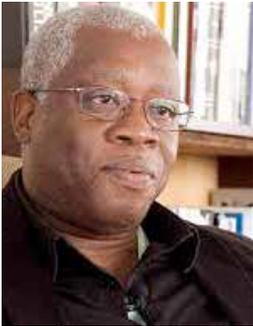


20 years of Democracy: Race Narratives in South African Society



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I suppose it is trite to aver that, because of colonialism and white minority rule during apartheid, race was the main social contradiction which shaped political, economic, cultural and other relations before the advent of our democratic order in 1994. Twenty years into our democratic dispensation, however, it should be – but it is not – self-evident that the gap between the procedural and substantive dimensions of our democracy is, in the main, but not exclusively, defined by the coincidence between race, on the one hand, and poverty, inequality and unemployment, on the other.

Even at those moments we are tempted to yield to class essentialism, sometimes in response to perceived or real race essentialism, we must, grudgingly or otherwise, accept that the conditions of relative underdevelopment which still plague many poor communities can be explained in terms of the coincidence between race and class. Instead of elevating exceptions to the status of a rule, we must, therefore, accept that this is a coincidence that preponderantly still finds expression in the social and economic conditions of those who are black.

This argument, however, is both the cause of discomfort and an inconvenience to those for whom the reincarnation and mutation of a colonial logic and entrenched interests still exist as a means of adaptation to our post-apartheid reality. This is the case, despite the fact that the African National Congress (ANC) during the liberation struggle adopted the position that the struggle for liberation was essentially about the liberation of blacks in general and Africans in particular.

In 1969, the ANC adopted its first Strategy and Tactics document in which it argued that: "The main content of the present stage of the South African revolution is the national liberation of the largest and most oppressed group – the African people. This strategic aim must govern every aspect of the conduct of our struggle whether it be the formulation of policy or the creation of structures."¹ But that was in 1969. In 1996, the then deputy president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, in a speech he delivered when the final constitution was adopted said the following in Parliament:

The great masses who are our mother and father will not permit that the behaviour of the few results in the description of our country and people as barbaric. Patient because history is on their side, these masses do not despair because today the weather is bad. Nor do they turn triumphalist when, tomorrow, the sun shines. Whatever

the circumstances they have lived through and because of that experience, they are determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be. We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be African. The constitution whose adoption we celebrate constitutes an unequivocal statement that we refuse to accept that our Africanness shall be defined by our race, colour, gender or historical origins. It is a firm assertion made by ourselves that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. It gives concrete expression to the sentiment we share as Africans, and will defend to the death, that the people shall govern.²

Is there a tension in how Africans and *Africanness* are defined in the 1969 Strategy and Tactics document of the ANC and what is now popularly known as Mbeki's "I am an African" speech? Is Mbeki's speech consistent with our post-apartheid condition twenty years since the 1994 democratic breakthrough? Put differently, which statement – between Mbeki's speech or the Strategy and Tactics document – is more or less consistent or inconsistent with this post-apartheid condition?

It seems to me that there is no easy answer to these questions. This notwithstanding, it may be a good starting point to remember that the Strategy and Tactics document was written under conditions that the ANC regarded as a revolutionary struggle that had a class content but, in response to the racist-colonial logic of the apartheid regime, was essentially racial in content. In addition, the answer may lie, in part, in a willingness to accept that there is a symbiotic relationship between a change in consciousness and perception, on the one hand, and a substantial or partial change in social, political or economic conditions on the other. Mbeki delivers his 'I am an African' speech two years after the first democratic election, at a time when the euphoria of 1994 is still with us and hopes are high that South Africa will indeed become a nirvana of peace, racial harmony and prosperity.

Since this revolution was also about creating a society which, in terms of the content of race relations, would be the antithesis of apartheid society, it is understandable that Mbeki presented in 1996 a conception of what it meant to be African which sought to both deconstruct and reconstruct race as a construct by positing an inclusive definition of Africanness.

The Strategy and Tactics document, on the other hand, was written not only at a time of revolutionary struggle but also after the disastrous 1967 joint Wanke MK-Zipra operation against Rhodesian forces in what is now Zimbabwe. The document was adopted at the 1969 Morogoro conference, a national consultative conference of the ANC held under conditions of illegality and exile and, therefore, secretly, in response to what was becoming a rebellion against the leadership by young MK guerrillas who thought that the exiled leadership of the ANC was not serious about infiltrating South Africa to liberate the oppressed. Therefore, the Strategy and Tactics document had to provide broad strategic direction and place the African masses at the centre of the strategy. In this context, Africans had to be a key motive force as well as the main beneficiaries of the revolution. Since this revolution was also about creating a society which, in terms of the content of race relations, would be the antithesis of apartheid society, it is understandable that Mbeki presented in 1996 a conception of what it meant to be African which sought to both deconstruct and reconstruct race as a construct by positing an inclusive definition of *Africanness*. This approach coincided with the reconciliation

agenda of Nelson Mandela – a man regarded by many in South Africa and the world as a saint for the time.

But it is the same Mbeki who in 1998, in response to media criticism of his characterisation of South Africa as a country of two nations, one prosperous and white, and the other black and plagued by conditions of underdevelopment, argued thus:

We have given these statistics to say that the fact of the gross racial disparities in our country is not the creation of the fertile imagination of an individual, who is driven by a desire to be nasty in order to gain political advantage. It helps nobody, except those who do not want change, to argue that the difference in income between a senior black manager and an unskilled black worker is as high as the difference in income between an equivalent senior white manager and an unskilled black worker, and therefore that, like many other countries, we are now faced with the challenge of class differentiation rather than the racial differentiation which is the heritage of white minority rule.³

Today I wonder whether during the past twenty years, there haven't been times when in its management of reconciliation and the race question, the ANC confused reconciliation with white approval.

Mbeki gave this speech a year before he became South Africa's head of state. With the benefit of hindsight, one is tempted to argue that, in this speech, and the 'two nations' speech which preceded it, Mbeki was signalling the departure from Mandela's conception of reconciliation. Mbeki's conception of reconciliation was that it would not happen unless the material conditions of those who were oppressed during apartheid changed substantially. The criticism that some have levelled against Mandela is that his

conception of reconciliation privileged the harmonisation of race relations over the imperative of a significant alteration of the material conditions of those who were victims of apartheid. The effect, others have argued, was that Mandela became a buffer zone between white fears and black aspirations. It is during this period that I argued that white people had embraced Mandela but not the race from which he came. Today I wonder whether during the past twenty years, there haven't been times when in its management of reconciliation and the race question, the ANC confused reconciliation with white approval. Is it not for this reason that there is discomfort with the race debate and rampant race denial of the fact that race matters twenty years into our democracy more than we care to admit? Is it not for the same reason that master narratives about the economy and the fact that blackness is still the main indicator of disadvantage, remain devoid of racial content – an attempt to present the illusion of a rainbow nation as the dominant reality in our post-apartheid condition?

My answer is that because whiteness is still the centre of the South African universe, very little has changed with regard to the fact that the numerical minority remains the cultural majority, whose ways of being and seeing constitute the main content of narratives about the present and the future of the state of the 'rainbow' nation. In the words of author, Zama Ndlovu, "... starting with a mandatory salutation to apartheid without mentioning colonialism allows the storyteller to spin a tale that power finds comforting."⁴ The point that Ndlovu is making here is that master narratives are a function of power. My own argument

is that master narratives, whether it is in the presence or absence of counter-narratives, are largely a function of the different forms of power that the cultural majority accumulated during colonialism and apartheid.

The race question – arguably in the same way that the ANC does not constitute the totality of what is wrong about our post-apartheid condition – will not help us understand all the deficits that have become an important feature of this post-apartheid condition. As Ndlovu puts it:

“It should be possible — mandatory — for all those who try to tell this story to find an honest balance between assessing areas where we have not progressed enough due to decisions made today, while acknowledging how deeply entrenched other problems are because of our past. These two sides are inextricable linked, and neither should be disingenuously ignored for the sake of a gripping story.”⁵

Those of us who participate in the process of creating counter-narratives must avoid the zealotry and hubris that may attach themselves to the belief that every argument we make about race is either always correct or must be an end in itself. Our counter-narratives must not be a counter-narrative of denial; they must not seek as their objective the paralysis of those who, during colonialism and apartheid, accumulated power and privilege from narrowly defined racial identities – identities that were intended to distance the other from social, intellectual, political and economic resources.

The creation of a non-racial society will definitely be within the realm of possibility if we deploy conflict between master- and counter narratives about race as a crucible that clarifies thought without eliminating difference, thereby maximising opportunities within the constraints that at present seem insurmountable.

While in the foreseeable future race will remain one of the key challenges facing South Africa, we must not allow it to become the tail that wags the dog (i.e. South African society). Part of the solution lies in re-imagining our future and in the ability to strike a healthy balance between seeing beyond race while we are tackling the ravages of its legacy. The alternative is to remain a society that is too internally divided to unite behind the vision of a non-racial society.

NOTES

- 1 Strategy and Tactics of the ANC – 1969, Marxists.org/subject/Africa/anc/1969/strategy-tactics.htm.
- 2 I am an African – Thabo Mbeki’s speech at the adoption of the Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill, anc.org.za/show.php?id=4322.
- 3 Statement of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki on the occasion of the debate on the budget vote of the Office of the Deputy President, National Assembly, June 3, 1998, unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/docs/1998/tm1998/sp980603.pdf.
- 4 The “Dangers of telling a Single Story about South Africa”, Ndlovu, Z., March 18, 2014, BDLive.co.za.
- 5 Ibid.