Part Three: In the Sphere of Public Deliberation

CHAPTER 9

RE-CLAIMING IDENTITY AS TRUTH

ON THE POLITICS OF THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT. *In South Africa, the politics of identity as promoted by the African Renaissance seeks to undermine the violence and assumptions of Western ethnocentrism regarding the African Other. In this way, it resembles the ideologies of négritude, the African personality and the Harlem Renaissance which emerged much earlier. However, the African Renaissance in formulating a discourse of authenticity undermines a Nietzschean appreciation of truth and its multiple possibilities.*

The old English meaning of the noun *truth* was "trustworthy". To establish trust between former enemies in order to create common ground for a humane future after the demise of divisive, thoroughly unjust *apartheid* was the major aim of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC). In tune with the rejection of Manichaean[1] thinking, resulting from imperial and totalitarian perspectives up and including the Cold War, the TRC thought to create the condition of "being true or factual", as implied by the Latin term *vērus*, about the violent, hidden South African past. The "theatre of pain and catharsis" as the *Mail and Guardian* (19-25/4/1996: 5), called the TRC's first meeting, quotes the Anglican prelate, Desmond Tutu:

> We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past; to lay the ghosts of the past so that they may not return to haunt us. That it may thereby contribute to the healing of a traumatised and wounded nation; for all of us in South Africa are wounded people.

Once "the truth" about atrocities committed on both sides would have been "confessed", that is narrated and interpreted on the level of moral justice rather than legally verified or validated, reconciliation as an interactive form of dialogue between perpetrators of empirical and symbolic violence would

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[1] *Manichaean*: referring to a scheme of thought associated with the name of the religious innovator Mani (Persia/Iran, 3rd century CE), and positing a radical division of the world into good and bad; in fact the scheme has much older antecedents, e.g. in Zarathustrian thought. (Eds.)

have been set in motion, and "nation building" on the basis of mutual understanding and trust could commence.

Evidence of the reception of this largely socio-political process inaugurated by the TRC suggests a rather mixed effect on the diverse peoples of South Africa. Although the media spectacle provoked profound soul-searching on the part of Afrikaans-speaking intellectuals, South African liberals seemed dissatisfied with the TRC's historico-narrative paradigm. Whereas the former appeared deeply touched by what might be called *moral justice* inscribed in all narrative truth, the latter were concerned rather with *legal justice*, a justice less defined by taking moral responsibility than by verifying and apportioning factual guilt.[2] Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998) and Anita Jeffrey's *The Truth about the Truth Commission* (1999) serve as examples, respectively. By-and-large, though, the limits of the desired process of reconciliation, facilitated by mutual "understanding" and solidarity with those who suffered under *apartheid*, are only too apparent in as much as many victims think of the TRC as "toothless" because of its explicit rejection of *retributive justice*. Others, like Mahmood Mamdani (1998) took the Commission to task for failing to define the terms of the social debate and to set the parameters for truth-seeking. Holding that, similar to Mamdani's conclusion, the "truth" of colonial and neo-colonial racial and economic oppression has been obscured, many Black African intellectuals like Malegapuru Makgoba (1999) and Thami Mazwai (1999) advocate an African Renaissance. This rebirth is tilted towards the majority of Black South Africans for the purpose of releasing traditional values and energies from a local history of colonization and oppression. Their project, more than five years after the transition to democracy, coincides with Thabo Mbeki's attempt to deal with the threat of exclusivist ideologies and largely racist extremist alliances by mapping an affirmation of cultural diversity (multiculturalism) across redistributive (socialist) economic transformation.

Following in the wake of the deliberations of the TRC, the African Renaissance seeks to restore the hidden, forgotten and, at the hands of the colonizers and Western ethnocentrism, actively discredited narrative of the African Other. As a recuperative move, the African Renaissance establishes selfhood by undertaking "the voyage in" like other anti-colonial writers and thinkers since the 1940s. Suffice it to mention in this regard *négritude*, the praise of the African personality, and even the Harlem Renaissance of the

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[2] It has to be kept in mind, though, that the TRC was constituted by various committees, one of which is the Amnesty Committee whose decisions are binding. Contradictions such as between the main (Tutu) Committee and the rest of the Commission arise precisely from differences between *moral* and *legal*, narrative, obligatory and verifiable or "factual", binding truths.

1920s, associated, among others, with names like Césaire, Fanon, Nyerere, and Langston Hughes, respectively. In the book edited by Malegapuru Makgoba (1999) after the September 1998 conference organised by him and Thami Mazwai, the African Renaissance operates with a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of becoming subject after the colonial reduction to slave, subaltern or generally the non-human savage. Thus, the African Renaissance is

> about Africans being agents of our own history and masters of our own destiny (Makgoba 1999: xii).

On the one hand, the rhetoric of the varied contributions to Makgoba's book derives its persuasive force from comparisons like "as good as" or "better than". Being "black in the world", and thus an "African" means being as good as a "white European", producing as good a history, a science, a philosophy etc., and being in possession of as good a rationality as the "white" man. The "white man" merely reduced the African to his inferior Other in the process of colonization and slavery. Now is the time to claim, or rather, to re-claim, the stolen past, to de-colonize the mind, and to infuse current Western science and everyday life with forgotten and buried traditional practices. With respect to human conduct and relations, *ubuntu* is superior to Western, European ethics, and, besides, it is the African people, in the words of Makgoba (1999: iv ff),

> that gave birth to humanity, language, science, technology, philosophy, wisdom, and so forth.

On the other hand the rhetoric purposely shuns any relational components, reducing the African Renaissance to an immanent absolute. There is only the still-to-be-fully-restored, authentic African tradition in Africa, and if you don't like – excuse the metaphor – doing like the Romans do when in Rome, then there is no place for you. In other words, current rhetoric employs a dual argument of a relational and of an exclusivist kind. This double argumentation makes the present debate around Africanization iridescent because it veils the actual aim and content of the emergent formation of an important and unique tradition.

Such construction of tradition resonates with a world-wide, contemporary bracketing of the *ethnos*, together with accompanying moves towards defining and establishing identity. Hence Makgoba (1999: v) continues in his Introduction:

> Why are the British, the Australians, the Israelis, and Germans revisiting the issue of identity and culture towards the end of the twentieth century? The answer is simple,

Makgoba says, providing a bulleted three-point response:

- Identity and culture are important national matters.
- When national identity and culture are not clearly defined, articulated or skewed, social tensions increase, national reconciliation and success (economic, educational, political) are stunted.
- National culture and identity are the common thread that weaves society together and facilitates coherent development.

However, Makgoba's somewhat simplistic answers obscure the reason for the current concerns with identity and culture; reasons, which I would argue, are to be found in increasing technological, economic and cultural globalization. Recently, sociologists, foremost among them Manuel Castells (1996-98), have pointed out that the prevailing issue of "identity" is a corollary of globalization which, in turn, according to Anthony Giddens (1990), has been facilitated by an accelerated process of modernization. Globalizing processes break down the historical nexus between nation, state, societal community and territory, and create anxiety in the face of post-modern instabilities. An engagement with alterity, supported by postmodernist ethnography, in a period of decisive shifts in global cultural politics and values, is thus producing the reassertion of national and group rights to recognition and respect. With regard to Europe and Asia, economic globalization demands the strengthening of regions across historical state boundaries which globalization renders fluid and economically unnecessary. On the eve of the "third millennium" – as counted by the Christian calendar – we are in the midst of another huge upheaval in world affairs, comparable in impact to the urbanization process. Peoples – and governments – are seeking to re-appropriate and reinterpret their inherited traditions, while facing at the same time the complication of cultural "globalization" in a world-economy of hegemonic commodities and information. American-Hispanic, African, Indian, Slavic, Islamic and Chinese peoples are asserting their equivalence with Europeans, Anglo-Americans and Japanese both in their own regions and on the world stage. Scholarly preoccupation with "multiculturalism" (Taylor 1992) in the wake of the Canadian debate of the late sixties, cross-culturalism – post-colonialism – hybridization or *métissage*, inter-cultural and intra-cultural dialogue, etc., on the one hand, and identity, on the other, testify to this current situation world-wide.

The African Renaissance can be seen, thus, as yet another symptom of globalization with its stress on reclaiming identity as a collective or communitarian rather than an individualistic affair. Since the notion of the individual, and individual rights, are regarded as Western imports, a return to the collective "we" is generally implied, in place of an individual subject who, as Kant has advocated, frees himself from self-imposed immaturity.

The African Renaissance, it seems, surmises President Mbeki's vision of the new "struggle", for he regards it as a "contribution to the recovery of African pride, the confidence in ourselves that we can succeed as well as any other in building a humane and prosperous society" (Mbeki in Makgoba 1999). This rebirth of an African identity is seen to be the necessary successor to the 1994 liberation, and precursor to the success of the coming "African century". Although discussion of the much desired African Renaissance in the main eschews reference to the TRC's deliberations, the TRC's envisaged nation-building project remains part of emerging African identity politics.

Recourse to identity thus appears as self-representation in the place of hegemonic representation by others like the colonial master, the ruler or the particular symbolic order of power. Therefore, such recourse to identity insists on articulating the narrative which these powers or agents of representation try to obscure. This is where the work of witnessing, memory, testimony, and solidarity achieves importance, work which the TRC succeeded in doing, despite Mamdani's (1998) critique to the effect that it turned a political compromise into a compromised truth in order to support the political. In fact, contestation is the very hallmark of the domains of truth and identity, for, rather than constituting immutable "facts" they are historically contingent constructs in and through language. Thus, the anti-Platonic turn in Western philosophy, illuminated repeatedly by, for instance, Richard Rorty (1999), and represented in particular by Nietzsche–Foucault, Marx–Althusser, Heidegger–Derrida, and Dewey–Rorty, rejects an eternal, essentialist (monistic) Truth; for, as Nietzsche (1979: 84) observed already more than a hundred years ago, truth is

> A moveable host of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered metal and no longer coins.

There are a number of considerations which arise from this, by now, famous constructionist statement:

- truth is plural;
- truth is a verbal/discursive construct referring to human relations;
- truth is the effect of *poësis* and rhetoric, which is to say: truth is produced or created in a process of making (*poësis*, "the poetic" in Greek means condensing, whereby the poet is a "densifier" who "thickens" language).

> The rhetorician, on the other hand utilizes persuasion in order to establish truth.

- truth is the result of an (impoverishing) historical process; impoverished because it removes truth from a general economy, rendering its "sensuous force" of exchange abstract.

Most importantly, though, truth, unlike identity when locked into *authentēs* (Greek for "author")[3], has to be thought of as non-substantive and relational. Although truth, like identity, functions as a stable criterion within the flux of phenomena, truth, – unlike identity – presupposes a process in order to establish equivalence or congruence between two entities or phenomena. This process, which is more often than not an agonistic one, is a struggle to "match" two entities, either by way of "matching" evidence with the performed act in a deliberative judicial manner in order to "establish the truth", as the jurist would put it. Historians usually require a match between an event and a document, for example, thus raising "documentation" to the status of proof. Proof as an important element in the construction of truth, of course, operates decisively in logic; thus, in the specific case of Aristotelian logic, truth is produced formally and purely linguistically. From a rhetorical perspective, truth, like the truth in or of science, can be said to be "true belief", in as much as a particular scientific community can arrive at consensus with respect to the analysis of specific observations. Apart from these outcome-based constructions of "truth", there is, moreover, truth in the (Heideggerean) shape of *alētheia* or that which is hidden from view and awaits being extracted or essayed from *lēthe*, the stream which nourishes the dead souls. In this sense, truth as disclosure describes best, perhaps, the narrative working of memory.

Whereas the TRC's proceedings oscillated between these ways of constructing truth, allowing more weight in accordance with its intention, perhaps, for the construction of historical truth in pursuit of *moral justice*, the African Renaissance's construction of identity dissolves historical or narrative truth in authenticity. In as much as any narrative truth aims at behavioural changes (which are required, for instance, for self-affirmation and/or reconciliation), it has a (historically) rightful place, despite its possible lack of *legal* or legally "binding" *justice*, something for which the TRC has been accused by a number of different voices including that of Jeffrey. Yet this does not change the specific distinction between truth and

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[3] In the sense, not of literary creator, but of "actor", i.e. "someone who carries out a deed by his own hand" – and most typically used for "murderer" and for "autocrat". (Eds.)

identity. Whereas both may be narrative in nature, truth stands to non-truth in a relation of deliberation, informed by either evidence, proof or revelation. Identity, however, stands to non-identity in a relation of alterity. Moreover, where *ethnos* – from which derived the notion of race in the modern era – is figured into identity, it becomes exclusive and grounded in non-negotiable authenticity and not in deliberation or consensus.

Ethnos in the Greek *polis* as much as in the modern nation-state or in the South African nation-building project is based upon an identity shared by a collective. Such shared "markers" might be constituted by way of an ancient concept of blood-ties (e.g. clan, tribe, and current German nationality), or citizenship (Greek *polis* and Roman Empire, USA), or the essentially European Romantic notion of a common culture and language. In each case it is proof of authenticity, not proof of truth, which decides on inclusion or exclusion of the group. Sadly, the project of nation-building on the basis of reconciliation seems to have been diverted by identity politics around the question of authenticity with regard to who is an African. Such authenticity operates on the level of immanence, and is dependant on its constitutive parts which, moreover, have to be traceable to an origin. Authenticity, thus, is always onto-logically founded and non-negotiable.

In as much as identity requires the matching of qualities and markers to a perceived authenticity or an *authentēs*, it tends to cut itself off from other entities and becomes exclusively grounded in an axiology and not in justice, whereby differing values, including truth-values, are regarded as unauthentic, and hence undesirable. Identity politics establishes an absolute, monistic Truth, THE truth of its ontologically defining qualities which are closed-off from any relational aspects with which Nietzsche saw truth as circulating within an economy of exchange. No wonder then, that multiculturalism's *ethnos* in the form of identity as truth, instead of fostering heterogeneous interactions between different identities, produces a flourishing cultural separatism, a kind of totalitarian particularism which, according to Wolfgang Welsch (1992) carries a retribalization in the form of discovering "roots" and "traditions".

In the retrieval of the forgotten, hidden, masked and obscured stories, historical truth, as uncovered by the TRC for instance, can, imbued with *moral justice*, speak the truth to political power in relation to the excluded. In as much as the African Renaissance seeks to build an image of the African as one constructed by himself/herself and not by others for the purpose of building his/her own development with his/her own hands, the project is concerned, like the TRC, with historical truth. However, where the African Renaissance turns into identity politics in order to achieve political

power, the historical truth is jettisoned for the sake of exclusivity. For truth as seen to be residing in identity is no longer plural, relational, and deliberative. Instead of being a "sensuous force" of exchange between diverse and distinct people who have to share the same country and the same, increasingly globalizing world, an undue emphasis upon the claim to ethnic, authentic identity is in danger of rendering the "coin" of truth into useless "metal".[4]

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[4] Reference is made once more to the image of the touchstone as used in Ancient metallurgy, cf. Cassin, this volume, footnote 8.