

THIRD AFRICAN RENAISSANCE CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL

REMARKS BY
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We stand upon the threshold of a momentous and tremendous task, and must rise to its challenge. Before the world we have proclaimed that there shall be a renaissance which redeems our continent from the social and economic plagues which have afflicted it since time immemorial. In doing so, we have launched a challenge without precedent which, if lost, will ridicule all of us in the eyes of our posterity.

Mankind's history has witnessed great moments of renaissance which, however, were appreciated and accepted as such after they had transformed the world of the time. Renaissance was recognised only in hindsight. When in the 14th century the first troubadours brought a new spirit of free-thinking throughout southern Europe, and the humanist culture broke the then suffocating paradigm of religious dogmas, no one had declared that a renaissance should take place, nor was there an awareness that such a revolution was in the making. Not even Martin Luther knew that nailing his protest - the so-called 95 theses - to the door of All Saints Church, Wittenberg, a few centuries later would usher in the Reformation and a second consequent renaissance of human spirituality.

On the African continent, we have chosen to dare, and we solemnly stated, that from this point forth we shall grow out of our chronic misery to embrace a path towards economic stability and social prosperity which no longer places our continent in the margins of world development. We have conceived a dream which places on South Africa the historical responsibility of exercising its leadership to transform the dream into reality for itself and our continent. We have given ourselves the task of titans. We must praise our President for having created the vision and promoted the inspiration which indeed make this task possible and pose the challenge to all of us to rise to such a task.

Our renaissance will only succeed if supported by an unwavering vision and principled actions which never confuse right and wrong. Our renaissance must grow out of our courage to recognise our weaknesses and to identify where we should grow and how we should develop. We must concentrate our efforts in ensuring that South Africa can fulfil the promises of the dream it has created for itself and has spread into the rest of the continent as a beneficial wildfire. We must focus our priority attention on South Africa and place South Africa first, so that South Africa can solve its problems first in such a way that it may finally become the engine of growth and development also for the rest of the continent.

We must produce a renaissance at home so that we can export it into other countries. Without having solved our problems at home first, we would be unduly optimistic in believing that we can play a successful role in helping other countries solve their problems and providing international leadership. The hard task of solving our problems first shall be the anvil on which we forge our credibility in the rest of the continent and internationally, and develop the moral standing to point out shortcomings in those countries in which, for many years, local leadership has made the population poorer and more miserable. We must be unwavering in our beliefs and dedication to the cause of freedom and democracy, Renaissance is about freeing people from tyrants and any form of tyranny to which they are subjected, and is about unleashing the potential within each of the building blocks of our society. There cannot be any renaissance without freedom, and there cannot be any freedom when government does not respect the autonomy of each of the building blocks of our society and communities.

For this reason, I remain concerned that our efforts to promote a notion of a renaissance both domestically and internationally may be undermined by our unresolved issues, such as that of traditional leadership. Traditional leadership is a cornerstone to maintaining the credibility of our pursuing our renaissance in a truly African fashion. The issue of traditional leadership has not yet been solved and has been shelved as if it were not a priority. In fact, if not promptly solved, this issue alone may undermine all the gains thus far secured by our fledgling democracy and the very notion of an African Renaissance.

My concern for future peace in this country is deepening by the day. I was quite stricken by a statement which was made recently by the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Provincial Affairs and Local Government at a public meeting of the Committee, that this issue of traditional leadership may be solved only in 40 years' time. There is a great deal that can be read from a statement of this kind from such an important office bearer of the ruling Party. There are people in this room who will still be alive in 40 years' time. But there are many of us here who will certainly no longer be amongst the people, whom we refer to in the liturgy of my church as "the quick", in 40 years' time. So the message from the Chairman of that Portfolio Committee is loud and clear that there is no intention on his part, or his Committee, to contribute anything tangible to resolving the issue of traditional leadership. For me, the flip side of that message is that we must forget about any African renaissance for there can be no African renaissance which is not structured in our indigenous African roots. Thus my concern.

I think South Africa will always bear gratitude and appreciation for the wisdom that President Mbeki has demonstrated in the leadership he has provided to our ongoing transition to democracy. He has acknowledged the tragedy and horrors of the black-on-black conflict and realised that the healing of the wounds such conflict created, required the visible and constant co-operation between the previously warring factions. My Party and his come from different policy backgrounds and we have different perspectives on many issues, and yet during the past seven years we have learned to work together as partners in the governance of the country. It has not always been easy and at times it has been mutually difficult. However, we have never detracted our focus and attention from the goal of reconciliation and prosperity which we set for ourselves and our followers.

It was particularly praiseworthy that President Mbeki invited me and my colleagues to participate in his government after the 1999 elections when the Constitution no longer made provision for a government of national unity entitling me and my Party to share in the governance of the country as a matter of right. Since then, we have come together because we believe that together we can promote the final goal which we share, which is that of achieving a total reconciliation of our people through development and prosperity. This is going to be a long-term goal, but there is no time to waste in building the broad, solid and deep-rooted foundation necessary to pursue it. Any crack in the foundations we lay now will undermine what we seek to achieve for the future. For this reason, I feel that on this occasion it is my responsibility, and part of my pledge of loyalty to the mission of reconciliation on which President Mbeki and I have jointly embarked, that I sound a warning about the need to solve the problem of traditional leadership.

We are committed to developing a truly modern and yet truly African state. We need to mix modernity with our traditions, recognising the role which each can bring to this difficult alchemy. We must embrace other traditions where our own traditions provide insufficient assistance. For instance, our architectural renaissance needs to metabolise into our context the building and design traditions of other cultures, for in our sub-Saharan continent we have nothing which compares to what has been built outside it. Similarly, we cannot look at an African tradition in many other fields of human endeavours, such as formal logic, sciences and mathematical thinking. However, there are peculiarly African features of our society which express valuable traditions which must be brought into the main core of our renaissance. As we do so, we need to ensure that the African renaissance becomes more than a large-scale exhibition of folklore, traditional cultural rituals and crafts, but is indeed a plan of development for our society.

We need to ensure that our traditions forge the way we develop and how we direct our strides towards modernity. A renaissance is about recognising that the new is better than the old and that change must bring about the betterment of our conditions. However, we must inspire the direction of change in a way which respects our essence as Africans. We shall become new Africans, but Africans nevertheless. One of the most important features of our African society is indeed traditional leadership and the system of laws and customs which place traditional leadership at the centre of a specific model of societal organisation which is our traditional communities. Our traditional communities are important building blocks of our society which must be developed and brought into modernity in accordance with their features and traditions, not against them.

For this reason, it is essential that traditional leadership becomes part of the overall formulae of development in our country, and that traditional leaders are given the opportunity to provide their necessary contribution to the development and upliftment of their communities. For this reason, I hope that this African renaissance festival will provide a renewed impetus in fulfilling the promise that the President made that the local government powers and functions of traditional authorities will be restored so as to avoid their clashing with those of the newly-established municipalities. In this fashion, traditional authorities and municipalities will be able to be partners in a new system of local government which will be completely dedicated to tangible delivery of services and development of the poorest of the poor.

Our renaissance will only succeed if we do not leave the majority of our people behind. It cannot be a trendy affectation of small and privileged communities in urban areas. It cannot be an elitist adventure pursued by a few for a few. It must be a massive movement which carries with it all our people in a shared effort to rise and develop and project themselves as the true protagonists of our future. I believe in a bottom-up vision of our renaissance in which people rise and develop in their families, work-places and communities. If we can bring renaissance into our families, work-places and communities, we can turn our society around and create a wave of renaissance which can spearhead progress and development of the whole of our society and, from there, in the whole of our region, and from there in the whole of our continent. It cannot be dictated to the mass of our people by an elite on top of the social ladder who are divorced from our cultural roots.

Let the renaissance begin from the most precious of all places which is the mind of the individual South African. Renaissance must change the heart and mind of people, freeing them from prejudice, ignorance, bigotry and fear. There is too much fear in our society. The European renaissance began when the notion became accepted that the dignity of one single individual could stand up to any value of society, for it was said and acknowledged that man, and man alone, was the measure of everything. Our renaissance must give the confidence to our people, both in urban and rural areas, to stand on their own two feet and embrace a culture of self-help and self-reliance which empowers them with the belief that they have within themselves the power to grow, develop and make tomorrow a better day than today.

The power of the renaissance begins within the individual will to better the social and economic conditions in which we happen to find ourselves. As a government, we must free this will from any artificial constraint imposed on it by fear, ignorance or bigotry and proclaim everywhere the proposition that people shall be free and people shall be responsible to contribute to their development. Freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin which is the only currency with which our communities, our country, and in the end our continent, shall be able to pay the ransom of its final renaissance.

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