



The life and times of **Thabo Mbeki**

Adrian Hadland
and
Jovial Rantao

DOCUMENTATION CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF DURBAN-WESTVILLE

Accession No.	1925/12
BRN	1830
Class No.	B/M



The African Renaissance, South Africa and the world



*Speech by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki at the United Nations University,
Tokyo, Japan, 9 April 1998*

We must assume that the Roman, Pliny the Elder, was familiar with the Latin saying, *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi!* (Something new always comes out of Africa). Writing during the first century of the present millennium, Pliny gave his fellow Romans some startlingly interesting and supposedly new information about Africans. He wrote:

Of the Ethiopians there are diverse forms and kinds of men. Some there are toward the east that have neither nose nor nostrils, but the face all full. Others that have no upper lip, they are without tongues, and they speak by signs, and they have but a little hole to take their breath at, by the which they drink with an oaten straw . . . In a part of Afrikke be people called Pteomphane, for their King they have a dog, at whose fancy they are governed . . . And the people called Anthropomphagi which we call cannibals, live with human flesh. The Cinamolgi, their heads are almost like to heads of dogs . . . Blemmyis a people so called, they have no heads, but hide their

mouth and their eyes in their breasts.

(Cited in: *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* by John Reader. Hamish Hamilton, London, 1997.)

These images must have frightened many a Roman child to scurry to bed whenever their parents said, 'The Africans are coming! The strange creatures out of Africa are coming!'

Happily, fifteen centuries later, Europe had a somewhat different view of the Africans. At the beginning of the 16th century, Leo Africanus, a Spaniard resident in Morocco, visited West Africa and wrote the following about the royal court in Timbuktu, Mali:

The rich king of Timbuktu... keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court... Here are great stores of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And hither are brought diverse manuscripts or written books out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise. (Reader, *op cit.*)

Clearly, this was not the Dog King of which Pliny had written at the beginning of the millennium, but a being as human as any other and more cultured and educated than most in the world of his day. And yet five centuries later, at the close of our millennium, we read in a book published last year:

I am an American, but a black man, a descendant of slaves brought from Africa... If things had been different, I might have been one of them (the Africans) – or might have met some... anonymous fate in one of the countless ongoing civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And so I thank God my ancestor survived that voyage (to slavery)... Talk to me about Africa and my black roots and my kinship with my African brothers and I'll throw it back into your face, and then I'll rub your nose in the images of the rotting flesh (of the victims of the genocide of the Tutsis or Rwanda)... Sorry, but I've been there. I've had an AK-47 (automatic rifle) rammed up my nose, I've talked to machete-wielding Hutu militiamen with the blood of their latest victims splattered across

their T-shirts. I've seen a cholera epidemic in Zaire, a famine in Somalia, a civil war in Liberia. I've seen cities bombed to near rubble, and other cities reduced to rubble, because their leaders let them rot and decay while they spirited away billions of dollars – yes, billions – into overseas bank accounts... Thank God my ancestor got out, because, now, I am not one of them.

(*Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* by Keith B. Richburg. Basic Books, New York, 1997.)

And this time, in the place of the Roman child, it is the American child who will not hesitate to go to bed when he or she is told, 'The Africans are coming! The barbarians are coming!'

In a few paragraphs, quoted from books that others have written, we have traversed a millennium. But the truth is that we have not travelled very far with regard to the projection of frightening images of savagery that attend the continent of Africa.

And so it may come about that some who harbour the view that as Africans we are a peculiar species of humanity pose the challenge: How dare they speak of an African Renaissance? After all, in the context of the evolution of the European peoples, when we speak of the Renaissance, we speak of advances in science and technology, voyages of discovery across the oceans, a revolution in printing and an attendant spread, development and flowering of knowledge and a blossoming of the arts. And so the question must arise about how we – who, in a millennium, only managed to advance from cannibalism to a 'blood-dimmed tide' of savages who still slaughter countless innocents with machetes, and on whom another, as black as I, has turned his back, grateful that his ancestors were slaves – how do we hope to emulate the great human achievements of the earlier Renaissance of the Europe of the 15th and 16th centuries?

One of our answers to this question is that, as Africans, we recall the fact that as the European Renaissance burst into history in the 15th and 16th centuries, there was a royal court in the African city of Timbuktu which, in the same centuries, was as learned as its European counterparts.

What this tells me is that my people are not a peculiar species of humanity! I say this here today both because it is true, but also because I know that you, the citizens of this ancient land, will understand its true

significance. And as we speak of an African Renaissance, we project into both the past and the future. I speak here of a glorious past of the emergence of *homo sapiens* on the African continent.

I speak of African works of art in South Africa that are a thousand years old. I speak of the continuum in the fine arts that encompasses the varied artistic creations of the Nubians and the Egyptians, the Benin bronzes of Nigeria and the intricate sculptures of the Makonde of Tanzania and Mozambique. I speak of the centuries-old contributions to the evolution of religious thought made by the Christians of Ethiopia and the Muslims of Nigeria.

I refer also to the architectural monuments represented by the giant sculptured stones of Aksum in Ethiopia, the Egyptian sphinxes and pyramids, the Tunisian city of Carthage, and the Zimbabwe ruins, as well as the legacy of the ancient universities of Alexandria of Egypt, Fez of Morocco and, once more, Timbuktu of Mali. When I survey all this and much more besides, I find nothing to sustain the long-held dogma of African exceptionalism, according to which the colour black becomes a symbol of fear, evil and death.

I speak of this long-held dogma because it continues still to weigh down the African mind and spirit, like the ton of lead that the African slave carries on her own shoulders, producing in her and the rest a condition which, in itself, contests any assertion that she is capable of initiative, creativity, individuality, and entrepreneurship. Its weight dictates that she will never straighten her back and thus discover that she is as tall as the slave master who carries the whip. Neither will she have the opportunity to question why the master has legal title both to the commodity she transports on her back and the labour she must make available to ensure that the burden on her shoulders translates into dollars and yen.

An essential and necessary element of the African Renaissance is that we all must take it as our task to encourage she who carries this leaden weight, to rebel, to assert the principality of her humanity – the fact that she, in the first instance, is not a beast of burden but a human and African being.

But in our own voyage of discovery, we have come to Japan and discovered that a mere 130 years ago, the Meiji Restoration occurred, which enabled your own forebears to project both into their past and their future. And as we seek to draw lessons and inspiration from what

you have done for yourselves, and integrate the Meiji Restoration into these universal things that make us dare speak of an African Renaissance, we too see an African continent which is not 'wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other unable to be born.'

But whence and whither this confidence? I would dare say that that confidence, in part, derives from a rediscovery of ourselves, from the fact that, perforce, as one who is critical of oneself, we have had to undertake a voyage of discovery into our own antecedents, our own past, as Africans. And when archeology presents daily evidence of an African primacy in the historical evolution to the emergence of the human person described in science as *homo sapiens*, how can we be but confident that we are capable of affecting Africa's rebirth?

When the world of fine arts speak to us of the creativity of the Nubians of Sudan and its decisive impact on the revered and everlasting imaginative creations of the African land of the Pharaohs – how can we be but confident that we will succeed to be the midwives of our continent's rebirth? And when we recall that African armies at Omduraman in the Sudan and Isandhlwana in South Africa out-generalled, out-soldiered and defeated the mighty armies of the mighty and arrogant British Empire in the seventies of the last century, how can we be but confident that through our efforts, Africa will regain her place among the continents of our universe?

And in the end, an entire epoch in human history, the epoch of colonialism and white foreign rule, progressed to its ultimate historical burial grounds because, from Morocco and Algeria to Guinea Bissau and Senegal, from Ghana and Nigeria to Tanzania and Kenya, from the Congo and Angola to Zimbabwe and South Africa, the Africans dared to stand up to say the new must be born, whatever the sacrifice we have to make – Africa must be free!

We are convinced that such a people has a legitimate right to expect of itself that it has the capacity to set itself free from the oppressive historical legacy of poverty, hunger, backwardness and marginalisation in the struggle to order world affairs, so that all human civilisation puts as the principal objective of its existence the humane existence of all that is human!

And again we come back to the point that we, who are our own

liberators from imperial domination, cannot but be confident that our project to ensure the restoration not of empires, but the other conditions in the 16th century described by Leo Africanus: of peace, stability, prosperity, and intellectual creativity, will and must succeed! The simple phrase 'We are our own liberators!' is the epitaph on the gravestone of every African who dared to carry the vision in his or her heart of Africa reborn.

The conviction therefore that our past tells us that the time for Africa's Renaissance has come, is fundamental to the very conceptualisation of this Renaissance and the answer to the question: Whence this confidence? Unless we are able to answer the question 'Who were we?' we will not be able to answer the question 'What shall we be?' This complex exercise, which can be stated in simple terms, links the past to the future and speaks to the interconnection between an empowering process of restoration and the consequences or the response to the acquisition of that newly restored power to create something new.

If, at this point, you asked me whether I was making a reference to the Meiji Restoration and its impact on the history and evolution of this country, my answer would be: Yes! However, I would also plead that you should not question me too closely on this matter, to avoid me exposing my ignorance.

But this I would like you to know: that in the depth of my ignorance I am moved by the conviction that this particular period in the evolution of Japan, to the point, today, when her economic problems are those of a surfeit rather than the poverty of resources, has a multiplicity of lessons for us as Africans, which we cannot afford to ignore or, worse still, not to know. And if we as students are badly informed, you have a responsibility to be our teachers. We are ready to learn and to become our own teachers as a result.

We would also like you to know that our determination to learn is exemplified by the willingness we have demonstrated to learn on our own from our experiences. I refer here, in particular, to the period since the independence of many of our countries. Among many Africans, this has been referred to as the neo-colonial period.

This constitutes an honest admission of the fact that an important feature of African independence at that stage was that the development of

these independent states was determined by the reality that the fundamental, structural relationship between the independent states and the former colonial powers did not change. As a consequence of the acquisition of independence, new state symbols had been adopted and were displayed daily. New state institutions were created. Political and other decision-making processes commenced, which represented and signified the formation of new nation-states. At last, Africans were governing themselves.

However, reality, including the purposes of the Cold War, dictated that the former colonial powers continued to hold in their hands the power to determine what would happen to the African people over whom, in terms of international and municipal law, they no longer had any jurisdiction. The mere recognition that this signified a neo-colonial relationship, rather than genuine independence, affirmed the point that the peoples of our continent had not abandoned the determination to be their own liberators!

Much of what you see reported in your own media today represented, for instance, by the exit from the African stage of a personality such as General Mobutu Sese Seko of the former Zaire, represents the death of neo-colonialism on our continent. And so we must return to the question, 'Whence the confidence that we, as Africans, can speak of an African Renaissance?'

What we have said so far is that both our ancient and modern history as well as our own practical and conscious deeds convey the same message: that genuine liberation, in the context of the modern world, is what drives the Africans of today as they seek to confront the problems which for them constitute a daily challenge.

The question must therefore arise: What is it which makes up that genuine liberation? The first of these [elements] is that we must bring to an end the practices as a result of which many throughout the world have the view that, as Africans, we are incapable of establishing and maintaining systems of good governance. Our own practical experiences tell us that military governments do not represent the system of good governance which we seek.

Accordingly, the continent has made the point clear that it is opposed to military coups and has taken practical steps, as exemplified by the

restoration to power of the elected government of Sierra Leone, to demonstrate its intent to meet this challenge when it arises. Similarly, many governments throughout the continent, including our continental organisation, the OAU, have sought to encourage the Nigerian government and people to return as speedily as possible to a democratic system of government.

Furthermore, our experience has taught us that one-party states also do not represent the correct route to take towards the objective of a stable system of governance, which serves the interests of the people. One of the principal demands in our liberation struggle, as we sought to end the system of apartheid was: 'The people shall govern!' It is this same vision which has inspired the African peoples so that, during the present decade, we have seen at least 25 countries establish multi-party democracies and hold elections so that the people can decide on governments of their choice.

The new South Africa is itself an expression and part of this African movement towards the transfer of power to the people. At the same time, we are conscious of the fact that each country has its particular characteristics to which it must respond as it establishes its democratic system of government.

Accordingly, none of us seeks to impose any supposedly standard models of democracy on any country, but we want to see systems of government in which the people are empowered to determine their destiny and to resolve any disputes among themselves by peaceful political means.

In our own country, conscious of the need to properly handle the contradictions and conflicts that might arise among different ethnic and national groups, aware also of the fact that such conflicts have been an important element of instability on the continent, we have made it a constitutional requirement to establish a Commission for the Promotion of Cultural, Language and Religious Rights.

In this context, we must also mention two initiatives which the continent as a whole has taken through the agency of the Organisation of African Unity. We refer here to the establishment of the inter-state Central Organ for the Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts which is empowered to intervene to resolve conflicts on the continent and which is currently working on the design of an instrument for peace-keeping to increase our collective capacity to intervene quickly, to ensure that we have no more Rwandas, Liberias or Somalias.

The second initiative to which we refer is the adoption of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights, which sets norms according to which we can judge both ourselves and our sister countries as to whether we are conducting ourselves in a manner consistent with the defence and promotion of human and people's rights. Like others throughout the world, we too are engaged in the struggle to give real meaning to such concepts as transparency and accountability in governance, as part of the offensive directed against corruption and the abuse of power.

What we are arguing therefore is that, in the political sphere, the African Renaissance has begun. Our history demands that we do everything in our power to defend the gains that have already been achieved, to encourage all other countries on our continent to move in the same direction, according to which the people shall govern, and to enhance the capacity of the OAU to act as an effective instrument for peace and the promotion of human and people's rights to which it is committed.

Such are the political imperatives of the African Renaissance which are inspired both by our painful history of recent decades and the recognition of the fact that none of our countries is an island which can isolate itself from the rest, and that none of us can truly succeed if the rest fail.

The second of the elements of what we have described as the genuine liberation of the peoples of Africa is, of course, an end to the tragic sight of the emaciated child who dies of hunger or is ravaged by curable diseases because their malnourished bodies do not have the strength to resist any illness.

What we have spoken of before, of the restoration of the dignity of the peoples of Africa itself, demands that we deal as decisively and as quickly as possible with the perception that as a continent we are condemned forever to depend on the merciful charity which those who are kind are ready to put into our begging bowls.

Accordingly, and again driven by our own painful experience, many on our continent have introduced new economic policies which seek to create conditions that are attractive for domestic and foreign investors, encourage the growth of the private sector, reduce the participation of the state in the ownership of the economy and, in other ways, seek to build modern economies.

Simultaneously, we are also working to overcome the disadvantages

created by small markets represented by the relatively small numbers of people in many of our nation states. Regional economic associations have therefore been formed aimed at achieving regional economic integration, which in many instances would provide the necessary condition for any significant and sustained economic growth and development to take place.

In our own region, we have the Southern African Development Community, which brings together a population of well over 100 million people. The community has already taken the decision to work towards transforming itself into a free-trade area and is currently involved in detailed discussions about such issues as the timetable for the reduction of tariffs to encourage trade among the member states and thus to take the necessary steps leading to the creation of the free-trade area to which we have referred.

We are also engaged in other initiatives aimed at the development of infrastructure throughout the region, both as an expression of development and to create the basis for further development and therefore a sustained improvement in the standard of living of the people.

As part of the determined offensive to achieve integrated and mutually beneficial regional development, we have taken other initiatives to deal with common regional problems, going beyond the directly economic. I refer here to the establishment of a regional instrument to address questions of regional security, peace and stability, including the building of regional peace-making and peacekeeping capacity. I refer also to the development of a regional system of cooperation to combat crime, including trade in narcotics and illegal firearms, as well as the evolution of common programmes and legislative frameworks to deal with such challenges as violence against women and children.

We are therefore determined to ensure that we end the situation according to which, for many years, Africa recorded the slowest rates of economic growth and, in many instances, actually experienced economic decline. Already, a significant number of countries have shown relatively high rates of growth as a direct consequence of changes in economic policy and, of course, the achievement of stability within our countries as a result of the establishment of democratic systems of government.

These economic objectives, which must result in the elimination of poverty, the establishment of modern multi-sector economies, and the

growth of Africa's share of world economic activity, are an essential part of the African Renaissance. We are certain that the movement towards their achievement will also be sustained precisely because this movement represents an indigenous impulse which derives from our knowledge of the mistakes we have made in the past and our determination to put those mistakes behind us.

I say this to emphasise the point that necessarily the African Renaissance, in all its parts, can only succeed if its aims and objectives are defined by the Africans themselves, if its programmes are designed by ourselves and if we take responsibility for the success or failure of our policies.

As South Africans, we owe our emancipation from apartheid in no small measure to the support and solidarity extended to us by all the peoples of Africa. In that sense our victory over the system of white minority domination is an African victory. This, I believe, imposes an obligation on us to use this gift of freedom, which is itself an important contribution to Africa's Renaissance, to advance the cause of the peoples of our continent.

The first thing we must do, clearly, is to succeed. We must succeed to strengthen and further entrench democracy in our country and inculcate a culture of human rights among all our people, which is indeed happening.

We must succeed to rebuild and reconstruct our economies, achieve high and sustained rates of growth, reduce unemployment, and provide a better life for the people, a path on which we have embarked.

We must succeed to meet the needs of the people so as to end poverty and improve the quality of life by ensuring access to good education, adequate health care, decent homes, clean water and modern sanitation, and so on, again a process on which we have embarked.

We must take decisive steps to challenge the spread of HIV/AIDS, of which Africa accounts for two-thirds of the world total of those infected. Our government has taken the necessary decisions directed at launching and sustaining a big campaign to confront this scourge.

We must discharge our responsibilities to ourselves, future generations and the world with regard to the protection of the environment, cooperating with all nations to meet what is, after all, a common challenge.

We must rise to the critical challenge of creating a non-racial and non-sexist society, both of which objectives are also contained within our constitution. I believe that we, who were exposed to the most pernicious racism represented by the system of apartheid, have the historic possibility and responsibility indeed to create a non-racial society, both in our own interest and as our contribution to the continuing struggle throughout the world to fight racism, which remains an unfortunate feature of many societies.

Similarly, we have a real possibility to make real advances in the struggle for the genuine and all-round emancipation of women and have, with this objective in mind, established a constitutional commission for gender equality which will help our society as a whole to measure the progress we are making to secure gender equality.

Many African peoples throughout southern Africa sacrificed their lives to help us secure our freedom. Others further afield ignored the fact of their own poverty to contribute resources to guarantee our emancipation. I am convinced that this immense contribution was made not only so that we end the apartheid crime against humanity, but also so that we build a society of which all Africa would be proud because it would address also the wrong and negative view of an Africa that is historically destined to fail.

Similarly, the peoples of Africa entertain the legitimate expectation that the new South Africa, which they helped to bring into being, will not only be an expression of the African Renaissance by the manner in which it conducts its affairs, but will also be an active participant with other Africans in the struggle for the victory of that Renaissance throughout our continent.

Necessarily therefore, we are engaged and will continue to be engaged in Africa's efforts to guarantee peace for her children, to feed and clothe them, to educate them and to bring them up as human beings as human as any other in the world, their dignity restored and their equal worth recognised and valued throughout our universe.

We would like you to join us in the noble struggle to achieve these objectives. The process of globalisation emphasises the fact that no person is an island, sufficient to himself or herself. Rather, all humanity is an interdependent whole in which none can be truly free and

free, in which none can be truly prosperous unless none elsewhere in the world goes hungry, and in which none of us can be guaranteed a good quality of life unless we act together to protect the environment.

By so saying, we are trying to convey the message that African underdevelopment must be a matter of concern to everybody else in the world, that the victory of the African Renaissance addresses not only the improvement of the conditions of life of the peoples of Africa but also the extension of the frontiers of human dignity to all humanity. Accordingly, we believe that it is important that the international community should agree that Africa constitutes the principal development challenge in the world. Having made this determination, we believe that we should then all join forces to ensure that we elaborate and implement practical programmes of action to respond to this principal development challenge.

Urgent steps are required to bring about debt relief to the many countries on our continent which suffer from an unsustainable debt burden. Measures must be taken to encourage larger inflows of capital into the continent, taking advantage of the fact of changed economic policies and improved political circumstances which have brought many of our countries into the mainstream of world developments with regard to the creation of circumstances which make for high and sustained economic growth.

The developed world has to follow more generous trade policies, which should ensure easier access of African products into their markets. Further, we still require substantial flows of well-directed development assistance. Accordingly, we believe that steps should be taken to reverse the decline in such assistance which has occurred in many countries of the developed world.

Similarly, as the process of globalisation develops apace, enhancing the need for a multilateral process of decision making affecting both governments and the non-governmental sector, it is necessary that, acting together, we ensure that Africa, like other regions of the developing world, occupies her due place within the councils of the world, including the various organs of the United Nations.

It is our hope and conviction that this important member of the world community of nations, Japan, will see itself as our partner in the practical promotion of the vision of an African Renaissance. By acting on the variety of matters we have mentioned and others besides, we trust that

Japan will continue to place herself among the front ranks of those who are driven to act not only within the context of a narrowly defined national interest, but with the generosity of spirit which recognises the fact that our own humanity is enriched by identifying ourselves especially with those who suffer.

When once more the saying is recalled, *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi!* Something new always comes out of Africa! – this must be so, because out of Africa reborn must come modern products of human economic activity, significant contributions to the world of knowledge in the arts and science and technology, new images of an Africa of peace and prosperity.

Thus shall we, together and at last, by bringing about the African Renaissance depart from a centuries-old past which sought to perpetuate the notion of an Africa condemned to remain a curiosity slowly grinding to a halt on the periphery of the world. Surely those who are the offspring of the good that sprang from the Meiji Restoration would not want to stay away from the accomplishment of so historic a human victory!

Thank you.

