

Ideological objectives underpinning *imbizo* as a model of communication and governance

ABSTRACT

In 2001, the South African government adopted an *imbizo* (plural: *izimbizo*) as a model of communication. *Imbizo* is a Zulu word for a traditional community gathering called by the chief to solve pertinent community issues. The word *imbizo* has its variants in many African languages in South Africa, e.g. *pitšo* in Sepedi, *kgotla* in Setswana and Sesotho. In African indigenous communities, *imbizo* is used as a platform to resolve pertinent community challenges through honest engagement between the subjects and leadership. In this article, the ideological nuances of the government's decision in 2001 to appropriate *imbizo* as a model of communication and governance are explored. It is argued that, at face value, *imbizo* is presented by government as a communication and governance model to deepen participatory democracy and public participation especially for the poor. It is argued in this article that the government's appropriated *imbizo* appears to be used to deepen the ideological positions of the government and ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) amongst the masses. It is further argued in this article that an *imbizo* is used by government of South Africa for the attainment of four interrelated ideological objectives.

- It is a vehicle to advance the political strategy of the ANC.
- It is used as an expression of the African Renaissance paradigm.
- *Imbizo* expresses the ideology of African unity.
- It is used as a manifestation of participatory democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Within the broader disciplines of journalism and communication, there is insufficient research analysing how African indigenous forms of communication have evolved within the postmodern conditions. An exception to this trend is an attempt by some few scholars to indigenise theory within journalism and communication studies, e.g. Kerr's (2001) examination of the Tswana-speaking community's use of *kgotla* as a channel of communication in Botswana. Kerr's contention is that *kgotla*, a Tswana variant of *imbizo*, is 'a myth' in that its agenda and outcomes are predetermined. In response to Kerr, Donnelly (2001) highlights the negative impact of globalisation on the original conception of *kgotla* in Botswana. There are also a small number of articles critiquing the concept of *ubuntu* in the media (Blakenberg 1991: 61). In her study of consumer magazines for black South Africans, Laden (2002: 23) makes the following observation:

[Most scholars] have been exploring, the applicability of the traditional concept of *ubuntu*, a collective solidarity whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to the perception of others. Although many South African intellectuals today are highly sceptical of the discourse of *ubuntu*, which overlaps with, but is not identical to discussions of South Africa as a rainbow nation, the discussion of *ubuntu* and the rainbow nation are both highly conspicuous in [the consumer magazines of black South Africans] and among the black South African people.

This article attempts to discuss *imbizo* as a form of African indigenous folk media and how the South African government appropriated *imbizo* as a communication and governance model. It will be shown in this article that *imbizo* and uses it as appropriated by government is an ideologically loaded concept. From the outset the concepts *imbizo* and *ideology*, respectively, should be defined.

1. DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

1.1 *Imbizo*

In African indigenous communities, it is common practice for a chief, headman or any other community leader to convene a community meeting with a view to discussing issues of common concern and interest. This gathering, in which members of a given neighbourhood and community discuss pertinent issues with leadership for their own development, is called *imbizo*. It refers to the gathering of people sharing a common nationhood, clanhood or religion, with a view to discussing issues affecting their development as a group. As a practice, *imbizo* evolved into a method of governance, administration and communication used in many African communities to formulate, implement and review pertinent issues affecting the community in question.

As an example of a community development platform, *imbizo* allows the ordinary members of the community to express their views through a combination of storytelling, rituals, poetry and popular theatre. Against this background, it can be argued that *imbizo* is another form of folk media as it is used by both the leadership and the community members to engage in a dialogic exchange of views on matters related to development (Kidd & Colleta, 1980; Epskamp 1989, Epskamp &

Boeran, 1992; Kerr, 1995). "What makes folk media preferable to modern means of [communication and information sharing] is that they use the language and symbols of the people, that they invite the audience to participate, and open the way for immediate feedback, and finally, that they are inexpensive" (Epskamp, 1989: 162). Mlama (1991: 205) aptly captures this view:

The choice of people's own theatrical forms of communication improves the people's willingness to express their views on development plans, something which radio, film, television or print have not yet effectively achieved.

As a popular channel of communication between community members and leadership, it discusses, strategises and develops programmes that advance the interests of the community. Emerging from this definition, one can discern that an *imbizo* is a popular platform for policy debates, discussion and performance and observance of community rituals. It is cross-sectoral in representation to allow everyone an opportunity to express their views on the issue under discussion irrespective of their socio-economic class. It should be indicated that an *imbizo* is held regularly to ensure that community problems are addressed as they emerge, as the Sepedi adage says: *La mpša le dubjwa le sa le meetse* (Strike the iron while it is hot!). In this regard, in most communities, it is held on a weekly basis, precisely to address possible problems that may occur in the chain of community development projects. After observing the utility of this platform, the South African government appropriated it in 2001 as a preferred means of communicating with communities and stakeholders on the implementation of government programmes (Netshitenzhe, 2003). In its appropriated form, *imbizo* is not simply a popular and preferred channel of communication, but has become a direct, unmediated and face-to-face means of communication compared with other forms of modern communication, such as television, print, film and outdoor. *Imbizo* is a popular aesthetic, which promotes the use of local knowledge systems and public participation (Chinyowa, 2005: 84).

1.2 Ideology

Ideology is the sum total of contested ideas, beliefs, convictions and values that are held by a particular group or individual on a particular issue with a view to converting other individuals and groups to believe it. Against this background, the ruling class ideology would ordinarily be different from the ideologies of subordinate classes. Marx and Engels capture this view succinctly when they say:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force in society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of the material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it (Gurevitch, Bennet & Woollacott, 1992: 22).

Ideology plays an important role in politics and governance (Seliger, 1976). Esterhuysen (1991: 22) contends that "*ideology links particular actions and mundane practices with a wider set of meanings and, by doing so, lends a more honourable and dignified complexion of social conduct*".

Ideology is seen as those images, concepts and premises which provide the framework through which some aspect of social existence is represented, interpreted, understood and made sense of (Hall, 2002). Ideology strives to achieve hegemony, the preponderant influence or domination of the powerful over the weak. It can be discerned from Esterhuysen's (1991) contention quoted above that ideology is a mobilising force used by those in authority and leadership to marshal the support and conformity of the citizens. It prescribes how the weak should behave and conduct themselves in particular situations. Ideology legitimises the political system, the relations of power in that system, the goals of the political process and the procedures to be followed to resolve disagreements.

This article aims amongst others, to unveil the ideological underpinnings couched in an appropriated *imbizo*. It will be argued that the *imbizo* campaign seems to reinforce the government and ruling party's ideological stance. Since government itself is often caught offguard to defend its policies and programmes (which are themselves premised on particular ideological stances), *imbizo* becomes a platform to legitimise policies and programmes in the public sphere. It will be argued that it is a covert means through which government lends public credibility to its policies and programmes. It is these ideological nuances expressed by *imbizo* that we are interested in exploring.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

This article proceeds from Derrida's theoretical paradigm of deconstruction. Deconstruction is one of the most highly contested paradigms to emerge in the study of humanities (cf. Loesberg, 1991; Royle, 1995, 2000; Haverkamp, 1995; Joseph & Roberts, 2004; Zima 2002). Derrida (1988: 147) defines deconstruction as:

this destabilization on the move in, if one could speak thus 'things themselves'; but it not negative. Destabilization is required for 'progress' as well. And the 'de' of deconstruction signifies not the demolition of what is constructing itself, but rather what remains to be thought beyond the constructivist or destructionist scheme.

Elsewhere, Derrida (1992:190) calls deconstruction 'the experience of impossible' to demonstrate the extent to which, unlike other theories and paradigms of analysis, it does not subscribe to prescribed rules and methodologies. Deconstruction as a paradigm of discourse and analysis is concerned with the 'other' of the language in the analysis of the text. Derrida (1988: 137) himself elaborates:

The concept of the text or of context which guides me embraces and does not exclude the world, reality, history. Once again... as I understand it... the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself... It does not suspend reference- to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say history, of the world, of reality that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualises according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible.

Using this paradigm of analysis, it will be demonstrated that *imbizo*, like a text, presents innumerable possible meanings. Its thorough analysis will reveal that the meaning assigned by its appropriated conceivers (government) is only one possible meaning. There are other alternative and possible meanings of *imbizo*, which could be unravelled by looking at the context, reality, and the history within which it was conceived.

In Derrida's opinion, the attachment of meaning to the text can by no means be concluded as absolute, but rather as one possible meaning within as wide a range of meanings as there can be people. In explaining this paradigm, Littlejohn (1989: 59) posits:

Derrida calls for *deconstruction*, which is designed to get at possible alternative meanings in the text, apart from the temporal and untrue interpretations of individual users. By deconstruction you reveal alternative meanings embedded in a text.

Imbizo can be described as an art form used by indigenous communities to resolve community issues and build community cohesion. It can also be viewed as a platform to promote citizen-participation in South Africa. This explains the extent to which the *imbizo* concept is prone to various interpretations.

In this paper, *imbizo* will be deconstructed to unveil its other alternative meanings. It will be shown that although *imbizo* is generally seen as a programme of government aimed at bringing the government closer to the people, we should search for other underlying objectives of *imbizo* in order to understand it better. This is a radical departure from ordinary methods of analysing phenomena confined largely to superficial revelations. It is these other hidden meanings of *imbizo* that we seek to uncover.

As Littlejohn (1989: 60) puts it, "deconstruction is an important process to reveal the infinite openness of textual structure and the all too frequent close-mindedness of speakers, writers and readers". In uncovering these hidden meanings of *imbizo*, this investigation will be guided by Michael Foucault's principle that each period of history has a distinct worldview or conceptual structure that determines the nature of knowledge (*episteme*) produced in that period (Zima, 2002). Therefore, an understanding of *imbizo* should be located within the purview of the *episteme* of its period of production. In other words, it is critical for one to analyse and appreciate fully the forces that were at play when *imbizo* was conceived in order to understand the periodical discourse of the time.

In deconstructing *imbizo*, an attempt will be made to investigate the ideological principles underpinning the concept of *imbizo*. It will be shown that *imbizo* has been adopted and implemented by government in the recent past to achieve particular ideological objectives beyond those of improving service delivery. *Imbizo* as a concept will be traced back to the ANC conferences between 1994 to 2004 and its discussion documents to ferret out the other forms of covert objectives that it was conceived to address.

It will be argued that the investigation of the ideological objectives (both overt and covert) is critical towards fully appreciating the complexity around the implementation of *imbizo*. Perhaps, in assessing its success, a distinction should be made between its perceived objectives (superficially related to matters of governance and improved communication) and real objectives (which are deeply political and ideological). An attempt will be made to investigate the deeper ideological underpinnings of *imbizo*, to see how it is being used to advance the government and the ANC's ideology in the public sphere.

3. IDEOLOGICAL THRUSTS UNDERPINNING IMBIZO

Ideology plays an important role in politics and governance (Seliger 1976). Esterhuysen (1991: 22) contends:

Ideology links particular actions and mundane practices with a wider set of meanings and, by doing so, lends a more honourable and dignified complexion of social conduct.

It can be discerned from this contention that ideology is a mobilising tool used by those in authority to assess the support and conformity of citizens. It prescribes how the ruled should behave and conduct themselves in particular situations. As Esterhuysen (1991:23) notes, it legitimises the political system, the relations of power in that system, the goals of the political process and the procedures to be followed to resolve disagreements.

Imbizo as an ideological construct underpins relations of power, political ideas and values. Within the concept of *imbizo*, there are deeper ideological permutations of the ANC which should be thoroughly investigated. A cursory analysis of the *imbizo* programme as practised by government reveals that it is an ideologically loaded concept. Within *imbizo*, the ANC and government are able to popularise and give practical meaning to their long-held ideological positions. A careful deconstruction of *imbizo* reveals that it is critical element that assists the ANC in achieving its strategic objectives. Secondly, it gives practical meaning and expression to the ANC's long-held ideology of African unity. Again, it is an expression of the ANC government's programme of African Renaissance and it reflects the ANC's commitment to upholding the principles of participatory democracy.

3.1 *Imbizo as a vehicle to implement the ANC's political strategy*

Since time immemorial, members of African communities would come together as a communion of people perceiving life through the eyes of collective consciousness to discuss matters of common concern (Kotze 1993: 66). This communion of people coming together on a regular basis to discuss issues relating to their own development normally assumes the form of *imbizo*. The communion evokes a sense of togetherness, co-operation and unity in the face of social, political and economic challenges among the African communities. It should be remembered that the communities in which *imbizo* is still being practised have their own unwritten admission criteria for eligibility of

participation by their members, have their own unwritten but well-known methods of convening the *izimbizo* driven largely through word of mouth, and have their own ways of determining the agenda of *imbizo* in response to pertinent issues affecting their community. In other words, *imbizo* is the lifeblood of these communities, and is accepted unconsciously as part of the community's way of life. It is part of the cultural calendar of communities. Ndebele (2002: 52) notes:

Cultural calendars arise when a social activity over time evolves common values, common adherence to an evolved discipline of rule and regulation, socially programmed anticipation that results in planning as a social activity, not something that bureaucrats do to our people. Cultural calendars produce common competencies. They bring about a sense of predictability and stability. They provide social cohesion and security. From the perspective of cultural calendar, the calendar of days, weeks and months becomes a series of signposts in the passage of social time, not the purposeless measure of life without value.

Imbizo is part of the cultural calendar of many traditional African communities. It enforces stability and common perspectives on issues affecting the communities in question. Realising the power of this method to unite communities, the ANC government appropriated *imbizo* as a model of communication and governance. The ANC as a political party with supporters and members largely rooted in these communities took advantage of this existing cultural communication and governance infrastructure transmitted through word of mouth to advance its own political and governance strategies.

The ANC has always articulated its strategy within the context of what it refers to as the "National Democratic Revolution". In its 1997 strategy and tactics document, the ANC aptly puts its strategic objective as follows:

The strategic objective of the National Democratic Revolution is the creation of a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society. This in essence means the liberation of Africans in particular and black people in general from political and economic bondage. It means uplifting the quality of life of all South Africans, especially the poor (ANC, 1997: 2).

This study argues that through *imbizo*, the government is contributing to the realisation of the strategic objectives of the ANC by ensuring that, although to varying degrees, the citizens are embraced as part of the development agents and catalysts of change. *Imbizo* portrays government before the public as a key driver of the process of social change. It creates a platform for the leaders of the ANC and government to articulate and popularise the vision of the ANC in the public sphere.

As can be seen from the above discussion, the ANC had to devise a means to keep itself alive in the consciousness of the citizens. *Imbizo* is therefore used as a strategy to ensure that it achieves this strategic objective. Even though it was conceived as a government programme, one is tempted to say that the timing of its conceptualisation and of the circumstances around it confirms that it also had some ideological objectives to pursue.

It can be argued that through the *imbizo*, the ANC wanted to achieve what Gramsci (1971: 12) calls “intellectual and moral leadership”, since it became clear that its real ideological soul was being contested in the tripartite alliance (a political partnership the ANC entered into with Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU] and South African Communist Party [SACP] to defeat the apartheid system of government). It should be stated that at the time of conceptualising *imbizo* in 2001, members of the political left in the Alliance (mainly from COSATU and SACP) were accusing the ANC of pursuing a neo-liberal agenda, especially from 1996 until around 2000 (Bond 2004). In this regard, *imbizo* became part of the ANC’s broader strategy to entrench hegemony by creating consent, so that all consciousness of society could fuse in a collective will of compliance, conformity and common understanding (Gramsci 1971). Marxist materialism insists that ideology does not only operate through discourse, but also through material relations (Strelitz, 2001: 39). *Imbizo* as a product appropriated by the ruling elite is used to advance a discourse that is in compliance with their aspirations and interests. Garnham (1995: 65) writes:

A delimited social group, pursuing economic or political ends, determines which meanings circulate and which do not, which stories are told and about what, which arguments are given prominence and what cultural resources are made available and to whom. The analysis of this process is vital to an understanding of the power relationships involve (sic) in culture and their relationship to wider structures of domination.

Therefore, it can be argued that *imbizo* becomes a form of entrenching “consensus” among and between the ANC and various forms of its constituencies. From this perspective, *imbizo* becomes an ideological programme to cement the ideological unity and narrow the existing gaps between the ANC partners and their constituency. Bennett, Martin and Woollacott (1986: 225) comment:

It is through ideology that the collective will is formed since its very existence depends on the creation of ideological unity which will serve as cement. ... The formation of the collective will and exercise of political leadership depends on the very existence of intellectual and moral leadership.

Against this background, *imbizo* can be seen both as a means to an end and an end in itself. It is a means to an end because it creates a platform for the political principals to articulate the policies of the ANC government, thereby “cementing” the ideology and unity of perspective in the ANC. As an end in itself, *imbizo* assists in forming the “collective will” between the ANC and its constituency. It gives the ANC a platform to deepen its intellectual and moral leadership. This is particularly imperative when considering that *imbizo*, like any other form of mass media transmitted through word of mouth, has the propensity to “provide a consistent picture of the social world which may lead the audience to adopt this version of reality, a reality of facts and norms, values and expectations” (Curran, Gurevitch and Woollacott 1984: 81). In the final analysis, *imbizo* plays a critical role in ensuring that a common worldview and perspective exists between government and the rest of society.

One must also indicate that although social power relations would normally tilt the balance of power in favour of the ruling elites, there is also inherent power in marginality. The very marginal communities which are being ideologically manipulated possess power in their own structures to challenge power in the centre. Within the context of *imbizo*, people express various forms of power through which they would hold their government accountable to them. Some might threaten no longer to vote for the ruling party, while others might profess that they would rather fight the government from within. Fiske's observation is valid:

Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing finally to submit to that power. The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle and antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat, hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded; top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder (Strelitz 2000: 40).

It is against this background that it is contended in this article that *imbizo* was appropriated by government to achieve party political objectives beyond service delivery and governance imperatives. *Imbizo* creates commonality of perspectives between the ANC and the popular masses, while creating a wedge between the masses and other political parties since it allows the government to articulate the strides and achievements made for the people, the challenges facing the nation and how to deal with them to improve the livelihoods of all the people, including the poor.

3.2 Imbizo as an expression of the African Renaissance paradigm

After its electoral victory in 1994, which ushered in a new democratic dispensation, the ANC struggled to embrace policy positions that were in favour of the poor in the context of transition politics (Terreblanche, 1999). In 1999, the ANC, under the leadership of Mbeki, announced an ambitious programme called "African Renaissance" as a tool to regenerate South Africa and the African continent as part of the realisation of its strategic objectives of creating a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa. In outlining the objective of the African Renaissance, Mbeki – its key architect and proponent in the twentieth century – opines:

Our vision of an African renaissance must have as one of its central aims the provision of a better life for all for these masses of the people whom we say must enjoy and exercise the right to determine their future. That Renaissance must address the critical question of sustainable development which impacts positively on the standard of living and quality of life of the masses of our people (Makgoba 1999: xvi).

The African Renaissance, as envisioned by Mbeki, is rooted in the revival and regeneration of the African continent to be able to stand on its own feet in the community of world nations. It is the renaissance that seeks to bestow dignity and respect to all Africans across the continent with a view to giving all South Africans an opportunity to express their own cultures and practices without shame and fear. Mbeki explains:

An enormous challenge faces all of us to do everything we can to contribute to the recovery of the African pride, the confidence in ourselves that we can succeed as well as any other in building a humane and prosperous society... Among other things, what this means is that we must recall everything that is good and inspiring in our past. Our arts should celebrate both our humanity and our capabilities to free ourselves from backwardness and subservience (Makgoba 1999: *xxi*).

The appropriation of *imbizo* can be seen as a contribution by the government of South Africa to the recovery of the African pride. As a communication method used in the past among indigenous African communities, it is part of everything that is good and inspiring in their past. However, it should be indicated that the philosophy underpinning the African Renaissance is not a new thing expressed recently by Mbeki. It can be traced back from Pixley Isaka Seme of the ANC, who in 1905 spoke of the urgent need to regenerate Africa. He remarked:

I have chosen to speak to you on this occasion upon The Regeneration of Africa. I am an African, and set my pride in my race over and against a hostile public opinion... The African recognises his anomalous position and desires to change. The brighter day is rising upon Africa. Already I seem to see her chains dissolved, her desert plains red and harvest, her Abyssinia and her Zululand, the seats of science and of religion, reflecting the glory of the rising sun from the spires of their churches and universities. Her Congo and her Gambia whitened with commerce... Yes the regeneration of Africa belongs to this new and powerful period. By this term regeneration, I wish to be understood to mean the entrance into a new life, embracing the diverse phases of a higher, complex existence (Makgoba, 1999: 42).

This ideological position concerning Africa has been a feature of the ANC since its establishment in 1912. The ANC has always expressed its wish to contribute to the revival of the African continent even in the midst of its intense battle against the white minority governments which endorsed the policies advancing the notion of white supremacy. This is an ideological strand that the ANC upheld even after it was banned in 1960. It continued to uphold this ideology for almost 30 years until its un-banning in 1990. In a 1996 watershed speech in Parliament, Mbeki again made a telling statement about the need to regenerate Africa when he declared:

I owe my being to the Khoi and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape – they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result... I am formed of the migrants who left Europe to find a new home in our native land. Whatever their own actions, they remain still part of me. In my veins crosses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East. Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture is part of my essence... I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to the battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom. My mind and my knowledge of myself is formed by the victories that are the jewels in our African crown, the victories

we earned from Isandhlwana to Khartoum, as Ethiopians and as the Ashanti of Ghana, as the Berbers of the desert. I am the grandchild who lays fresh flowers on the Boers graves at St Helena and the Bahamas, who sees in the mind's eyes and the suffering of a simple peasant folk: death, concentration camps, destroyed homesteads, and dreams in ruins. I am a grandchild of Nongqause... I come of those who were transported from India and China, whose being resided in the fact that, solely, that they were able to provide physical labour, who taught me that we could both be at home and be foreign, who taught me that human existence itself demanded that freedom was a necessary condition for that human existence. Being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dare contest that assertion I shall claim that I am African (ANC 1996: 3).

This was an important speech in which Mbeki expressed his deep-seated loyalty and allegiance to Africa and its history. He reclaimed his Africanness which had been destroyed by many years of colonialism and apartheid. He argued that he belonged to Africa, hence the bold assertion that "I am an African". This was truly the speech that celebrated African experience, achievement and resilience in the face of colonialism and imperialism. It is a speech which reinforces Prah's (1996:28) view:

As the African masses find their voice for democracy and popular political expression, hope and expectations of the betterment of the human condition is again beginning to resurface in the social consciousness of the African people...the unity of African people is a prerequisite for whichever paradigm for progress we envisage (Prah, 1996: 28).

The African Renaissance has also assumed much greater significance with the call for the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems (Higgs 2003). *Imbizo* as an indigenous form of communication can also be seen as a form of indigenous knowledge system in that it refutes claims that Africans possess little or no indigenous knowledge of value that can be utilised in the communication and governance transformation. There is a notion that only the European forms of communication expressed through mass media can be used as the only index of progress. Through *imbizo* an attempt is being made by government to reclaim the effective communication and governance tools of indigenous African communities and to customise these to deal with modern challenges. *Imbizo* helps entrench an African worldview by situating the government's communication efforts with its citizens within an indigenous socio-cultural framework (Higgs, 1994; 1999). This is particularly valid as the vast size of South Africa, coupled with its state of underdevelopment and high levels of poverty, sometimes precludes government from reaching all citizens through modern forms of communication such as mass media (Government of South Africa, 2002).

Imbizo therefore assists in addressing the information needs of the rural poor, where Western forms of media do not reach them or cannot be accessed. The utilisation of *imbizo* seeks to demonstrate how indigenous forms of communication and philosophy can be made relevant in resolving the challenges of modern times. It further confirms that African indigenous forms of communication are liberating and empowering, particularly for communities that have long been

marginalised from participating in the affairs of government. In this context, *imbizo* becomes an assertive mechanism for an African identity, which seeks to transform the stereotypes and prejudices of African experience as a result of Africa's colonial history (Motshekga, 1999).

Within the broader programme of the African Renaissance, there is the philosophy of *ubuntu* which is defined by Mbigi and Maree (1995: 1) as a "metaphor that describes the significance of group solidarity on survival issues that are central to the survival of the African communities". Mbiti (1970: 108) sheds light on the philosophy of *ubuntu*:

Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."

By bringing a community together to discuss issues that affect it in order to reach collective solutions that would better the lives of the community, *imbizo* is proving to be a key driver in the implementation of *ubuntu* philosophy. This philosophy is premised on the principle of collective unity. *Imbizo* is used by government and the ruling party as a means to foster, in a subtle way, the realisation of the ideals inherent in the *ubuntu* philosophy. One such ideal is that of "compassion" which Teffo (1999: 145) sees as a quality in humankind which goes a long way towards binding people together through relationship and friendship. He (1999:145) further elaborates:

This quality of compassion has a lot to do with African humanism as people in various parts of the continent have lived it. Compassion, reaching out to others, is what this humanism is about: you are enlarged and increased when you go out of yourself. I am attracted to an existence in which people treat each other as human beings and not simply as instruments or tools, where people become committed to one another without necessarily having to declare such commitment. When the chips are down, it is compassion which makes it possible for others to rise to the occasion. Compassion integrates and binds people together.

Against this background, it can be argued that *imbizo* creates a platform for the spirit of compassion to thrive amongst communities. As members of a particular community interact with government on policy implementation and how best to improve their lives, government begins to feel for the suffering of communities trapped in conditions of abject poverty. For example, after the Presidential *imbizo* in Kwazulu-Natal in 2004, Mbeki (2004:4) made this compassionate comment:

Regularly [citizens] raise the issue of the need for jobs and the need to provide appropriate training especially for the youth to ensure that on completing their school years, they are able to find employment. Like others of rural communities, rural Kwazulu-Natal called on government to help with the provision of tractors and seed to assist the people to till the soil.

Imbizo portrays government as caring for the plight of the poor and being concerned about their upliftment from the conditions of poverty in which many find themselves. *Imbizo* further reaffirms

the view that if Africans are going to undertake the challenge of development, they need to discover their own collective self-identity, which has to be an inward journey leading to the celebration of collective personhood (Mbigi & Maree, 1995: 6). More than any of these, it is argued in this study that *imbizo* expresses the ideology of African unity.

3.3 Imbizo as an expression of the ideology of African unity

There have always been various competing ideological tendencies in the ANC. This happened before the ANC was banned, when its leadership was exiled and many of its members imprisoned. It is for this reason that the ANC was later labelled a “broad church” able to accommodate members with varying ideological beliefs. Suttner (2003: 304) remarks:

The various components also represent distinct practices and expectations of what it means to be an ANC member and what different people hope to derive from such membership. It may also define what describing the ANC as a broad church means, and what may be included or excluded from that concept at different times and under diverse conditions.

Like any mass movement, the ANC operates within a highly contested ideological sphere. It can be argued that within the *imbizo* programme as practised by government, there are reflections of an ideology, aspiring for the unity of Africa and Africans (Pan Africanism). Although the ANC does not publicly acknowledge that the African Renaissance programme that it preaches is similar to the pan-Africanist ideology that was mooted years ago by such African liberation fighters as Nkwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Patrice Lumumba, there is evidence suggesting a commonality of perspectives between African unity ideals and pan-Africanist ideology. Defining the latter, Prah (1996: 11) opines:

Pan-Africanism is an affirmation and assertion of African humanity, a spirit of indomitability, an attestation of the right and willingness of Africans to unite and seize their equality amongst humankind. It is not a dogma cast in stone by a political pedigree, and which requires doctrinal fidelity every time it is called into analytical or practical service. It is a dynamic frame of reference which responds to changes in focus and relevance according to changing historical realities.

Both African Renaissance and pan-Africanism call for the unity of the African people in Africa and in the diaspora. The adoption and implementation of *imbizo* as a form of government communication by government, therefore by the ANC, can be seen as a practical manifestation of the wish for African unity at a more micro level. To substantiate this view: between 2001 and 2004 there was no *imbizo* programme targeted exclusively at either the Indian or the white communities in South Africa. *Imbizo* has always been targeted at black communities, and to a lesser extent coloured communities, as a way of strengthening this African unity philosophy. *Imbizo* seeks to bring to the fore the deep-seated African values of unity, solidarity and communality. In a way, it has projected the government as holding the complete antithesis of the values that the previous apartheid

government stood for, namely: white supremacy based on individualism. Commenting about the differing value systems of Africans and Europeans, Levi–Strauss says:

We Europeans have been taught from infancy to be self-centred and individualistic. On the other hand, before the arrival of the colonialists, African man continued to structure his society so that it provided him with the security and harmony of the mythical life no longer effectively provided. But he too, like Western man, created a social environment and made history rooted in his way of life, his activities and expectations (Pokela, 2001: 194).

It can be argued that *imbizo* symbolises a value system based on solidarity, co-operation and unity in action. It binds African communities and government together in their efforts to address poverty and underdevelopment. It creates a platform for the entrenchment of these value systems and philosophies that are the principles advanced in the ideologies of African unity.

Following his *I am an African* speech delivered in Parliament, Mbeki engineered a programme to take Africa out of the malaise of underdevelopment and poverty to give practical manifestation to the ANC ideals of regenerating the African continent and fostering African unity. After its initial conception, this programme was later named New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The programme was designed to address the current challenges facing the African continent: escalating poverty levels, underdevelopment, and, the continued marginalisation of Africa. It was a radical intervention, spearheaded by African leaders to develop a new vision that would guarantee Africa's renewal. The NEPAD (NEPAD Secretariat, 2001) objectives have been articulated as to:

- eradicate poverty
- place African countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development
- halt the marginalisation of Africa in the globalisation process and enhance its full and beneficial integration into the global economy
- accelerate the empowerment of women.

The implementation of this ambitious programme required, amongst others, that the ANC and its government had to firmly entrench its hegemony in all sectors of South African society. It had to maintain a closer contact with the citizens who voted it into power. Some elements of African unity were therefore couched in the broader programme of *imbizo*. As one of the government's chief intellectuals, Netshitenzhe (cited in De Villiers, 2003: 1) says:

The participation of citizens in formulating decisions that affect them is most desirable. But often, the words sound pious and worn-out. Is it indeed realisable? This is a challenge that genuine democracies face – to bring government to the man and woman in the street. It is South Africa's goal that this should be the case. The point is to make it happen across all spheres of government and among all the people – rich and poor, men and women, young and old. Governance after all, is about the people.

Although *imbizo* was introduced in 2001 as an original form of government communication programme to improve service delivery and address logjams, this researcher argues that it is part of the broader ideological crusade of the ANC to preach the philosophy of African unity. It is a tool to implement the ANC's ideals of African unity premised on the revival of South Africans' indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices of *letšema* and *vukuzenzele* (arise and act!), phrases that have become common in the lore of the ANC government since 1999.

It can be seen from the arguments presented above that running like a golden thread in both the philosophy and practice of *imbizo* is the concept of participatory democracy.

3.4 Imbizo as a manifestation of participatory democracy

It is common knowledge that one of the striking effects of colonialism and imperialism in Africa was that it severely reduced the rights of local people to participate in their own governance. With the dawn of liberation in Africa, the situation did not improve much as the new ruling elites across the continent reinforced those very principles of colonial rule that they themselves had fought against. Adejumobi (2000: 4) puts it poignantly:

...decolonisation failed to advance the cause of African freedom and development. Instead of promoting independence, it deepened dependence. Instead of terminating colonialism, it initiated neo-colonialism. The illusion of legitimacy in the new states soon paled. There remained among the populace an inherent disbelief in the equality of all citizens and the virtues of individualism on which the new states were based. The ballot box has regularly failed to reflect the will of the people at elections, and is, by no means evidence of popular participation, hence the continued crisis of the state.

The experience of participatory democracy in Africa has not been very encouraging since post-colonial independence. Even where development of local participation is an important objective of rural development and where political education in mass participation is a key element of the development strategy, programmes have not developed neither genuine participation nor genuine responsibility among the rural people. This is a challenge facing most African governments, and also the South African government.

However, the ANC government, which was only installed in 1994, had the benefit of hindsight in that it saw how most independent states had lurched from one crisis to the next after their independence. It thus had to do everything in its power to distinguish itself from behaving in a manner similar to that of the previous independent African states, especially because there was already a perception in the international community that South Africa would follow the route of all other African states that had been liberated before it. It had to image itself as an antithesis of post-colonial states in a neo-colonial context (Sparks, 2003).

In 1994, the ANC government adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), as its programme of action after the first democratic elections. The issues of democratising the

state and society and of engendering the spirit of participatory democracy were dominant in the RDP document. The document called for a democratic government and society, which would be realised through the enfranchisement of all people and their direct participation in the process of government (Rantete, 1998: 98). The RDP document states:

...democracy for ordinary citizens must not end with formal rights and periodic “one person one vote” elections. Without undermining the authority and responsibilities of elected representative bodies (the national assembly, provincial legislatures, local government), the democratic order we envisage must foster a wide range of institutions of participatory democracy in partnership with civil society on the basis of informed and empowered citizens... and facilitate direct democracy (people’s forums, referenda where appropriate, and other consultation processes (ANC, 1994: 7).

Throughout the RDP document, the ANC managed to advance a grassroots -focused development ideal to be implemented by government in partnership with the rest of society, including the poor. It captured in very succinct terms the principles of participatory development and democracy. The RDP document further asserts:

... the central objective of our RDP is to improve the quality of life of all South Africans, and in particular the poorest and most marginalised sections of our communities. This objective should be realised through a process of empowerment which gives the poor control over their lives and increases their ability to mobilise sufficient development processes, including from the democratic government where necessary. The RDP reflects a commitment to grassroots, bottom-up development which is owned and driven by communities and their representative organisations (ANC, 1994: 8).

By the same token, the ANC made an interesting observation on democratisation and governance in its strategy and tactics document:

Our commitment is to open and transparent government, and to ensuring that an informed and active citizenry are more than just high sounding phrases. They are the life-blood of democratic governance, the core values of people-centred and people-driven transformation. We shall therefore continue to strengthen relations between government and civil society, including non-governmental and community-based organisations; and promote their role in the process of transformation (ANC, 1997: 3).

It should be indicated that this document was prepared for the national ANC conference held in Mafikeng (North West Province) in 1997. At the time, the ANC was faced with the challenge of ensuring that all sectors of society were fully involved in matters of governance. Considering that the 1999 election campaign was to start in less than 16 months’ time, it can therefore argue that this statement signalled the ANC’s efforts to foreground participatory democracy as the hallmark of its policy and practice.

In the late 1990's, the ANC government also strove to implement participatory democracy principles in local government through the implementation of the Municipal Systems Act 2000 (Government of South Africa, 2000) and Municipal Structures Act (Government of South Africa, 1998). The Acts broadly stipulate that local government should comprise of key critical stakeholders, namely elected public representatives, community and local government administrative officials. They further argue that the community must be a critical stakeholder in the formulation and implementation policy at the level of local authorities. This was the ANC's attempt to democratise every sphere of governance to ensure that ordinary people have a stake in governing their own affairs.

At a much more broader international level at the time, the ANC government was receiving accolades for transforming the apartheid state into a constitutional order.

However, in the mid 1990's, pressure was beginning to mount from within the ANC and the broader congress movement that the ANC was becoming more centralised in its decision-making processes. At the centre of the row was the adoption and implementation by the ANC government of the macroeconomic Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR), which sparked tensions between the ruling party and its alliance partners, the SACP and COSATU (Sparks 2003). Explaining the context within which these opposing views emerged, Terreblanche (1999: 5) says:

The fact that the ANC government... has not only accepted the macro-economic strategy, but has also declared that its contents is non-negotiable, reflects a remarkable shift in the ANC's ideological orientation in the period from 1990 to 1996. While the ANC in 1990 took a position on the economic ideological spectrum well to the left of the centre, its present position can be described as centre-right. In ideological terms the ANC walked quite a long distance from the RDP to GEAR. It is therefore not surprising that the government experiences quite serious problems to convince all its partners about the merit of GEAR. In sharp contrast to the RDP document, which was intensively discussed in the ANC alliance, GEAR was preceded by no consultation within the ANC – even top ANC figures were not acquainted with its details before its public release.

This was the beginning of a storm in the ranks of the ANC alliance. Acknowledging these tensions, a leading SACP intellectual, Jeremy Cronin, explains:

Those would be organizational challenges of the post-independence, post-democracy breakthrough period. The challenges would be much more to maintain the dialectic and to struggle for popular working class dominance, over a complicated multi-class front, a front to which nonetheless we were committed, we said at the time, and that is what we are living through. So if there is marginalisation, shouting down, suppression of views and perspectives, it might have to do with individuals who are nasty, with Stalinist tendencies. It might have to do with a lack of imagination or any number of factors (Sheehan, 2000: 12).

The perception of the centralisation of power by the ANC government was also reverberating in the broader sphere of public discourse. In delivering the Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, Mda (2002: 6) made the following interesting remarks:

South Africa is yet to learn that there can be no transformation without popular participation. Hence we do not see any organised efforts to increase people's control over their own institutions and resources. Popular participation in the transformation of South Africa has been rendered irrelevant by a government bent on centralising power at all levels. Even at the very village level people are represented in local government structures by officials who have been deployed from outside those communities, in many instances as a reward for services rendered the party. Local communities are regarded as spoils that must be shared at the table of expediency.

These perceptions were also gaining ground in the tripartite alliance and had a potential to create a wedge between the ANC, citizens and its constituency. Inevitably, there had to be a strategy by the ANC, as the leader of the alliance to quell them, or at least manage them, so that they could not undermine the broader political strategy. In 2000, as part of its preparation for the National General Council conference, the ANC released a discussion document entitled *Tasks of the National Democratic Revolution and the Mobilisation of the Motive Forces*. In this document, it was stressed that the ANC needed to mobilise the masses of the people to govern themselves (ANC, 2000: 12).

It should be underlined that this pronouncement was made some months after the ANC had won an electoral majority in 1999. As democracy became more entrenched after the second general elections held in 1999, there were some speculations in the political discourse that the ANC was gravitating more towards the right of the political spectrum, particularly after its fierce public ideological contestations with two of its struggle allies, COSATU and the SACP over the macroeconomic policy and privatisation of state assets (Sparks, 2003: 174).

The ANC was therefore battling to project itself as a genuine representative of the ideology of the left and this posed a major political risk. It was immediately after the National General Council of 2000 that *imbizo* was conceived and implemented as a communication and governance model to improve service delivery. After its implementation, the ANC government announced many policies aimed at strengthening its relationship with the citizens. The implementation of *imbizo* was driven largely by the conviction that participation in planning and implementation of programmes can develop the self-reliance necessary among rural people for accelerated development.

In this researcher's view, *imbizo* - as a tactical approach - was meant to come across as creating space for ordinary citizens to participate in the governance of their own affairs and to create a wedge between the ANC leadership and those who were opposed to its policies. This was critical because the ANC government was beginning to lose its public legitimacy among its rank and file. The tensions in the alliance that we referred to earlier needed to be managed whilst, at the same

time lost ground had to be reclaimed among its constituency. The idea of participatory democracy was not entirely the primary objective of the *imbizo* programme as such. Its primary objective was to manage the political tensions that were erupting in its alliance. Some form of legitimacy had to be reclaimed from the very supporters who had voted it into power.

As part of the ideological justification of the ANC's policies to the citizens, the *imbizo* has had enormous symbolic importance. It created consensus between the government and the citizens, many of whom were already accusing it of betraying the trust of those who had voted it into power. It also played a critical role in disarming the alliance partners, COSATU and the SACP, who were accusing it of becoming a guardian and champion of neo-liberal interests. *Imbizo* was critical in healing the divisions of the past between the ANC and its alliance partners, on the one hand, and between the ANC and the masses, on the other. It afforded the ANC an opportunity to redeem itself after much criticism had been levelled against it, mainly for abandoning the plight of the poor. Alliance partners and analysts alike questioned the ideological allegiance of its political leadership. Ayeye (2000: 5) makes this important observation about African leaders:

Most African leaders were more concerned with asserting their power, authority and hegemony over their subjects than with enhancing their participation and legitimacy. In a context where there were new political and economic resources which could allow leaders to purchase this legitimacy, the natural tendency was for them to attempt to establish the security, control and autonomy of the regimes.

Against this background, it can be argued that the ANC government used *imbizo* to purchase its legitimacy among the constituencies whose support it was beginning to lose. It further used *imbizo* as a tool to weaken or eliminate tensions that were beginning to resurface strongly in the tripartite alliance, and not only to promote genuine popular participation in the affairs of governance. This is not new in early attempts by states to promote participation. The telling observation made by Alfonso (cited in Ayeye, 2000: 26), is still relevant:

Regularly [government agencies] incorporate the rhetoric of participation in their development plans – the reality seldom resembles the rhetoric. A growing body of evidence suggests that one explanation for the gap between rhetoric and reality can be found in the operating structures of organizations responsible for the implementation of development projects.

Against this background, one is tempted to argue that *imbizo*, as practised by the ANC government, has been a covert attempt to enfeeble the citizens and organs of civil society and escape criticism from the alliance partners thereof. In the realm of decision-making, genuine participation by the masses has been stunted, as power is still more concentrated in the centre, and more so than before. All the *izimbizo* conducted thus far have been slanted more towards assessing the impact of government policy in relation to service delivery. This presupposes that a policy has been determined at the centre (national government, provincial government, local authority), and therefore, *imbizo* seeks to assess how far the policy has fared in terms of implementation. With

this approach, the participation of ordinary citizens is narrowed down purely to matters of implementation. No sufficient space has been created for ordinary citizens to participate in the formulation of policies and programmes of government. This is important, as there is a lack of homogeneity of interests between local interests and national interests, the interests of the ordinary citizens and those of the elected public representatives.

One can conclude that the *izimbizo* of the past helped to slowly create unity and harmony between the ANC government and its alliance partners and citizens. Although this was a high-level objective of *imbizo*, it is also important to look at other secondary objectives. One critical secondary objective was to improve service delivery in communities afflicted by poverty and underdevelopment. It is through *imbizo* that government began to realise that the challenges of implementing government policies and broadening access to government services required a special cadre of public servants who would be rooted in the communities, and able to be accessed by communities for government information and services. This new cadre of public servants were then called community development workers (ANC, 2003: 4).

Through *imbizo*, government began to recognise the critical need for this type of worker in communities.

4. CONCLUSION

This article has shown that *imbizo* as a government communication programme includes subtle ideological objectives. Although it is a government communication programme, it assists in entrenching some of the deeper ideological principles of the ANC, which was the ruling party between 2001 and 2004. It was also shown that *imbizo* is used as one of the critical vehicles to implement the ANC strategy of building a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

Imbizo also invokes the principles of unity of the oppressed across Africa, solidarity of the poor, and co-operation in an unfavourable post-colonial setting. Its implementation at the community level is a microcosm of the ANC's dream to unite the Africans across the whole of the African continent. It was further shown in this article that *imbizo* seeks to promote the country's constitutional ideals of entrenching participatory democracy; it is a platform that the ANC-led government uses to make claims that they are "true democrats" who involve all South Africans in policy formulation and implementation. It portrays the ANC government as being the antithesis of the erstwhile apartheid state, thus advancing its claim of popular legitimacy. Above all, it was argued that *imbizo* is a political strategy of the ANC to manage inherent political tensions in the tripartite alliance, and to entrench its hegemony within the public sphere.

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