



# Thabo Mbeki's Decolonial Idea of an African in the African Renaissance

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## Abstract

In this essay, I deploy a liberation philosophical perspective in order to understand Thabo Mbeki's decolonial imagining of an African in the African Renaissance. It is my understanding that the African of the African Renaissance is one who has awakened to the task of undoing coloniality in the African postcolony. For instance, that an African has to declare that 'I am an African' in Africa, as Mbeki does, reflects the troubled and also troubling idea of being African in the African postcolony. It might seem that being human, and African in Africa, is an idea under question that must still be declared or defended. Whether one is an African or not in the postcolony is not a given, as colonialism succeeded in changing the being and belonging of Africans in Africa. Through colonialism, settlers became local in Africa and Africans became aliens in their own native territories. Colonialism, especially in its apartheid expression in South Africa, questioned the humanity of Black Africans, displaced them, and dispossessed them of their land. It is the uprooted, displaced, and dispossessed African represented in Mbeki who makes the remark that: 'At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the

leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.' This dehumanised African is the subject who travels from the dystopia of colonialism to the utopia of reconciliation and a renaissance of Africa. This is the African who was caught in the tragic optimism of the liberation 'dreamer', but was later to concede that after the end of juridical colonialism, South Africa remained 'two nations' racially and socially. Even a globally celebrated democratic Constitution did not come close to solving the political and social equation, the paradox, where South Africa remains the 'most unequal country in the world'. For the African of Mbeki's representation and observation, the dream of liberation from colonialism collapsed into a nightmare of coloniality, and the starting point of an African renaissance is the decolonial effort to dare dream and imagine another Africa and other Africans built from the ashes of the colonisers and the colonised. This essay is also an observation of the dilemma of a philosopher of liberation who was torn in between the necessity of justice for the victims of colonialism and the importance of reconciliation with the colonisers in the African postcolony.

## Introduction

In this essay, I deploy a liberation philosophical perspective in order to understand Thabo Mbeki's decolonial imagining of an African in the African Renaissance. It is my understanding that the African of the African Renaissance is one who has awakened to the task of undoing coloniality in the African postcolony. For instance, that an African has to declare that 'I am an African' in Africa, as Thabo Mbeki (1998: 31) does, reflects the troubled and also troubling idea of being African in the African postcolony. The idea of being African is troubled in that it is a search for true liberation and full humanity where liberation remains elusive, and the humanity of Africans continues to be questioned if not denied. It is troubling in the sense that the insistence by Africans that they are African and human haunts those who have sought to question their humanity and have benefitted from their dehumanisation. Mbeki imagined the African Renaissance as the awakening of Africans in South Africa and beyond from a colonial slumber to decolonial consciousness that would lead to justice and liberation. The philosophical dilemma that confronted Mbeki's imagination is that true liberation and reconciliation between the former colonisers and the colonised could not be achieved without justice. Mbeki, as the Vice-President to President Nelson Mandela, presented the 'I am an African' speech on behalf of the African National Congress (ANC) in Cape Town on 8 May 1996, on the occasion of the passing of South Africa's new Constitution. The speech became a classic amongst many other speeches that Mbeki presented as part of introducing the idea of the African Renaissance. Mbeki's poetic declaration that 'I am an African' in South Africa might just indicate that being human, and African, in Africa is an idea under question that must still be declared or defended in the postcolony. So fragile is being African in Africa that as part of his explication of the idea of the 'postcolony' in Africa, Achille Mbembe (2001) notes that being African, thinking about Africa, and writing about it has never come easy. It has never come easy because the postcolony is that uneasy place where colonialism has not really died, while liberation from colonialism struggles to be born.

The long history of the dehumanisation of Africans by slavery and colonialism – and the fact that

Africans were not named Africans by themselves but by their colonisers – led Mogobe Ramose (2005: 4) to accept being called an African in Africa only 'under protest'. Mbeki's speech was delivered at an uneasy time in the South African postcolony. It was a time when the Black South African population had high expectations of liberation after the long years of apartheid. It was a time when white South Africans were gripped by fear of the revenge of Black people, who for very long had lived outside the mainstream economy and polity of the country. Political leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Mbeki had to negotiate high Black expectations, while also allaying deep white fears at a time when the South African constitutional and democratic experiment was still young and fragile. The language of forgiveness and reconciliation was, at the time, the currency of political trade in a South Africa that Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1996) had christened the 'rainbow nation of God', where seemingly impossible forgiveness and reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of apartheid was taking place. Mbeki's speech could not escape being infected or flavoured, depending on where one stands, by the political climate of the time. As such, the African that Mbeki describes in his speech is an African who seeks to re-invent the self and the continent of Africa itself. For instance, Valentin Mudimbe (1998) described how Africa and Africans needed to be re-invented after the continent and its people had gone through decades of 'invention' by colonialism. The idea of the African Renaissance itself might, after all, be an idea about the decolonial re-invention of Africa and Africans. Re-inventing Africa and Africans takes a decolonial imagination and a tragic optimism that is clear about the colonial invention of Africa and Africans and can envision a re-invented Africa and new Africans. That task, as represented by Mbeki, takes an African who sees and believes in the utopia of forgiveness, reconciliation, and liberation – under a dark cloud of the real history of the dystopia of colonisation, dehumanisation, and oppression in the postcolony. That the African Renaissance itself is an awakening is based on the reality that there was a colonial wound to heal and a colonial slumber from which Africans must wake.

Mbeki begins his 'I am an African' speech by invoking the name of the African in Africa as a victim of conquest and colonisation who is proudly prepared to march to a new future with some dignity. This is an angry and proud African who is only too aware of the depth of the colonial wound that continues to bleed, even after political independence has been declared. It is this African who says:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives – in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as people, perished in the result. (Mbeki, 1998: 32)

As Sisonke Msimang (2000: 70) notes: 'after three years of carefully constructed Mandela speeches on the importance of 'non-racialism' there was something in Mbeki's affirmation of Africa that seemed to be alluding to a South Africa that was very different from the Rainbow Nation.' This was the South Africa of the angry but proud African who still looked at the bleeding colonial wound and was not easily enchanted by the 'sugar-candy mountain' of reconciliation. However, as if unable to escape the enchantment of the 'rainbowism' of the political moment, in the same speech and same voice, Mbeki turns around to describe another African who is not simply Black and native to Africa, but rather an inclusive African whose 'Africanity' accommodates others, including the white settlers themselves, 'whatever their own actions' in the history of South Africa. This other African who Mbeki projects is a wounded but forgiving victim who dreams of a South African future that includes both the victims and the perpetrators of apartheid as fellow citizens who are prepared to pursue a future together:

I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home on our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence. The stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slave-master are a reminder embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done. (Mbeki, 1998: 32)

In this essay, I write about this wounded but forgiving African. My observation is that this is not a fragile African who espouses forgiveness and reconciliation from a position of defeat, surrender, and weakness. Rather, this is an African with a liberation philosophy purpose: one who sees liberation beyond not only the conflict between the coloniser and the colonised, but also beyond the identities and positionalities of the oppressor and the oppressed. Paulo Freire (1993) refers to such liberation thinkers and political activists as great humanists who have the task not only to liberate themselves, but also to free their oppressors from the existential and systemic prison of being oppressors. The oppressors, Freire notes, by virtue of being oppressors do not have the power to free their victims or themselves. They can only be freed by the power that arises from the 'weaknesses' of the victims who are the ones who can forgive, even if they do not forget. Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2016) describes such political thinkers and activists as the 'decolonial humanists' who practice the 'politics of life', as opposed to the politics of revenge and death. It is such thinkers and political activists who can, in the midst of dystopias such as post-apartheid South Africa, dare to imagine the utopia of a working constitutional and democratic dispensation where former perpetrators and former victims can live under one Republic, salute one flag, and sing one national anthem. As forgiving as these thinkers and political activists seem to be, they nonetheless retain a sharp memory and view of the colonial wound. They do not forget. It was Mbeki, the philosopher of liberation (Mpopfu, 2012), who in the midst of his conciliatory

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speech could be un-forgetful enough to remember that post-apartheid South Africa would necessarily have to accommodate those who colonised South Africans and those who continued to economically benefit from the proceeds of apartheid. In expressing the philosophical and humanist dilemma of accommodating former enemies, Mbeki poetically noted that: 'At times, and in fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black Mamba, and the pestilential mosquito' (Mbeki, 1998: 31).

The liberated South Africa of Mbeki's philosophical and poetic imagination was a South Africa where the African would share citizenship with dangerous monsters whose history and deeds resembled those of leopards, mambas, hyenas, and pestilential parasites such as mosquitos. In dehumanising the Africans through colonisation and apartheid, the colonialists dehumanised themselves into wild animals, venomous snakes, and other creatures of the wild. As a forgiving but un-forgetting philosopher of liberation, Mbeki remained clear about the violence of apartheid in the past and in the present. Nonetheless, he remained dedicated to reconciliation and democracy. Such forgiveness, as is required from the victim of colonialism and other crimes against humanity, is described by Hannah Arendt (1958) as impossible but necessary and therefore achievable by those who have the courage and the optimism to see brighter human futures in dark times. Such forgiveness, Arendt noted, is more religious than political in origins. Arendt observes how forgiveness after large-scale crimes, such as holocausts and genocides, is actually a quality of God which only some brave human beings with great purposes can afford. The great purpose of re-inventing Africa and Africans required not just humility, but also the courage to forgive the unforgivable. South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy involved the victims of apartheid forgiving their victimisers. This is why the transition was understood as a kind of miracle: because apartheid wounds were too deep, Black expectations of liberation too high, and white fears of punishment too vivid. Those who forgive might not forget, and some might forget but not forgive, remaining with deep anger bottled up in their psyche.

Mbeki, as the forgiving but not forgetting philosopher of liberation, made the bold observation that South Africa's beautiful and democratic Constitution, though celebrated worldwide, was unequal to the task of eradicating the social inequalities left behind by apartheid. On the occasion of the debate on reconciliation in the National Assembly, Cape Town, on 29 May 1998, Mbeki (1998: 68) delivered another historic speech: 'South Africa: Two Nations'. In this speech, he pointed out that South Africa was still divided between rich white people and poor Black people. The constitutional goal of 'national unity and reconciliation' in South Africa was a dream that had turned into a nightmare. The white South Africans who had perpetrated apartheid and who had benefitted from its economic and political crimes against humanity did not seem to be interested in undoing the inequalities that apartheid had produced. Mbeki (1998: 75) noted how 'it comes about that those who were responsible for or were beneficiaries of the past absolve themselves from any obligation to help do away with an unacceptable legacy'. The Mbeki who delivered the 'South Africa: Two Nations' speech was true to the philosophy of liberation that might forgive but not forget. In the midst of celebrating a beautiful Constitution, he pointed out that, in post-apartheid South Africa, the social inequalities created by apartheid were not a crime of the past, but rather a crime of the present that needed urgent resolution. In other words, Mbeki insisted that apartheid was a present reality. South Africa was true to what Mbembe (2001) has called the 'postcolony': a time and a place where the corpses of colonialism and apartheid insist on resurrection whenever attempts are made to bury them for good. The tragedy of the project of re-inventing Africa and Africans is that those who were supposed to be forgiven did not make themselves available for forgiveness, as they resisted giving away the privileges that they gained from apartheid. It was a tragedy of having to forgive those who were not willing to apologise for their injustices and crimes. This turned forgiveness into an even more difficult challenge that requires political and philosophical courage. Even more tragic, perhaps, and requiring more courage, may be the attempt to forget apartheid when the social inequalities it produced are still very much alive. The two speeches 'I am an African' and 'South Africa: Two Nations' represent Mbeki as an African Renaissance philosopher who was as keen

to forgive as he was not to forget the injustices and crimes of apartheid. Mbeki was vividly aware of the fragility of reconciliation without justice, and of the shortcomings of a forgiveness and reconciliation experiment that was based on a politically-motivated collective amnesia.

### **The Philosophy of Liberation and the African Renaissance**

When Friedrich Nietzsche (2014) determined himself to look 'beyond good and evil' and to come up with a 'philosophy of the future', he opined that those who fight against monsters should be careful not to become monsters themselves. Similarly, those who fought against apartheid in the South African liberation movement had to take care that they did not, once in power, practice a new version of apartheid against those who had oppressed them. While Nietzsche was the direct opposite of a philosopher of liberation, because of his celebration of 'will power' (Nietzsche, 1968) and his valorisation of the politics of domination, his present observation affirms the philosophy and politics of liberation. The philosophy of liberation, and the politics of liberation that it gives birth to, do not privilege the ideas and practices of retaliation and revenge. In his articulation of the African Renaissance, from his background in the South African and African liberation movements, Mbeki was aware that retaliation and revenge against the perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid were not sustainable options. Revenge and retaliation can only produce new victims and new victimisers. Nonetheless, he was also aware that those who enjoyed the political and economic privileges of apartheid were not going to easily forfeit those privileges. It became the existential and political dilemma of the leaders of the liberation movement to build a new democratic South Africa in which even the perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid would find home. The tragedy of the South African democratic and constitutional experiment, therefore, as expressed by Mbeki in the 'South Africa: Two Nations' speech, is that the perpetrators and beneficiaries of apartheid did not only find home in post-apartheid South Africa, but also kept their power and privileges. As canonically described by Enrique Dussel (1969) and Paulo Freire (1993), the burden of the philosophy of liberation is that its humanist vocation compels it to look after not only

the victims of oppression, but also the oppressors. Liberation philosophers practice politics not as a profession of opportunists and tricksters, but as a vocation of liberators who are determined to make the world a shared place where people of different historical and political positionalities can co-exist. This did not eventually take place in South Africa, a country which remains racially divided, with white people monopolising the economy. This reveals the tragic messianism of the philosophy of liberation, which leaves the victims of oppression on the cross of history, crucified and sacrificed on the altars of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace. The peace that arises from a reconciliation that is not accompanied by justice is a negative peace that amounts to the silence of the defeated who await the opportunity to return to conflict.

The African Renaissance, as articulated by Mbeki, might then have been a return to the struggle of an aggrieved philosopher of liberation who was witnessing the durability of apartheid even after political independence had been declared in South Africa. In the narrative of *Endgame: The Secret Talks and the End of Apartheid*, Willie Esterhuysen (2012) describes how Thabo Mbeki was always 'against war' and for a negotiated liberation of South Africa that would liberate Black people and also preserve the humanity of those who perpetrated and benefitted from apartheid. That South Africa remained 'two nations' after the negotiated settlement might therefore have come as tragic crucifixion for Mbeki. It is the crucified Mbeki who found in the idea of an African Renaissance an avenue to return to the unarmed struggle for liberation in South Africa and in Africa. Apartheid and colonialism were now to be fought through the re-invention of Africa and its people, through an African Renaissance that was not interested in punishing perpetrators, but was rather interested in empowering victims. Even as the African Renaissance as represented by Mbeki sounded only poetic and philosophical, it was still political and powerful in the way that its project was to re-invent what had been invented by colonialism. In that way, the African Renaissance was the work of beauty and power as a philosophical idea. The idea of the African Renaissance suffered the Marxian limit, in which the impotence of philosophers lies in the fact that they describe the world, when in fact the point is to

change the world for the better. In South Africa, the limits of the political messianism of the philosophy of liberation might have been the forgiveness extended by victims and their reconciliation with victimisers who were not interested in relinquishing their power and privilege.

### The African Renaissance

The reason why Pitika Ntuli (1998: 15) had to ask 'who is afraid of the African renaissance' is because the idea of an African Renaissance threatens power and knowledge systems that have normalised Africa as a dark continent that is beyond repair. The idea that Africa is lost beyond recovery is comforting to the colonial ego. The idea of an African Renaissance is also threatening to Africans who have to carry out the cultural, economic, intellectual, and political tasks that will lead Africa to its long overdue awakening. The tasks 'will involve [a] re-analysing of Africa's past', decolonising education in Africa, and paying attention to the diversity of Africans in Africa and around the world (Ntuli, 1998: 15). In other words, the idea of an African awakening is threatening to those who benefit from the African economic and political condition of slumber. In his reading and interpretation of the work of Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019: 3) understands the idea of an African Renaissance as the hard work of African intellectuals and political leaders 're-memembering', in the sense of re-assembling the organs of an African continent and African people that were 'dismembered' by colonialism. This intellectual and political work is frightening to Africans themselves and is threatening to those who have benefitted from a dis-membered Africa.

The call for an African Renaissance is a direct challenge to Western economic, political, and cultural imperialism. It is a call that 'challenges the right of Europeans to impose their cultural and spiritual values on African communities' (Nabudere, 2001: 11). Dani Nabudere (2001: 1) notes how the African Renaissance idea seeks to 'redefine a new political and ideological agenda of pan-Africanism in the age of globalisation' and that 'the key pillars of the African Renaissance are sociocultural, political, economic regeneration and improvement of Africa's geo-political standing in world affairs'. In other words, the African Renaissance is not seen as a simple awakening or coming to

consciousness, but also as an insurrection against Western cultural, economic, and political domination. In the first place, 'the struggle against imperialism in Africa was a struggle for African independence and to that extent for an African Renaissance' (Nabudere, 2001: 15). In that way, the poetic but also vigorous call for the African Renaissance was a call by a philosopher of liberation who had been awakened to the reality that the end of juridical apartheid and colonialism in Africa did not necessarily entail the end of coloniality, hence the need to return to the struggle, even if it was an unarmed struggle. Percy More (2002: 61) notes that 'the concept of the renaissance has since brought into sharp focus the post-apartheid notion of the return'. Regardless of whether the idea of return can be seen to be retrogressive and oppressive, it is in this case understood as progressive in the sense that Aimé Césaire pronounced *Return to the Native Land*, and Amílcar Cabral made bold the call for a *Return to the Source*. It is in that way of the return to the centrality of Africa and Africans in the world that the idea of the African Renaissance shares at least some similarity with the 'Afrocentric Idea' that is proposed by Molefi Kete Asante (1998), and which advances as its central idea African power, relevance, genius, and pride.

Another way of understanding the idea of the African Renaissance, especially as articulated by Mbeki, has been that it was a political way of returning South Africa to Africa and to the world after many years of isolation. Peter Vale (1998: 272) observes that the idea of the African Renaissance was rooted in 'South African diplomacy' and the politics of return to the world comity of nations. The African Renaissance had to do with 'South Africa's destiny' in the world and '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' (Vale, 1998: 274). It is even thinkable that after Mandela's global fame and aura, his successor had to respond to the political and intellectual pressure to engage with South Africa, Africa, and the world in the grand terms of a Renaissance. After all, the ANC had to recover its place and name in the world as the *African National Congress*. If the idea of the African Renaissance had to do with South Africa leading the continent in search for global relevance, then it might be true that the idea is an off-shoot of the Pan-African ideal of a united continent that would become a meaningful global player.

## The Genealogies and Goals of the African Renaissance

It is important to emphasise that the idea of the African Renaissance was not in any measure an invention of Mbeki who, in his own words, only saw himself as an heir of a long legacy of African intellectuals and political leaders. Addressing the gathering of the Second Southern African International Dialogue in Namibia in 1998, Mbeki poetically claimed his intellectual heritage from earlier African leaders, intellectuals, and Pan-African activists:

Let me say something about myself and about some other people in this hall who belong to my generation. I am a product of the teachings and example of Abdul Gamal Nasser of Egypt, of Ben Belta of Algeria, of Habib Bourgiba of Tunisia, Mohamed V of Morocco, of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, of Medico Keita of Mali, of Patrice Lumumba of Congo, of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, of Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo of Zimbabwe, of Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique, of Agostinho Neto of Angola, of Sam Nujoma of Namibia, of Seretse Khama and Ketumile Masire of Botswana, of Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela of South Africa. (1998: 289)

Mbeki's pronouncements about his and his generation of African leaders, as produced by former African heads of states, some of them intellectuals and others soldiers, was a Pan-African performance that accompanied his articulations of the African Renaissance. Mbeki, in this and other speeches, was keen to project the Pan-African and decolonial roots of the African Renaissance. The speech was titled 'Stop the Laughter' (Mbeki, 1998: 289) and its gesture was that African leaders should stop the corruption, despotism, ignorance, greed, and violence that made Africa's former colonisers in Europe laugh at the continent and its people. Thus, the African Renaissance was not only a movement against Western imperialism in Africa but also against the rot in African post-colonial leadership that delayed the envisaged renewal of Africa. The paradox in Mbeki's celebration of earlier African leaders was the mention of genocidal tyrants such as Mugabe, who had become native colonialists of their own countries in their use of colonial modes of rule that combined force and fraud. It is another

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tragedy of the African Renaissance that it had to claim its roots from some earlier African leaders who had betrayed the cause of liberation with despotism, one-party state experiments, and a variety of claims to life presidencies. It is for that reason that Kwesi Prah (1999: 37) cautioned that the African Renaissance should not fall to the temptation of 'warlordism' and other inimical forms of African leadership.

The point that is not to be missed is that, in articulating the African Renaissance, Mbeki was standing on the broad shoulders of Pan-African leaders, intellectuals, and some Africanist historians of the previous decades. From South Africa, Pixley Ka Isaka Seme (1906) wrote of 'The Regeneration of Africa' after years of colonial subjugation. Later, from Nigeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe (1937) wrote of 'Renascent Africa' to pronounce a vision of an African continent that was bound to recover from colonial wounds and to claim its place amongst world civilisations. The Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop (1966) produced a collection of essays ruminating on the African Renaissance – *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development, 1946-1960* – that claimed that Africa was the cradle of world civilisation. The Africanist historian Basil Davidson celebrated the rise of African nationalism in his book *The African Awakening* (1955). This was followed by Roger Woddis, who celebrated African trade unionism against colonialism in *Africa: The Lion Awakes* (1961). These works highlight the idea of the African Renaissance as part of the Pan-African and decolonial politics of a return to the continent.

The idea of the African Renaissance, in short, had a long history before Mbeki. This history compels us to ask what happened to the earlier calls for the African Renaissance and what might be the future of Mbeki's latest call. The suspicions that the idea of the African Renaissance might be Pan-Africanism dressed in new words and charged with new agendas is compelling. While Pan-Africanism was generated as a philosophy of African unity against colonial divisions of the African continent, the African Renaissance is trained against the coloniality that endures after the dethronement of juridical colonialism in Africa.

Sisonke Msimang poses the question: 'African Renaissance: Where Are the Women?' (2011: 67). Msimang argues that if women and their oppression are not centred in the African Renaissance, then the liberatory potential of the idea is limited and compromised. The history of Pan-Africanism and its leaders has been associated with the exclusion of women. Msimang contends that isolating the African Renaissance to the elite circles of the South African polity, academy, and corporate sector effectively limits its decolonial stamina and reduces it to a political, intellectual, and corporate slogan. As a decolonial South African feminist, Msimang enters the African Renaissance debate with a scathing but constructive critique. Her ideas rhyme with Dani Nabudere (2001), who suggests that African intellectuals, political leaders, and activists should come forward and transform the African Renaissance from an idea to a continental policy and cultural agenda. The African Renaissance, in other words, is too important an idea to be left to a few politicians, scholars, and elites.

As a committed Black South African feminist, Msimang exercised political and intellectual activism in carefully reading Mbeki's speeches, critiquing them, and eventually gleaning what the goals of the African Renaissance were. Msimang (2000) notes how Mbeki's emphasis on 'the importance of democracy and multi-party rule taking hold throughout Africa' and 'the need to counter negative outside perceptions of Africa' were some of the prominent goals of the African Renaissance. The need for economic reforms, including 'the development of regional economic blocks' and ending corruption (Msimang, 2000: 72) are the other goals. These goals would only be achieved if Africans observed the importance of peace and stability on the continent and stopped the trend of

civil wars and military coups, for instance. In Mbeki's view, African leaders and Africans at large should work on themselves and modernise their political and economic cultures in order to be equal to the grand task of African awakening. This awakening is aimed at eventually empowering Africa to participate as an equal amongst other continents in world affairs. The business of world affairs requires an Africa that has rid itself of tyranny, corruption, political violence, and disunity. Mbeki optimistically envisioned Africa as a formidable player in the 'New World Order' amongst other continents. As President of South Africa, delivering a State of the Nation Address on 25 June 1999, Mbeki announced the drive towards Africa's contribution to the New World Order:

Gradually, Africa will work her way towards the resumption of her rightful place among the continents of our globe. Where necessary, we will call on the services of such outstanding African statespersons as former Presidents Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Sir Ketumile Masire and Nelson Mandela to assist in the promotion of this agenda. As part of the world community of nations, we will make our due contribution to the construction of a new world order that will be responsive to the needs of especially the poor of the world. (Mbeki, 1999: 11)

Mbeki interestingly talks of 'a resumption' of Africa's 'rightful place among the continents of our globe' which betrays his belief in a great Africa of the past that was once influential in world civilisation. The African of the African Renaissance, therefore, will be an African who is concerned as much with the glories of the past as with the goals of the future. This is an African who is concerned both with Africa's ancestors *and* with its descendants. Mbeki admits that the African Renaissance will be 'gradual' and will benefit from the wisdom of past leaders. A decolonised and renascent Africa would be one that is rooted in itself as a continent, united and prosperous, and ready to be relevant and competitive globally. Mbeki's is the tragic optimism of a philosopher of liberation who was clear about the dystopia surrounding Africa, but was nonetheless confident that with intellectual and political will, the continent could navigate itself to becoming a formidable and equal player in world affairs.

## Conclusion

Thabo Mbeki's ideas of the African Renaissance are characterised by the tragic optimism of a philosopher of liberation who is clear about the dystopia of the history of colonialism, but who nonetheless retains a stubborn hope for a brighter future. The declaration 'I am an African' is at once a defence of African humanity and identity *and* a threat of the return of the continent to a significant place in global affairs. The African Renaissance philosopher of liberation forgives, but does not forget, colonial wounds and injustices. The philosopher is impatient about the tyrannies, corruption, ignorance, and political violence on the continent. The African has to work on African weaknesses in order to be equal to the decolonial task of re-inventing the continent and recovering it from dystopia in order to restore it to utopia. The beauty of poetry and philosophy are mobilised in order to resist African dehumanisation and dispossession and to instead strive for the economic and political empowerment of the people and their continent. The dream of restoring Africans to full belonging in the global human family and the restoration of the continent to prominence belongs to the messianism of the philosophy of liberation. This philosophy is willing to save the victims and the victimisers in order to achieve a fantasy of a paradisaical world that might be more real in poetry and philosophy than in the present New World Disorder, where the geopolitical and economic inequalities of the past are more pronounced than ever.

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