

African Identity and the Resolution of the “Native Problem” in South Africa

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A few years ago, I was intrigued by my university colleague’s frantic attempts to learn French. Upon inquiry he indicated that he was going to France for two weeks. “Just for two weeks!” I exclaimed after being unable to suppress my disbelief. Yet it made sense – in France the French were not going to be at his service. This much we knew. Despite having spent all his youth and adult life in South Africa, the need for him to learn an African language had not dawned upon him.

The fact is that in a country such as South Africa, white South Africans are more likely to learn European languages than the African languages spoken by the majority of people who reside in the same country. This disregard and lack of interest in the languages of fellow compatriots is one of the defining characteristics of many white South Africans for whom blacks do not exist except to be at their beck and call. Despite occupying the same national space, they exist as if they are worlds apart - in another place and time. In this case, the French mattered – Africans did not. This remains the case for most white South Africans today.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu jokingly expressed similar sentiments when he remarked that his embrace of the master’s religion, his exposure to the best of British university education, and winning a Nobel Peace prize did not grant him rights equal to that of a useless white bum in the park. After all, to the apartheid regime he was non-white and non-European.

The labels ‘non-white’ and ‘non-European’ were deliberately meant to drive two points home: one, that being black is an aberration from the norm, which is white; and two, by the extent of this logic, blacks had to disabuse themselves of the notion of any equality with whites. Under these fraught circumstances, should we therefore be surprised that the assertion of an African identity has become a post 1994 political, cultural and social national imperative?

This assertion and the attendant cultural reclamation should be seen as a corrective step following centuries of denigration, dehumanisation and oppression. As Tim Brennan puts it so eloquently in his essay “The National Longing for Form”, anti-colonial nationalism has as its task “reclaiming community from within boundaries defined by the very power whose presence denied community.”¹

Es’kia Mphahlele captures this as follows:

I cannot help but appreciate and support the concept of Black Consciousness in South Africa. How else? We have been shut up in an enclave for three hundred years so that we never forget that we are black, so what is so startling or scary when we make it known that blackness has become our anchor, our source of strength, the reason for our survival?²

It is this experience that makes President Mbeki's bold, ambiguous and unapologetic assertion "I am an African", (echoing the words and sentiments of earlier impulses towards a black and African identity) so profound. This bold assertion of African identity is part of the healing process following centuries of denigration. Such a bold assertion is unlikely to endear us to those who had declared themselves our perpetual masters.

It can also be understood, as Frantz Fanon articulates in *The Wretched of the Earth*, as recognition of an identity that goes beyond the mere space of the nation state and evokes a continental consciousness that also resonates with African diasporic identities. To this extent, it is a response at the level of ideas to apartheid identifications. As Fanon explains: "The native intellectual who decides to give battle to colonial lies fights on the field of the whole continent. The past is given back its value.... The native intellectual who has gone beyond the domains of Western culture and who has got it into his head to proclaim the existence of another culture never does so in the name of Angola or of Dahomey. The culture which is affirmed is African culture."³

This affirmation of African cultural and political identity has led to accusations of reverse racism among white South Africans who refuse to accept change that originates from black minds. In some cases, they have staked their claims to be called African. In other cases, they have looked to Europe and America and argued that globalization has given rise to global identities and that a new nation state, other than as a mere site of citizenship, is practically dead upon arrival and doomed to failure with its African nationalist project. Afro-pessimism has prevailed on the part of many whites, who refuse to believe that blacks can lead.

There are also those who see the assertion of an African identity as a return to the past, prior to their 'civilising' of the natives. Theirs is a fear of the return of the repressed. Their fantasy is that of the mob, the black mass – the "swart gevaar" as they labelled black resistance under apartheid. Seldom do they recognize that the former colonized have long been modernized and have an array of identities more sophisticated / complex and theorized than some of them could care to imagine. Referring to this challenge Steve Biko wrote: "So immersed are [whites] in prejudice that they do not believe that blacks can formulate their thoughts without white guidance or trusteeship."⁴

While some of them may have genuine grievances and real feelings of alienation that they are being discarded in the South African reconstruction processes despite the skills they can bring, it is also understandable that Mbeki, in his role as President is easily irritated by what some may consider mild expressions of racism. If anything, tolerance of such remarks is indicative of failure by sections of the white South Africans to reciprocate the reconciliatory spirit displayed by Africans. For black people, no racial incident, racial remark or expression in behaviour is remote, isolated, mild or inconsequential. They are experienced as part of the cumulative experience of racial bigotry and injustice.

In the broad scheme of things, this assertion of an African identity is part of the process to resolve a native problem created by apartheid colonialism. To the extent that the oppressed are their own liberators, it is incumbent upon the natives to resolve this problem – a challenge of turning around a state of alienation and self-loathing and to turn their identity into a positive force. For Mphahlele, Mbeki and Malegaparu

Makgoba, the African identity project is about reclaiming the right for Africans to name themselves. It is about taking ownership of the native question. Gone are the days when Africans have to carry labels imposed on them. Prospects of non-racialism and the configuring of new identities are predicated upon the resolution of this native question. It is possible to reconfigure new identities simultaneously as we resolve this historic challenge. For those of us who have never doubted our Africanness, these debates are meaningless. They are a diversion from critical issues such as poverty, diseases, homelessness, landlessness, unemployment, illiteracy etc., all of which impact heavily on the African majority.

The sudden vociferous interest and appropriation of the African identity by whites is understandably considered to be nothing short of a deliberate obfuscation and mystification aimed at derailing Africans from dealing with white privilege and all its manifestations. Not surprisingly, the ANC and other liberation movements are unwavering in declaring that “first and foremost the struggle and challenge remain that of the liberation of blacks in general and Africans in particular. Secondly, the ANC’s own argument states that it is the struggle to create a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and united South Africa. Thirdly, it is the quest for a single united South African nation with a common overriding identity. Fourthly, it is about resolving the antagonistic contradictions between black and white. And, fifthly, it is about combating tribalism, racialism or any other form of ethnic chauvinism.”

This definition of an African or black does not include whites and the new identities that such liberation may result in cannot be based on white privilege, nor can it lead to identities that come out of negotiation or dialogue between white and black. Additionally, it does not suggest an elitist exercise of engagement between white privilege and black suffering. The commonalities in this attempt at definition, are defined through being black (read: black experience); and whites would have to fit into this reality of natives taking centre-stage at this defining phase and resolving the native question.

What then of the future?

In a profound sense, the process of identity definition and formation is linked to the inauguration of a new cultural, political and human consciousness. The construction of this identity becomes therefore an act of liberation. For Gessler Nkondo, this shift should “institute a practice that would break with the familiar, the now routine way of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things, so that the new organism become receptive to the potential forms of a non-aggressive, non-exploitative society”⁵

This involves the field of culture with expressive practice becoming “the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation.”⁶ Consistent with the above, freedom should provide us with the space to name ourselves as we see fit. Within the umbrella of ‘African’ a range of identities then becomes possible rather than a simple acceptance or adoption of one. Identity preferences range (singly or in combination) from black, male, female, Zulu, Indian, white, Christian, Muslim, heterosexual, gay, scholar, poet, writer, Marxist, capitalist, etc.

The assertion of different identities is a rejection of attempts to impose a new official identity and is an embrace of identities that are true to the individual self as they are to collective affiliations and identifications. It is about biological reality and symbolic life and the different roles people play depending on a range of factors, including location, geography, positionality in the economy.⁷ These are also identities literally in motion as one person may move from one physical space to another, from a place of birth to a place of work, from a rural to an urban terrain. Their co-existence, without one excluding the other, may lead to less separation (of selves) and to more coalescence, a greater sense of community and revealing deeper truths. A sense of the ‘coming out’ of a totality of identities even within a single individual can fulfil the desire for affirmation and serve to nurture a new homogeneous identity and armed with it, a

new set of principles (read: ethics). The resultant new South African identity would be informed by the objective realities inasmuch as it would be an identity that is being imagined or constructed.

At societal level the question arises: what is distinctive about being South African? After all, national identity can be a socialising and mobilising instrument for social, economic and political ends. If this assertion leads to real and sustained social and economic benefits for the poor and the marginalised, then it would be worth the effort. But one must guard against the assertion of national identity as an alibi for an incipient authoritarianism or to benefit only an elite yet acting supposedly in the name of the people (whom they claim to represent).

At the same time, the dangers of a narrow nationalism where politicians and the ruling party are the sole scribes of a national discourse and its political character must be pointed out. The terrain of the nation ought to be maintained as a site for improving the material circumstances of those who reside in it and abide by its rules.

When the national space is seen from the outset through an international outlook, that emphasises the solidarity between one people's struggles and another, when notions of development and underdevelopment are fully understood as not only a South African phenomenon, but a microcosm of the divisions of labour and the distribution of wealth in the world, there is greater possibility for progressive change.

When the South African people remember and can recall not only their own trials and tribulations, but those of their neighbours and the rest of the continent, only then can they develop a shared purpose and pursue a common future. Their memory should extend to liberation and post liberation efforts in other African countries. They need to learn from history and not see themselves as unique or approach the transition without the full knowledge of what has happened in the rest of Africa at their disposal. The assertion of being undeniably African is simply the start of this process.

This is the African identity that should shape and inform our domestic and foreign policies. An awareness that the objective realities are shaped by history as well as present day challenges of underdevelopment. In this way, being African – an African identity in action - becomes a space and time that is not constrained by nationhood, but suggests collective vantage points all over the African continent and even in the African Diaspora - linking cultural and social identity to political action of improving the lot of Africans, of being black in the world. It becomes as Fanon suggests, "a global responsibility":

"Far from keeping aloof from other nations, therefore, it is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. And this two-fold emerging is ultimately the source of all culture."⁸ This allows not only for solidarity, but shared suffering and collective victories. For the intellectual it means, as Edward Said has stated, that the task at hand is to universalise the crisis.⁹

The second aspect of this identity relates to commitments that a country enters with itself as it creates a different if not new society. This calls for an appreciation of how identities intersect and a celebration of cultural and ethnic diversity, while allowing the African majority the right to address the historical injustice. All these mean that African identity cannot be reified. It is dependent on change and the ongoing and varied responses of people to their material circumstances at different times.

In this changing reality, an understanding of time itself is freed from repression and oppression of the past (i.e. a mere association of one's identity with the past), and a real possibility exists of something new, which therefore constitutes a rupture. African identity in this way can cause a real break with the past (no longer trapped in the Africa of time past heralding simply past glory or the recalling of the injustices

caused by slavery, colonial plunder and colonial genocide) through allowing for multiple identities and the creative expressions thereof.

A new temporality thus can emerge and new practices, encompassing a new consciousness of what Fanon calls “a new rhythm of life” when “the present is no longer turned in upon itself but spread out for all to see.”¹⁰ It is this space that may lead to the construction of a new South African identity. It is through continental identity that the nation is looked at through greater clarity of vision. Aside from providing us with a unifying mission, this identity should enable us to create for ourselves a space that is big enough to tell our own stories.

The emergence of these narratives will initiate us into a world where nothing is deemed static, where neither nation nor people is finalised or finalisable, where the naming and shaping of the social world proceeds apace, seeking to complete the human condition through alleviating the plight of the suffering and offering more sustained solutions to the problems afflicting Africans in the world.¹¹

In this way, we return to where we began: that the debate on an African identity is fundamentally an attempt to address the native question. Asserting the very idea of African identity, the notion of an African nation in the making, might well take us beyond current constraints and political expediencies to address the human question.

Notes

1. Tim Brennan. “The National Longing for Form”. In Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation and Narration*. Routledge. London. 1990. p.58.
2. Es’kia Continued. Stainbank and Associates. Johannesburg. 2004.
3. Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books. London. 1967. p. 170.
4. Steve Biko. *I Write What I Like*. Picador Africa Publishers. Johannesburg. 2004.
5. G.M. Nkondo. *The African in South Africa in a Time of Reconstruction and Development*. (Mimeo) University of Venda, Thohoyandou. 1996.
6. Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge. 1993 p.40. Uses this expression to refer to the African diasporic people of the Black Atlantic. For drawing attention to this, I am indebted to Neil Lazarus’s study, *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1999.
7. Julia Kristeva in her essay “Women’s Time”, has some points which are useful for our purposes although her focus appears to be more on a European reality which limits its usefulness for our purposes. In her analysis of women’s identities, she speaks of the “singularity of each person”, “the multiplicity of every person’s possible identifications” and “the relativity of his/her symbolic as well as biological existence” and the responsibility that results from all these leading social and individual stakes opening the possibility for a new ethic. See, *The Kristeva Reader* edited by, Toril Moi. Columbia University Press. New York. 1986. pp. 210-211.
8. Frantz Fanon. *Op cit*. p. 187.
9. *Representations of Intellectuals: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. Pantheon Books. New York. 1994
10. Frantz Fanon. *Op cit*. p. 194.
11. Homi Bhabha in his essay “DissemiNation” sees the people as both the historical objects of a national pedagogy, as indeed they are subjects of a process of signification and he speaks of “the living principle of the people as the continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process.” In, Homi Bhabha. *Ibid*. p. 297.