key component of its ideological outlook, especially as this pertains to international matters. This concept is discussed at length in the organization’s key policy document, *Strategy and Tactics*. Every year, on January the 8th, the ANC, on the occasion of the celebration of its anniversary, makes important policy pronouncements and outline strategic tasks for the year for its membership. Thus for the year 2000 January 8th statement, the ANC

declared this year the Dawn of the African Century and identified the realization of the African Renaissance as one of his five strategic tasks³ Indeed, the Department of Foreign Affairs, according to its Minister, is preparing a law, the African Renaissance and International Co-operation Bill, for later this year, that will enable “us to play our new role meaningfully and effectively within our modest means”⁴. It is expected that a special African Renaissance Fund will be established by the department as part of this process.

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The current use in South Africa of the “African Renaissance” dates back to 1994, after the first democratic elections, but it was only after May 1996 in the wake of famous “I am an African” speech by Thabo Mbeki (on the occasion of the adoption of the new Constitution for the country), that it entered the public discourse. Mbeki, then the Deputy President, later made the first official pronouncement on this when he addressed a group of business leaders in April 1997 in Virginia, USA. He used the occasion to unveil what were later to be known as key elements of his conception of the African Renaissance : social, political (democratization), economic regeneration and the improvement of Africa’s geo-political standing world affairs⁵. Few months later, in June 1997, Mbeki’s political adviser, Vusi Maviembela, published an article in the weekend newspaper, *Sunday Independent*, wherein he described the “African Renaissance” as a “third moment” in Africa’s post-colonial history. According to this view, decolonisation represent de “first moment”, with the 1990s democratic upsurge representing the “second moment”⁶.

Thus the debate entered the public discourse. While some warned against the “African Renaissance” becoming at “totalising idea”, others, especially among the minorities, wondered whether this concept was not the ANC’s turn towards narrow Africanism⁷. As for the Pan African Congress, an organization that broke away from the ANC in 1959 over the latter’s non-racialism, it is battling to enter the debate on its own terms; while some of its leaders claim the “African Renaissance” as “theirs”, others dismiss it as “confusion” and “the so-called ‘African Renaissance’ [that] is trying to borrow and transpose its [‘European Renaissance’] rationale”⁸. And, if newspaper reports on the first “African Renaissance” conference are anything to go by, the response from the African diplomatic community in the country has been less enthusiastic :

The conference heard that many African ambassador had declined invitation. “They ask, ‘What’s this African renaissance nonsense?’”,

Complained [Thami] Mazwai [the leading organizer].⁹

But the debate has not been polarized as suggested by the description above. In fact, it has generated enthusiasm and hope among the people. Perhaps, one explanation

could be what Moeletsi Mbeki, the brother to the President, described as “a triumphalist syndrome that afflicts newly liberated African countries”¹⁰.

Peter Vale and Siphosiso Maseko have divided the debate into two : the globalist and Africanist interpretations¹¹. This paper will argue for the revision of this categorization as follows : globalist, PanAfricanist, and culturalist perspectives. But this does not suggest that there are no linkages across these perspectives.

The globalist perspective is what is associated with Mbeki and the ANC. Here emphasis is, on the one hand, on the need for political (i.e. democratization) and economic renewal in the continent, and, on the other, on the need for the transformation of the world political and economic order, including its institutions. The ANC’s “Developing Strategic Perspective on South African Foreign Policy” discussion document of 1997, identified the following as the key element of the “African Renaissance”:

- The recovery of the African continent as a whole
- The establishment of political democracy on the continent
- The need to break neo-colonial relations between Africa and the world’s economic power
- The mobilization of the people of Africa to take their destiny into their hands thus preventing the continent [from] being seen as a place for the attainment of the geo-political and strategic interests of the world’s most powerful countries; and
- The need for fast development of people-driven and people-centered economic growth and development aimed at meeting the basic needs of the people.¹²

Accordingly, the ANC *Strategy and Tactics* document argues for the “African Renaissance” that recognizes “in the first instance the difficulties wrought on the continent by years of colonialism and unjust international relations, including debt crisis, underdevelopment, social dislocation, and in some instances untenable political relations underpinned by forms of government that imperialism encouraged for its own selfish interests”¹³. In this sense, “African Renaissance” is part of a broader anti-imperialist movement.

The pan-African perspective, for its part, attempts to locate the South African debate within the broader Pan-African tradition, dating back to the turn of the last century. According to Chris Landsberg and François Kornegay :

Is the renaissance a Pax Pretoriana thinly disguised as a Pax Africana? Or is it genuine Pax Africana? Pax Africana... means African solutions for African problems ...

Pan-Africanism in turn embodies a political, economic, social and cultural movement that seeks to span the political divisions of the

African continent ; the African Renaissance is indeed a modern, late-20th century variant of that ideology¹⁴.

The culturalist perspective, informed, as it were, by ethnophilosophy, sees the “African Renaissance” as a movement for a return to the “roots”. This perspective, arguably, is most dominant in the popular discourse about the concept. There is more and more interest in the public sphere in what is believed to be traditional African Practices and beliefs. One element of this perspective is the notion of *ubuntu*, a concept that has been around for some years but has now recently assumed some popularity. According to William Makgoba, one of the leading figures of SACAR, *ubuntu*, defined as “humanism”, means, for example :

... if you called an African by name, he or she will hear and respond by saying “are you calling me” even if he or she was the only one within the crowd... [I]n general African tend to look at things holistically and look for meaning and symbolism into the phenomenon ... Consensus or group identity is another powerful feature of African socialization¹⁵.

Other arguments raised in this article by Makgoba include : “... in both manner of communication, numeracy, though, interpretation and aesthetic appreciation there is a way in which Africans approach these matters in a specific way that is uniquely different say from the European, Japanese or Chinese”; and “... his [African] ethics is not based on wars. The African is not a conqueror but good at defence”.

An ontological question that is being raised by culturalists is indeed: “What is and what does it mean to be an African?”. Answers to this question turn to play around known ethnophilosophical themes. Additionally, according to culturalists : “They [Africans] must have the courage to consider discarding some of the ineffective and culturally irrelevant institutions and structures that have been promiscuously copied from the West¹⁶. To be sure, the first “ African Renaissance” conference was informed by a culturalist experience : “Thami Mazwai conceptualized this conference at an initiation ceremony in Bizana [in the Transkei]”¹⁷.

There are a number of themes, running across the above three perspectives, that one may have to single out in this discussion of the South African “ African Renaissance” debate. Firstly, is the question of the motive forces that will bring about the renaissance. Of course, the ANC puts more emphasis on “the mobilization of the people of Africa to take their destiny into their own hands” and the establishment of bodies such as SACAR.¹⁸ But linked to this, is the role of the “patriotic” bourgeoisie and intellectuals, as opposed to that of

the poor and other marginalised sectors of the society. Furthermore, there are some scholars who tend to accord greater role to state. Thus, viewed from the latter perspective, doubts are raised about the prospects of the renaissance because of the “weak” and “collapsed” state of the African State¹⁹. Others, however, prefer to focus on multilateral and African regional economic blocs as possible vehicles for the renaissance, especially as these pertain to the place of Africa within globalization.²⁰

The second theme is about the role of South Africa in the renaissance : should South Africa lead, or, as Landberg and Kornegay put it, is the African Renaissance some Pax Pretoriana in disguise? This is a continuing debate, but there is certainly some consensus that South Africa has an important role to play in the renaissance. According to the ANC *Strategy and Tactics* document : “In these efforts [towards the African Renaissance], we should not overestimate ourselves as a small middle-income country. Neither should we underestimate the relative influence we enjoy deriving from our democratic project, the strategic location of our region and the resources and potential it commands”²¹. Moeletsi Mbeki advocated for a similar view, but arguing more for caution because of South Africa’s lack of experience. There are, however, others such as Greg Mills of the South African Institute of International Relations and some members of the Institute for Security Studies, who are arguing for a more decisive, say, leadership, approach by South Africa, especially on matters of peace and security in Africa. This view tends to be a reaction to South Africa’s tendency to be cautious and reluctant to play what could be interpreted as a dominant role in a conflict situation. There is some sensitivity within government that South Africa should not be perceived as a regional hegemony.

Finally, and linked to the two other themes, is the question of process that will lead to the renaissance. For example, Ian Liebenberg, arguing against seeing the “African Renaissance” as a myth, is of the opinion that : “A renaissance, if described as a historical phenomenon, is mostly likely a planned and intended result of renaissance by stealth – even default – and of concerted planning by the elite, bureaucrats, peasants, farmers and business people”²². Vusi Mavimbela, for his part, argues for a less rigid approach :

*A “renaissance” is an historical moment whose many elements will develop independently, irrespective of our subjective intentions. It cannot simply be decrees or conjured up like a spell but will arise on the basis of certain minimum factors. However, without an integrated programme of action to build upon those minimum factors, the dream of the renaissance will forever be deferred or remain a romantic idealist concept.*²³

Thus Mavimbela suggested a programme of action that included the emancipation of women, the involvement of the youth, and regional co-operation and integration. As for the

ANC, South-South co-operation and “party-to-party” links (i.e. established strong relations with like-minded parties in other part of Africa and the rest of the world), are considered part of renaissance programme of action. Indeed, some scholars such as John Stremlau, have their own recipe for renaissance, which includes ingredients such as the promotion of human rights and “promote collective action to deal with globalization”²⁴.

It is clear from the above discussion that the “African Renaissance” has set an intellectual agenda for post-apartheid South Africa. But there are certain weaknesses with the debate, and it is to these that I now turn.

A - Critique

One obvious observation that one can make about the debate in question is that it remains confined to South Africa ; the debate is yet to capture the imagination of the whole continent and the Diaspora as was the case in the 1960s and the preceding decades. This may, on the one hand, and in the case of South Africa, be because of what Moeletsi Mbeki referred to as a “triumphalist syndrome” ; or, on the other, this could be because of the perception that the “African Renaissance” is a South African foreign policy doctrine, and therefore not a matter for the whole continent.

The second issue, of course, relates to the periodisation of the renaissance discourse. While the South Africa material tends to date the discourse to 1994 or 1996, there are other views in others parts of the continent that are not entering the South African debate. The first problem is the consistent failure of the South Africa debate to historicise the renaissance discourse and firmly recognize works such as those by Mrandi Azikiwe and Cheik Anta Diop.²⁵ As a result of this, and as argued later in this section, this debate is yet to bring on board the experiences that can be drawn from the 1960s. As for actual periodisation, where do we start? Pan-Africanism of the 19th century or with the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) and the Abuja Treaty (1991)? Indeed, there are some who consider the Kampala Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA) of May 1991, as the kick (start of the current renaissance movement²⁶. In fact, in March 1996, two month before the May 1996 “I am an African” speech of Thabo Mbeki, a conference was convened in Dakar in honour of the memory of Cheik Anta Diop, with the theme : “An African Renaissance at the Dawn of the Third Millennium”. Thus one of the participants at this conference remarked in the CODESRIA Bulletin: ... we must congratulate South Africa Vice President Thabo Mbeki ... for adopting “the African renaissance’ we discussed a year earlier at the Dakar Conference as the principal theme of his country’s diplomacy”.²⁷

Thirdly, perhaps the issue is with how “renaissance” is being conceptualized in this debate. This concept, introduced into the mainstream discourse by the publication Jacob

Burckhardt's *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* in 1860's, some three hundred years or so after the "European Renaissance", is no longer accepted without question among European scholars. According to Arnold Toynbee, in his monumental *A Study of History* : "The metaphorical application of the French word *renaissance* to denote the "rebirth" of an extinct culture or of an obsolete phase of a surviving culture is a specific modern Western usage"²⁸. Toynbee shows not only that the "renaissance" is a universal phenomenon in terms of its spatial and temporal distribution across the universe, but also that it was not peculiar to the "Renaissance" period itself. Similarly, argues Peter Burke :

The idea of the [European] Renaissance is a myth... When professional historians refer to "myths", they usually mean statements about the past which they can show to be false, or at any rate misleading. In the case of Burckhardt's account of the Renaissance, they object to the dramatic contrasts which he makes between Renaissance and Middle Ages and between Italy and the rest of Europe. They consider these contrasts to be exaggerated, ignoring as they do the many innovations which were made in the Middle Ages ; the survival of traditional attitudes into the sixteenth century, or even later...

The second sense of the term "myth" is a more literary one. A myth is a symbolic story told about characters who are larger... than life ; a story with a moral, and in particular a story about the past which is told in order to explain or justify some present state of affairs. Burckhardt's Renaissance is a myth in this sense too. The characters in his story ... are all larger than life. The story in the sense that it describes cultural change in terms of the metaphors of awakening and rebirth. These metaphors are not merely decorative. They are essential to Burckhardt's interpretations.²⁹

But what about "renaissance" as a metaphor or a representation of a desired the "African Renaissance", as opposed to its European counterpart, is not a celebration of an accomplished past, but an aspiration and somehow even apocalyptic. The "Renaissance" as a metaphorical projection into the future assumes that, given certain minimum objective conditions and subjective factors, the future can be predicted with certainty. The subject has confidence not only in his/her subjective intervention in the historical process, but also in the hope that historical forces can be brought under control with relative ease. Hence the debate in question, moving from the "second moment" as an objective given, explores ways and means (the subjective factor) to bring about the "third moment".

What could be useful, therefore, is for South African debate to follow its European counterpart and recognize "renaissances" (in plural) rather than the renaissance with a capital "R". In this way, it becomes easier to learn from other experiences and avoid repeating unnecessary mistakes.

There is also a way that South Africa debate can learn, for example, from critiques of the modernisation theory and ethnophilosophy. "The globalist perspective has a modernist connotation that seen to suggest that the "african Renaissance" involves

“catching-up” with Europe at the economic and technological level through Western Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows. The cultural perspective, for its part, reflects a serious ignorance of what is now a generally accepted critique of the works of Placide Temples, Lucien Levy-Bruhl and John Mbiti, in particular. Even the Negritude à la Senghor and Anta Diop’s notion of “stolen legacy” have been a subject of intense discussion, especially among African philosophers.³⁰

Conclusion

This paper may have left the impression that “African Renaissance” should not be our continent’s ideal. Far from that, very few people in Africa want to see the continent continue to be as marginal as it is today, a renaissance of some sort has to happen. What this paper tried to tackle however, is the extent to which the South Africa “African Renaissance” debate advances the cause of the renaissance on the one hand, and contributes to intellectual deliberations about the plight of the continent and its future, on the other. Without doubt, the South African debate is a crucial instrument for nation-progressive and Africentric agenda for the post-apartheid era. Perhaps what remains to be done is to make a break with the “triumphalist syndrome” that tends to affect newly liberated countries.

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