

The African Renaissance: Confronting the Unspeakable

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A plague wind has been sweeping across Africa, blowing across stagnant pools of absurdity, deception and attrition. The wind tears into the new millennium. Attempts at reconciliation are cast adrift. It is with disbelief, though not unexpected, that one encounters South Africans, who having chosen the supremacist path of the pre-1994 era, and having swallowed the “race” classification pill then, are now still slaves to that deception. It seems they believe that stagnation is viable, that locking themselves inside “die huis van die dowes” is still an option. It is against the backdrop of these absurd ironies that the inspiration for an African Renaissance programme has emerged. A plan for unity, for the renewal of Africa. A plea for the re-humanisation of this traumatised continent. President Thabo Mbeki, has, like Robert Sobukwe decades before him, with urgency, repeatedly spoken of his vision for progress that embodies the concept of an African Renaissance.

In times of crisis we have a tendency to look for signs of hope. We look for the elusive light at the end of the darkening tunnel. The African Renaissance initiative is a sign, a signal that desperation point has been reached in Africa and that desperate measures are needed to salvage a better future for the continent.

Politicians, however, are not believable. The plunder of the African people bears grim testimony to the corrupt acts of so-called statesmen. My concerns are for what happens outside of the air-conditioned and ideologically-conditioned boardrooms. Men, women and children look to these torchbearers to alleviate their daily struggles for basic survival.

When the signposts are down, when the map of the neighbourhood is a confused blur, when deep feelings of hurt rise to the surface, desperate questions become deafening.

Does the African Renaissance include within its scope, the politics of feeling, of morality, of compassion? Is the African Renaissance going to dig out the land mines in Angola? Does the African Renaissance have the heart to embrace the human debris all over the continent, to look into the eyes of the betrayed children of Africa – those orphans in Sierra Leone or Liberia or Angola who have had their limbs hacked or blown off? Is the African Renaissance going to make a real difference to the lives of ordinary people? In the theatre of cruelty that is Africa, will the African Renaissance take the hand of that solitary figure, the abandoned mother who has lost her family to blind bullets in the Congo?

A truly humane movement is needed. Not just a cultural song and dance. A truly African Renaissance cannot set about healing the wounded while at the same time allowing enclaves of privileged opportunists to indulge in their tyranny of shameless self – enrichment. Can there be a Renaissance after Rwanda?

If the answer is a unanimous “Yes!” then the African Renaissance has to be defined by an enlightened vision, one that is counter hegemonic, that is compassionate. The mistakes of the past need to be supplanted by more authentic actions. There can be no masquerading. It cannot flaunt itself among the graves, the skulls and the betrayed children of Africa. In searching for alternatives, I am reminded of Joseph Beuys who propounded the concept of “everyone is an artist” in which he

emphasises the responsibility we all have to work with a creative social consciousness. Beuys's concept is an antidote to hopelessness. We cannot limit ourselves to an unimaginative mentality. Beuys reminds us of our innate creativity and urges us to use our intuitive and imaginative faculties for the awakening of social consciousness. Acting with appropriate responsibility, with integrity, we can ignite the spark of sustained creative engagement. In a time of crisis there is a greater need for the activation of the humane in the midst of so much subterfuge.

If our African Renaissance is about culture at all, then that culture has to take into account accumulated layers of fear, anger, and guilt. It has to provide tangible recognition that Africa's voiceless have suffered enough! Authentic transformation of the cultural terrain demands the growth of a transformed collective consciousness focussed on restoring a more compassionate humanity to end the suffering.

People have to deal with imported plagues, the ravages of conflict, trauma, pain, deception and betrayal and yet Africa has to breathe new life into itself. New forms of communication, respect and cooperation need to evolve across the limitations of national borders to enable the establishment of communities free of fear and repression. The people have to rise with newfound unity to be able to withstand the onslaught of First World marketeering. Africa must move from vulnerability to strength. Africa demands an authentic Renaissance that is committed to serving the desperate needs of the African peoples.