

Steve Biko's Memorial Lecture by: Ngugi wa Thiong'o

The Fourth Steve Biko Annual Lecture given by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of California Irvine, at University of Cape Town, South Africa, 12th September 2003.

Consciousness and African Renaissance: South Africa in the Black Imagination 1 2

When Vasco da Gama set foot at the Cape in 1498, it was part of the general period of what has come to be known as the European renaissance, the founding moment of Capitalist modernity and Western bourgeois ascendancy in the world. It was also the beginnings of the wanton destruction of many city civilisations along the coasts of Africa, East Africa in particular. In 1994 Nelson Mandela as the first black president of the Republic of South Africa at a meeting of the OAU in Tunis recalls the destruction of Carthage by the generals of an earlier empire and says: "where South Africa appears on the agenda again, let it be because we want to discuss what its contribution shall be to the making of the new African renaissance. Let it be because we want to discuss what materials it will supply for the rebuilding of the African city of Carthage." ³ In a way South Africa has already supplied such material by wan of men and women whose life and actions and thought have made South Africa an integral part of the Black self-imagination. Steve Biko, whom we have come to honour, is among this great gallery whose work and devotion have impacted those beyond the native shores and make it possible for us to even talk about the possibilities of a new Africa out of colonial ashes of the latter day empires.

I therefore feel honoured, humbled in fact, to have been asked to give the Fourth Annual Biko lecture in memory of this illustrious son of the soil. He combines the cultural, the intellectual and the political in the same person. He exemplifies the public intellectual in its finest tradition. In one of his interviews reproduced in *I Write as I Like*, Biko describes a confrontation with his jailers in which he asserts his right to resistance for as long as he is able.

"If you guys want to do this your way, he tells his jailers, you have got to handcuff me and bind me feet together, so that I can't respond. If you allow me to respond, I'm certainly going to respond. And I'm afraid you may have to kill me in the process even if it's not your intention".

¹ Fourth Annual Steve Biko Lecture

² I am indebted to the work of Dr Ntongela Masilela and the discussions I have had with him over the intellectual tradition in South Africa. I have also benefited from intense discussions with Dr Eunice Njeri Sahle. Others with whom I have had talks about this paper include Dr Colette Atkinsoe and Dr Peter Atkinsoe. I am also grateful to my assistant Barbara Caldwell for unearthing books and journals.

³ <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mandela/1994/sp...>

The words spoken in 1976 a few months before his brutal murder, are evocative of others spoken earlier in 1964 by Mandela from the dock at the Rivonia trial where, in expressing his ideal of a democratic and free society, he reaffirms his commitment to live for and to achieve the ideal. *'But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.'* One eventually went to prison for twenty-seven years, the other died in prison, a prophetic fulfilment of his words: *'It is better to die for an idea that lives, than to live for an idea that dies'*.

In both cases, their words and lives add to the rich intellectual legacy of African heroes and heroines of Pan-African struggles, a legacy summed up in Robert Sobukwe's words: "It is meet that we tell the truth before we die: One associates Soboukwe and Biko with consciousness, Mandela with the Renaissance. But it is significant for me that the three lives, while inextricably linked to Black and social imagination everywhere, are South African and the concepts of consciousness and renaissance have found new life in South Africa today.

As a Kenyan, an African, and a writer, South Africa holds a special place in my social experience and intellectual formation. It was as an educational presence that I first became aware of this country. I had just started primary schooling when it was announced that one of our teachers, moreover from my village, was leaving us. He was going to Fort Hare for more learning. The image of Fort Hare as a Mecca of learning was reinforced when later yet another from the same region, this time a minister of religion, followed suit.

However, it was while I was a student in an independent African school that I first became aware of the South African story as also my story. The independent African-run schools in Kenya were started in the thirties of the twentieth century and their coming into being had been inspired by the Ethiopian movement in South, Central and East Africa. But it was the way our teacher taught the South African story, from the perspective of the Black experience, that brought it home to us and the names of Shaka, Moshoeshe, Cethswayo became part of our collective memory. When the Mau Mau war for Kenya's independence started in 1952, the colonial administration reacted by closing down these schools or taking them over, and this time the story of South Africa became that of Vasco da Gama, Kruger the Great Trek, and of course, General Smuts.

Fortunately, the other image of the South African story as my story never disappeared. In fact it was rekindled with greater intensity when later in high school, a missionary-run school, I one day saw one of the only two African teachers in the school holding a copy of Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom*. It is difficult to quite describe the impact of the title on my imagination, encountering it, as I did, when Kenya was in the midst of the War of Independence. The title was to lead me to the works of Abrahams and to the great gallery of South African writers, some of whom I was later to interact with as fellow writers and friends.

I cannot forget the impact of Mphahlele on African writing in general and on Kenyans in particular. His Chemchemi Cultural Centre in Nairobi in the early years of our independence became truly a spring for young Kenyan talent. His struggles for the African image as that of an assertive sovereign subject, acting on his environment, resonated with me, growing up, as I did, in the shadow of the colonial white image of the African as an object without agency, always acted upon.

By exploring the human interiority, these writers, artists and musicians told the human dimension of what was being enacted in the open theatre of organised politics which had also produced heroes and heroines who became expressions of our own struggles. I cannot think of another country which has produced so many names in so many walks of life which have become part of the African experience, using the term African in its pregnant inclusiveness, as used in Thabo Mbeki's 1996 address to the constitutional assembly: I am an African.⁴

Not surprisingly, South African is always on my mind. At the Unicef Conference on the situation of children in Southern Africa held in Harare in March 1988, I opened my talk on the role of intellectual workers⁵ with the assertion that the liberation of South Africa was the key to the social liberation of the continent.

Later in April 1990, in an article celebrating the release of Nelson Mandela⁶, I came back to the same theme, the place of South Africa in the Black self imagination, and claimed that South Africa was a mirror of the emergence of the modern world. I was not saying anything new. No less a figure than Adam Smith of *The Wealth of Nations*⁷ fame was to cite the discovery of America and that of a passage to the East Indies via the Cape of Good Hope, as the two of the greatest and most important events recorded in human history, a claim repeated in the nineteenth century by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, where they argue that the consequences of the twin events gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known, and therefore, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.⁸

Adam Smith was to wonder about the benefits or misfortunes that could follow those events, but we, having lived through the consequences of those events, know that the benefits went largely to Europe and America, or colonising nations, and the misfortunes

⁴ Thabo Mbeki, 'I am an African', the Deputy President's statement on behalf of the ANC, at the adoption of South Africa's 1996 Constitution Bill, Cape Town, May 1996.

⁵ Now reproduced in my book, *Moving the Centre*, (1995) under the title, 'Resistance to Damnation'.

⁶ See 'Many Years' Walk to Freedom: Welcome Home Mandela', in *Moving the Centre*.

⁷ For Smith's core arguments see his seminal work, Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991.

⁸ Paul le Blanc, *From Marx to Gramsci*, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1996, pp. 128-129.

to Africa, or colonised peoples. Where Smith wondered about the possible benefits and misfortunes, Marx and Engels were clear that arising from the dialectically linked benefits and misfortunes of capitalist modernity was the creation of the world that reflected the West. In making all nations on pain of extinction to partake of that modernity, 'it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst ... In one word, it creates a world after its own image.'⁹ The creation of a world after the image of the western bourgeoisie was not without resistance as seen in class and national struggles everywhere.

Because of its historical constitution, South Africa was to embody more intensely than most the consequences of the benefits (to a white minority linked to Europe) and the misfortunes, to the majority linked to the rest of Africa and Asia, with the minority trying to create a South Africa after its own image which it also saw as representative of what it called Western civilisation. But South Africa was also to embody the resistance against the negative consequences of that modernity, and in its history we see the clashes and interactions of race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and the social forces that bedevil the world today.

Thus South Africa as the site of concentration of both domination and resistance was to mirror the world wide struggles between capital and labour and between the colonising and the colonised. For Africa, let's face it, South African history, from Vasco da Gama's landing at the Cape in 1498 to its liberation in 1994, frames all modern social struggles, certainly black struggles. If the struggle, often fought out with swords, between racialised capital and racialised labour was about wealth and power, it was also a battle over image often fought out with words, and when Biko asserts the right to write as I like, he is asserting the right to draw the image of himself, unfettered, a position reflective of Robert Sobukwe. Images are very important. You have seen how we all like looking at ourselves in the mirror. We all like to have our photos taken. In many African societies the shadow is thought to carry the soul of a person. But here we are talking about the image of the world as a physical, economic, political, moral and intellectual universe of our being. This image resides in the memory. So also are dreams. So also our concept of life.

Colonialism tried to control the memory of the colonised, or rather, to borrow from the Caribbean thinker, Sylvia Wynter, it tried to subject the colonised to its memory, to make the colonised see themselves through the hegemonic memory of the colonising centre. Put another way, the colonising presence tried to mutilate the memory of the colonised and where that failed, it dismembered it, and then tried to re-member it to the coloniser's memory: his way of defining the world, including his take on the nature of the relations between the coloniser and the colonised

This relation was primarily economic for nobody colonises another for the aesthetic joy of simply doing it. The colonised as worker, as peasant, produces for another. His land

⁹ Ibid. p.131

and his labour benefit another. This is of course effected through power, political power, but it is also accomplished through cultural subjugation, the control of the entire education system for instance, the ultimate goal being to establish psychic dominance on the part of the coloniser and psychic submission on the colonised. Economic and political subjugation are obvious for you cannot convince a person who has lost his land to forget the loss; the person who goes hungry, to forget his hunger, and the person who bears the whiplashes of an unjust system, to forget the pain. But cultural subjugation is more dangerous, because it is more subtle and its effects, long lasting. Moreover, it can make a person who has lost his land, who feels the pangs of hunger, who carries flagellated flesh, to look at those experiences differently. For instance, from the standpoint of pessimism, oh there is nothing I can do about this, failing to see in his history any positive lessons in his dealings with the present. He or she has been drained of historical memory of a different world. The prophet who once warned, fear not those who kill the body, but those who kill the spirit, was right on the mark, and Steve Biko, with his black consciousness was working within the prophetic warning.

Consciousness distinguishes humans from the rest of nature. In humans, death is marked by the end of consciousness. In that sense all humans to the extent that they are human, have a consciousness. But in a situation of the coloniser and the colonised, the question of consciousness is vital, in fact it becomes a site of intense struggle. Let me fall back on Hegel. In his books, particularly in the Phenomenology of the Spirit and the Science of Logic, Hegel distinguishes Being-in-itself, (not the Kantian unknowable thing-in-itself) and Being-for-itself. Being-in-itself is mere existence. Being-for-itself is being aware not only of its existence but existence for a purpose, an ethical purpose, the distinction between the saying I live to eat and I eat to live. But in a situation of the master and the slave, *the for-itself* can be appropriated by another, to become the *for-another*. Marx was to apply the same notion for classes and class struggle, distinguishing between a class-in-itself, and a class-for-itself, when it becomes aware of itself as a class with its own class interests and identity. The struggle of classes takes the form of the dominant trying to turn the dominated class not into a class for itself, but a class for the interests of another, the dominating. In race politics, the same can apply when the self-consciousness of a race is appropriated by another to serve the interests of a dominant race. Racism was a conscious class ideology of imperialism, and colonialism and colonial relations, even when clearly economic and political, often came wrapped in race. The problem of the twentieth century, said Du Bois, was that of the colour line, 'the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in American and the islands of the sea'. The more class conscious CLR James was to add that while the race question was subsidiary to the class question in politics and that to think of imperialism in terms of race was disastrous, 'but to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental, is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental'. Within the overall context of economic and political domination, race could and was and is often used as a means of diminishing the self-evaluation of the dominated. In that context, racial self-assertion was a necessary first step in the reclamation of a positive self-awareness. A person without a consciousness of his Being in the World, to use the Heideggardian phrase, is lost and can easily be guided by another to wherever the guide wants to take him, even to his own extinction.

Black consciousness then becomes the right of black peoples to draw an image of themselves that negates and transcends the image of themselves that was drawn by those who would weaken them in their fight for an assertion of their humanity. Or in the Sobukwe era, formulation to fight for the right to call our souls our own. It seeks to draw the image of a possible world, different and transcending the one drawn by the West by reconnecting itself to a different historical memory and dreams, and that is why in a preface to the 1996 edition of Biko's book, *I Write as I Like*, Bishop Tutu makes a tantalising connection between consciousness and renaissance. "It is good that there is this new edition to enable us to savour the inspired words of Steve Biko – perhaps it could just spark a black renaissance." Here Tutu intimates that positive self-consciousness can open new vistas and extensions of our being, but consciousness resides in memory. Even at the very simple level of our daily experience we get excited when we visit say, the place we were born, and recall the various landmarks of our childhood. Sometimes we feel a sense of loss when we find that the place no longer holds any traces of what the place once meant to us. Memory is also the site of dreams, desire. And when we say that a person has lost his or her memory, we are talking of a real loss of those traces that make individuals make sense of what is happening to them. Imprisonment and torture alters or breaks memory.

If the site of dreams, desire, image, consciousness, is memory, where is the location of memory itself? What is the site of memory? Memory lies in language. In incorporating the colonial world into the international capitalist order and relations with itself as the centre of that order and relations, the imperialist West also went about subjecting the rest of the world to its memory through a vast naming system. It planted its memory on our landscape by renaming it. Egoli or whatever was the original name, becomes Johannesburg. The great East African lake, known by the Luo people as Namlolwe, becomes Lake Victoria. They also planted their memory on our bodies. Ngugi becomes James. Noliwe becomes Margaret. Our names get stuck with their names. Thus our bodies, in terms of their self-definition, become forever branded by their memory. The name mark pointing to my body defines my identity. James? And I answer, Yes. I am. And, most important, they planted their memory on our intellect through language. Language and the culture it carries is the most crucial part of that naming system by which Europe subjected the colonised to its memory. The more educated in the culture of the coloniser, the more severe the subjection, with devastating results for the colonial subject as a whole.

Writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals, workers in ideas are the keepers of memory of a community. What fate awaits a community when its keepers of memory have been subjected to the West's linguistic means of production and storage of memory – English, French and Portuguese – so that those who should have been keepers of the sacred word can now only see themselves and the different possibilities for the community within the linguistic boundaries of memory incorporated? We have languages but our keepers of memory feel that they cannot store knowledge, emotions, intellect, in African languages. It is like having a granary but at harvest you store your produce in somebody else's granary. The result is that ninety percent of intellectual production in Africa is stored in European languages, a continuation of the colonial project where not even a single treaty

between Europe and Africa exists in any African language. We do not exist in these languages!

The relationship between African and European languages as producers and storages of memory have been at the heart of the struggle for a sovereign consciousness. It has certainly been part of the South African intellectual tradition, at least so, since the rise of what scholar Ntongela Masilela calls the New African Movement. Let me quote two instances:

In *The South African Outlook* of July 1, 1939, there is a letter to the editor written by BW Vilakazi. It is a reply to his friend and fellow writer, HIE Dhlomo, the younger of the two Dhlomos. HIE Dhlomo writes in English as opposed to his elder brother RRR Dhlomo who wrote in Zulu. HIE Dhlomo had published an article on African Drama and Poetry in which he disagreed with Vilakazi's MA thesis, The Conception and Development of Poetry in Zulu. Where Dhlomo draws from Hebrew and Shakespeare and quotes liberally from Western sources including Sir Arthur Quiller Couch to buttress his argument, Vilakazi turns tables to remind Dhlomo that he does not write in Zulu. Vilakazi aligning himself subtly with the elder Dhlomo, is clearly unapologetic in his building on the literary heritage of Zulu language in form and content.

'My course primarily lies in Zulu poetry. And there I am definite. Zulu poetry is a contribution to Zulu literature. Secondly, I am convinced it is a mission, a self-imposed mission, to help build a vista of Bantu poetry. And Zulu poetry will therefore stand parallel to English, German or Italian poetry, all of which form the realm of what is called European poetry.'

In saying that Zulu is part of Bantu literature and that *Bantu poetry stands on the same parallel as European poetry*, Vilakazi is arguing that Zulu or any African language is to African Literature what any particular European language is to European literature. He recognises that there is no abstract African literature that is not rooted in specific African languages anymore than there is an abstract European literature that is not rooted in specific European languages. He is very clear as to what he means by Bantu literature:

'By Bantu drama, I mean a drama written by a Bantu, for the Bantu, in a Bantu language. I do not class English or Afrikaans dramas on Bantu themes, whether these are written by Black people. I do not call them contributions to Bantu literature. It is the same with poetry ...'¹⁰

And then follows a statement that is really a celebration of his refusal to be subjected to the linguistic perimeters of European memory:

¹⁰ This statement precedes that of Obi Wali in the 1960's when he took a similar position on African writing in

European languages, see *Transition* n 10.

'I have an unshaken belief in the possibilities of Bantu languages and their dramas, provided the Bantu writers *themselves* can learn to love their languages, and use them as vehicles for thought, feeling and will. After all, the belief, resulting in literature, is a demonstration of people's "self" where they cry: "Ego quad sum". That is our pride in being black and we cannot change creation.' 11

Is this not a literary expression of black consciousness long before Biko gave it a name and currency? Vilakazi's conscious commitment to African languages takes us back to Krune Mqhayi.

In his book, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela describes an event in his school, Healdtown, that for him was 'like a comet streaking across the night sky'. It was a visit by Krune Mqhayi. Performing on the stage in his native Xhosa dress and holding an assegai he tells his mesmerised audience, 'The assegai stands for what is glorious and true in African history. It is a symbol of the African as a warrior and the African as artist', and contrasts this to skilful but soulless Europe ... 'What I am talking to you about is not .. the overlapping of one culture over another. What I am talking about is the brutal clash between what is indigenous and good and what is foreign and bad ... We cannot allow these foreigners who do not care for our culture to take over our nation. I predict that one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper. 12

The performance profoundly impacted the young Mandela's previous assumptions about white and black power. 'I could hardly believe my ears. His boldness in speaking of such delicate matters in the presence of Dr Wellington and other white seemed utterly astonishing to us. Yet, at the same time, it aroused and motivated us, and began to alter my perception of men like Dr Wellington whom I had considered as my benefactor.' 13

But Mqhayi's performance with its unapologetic celebration of being both Xhosa and African does something more: it shows that there is no such thing as an Abstract African and it makes the young Mandela accept his own Xhosa-Being as the real condition of his African-Being, and not the other way round. Mqhayi wrote in Xhosa, and in the *Bantu World* of July 20, 1935, the same year of the event narrated by Mandela, Guybon B Sinxo, another South African intellectual wrote a commissioned piece on Mqhayi in which among other tributes, he describes Mqhayi's book, *Ityala Lama Wele*, as being next only to the Bible in greatness. And of Mqhayi who learnt under the feet of Xhosa elders, he writes:

'Today ... that same boy who at a time when most of the educated Africans in the Cape we well as Europeans controlling Native Education, looked down upon

11 Vilakazi, 'Letter to the Editor', *The South African Outlook* of July 1, 1939

12 Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994, p41

13 Ibid

Xhosa stood up for our language and by pen and word of mouth created a renaissance in our literature.’

The issue carries, in banner headlines devised by the sub-editor, RV Selope Thema, this tribute to Mqhayi as a creator of Xhosa renaissance.

What stands out, on looking back is not only this wholehearted tribute by two fellow intellectuals, Sinxo, a Xhosa, and Thema, a Pedi, but the fact that the term, *renaissance* is used in 1935 in reference to the work of an African intellectual who wrote in an African language and whose performance in that language had such a profound impact on the Healdown students. From their tributes Mqhayi emerges as a renaissance figure combining in himself many talents and interests: an *imbongi*, performer, writer, poet, dramatist, essayist, translator, humorist, critic, cultural advocate, political analyst, a public intellectual who preaches and practices his doctrine. Are there echoes of this renaissance Mqhayi when years later in 1994 Mandela exhorts Africa to believe in itself?

‘We know it is a matter of fact that we have it in ourselves as Africans to change all this. We must, in action, say that there is no obstacle big enough to stop us from bringing about a new African Renaissance.’¹⁴

Since the 1994 call, Thabo Mbeki has further elaborated on this theme and his 1996 address, *I am an African*, with its poetic suggestiveness, its depiction of this ‘African’ as containing in himself multitudes, a truly renaissance persona, has justifiably become a classic. Clearly, the African Renaissance seems to be an idea whose time has come, to witness the number of books, articles and conferences¹⁵ which it has generated. The discussions have been rich in their economic, political and even cultural exploration of meaning and implications of the idea. However, the shortcomings in the recent academic discussions, as opposed to those of the times of Mqhayi and Vilakazi, have been a virtual silence over the relationship between language and renaissance. Language, though often seen as a product and reflection of economic, political and cultural order, is itself a material force of the highest order.

That is why we must ask: is an African Renaissance possible when we, the keepers of memory, have to work outside our own linguistic memory? Working within the prison

¹⁴ Op cit, <http://www.anc.org> ...

¹⁵ See Mbeki’s speeches. Also *Occasional Papers*, Johannesburg – RSA May 1998 “The African Renaissance” with articles by: Thabo Mbeki, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Sean Michael Cleary, Francis A. Kornegay and Chris Landsberg, and Yvonne Mokgoro; *The African Renaissance: History, Significance, and Strategy* by Washington AJ Okumu, 2003; Fantu Cheru, *African Renaissance*, 2002; Moyo Okediji, *African Renaissance*, 2002; *Black Renaissance*, a quarterly journal edited by Manthia Diawara, etc; Mukanda and Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance*, 2000, etc; Malegaropuru William Makgoba (editor), *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*, 1999; Cheikh Aihk Anita Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*. It is interesting that these essays previously issued under a different title are now so titled in the 1996 Red Sea Press edition. Leonard Barnes’ *African Renaissance*, 1969, does not belong to the current revival.

house of European linguistic memory? Often drawing from our own experiences and history to enrich the already very rich European memory?

Bothered by our almost religious attachment to that memory, Cheikh Anito Diop, another multi-talented figure in the Mqhayi tradition, in 1948 posed the same question in a paper published in *Le Musee Vivant* under the title: *When can we talk of an African Renaissance?* After reviewing the predicament and even the complexity of Africans writing in European languages, he ends up echoing Vilakazi's sentiments in very emphatic terms, in fact asserting that 'It is absolutely indispensable to destroy this attachment to the prestige of European languages in the greater interest of Africa.'

Some could raise the objection that Africans who use foreign languages do so in an original manner and that their expression contains something specific to their race. But what the African can never express, until he abandons the use of foreign languages, is the peculiar genius of his own languages ... all these reasons – and more – lead me into affirming that the development of our languages is the prerequisite for a real African Renaissance. 16

Nadine Gordimer was to express similar sentiments in her contribution to a Unesco symposium in Harare in 1992. In the paper called Turning the Page: African Writers in the Twenty-first Century, she, of course acknowledges, and rightly so, the brilliance of what has already been produced by African writers in acquired European tongues and then adds:

'But we writers cannot speak of taking up the challenge of a new century for African literature unless writing in African languages becomes the major component of the continent's literature. Without this one cannot speak of an African literature. It must be the basis of the cultural cross-currents that will both buffer and stimulate that literature. 17

What Diop 18 and Gordimer say about literature applies to intellectual production as a whole, for renaissance is not about literature alone, it is exploration of the frontiers in the whole realm of economy, politics, science, arts, the extension of dreams and imagination. Still the quest for knowledge is central in the enterprise.

16 Cheikh Anita Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance*, 1996. The translations from the French are by Egbuna P. Modum.

17 Now in Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*.

18 Cheikh Anita Diop, 'A Continent in Search of History' in *Towards the African Renaissance*, 1996. Of particular interest in this case is his discussion of the capacities of African languages for thought and science.

European renaissance involved not only exploration of new frontiers of thought but also a reconnection with their memory with roots in ancient Greece and Rome. In practice, it meant a disengagement from the tyranny of hegemonic Latin and discovery of their own tongues. But it also meant a massive and sustained translation and transfer of knowledge from Latin and Greek into the emerging European vernaculars including English. There was also a lot of inter-vernacular translation of current intellectual production among the then emerging European languages, for instance, from French into English and vice versa.

The African keepers of memory could do worse than usefully borrow a leaf from that experience. Thabo Mbeki's contribution to the debate, in fact, comes as a challenge to the African intelligentsia, the keepers of memory, to 'add to the strengthening of the movement for Africa's renaissance'.¹⁹

The challenge to the intelligentsia is as it should be. No renaissance can come out of state legislation and admonitions. States and governments can and should and must provide an enabling democratic environment, and resources. In this respect South Africa has to be commended for coming up with a very enlightened language policy. Most governments tend to hide their heads in the sand and pretend that African languages do not exist or else try to force a retrograde policy of mono-lingualism. Governments can help by policies that make African languages part of the languages of social mobility and power, currently a monopoly of European languages. But renaissance, as rebirth and flowering, can only spring from the wealth of imagination of the people, and above all, from its keepers of memory.

We must hearken to Diop's and Vilakazi's call when they tell us to use our languages as vehicles for 'thought, feeling and will'.²⁰ We must produce knowledge in African languages and then use translation as a means of conversation in and among African languages. We must also translate from European and Asian languages into our own for our languages must not stay isolated from the mainstream of progressive human thought in the languages and cultures of the globe.

But how can we turn our present predicament, where a lot of knowledge produced by sons and daughters of Africa is already stored in European linguistic granaries? A lot of these works, as Gordimer has noted, are brilliant examples of the results of acquisition of European languages. Diop makes the point over and over again that he is not underestimating the contributions by those African writers who use foreign languages. And Vilakazi in his debate with HIE Dhlomo, is not questioning the quality of Dhlomo's work. These works, like stolen gems, must be retrieved and returned to the languages and cultures that inspired them in the first instance. The task of restoration is at the heart of the renaissance project.

¹⁹ Mbeki, preface to Makgoba (editors: *African Renaissance: The New Struggle*, 1999)

²⁰ Vilakazi, op cit

The problem and the process on a worldwide scale is what we at the International Centre for Writing and Translation at the University of California Irvine have dubbed the *Restoration Project*.

What is the Restoration Project? Like in Africa, a lot of the intellectual production by the native keepers of memory in Asia, the Pacific and within North American Native populations, has been in languages other than the ones spoken by the people. In reality, this is often an act of cultural translation from the subject memory into the dominant memory. But it is a mental act, which means that in the process, the original text is lost. The Restoration Project imagined at the International Centre for Writing and Translation of which I am the first director, involves the support for models of translations for works written in dominant languages by people who draw from languages and cultures other than the dominant one, in which the works were first written. We call it a project of restoration because, in putting works back into the original languages (or into other marginalised languages as well), it would be helping in restoring the work to its original language and culture without interfering in its existence in the dominant memory – almost like rescuing ‘the original’ mental text from exile. Or, to use the metaphor of a harvest stored in somebody else’s granary, it would be like the owners of the harvest retrieving their produce and re-storing it in their granaries.

Conceived as a global project, it would affect quite a number of cultures in Asia, Africa, Europe and the islands, and it would help in re-drawing the cultural power map of the world. For it is like reversing the brain drain by ensuring that the products of that brain drain go back to build the local base. The success of such restoration would have to be a creative partnership of the writer, the translator and publisher and, of course, the state, which would provide an enabling economic and political environment. In such a situation, and given the place that, say English occupies in the world today, no matter what we think of the process by which it came to occupy that position, we can challenge it to enable and not disable, use it to enable conversation among languages where, given the shortage of people who know two marginalised languages sufficiently for them to translate directly, we can use English or French as a medium to enable without disabling.

Once again, South Africa offers a rich soil for a starting point for a model of such a global project. A very important work on the New African Movement has been done by the South African scholar, Ntongela Masilela. He has dug up old newspapers and come up with astonishing results of the enormous output of South African intellectuals of the twenties, thirties and forties, a good number of whom wrote and published in African languages. We would like to explore ways in which we can work with South African publishers and international publishers to start a pilot project to have their unpublished works republished in book form, or those out of print, reissued in scholarly editions in both the original African languages and in English. We would like to see, for instance, all the Zulu works of Mazisi Kunene, an intellectual descendant of Vilakazi, and the great tradition of Zulu orature going back to Magolwane and Mshongweni of Shaka’s court, published in Zulu and other African languages. So also the historical Zulu novels of RRR Dhlomo. We would also like to see the works written in English by say, HIE Dhlomo, and others restored back to their original language and even other African

languages. As I said, this is only a pilot model for what should be a global restoration project.

For us in Africa, and in the current ideas of renaissance, this can be a model for practical steps in realising the goals of the African Renaissance. We have, for instance, three Nobel Prize winners in Literature, Soyinka, Gordimer and Mafouz. Why shouldn't their works be made available in the languages and cultures of the continent which nourished their imagination? Why shouldn't the work of Biko be available in African languages? What about Nkrumah's, Nyerere's, Mandela's, Machel's, Neto's, Cheikh Anita Diop's work? What of all the corpus/ovres of all the African intellectuals? What of all the works of diasporic Africans in the Caribbean and Americas, Sonia Sanchez's, for instance? What of the works of the two other black Nobel winners, Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison? If we can think of scouting European museums asking and even demanding the return of our precious works of art, why not also the restoration of the precious works of written thought?

All this calls for a very different attitude and relationship to our languages on the part of African governments and the African intelligentsia as once articulated by Vilakazi, and Diop, and exemplified by Mqhayi and the whole line of African intellectuals who have always kept faith in African languages. There are signs of positive responses to his call.

Some governments have begun to come up with positive policies on African languages, the prime example once again being South Africa. There a few countries, Ethiopia for instance, where writing and intellectual production in African languages has always been taken as the norm. The government's attitude to culture in general, and to African languages in particular, is important, for as Gordimer has rightly observed, 'in the twentieth century of political struggles, state money has gone into guns, not books. As for literacy, as long as people can read state decrees and the graffiti that defies them, that has been regarded as sufficient proficiency'.²¹

That, of course, is decidedly not the best recipe for a renaissance. The state can provide an enabling environment including ensuring respect and protection of what Gordimer calls the implicit role of writers supplying a critique of society for the greater understanding and enrichment of life there. But ultimately the work of intellectual rejuvenation must come from the keepers of memory and here too there have also been encouraging signs.

In January 2000, scholars who gathered in Asmara from all the regions of Africa and abroad, came with the *Asmara Declaration* which called on African languages to accept the challenge, the duty and the responsibility of speaking for the continent. The second such conference is scheduled to be held in South Africa and the Buwa regional conference next week is part of that dialogue and preparation for the second continental conference on the matter.

²¹ Gordimer, op cit.

These trends are in keeping with what seems to me the main challenge of Biko's life, thought and legacy: to disengage ourselves from the tyranny of the European post-renaissance memory and seize back the right and the initiative to name the world by reconnecting to our memory. This brings us back to the words of the great African sage who, as he stood in Tunis hearing in his mind the words of the Roman general who sentenced the African city of Carthage to death, refused to moan about the death and past loss, but instead, he lets its memory carry him on new waves of optimism. 'All human civilisation rests on the foundation of the ruins such as those of the African city of Carthage,' Mandela said, recalling no doubt all the ruins wrought on the psyche of the continent by the more contemporary empires of European modernity. Then he issues the call:

'One epoch with its historic task has come to an end. Surely another must commence with its own challenges. Africa cries out for a new birth. Carthage awaits the restoration of its glory.'

Surely with his life Nelson Mandela has earned the right to issue that call to the youth of Africa.

Biko would have understood that call. His life and thought, as that of Chris Hani, Robert Sobukwe, Ruth First, all the political prisoners and many others, remind us that whatever has been gained, including independence and national liberation, did not come of themselves. They were results of struggle and sacrifice, and it behoves us, the inheritors of any and every benefit of those sacrifices, never to forget. A people without memory are in danger of losing their soul.

Is the task in front of us - that of the recovery of the African historical memory and dreams - too difficult a task? There is no way out this. Keepers of African memory must do for their languages what all others in history have done for theirs. As we set about disengaging from the hegemonic tyranny of bourgeois Western memory and reconnecting with that contained in the living matter of our languages, let the words of Thabo Mbeki echo determination in our hearts and not waver in our resolve:

'Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us err today and say: nothing can stop us now.' 22

Among writers that Biko admired was Aime Cesaire, whose poem, *Return to my Native Land*, is a poetic call and celebration, a return to the source of one's being, a vital reconnection with memory. The poem sums up the essence of Black Consciousness with a rejection and affirmation:

For it is not true that the work of man is finished
That man has nothing more to do in the world

22 Thabo Mbeki, op cit

But be a parasite in the world
That all we now need is to keep in step with the world
But the work of man is only just beginning
And it remains to man to conquer all the violence embedded in the recesses of his passion
And no race possesses the monopoly of beauty, of intelligence, of freedom
There is a place for all at the rendezvous of victory.

We can add to this and say that no language has a monopoly of beauty, that all memories
have a place at the rendezvous of human victory.