

## PANEL DISCUSSION

### 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 stench is hurled into the new millennium. It is with disbelief, though not unexpected, that one encounters, daily, 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 from within these frontiers of ironic absurdity, that the inspiration for an African Renaissance programme has emerged. A plan for the renewal of Africa. A plea for the re-humanisation of this traumatised continent. President Thabo Mbeki, may not be the first, but he has repeatedly spoken of his vision that embodies the concept of an African Renaissance.

During times of a 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 is a sign, a signal that desperation point has been reached in Africa and that desperate measures are needed in Africa 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

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ideologically – conditioned boardrooms. Men, women and children look to these torchbearers to alleviate their daily struggles for basic survival.

When the signposts are done, when the map of the neighbourhood is 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? Does the African Renaissance have the stomach 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 off 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 the African Renaissance has to take the hand of that solitary mother who has lost her family to blind bullets in the Congo.

A truly humane movement is needed urgently. Not just a cultural song and dance to drown out the screams of the betrayed of Africa. Can there be a Renaissance after Rwanda?

If the deafening, unanimous answer is "Yes!" then the African Renaissance has to be defined by enlightened vision, one that is filled with compassion. The mistakes of the past need to be supplanted by more authentic actions. An African Renaissance needs to take serious steps beyond Hollywood-style stereotypes. There can be no masquerading. It cannot flaunt itself amongst the graves, the skulls and the betrayed children of Africa. I am reminded of Joseph Beuys who propounded the concepts of "everyone is an artist" in which he emphasises the responsibility we all have to work with a creative social

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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 for us to use the intuitive and imaginative faculties for the awakening of social consciousness. The artist, acting with appropriate responsibility, can ignite the spark of creative engagement. In a time of crisis there is a greater need for the revelation 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 the fear, the anger, and the guilt. It has to provide tangible recognition that Africa's voiceless have suffered enough! Authentic transformation of the cultural terrain suggests the growth of a transformed collective psyche focussed on restoring a more compassionate humanity to end the suffering.

In the face of imported plagues arriving on the back of suspect politics and contrived commercialism, Africa has to breathe new life into itself. Africa has to rise with newfound strength to be able to withstand the onslaught of First World marketeering. The people have to deal with the traumas, the pain, the rages of meaningless conflicts, the deceptions, and the betrayals. Africa has to move from vulnerability to strength. Africa has to demand Renaissance that sets out to serve the desperate needs of the African peoples.

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