

*Dark side of the rainbow:
the impact of HIV/AIDS on
the African renaissance*

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The African renaissance is upon us. As we peer through the looking glass darkly, this may not be obvious. But it is upon us...There exists within our continent a generation which has been victim to all the things which created this negative past. This generation remains African and carries with it a historic pride which compels it to seek a place for Africans equal to all the other peoples of our common universe...It is this generation whose sense of rage guarantees Africa's advance towards its renaissance.ⁱ

These are the words of the foremost visionary of the 21st century African renaissance. Thabo Mbeki envisages a veritable rebirth and revival to envelop the perennially ravaged continent. Drawing inspiration from the acclaimed European renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – a historical event of immense importance as it subsequently propelled the nations of Europe to the pinnacle of world dominion – Mbeki encourages the present generation to implement their ‘historic pride’ and ‘rage’ and enforce a revival of Africa’s global standing.

Like Europe was able to re-emerge from such cataclysmic events as the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) and the Black Plague (1347-1351), Mbeki is convinced that Africa is likewise about to shake off the restraints of apartheid, underdevelopment and poverty. Yet where the European renaissance was able to be conceived from the wealth created by the burgeoning commerce of the Italian city states in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (where wealth abounded, arts and culture was consequently able to thrive), the African renaissance seems from the outset to suffer from the fundamental handicap of Africa’s dearth of wealth and development.

With this seemingly crippling defect in mind, the fledgling African renaissance is differentiated from the European renaissance model. Nevertheless, Thabo Mbeki outlined his vision for the African variant of renaissance as follows: "(Africa) must resist all tyranny, oppose all attempts to deny liberty to resort to demagoguery, repulse the temptation to describe African life as the ability to live on charity, engage the fight to secure the emancipation of the African woman, and reassert the fundamental concept that we are our own liberators from oppression, from underdevelopment and poverty, from the perpetuation of an experience from slavery, to colonisation, to apartheid, to dependence on alms."ⁱⁱ Yet Africa remains poor, and for as long as Africa's economic well-being will be subservient to the whim of Western countries, Africa's trumped-up renaissance will remain a distant dream.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is exactly where the feasibility of Thabo Mbeki's African renaissance seems to flounder, or at least the feasibility of an African renaissance in the near future. Mbeki has described the economic regeneration of Africa as a fundamental key to the success of the African renaissance and maintains that many African countries have embarked on a process of economic reform so as to attract foreign investment.^{iv} Yet as former president Nelson Mandela reflected on the history of the African continent: "In the end, we were held out as the outstanding example of the beneficiaries of charity, because we became the permanent victims of famine, of destructive conflicts and of pestilences of the natural world."^v

Sadly, up until now this crude archetype has not been vastly altered (and the prospects for Africa's renaissance have thus not improved). In fact, the supposed renaissance has faltered at the hands of Africa's

critical wealth inhibitors, and has thus failed to materialize in force. HIV/AIDS is a significant inhibitor of the African renaissance, for this simple reason that it inhibits a country's road to wealth. Without wealth and prosperity Africa will not be able to foster an environment favourable to cultural, social and economic revival, and the African renaissance will remain a tantalising myth.^{vi} If the African renaissance should appear as a rainbow after the storm that lasted for centuries in Africa, it will be a rainbow that includes a distinct dark colouring: the stark shade of HIV/AIDS in Africa.

The European renaissance was in the first instance a rebirth and rediscovery of the celebrated Classical period. The renaissance was initiated with the belief that Europe of the fifteenth century resumed the civilization of the Greco-Romans (after the long interruption of the Middle Ages).^{vii} In the wake of this rebirth Europe was saturated with a surge of confidence; humanity was seen to be capable of anything as the splendours of classical literature, sculpture, and architecture provided ample inspiration.^{viii} How does this historical precedent bode for the African renaissance? In order to fuel a modern African revival former president Mandela has been eager to elevate events in Africa's past to monumental inspirations for the present: "...all human civilisation rests on foundations such as the ruins of the African city of Carthage. Its architectural remains, like the pyramids of Egypt, the sculptures of the ancient kingdom of Ghana and Mali and Benin, like the temples of Ethiopia, the Zimbabwe ruins and the rock paintings of the Kgaladi of the Namib desert; all speak of Africa's contribution to the foundation of civilisation."^{ix}

Proponents of the African renaissance attempt to portray Africa's position in civilisation as the 'cradle of mankind,' and point to Africa's pre-colonial history as inspiration for a post-colonial, post-apartheid

revived African continent.^x Yet the African renaissance will first and foremost be a practical matter firmly rooted in the realities of the present global environment. What is more important than the inspirations of the past are the ways in which the advantages of Africa's traditions can be integrated into a coherent, contemporary strategy and also how the derailments of the distant and recent past can be avoided. Hence Thabo Mbeki's call for good governance and stable democracies (and thus consequent foreign investment) in Africa.^{xi}

By definition, 'renaissance' refers to positive transformations in all spheres of Africa's existence: cultural, economic, social, and political – as indeed the European renaissance was characterised by a distinct revival in all of these fields. Yet with the African population still mired in poverty and under-development, the African renaissance will inevitably be forced to bear a marked economic focus.^{xii} Significantly, as the African renaissance will not be able to escape the straightjacket of an economic focal point, it will also not be able to escape the fetters of HIV/AIDS and the dearth of wealth engendered by the epidemic. This is indeed the catch-22 predicament that seems to nip the African renaissance in the bud at its very outset.

Thus to promote the African renaissance only as a triumphant harking back to the glory of pre-colonial Africa is naïve. A voyage of cultural discovery may serve to bolster African pride and the African image in the global context but will not uplift the hitherto beleaguered continent from hunger and poverty.^{xiii} The goal that the African renaissance should seek to achieve is the development and prosperity of Africa as a geo-economic space, with the challenge of launching the African continent into an able and contributing partner in the modern world. One way of achieving such a feat would be to remodel Africa's

economic output from mainly producing raw materials to exporting manufactured goods. Such a process, however, would entail a complete restructuring of Africa's political economies, and could thus not be engineered overnight.^{xiv}

An African renaissance will only materialise if it is founded on domestic renewal that reflects a broad public-private partnership, driven by limited state participation and incorporating a large-scale mobilisation of African society – facilitated by the supposed 'sense of rage' mentioned by Thabo Mbeki.^{xv} Yet any domestic revival will only be effected in the context of Africa's improved standing in the global environment. Counting in Africa's favour is the fact that it is one of two new targets (the other being China) of the attention of global companies engaged in resource extraction, both oil and gas mining.^{xvi} However, hanging like a sceptre over Africa's economic potential is the scourge of HIV/AIDS. Recent estimates predicted grimly that if the epidemic should continue at its present rate, within four generations the economy of South Africa would be fully halved.^{xvii}

Moreover, the economic indicators regarding Africa's human development statistics provide a picture very similar to the state in which Africa was thirty years ago. The state of disarray in which many African countries find themselves severely limits their ability to regroup and mobilise their resources in an effective way. At the beginning of the 1990s it was observed that 45 percent of the sub-Saharan population was income poor. In sample countries like Zambia and Gambia approximately two-thirds of the entire population was income poor; in Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau and Uganda it was more than half; and in Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya and Nigeria more than a third. If the African renaissance is to become a meaningful process in Africa it needs to promote the dignity of Africa's people by allowing them to

participate effectively in the economy. Yet the disarray created by endemic conflicts and political instability inevitably weaken the prospects for this to occur. The African renaissance will only succeed if wealth is created in Africa in a stable, productive environment, and this in turn cannot be realised without the collective action of all countries on the African continent.^{xviii}

If the projected impact of HIV/AIDS on the South African economy is anything to go by, the prospects for the advent of an African renaissance are not promising. The epidemic is expected to lead to stagnation in population growth in South Africa. Infection rates are expected to peak at almost 17 percent for the entire population and 26 percent for the economically active population in 2006. That means that South Africa's workforce will be disproportionately affected by the epidemic. While the full force of the epidemic will be felt most acutely among the semi-skilled or unskilled segment of the workforce, the skilled and highly skilled sectors are also expected to bear the brunt of the epidemic, with infection rates peaking at 20 percent and 10 percent respectively. The epidemic will thus aggravate the existing skills shortage within South Africa.^{xix}

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is also expected to negatively impact on economic growth in South Africa. Researchers estimate that the average annual trend rate throughout the first decade of the 21st century is likely to be 0.3-0.4 percentage points below the rate in a no-AIDS scenario. The costs of the epidemic will also certainly deplete household, corporate and government savings. Moreover, a heightened international perception of country risk associated with HIV/AIDS will adversely affect the influx of foreign investment. In this regard foreign loans would have to compensate for the dearth of foreign investment, but loans would in turn lead to foreign debt. The

lack of foreign savings would ensure that the savings-investment imbalance forces interest rates higher, further deterring economic growth and slowing the creation of wealth.^{xx}

Nevertheless, as a fervent proclamation of the African renaissance, Thabo Mbeki exclaimed in 1998:

This thing that we have done today, in this small corner of a great continent that has contributed so decisively to the evolution of humanity, says that Africa reaffirms that she is continuing her rise from the ashes. Whatever the setbacks of the moment, nothing can stop us now! Whatever the difficulties, Africa shall be at peace! However improbable it may sound to the sceptics, Africa will prosper!^{xxi}

While Thabo Mbeki might be convinced that he is about to witness the advent of a renascent rainbow over Africa, the realities facing the perennially struggling continent are simply too overbearing to gloss over. Without wealth and development there will be no meaningful change in Africa, and the stated goal of the African renaissance is to uplift Africans from the dismal malaise of poverty and underdevelopment. Indeed, it would be meaningless for the African renaissance to manifest itself simply as a cultural revolution without uplifting Africans from their hitherto unenviable economic plight. Despite enlisting the cultural splendours of Africa's past Africa remains poor. Moreover, Africa remains beset with HIV/AIDS. Thabo Mbeki might not be wrong to believe that Africa will experience substantial revival, but it will in all probability not appear in his lifetime. The rainbow that is currently envisaged for Africa under the aegis of the African renaissance cannot escape a certain grim colouring. There can and

will be no African renaissance while the degeneration engendered by HIV/AIDS is prevalent in Africa.

Endnotes

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- ⁱⁱ T Mbeki, The Deputy President's address to the Corporate Council Summit – 'Attracting capital to Africa,' Chantilly, Virginia, USA, April 1997, in Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Occasional Papers: *The African Renaissance*, May 1998, p. 10.
- ⁱⁱⁱ B Magubane, 'The African renaissance in historical perspective,' in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 36.
- ^{iv} P Botha, 'The challenges of an African renaissance in the 21st century,' in *Problematising the African renaissance*, edited by E Maloka and E le Roux, Africa Institute Research Paper No. 2, Pretoria, 2000, p. 17.
- ^v Quoted in B Magubane, 'The African renaissance in historical perspective,' in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 11.
- ^{vi} S Seepe, 'How Mbeki is hampering the renaissance,' *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, June 9 2000.
- ^{vii} B Magubane, 'The African renaissance in historical perspective,' in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, pp. 11-12.
- ^{viii} A van Niekerk, 'The African renaissance: lessons from a predecessor,' *Critical Arts Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 2, 1999.
- ^{ix} B Magubane, 'The African renaissance in historical perspective,' in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 11.
- ^x S Gueye, 'African renaissance as an historical challenge,' in *The African renaissance in historical perspective*, in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 245.
- ^{xi} A van Niekerk, 'The African renaissance: lessons from a predecessor,' *Critical Arts Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 2, 1999.
- ^{xii} S Gueye, 'African renaissance as an historical challenge,' in *The African renaissance in historical perspective*, in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 243.
- ^{xiii} S Cleary, 'African renaissance: challenges for South Africa,' Southern African-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry: 25 November 1997, in Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Occasional Papers: *The African Renaissance*, May 1998, p. 22.
- ^{xiv} R Khoza, 'The institutional structures that should underpin the African renaissance,' in *African renaissance. The new struggle*, edited by M Makgoba, Cape Town, 1999, p. 280; A van Niekerk, 'The African renaissance: lessons from a predecessor,' *Critical Arts Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 2, 1999; P Botha, 'The challenges of an African renaissance in the 21st century,' in *Problematising the African renaissance*, edited by E Maloka and E le Roux, Africa Institute Research Paper No. 2, Pretoria, 2000, p. 37.
- ^{xv} F Kornegay and C Landsberg, 'Can South Africa lead an African renaissance?,' in Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Occasional Papers: *The African Renaissance*, May 1998, p. 30.
- ^{xvi} S Cleary, 'African renaissance: challenges for South Africa,' Southern African-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry: 25 November 1997, in Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Occasional Papers: *The African Renaissance*, May 1998, p. 22.
- ^{xvii} 'State of the global epidemic: Africa, centre of the epidemic,' United Press International, September 10, 2003, Distributed on the af-aids regional forum on HIV/AIDS in Africa.
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^{xix} K Quattek, 'The impact of AIDS in South Africa: a dark cloud on the horizon,' in Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Occasional Papers: *The African Renaissance*, May 1998, pp. 50-51.

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