

PANEL DISCUSSION

ABSENCES AND VISIONS: QUESTIONS REGARDING THE RHETORIC OF THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

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The burning need to inject a new sense of purpose in South Africa and its people by arguing for the idea of an African Renaissance - first mooted by President Thabo Mbeki in 1996 - is beyond question. Promising a redress of past imbalances, and celebrating the history of Africa and its cultural and other achievements, President Mbeki's African Renaissance evokes comparison with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and other Africanist movements that have sought, rightly, to foster a sense of pride in the face of repeated attempts to undermine and denigrate Africa and its people.

Unfortunately, though, there are many gaps between the rhetoric of the African Renaissance and the realities facing South Africa's people. Indeed, while the rhetoric of this re-birth of the continent often evokes the values and traditions of rural communities, it tends in fact to serve the interests of educated and comparatively wealthy urban communities engaged in a nostalgic search for roots. In the event, while those stuck in the rural periphery of South Africa are held up as an example for all to admire, they seldom if ever benefit from the ideas contained in, and celebrated by the African Renaissance. If anything, these communities actually continue to suffer much the same sense of exclusion they were forced to endure in the apartheid era. To cite one example: while the

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African Renaissance promises to honour indigenous practices, including the practice of speaking African languages, it is nothing short of ironic that the transcriptions for a meeting of traditional leaders, called by South Africa's parliament in the mid-1990s, broke off every time someone spoke in an African language, thereby rendering the speakers mute and process of recording this event entirely meaningless.

This is certainly not to suggest that the rhetoric of the African Renaissance is always or necessarily empty. On the contrary, it is a remarkable tribute to the Mbeki government that it has embraced the idea of, for example, validating the contribution traditional healers make to maintaining the health of South Africa's people. It is against this background that the Medicines Control Council recently decided to commission a study by TRAMED, the University of Cape Town's Traditional Medicines Programme. There can also be little doubt that it is due in part to the rhetoric of the African Renaissance that there has been an increasing realization, in the country's universities and elsewhere, that these and other Africa's knowledge systems remain largely untapped.

Ultimately, though, there is little chance of achieving the complex pan-African vision of the African Renaissance. For, while the idea of developing a pan-African community of like-minded people who will strive to develop Africa and its people both culturally and economically is undoubtedly laudable, there is virtually no hope that the African Renaissance will ever make it beyond the borders of South Africa as long as it costs twice as much to fly to Tanzania and Uganda, as it does to fly to London. Culturally and otherwise, therefore, we remain locked into a world that in many ways

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continues to deny the remarkable creativity and other achievements of our country and our continent.

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