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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
THE AFRICAN INTELLECTUALS PROJECT SEMINAR
SETTING THE TONE FOR DR REUEL KHOZA'S LECTURE ON
REVISITING THE AFRICAN RENAISSANCE AND AFRICA'S GLOBAL
COMPETITIVENESS IMPERATIVE
UNISA MUCKLENEUK CAMPUS, PRETORIA
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Programme Director, words fail me in trying to express my great pleasure at the momentum that this lecture series has gained. This is the third lecture this year held under the rubric of the African Intellectuals Project.

It is our aim, through this series, to invite speakers who can challenge us to think deeper about some of the problems facing us as a country and as a continent.

It is therefore my great pleasure to welcome Dr Reuel Khoza who will share with us some of his insights into how we may become players in a competitive world.

In his 2001 critique of the concept of African Renaissance, Dr Eddie Maloka observed that the concept was so ubiquitous at the time that

it was spoken about and referred to throughout varied sectors.¹ Indeed, we remember how, during the early 2000s, almost everyone was talking about the African Renaissance. This was the case for everyone - whether a supporter or a critic of the concept.

What cannot be denied is that debates around the concept enriched the national discourse. A cursory look at the literature at the time yields a rich tapestry of written text that we may have to also revisit with a view to enriching ourselves.

South Africa was a country in conversation with itself. There was at the time an emerging sense of a country that was taking the exchange of ideas seriously.

In contributing to the debate today, I want to look at the overall theme that Dr Khoza will be sharing with us in terms of the following topics. Firstly, I wish to revisit the etymology of the concept. Secondly, I wish to examine how we may use the concept in the current juncture for us as a country. Related to that, I wish to re-examine the role that the African Renaissance may play in the transformation of higher education, and UNISA in particular. Finally, I will try to propose how

¹ Eddie T. Maloka 2001. The South African "African Renaissance" debate: a critique. http://scholar.google.co.za/scholar_url?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpolis.sciencespobordeaux.fr%2Fvol8ns%2Fmaloka.rtf&hl=en&sa=T&oi=ggp&ct=res&cd=7&d=13471906251317730257&ei=rhL7XKzLC4uemgHkjbeAAQ&scisig=AAGBfm02AmjMwi8K2LCoyV_wDS7rLRxF1Q&nossl=1&ws=1600x731&at=The%20South%20African%20E2%80%9CAfrican%20renaissance%E2%80%9D%20debate%3A%20a%20critique&bn=1 [Accessed on 8 June 2019].

we, as a country and the higher education sector (and UNISA in particular), may try to take this debate forward.

African Renaissance: an etymology

It is not my intention to provide an extensive and detailed academic examination of the concept of African Renaissance. Such an exercise would require either a full lecture on my side or an article. What I wish to do, though, is to provide a simplified reflection of the concept.

There should be consensus that, in its modern conceptualisation, African Renaissance can be traced to the collection of essays by that great African mind, Cheik Anta Diop, *Towards the African Renaissance: essays in culture and development, 1946-1960*.²

Anta Diop was writing at a time when African scholars were leading their country men and women in a rebellion against colonialism, and therefore seeking to assert their identity and reclaiming their dignity.

Theirs was not just a Pan-African movement to reclaim the dignity of African people. Neither was it just part of a global movement by African people to fight off the ravages of colonialism and slavery.

² Cheik Anta Diop 2000. *Towards the African Renaissance: essays in culture and development, 1946-1960*. New Jersey: Red Sea Press.

Theirs was also part of the broader humanity to restate the fact that all humanity is equal, and that none of us was born a master or a slave.

It can be argued, when locating Anta Diop within this global and therefore internationalist milieu as I have just pointed out, that there must have been an influence on him by the Harlem Renaissance movement in New York. The latter was in turn influenced by and drew inspiration from the nascent jazz and blues movement, helping to bring these artistic expressions to the fore and promoting them.

It can further be argued that the movement was also influenced by the Nardal sisters, Paulette and Jeanne, in Paris. Originally from Martinique, the sisters laid the foundation for what was to be termed Negritude, later advanced by Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas.

Therefore, as a concept, African Renaissance has a rich history which must still be researched and shared with generations to come.

At its core, African Renaissance is a cry or a call by and to African people to raise their hands and be counted as men and women who do not allow anyone to trample on their dignity. But more than that, it is a resolve by African people to eradicate from Africa those practices, whether visited upon the continent by others or by

ourselves, which hold us back. Thus, it is a call to carve a developmental path for the continent; a path that can lead to her prosperity.

Since the 1990s the clarion call for an African Renaissance was reinvigorated by our own Chancellor and former President of the Republic, Thabo Mbeki. Many agree that his 1996 *I am an African* speech, on the occasion of the adoption of the country's Constitution, marked the revival of the concept.

It was after that speech that Mbeki went on to position South Africa, and indeed the continent, as an important player in global affairs.

Some of the developments that arose, which were directly influenced by the popularisation and pursuit of the African Renaissance as propounded by Mbeki, include the formation of the African Union, out of the ashes of the Organisation of African Unity, the establishment of the AU parliament and the establishment of the AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

For us as academia, the most exciting project inspired by the African Renaissance was the collation, preservation and archiving of some of the Timbuktu Manuscripts. I emphasise 'some' because, as we know,

other manuscripts fell into the hands of rebels and were destroyed in 2013.³

The preservation of the Timbuktu Manuscripts demonstrated our resolve to preserve our heritage. This is a clear attempt to show that ours is an ancient civilisation of science and literature, which has contributed to the advancement of humanity like any other.

How then do we employ this reflection to our current situation as a country?

African Renaissance today: How and for what?

In examining the potential that the African Renaissance has for the country, and indeed the continent, it is important to observe epochal significances around the concept.

Firstly, and as indicated earlier, the African Renaissance was crystallised during the 1940s and 50s. This was a period when the African independence movement was becoming stronger, led by young African students who were pursuing their studies in the heartlands of colonial powers.

³ Luke Harding. 2013. Timbuktu mayor: Mali rebels torched library of historic manuscripts. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/28/mali-timbuktu-library-ancient-manuscripts> [Accessed on 8 June 2019].)

These students were beating the drums of independence in concert with their country men and women, workers, peasants and youth, and later guerrilla fighters throughout the continent.

Therefore, the African Renaissance was an intellectual movement that fed the struggle for the liberation of Africa. It was born out of the stretched muscles and frowned sweating brows of the workers who were rebelling against the fact that the fruit of their labour was being used to enrich Europe, while their motherland was languishing in poverty and squalor. As the late founding President of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah long observed, Africa is poor, yet it is “potentially extremely rich”.⁴

The second episode of the pronouncement of the African Renaissance by Mbeki was against the backdrop of one of the last countries on the continent, i.e. South Africa, to be free.

⁴ Kwame Nkrumah. 1961. *I speak of freedom: a statement of African ideology*. London: William Heinemann.

In Mbeki's conception the African Renaissance would have to deal with and confront the reality of neo-colonialism. As former President Nkrumah did painfully observe: independence did not lead to the complete freedom of the continent.⁵ And as Walter Rodney articulated, the continent's riches have helped to enrich Europe, yet Africa itself remains underdeveloped.⁶

Mbeki's conception, leading to the establishment of NEPAD, was and remains a response to the trade imbalances between Africa and the rest of the world, especially the North. This imbalance is characterised by the continent participating as a junior partner in all the transactions entered into.

In the era of increased volumes in illicit financial flows,⁷ the African Renaissance should mean that the continent must assert itself against what is daylight robbery of losing \$50 billion annually,⁸ facilitated through various means to siphon resources out and rendering its people poor.

⁵ Kwame Nkrumah. 1987 [1965]. *Neo-Colonialism: the last stage of colonialism*. London: Panaf Books.

⁶ Walter Rodney. 1973. *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture.

⁷ For an illustration on how the continent is suffering from illicit financial flows see *Track it! Stop it! Get it! Illicit Financial Flow – Report of the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa*.

https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/iff_main_report_26feb_en.pdf [Accessed on 8 June 2019].

⁸ Mbeki, quoted above



Programme Director, what these tell us is that the African Renaissance as a rallying call to all Africans is as relevant today as it was during the 1920s, through to the 1960s and 70s, as the continent gained its independence from colonial powers.

The call is as relevant today as it has been over the years as Africans realised that they remain poor among their own riches. As they realise that, let me assure you that there is a continent endowed with resources, and yet they are unable to compete on levelled playing fields.

What is clear here is that the concept of the African Renaissance is enduring. We are therefore advised to revisit it.

How then should we view and relate to the concept in this era?

Taking the African Renaissance forward in the era of national recovery

It is not my intention to get entangled in the nitty-gritty of our situation. It is, however, safe to say we should all agree that we have gone through a painful period. Irrespective of where we stand, what we will all agree on is that we were torn apart, and at the same time tore each other apart.



Our internal turmoil did not only affect us. It affected the way we are perceived throughout the world. Our standing on the continent, which, as I illustrated earlier, was in high regard, was dealt a negative blow.

It is therefore logical, and necessary, that after such a painful period the nation should go through a phase of recovery and healing.

We must admit that we are not in good shape. It is necessary for us to gather the courage to stand, dust off our shame and pronounce our comeback as a country.

We can only do so if we have a clear sense of purpose. For me, such a purpose must draw on what we have already built. It includes the revisiting of the African Renaissance as a rallying cry.

It is therefore a pleasure to welcome Dr Khoza today, to hear from him how we, as a country, may revisit this rallying cry to heal and, importantly, how we may pronounce our return to a world that is more competitive than the last time we abdicated our position and space.

But before we can invite Dr Khoza to share his wisdom with us, allow me to reflect a bit on the space within which many of us in the audience operate – the higher education sector.



In 2015 students throughout the country rallied around two war cries: *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*. It may well be that many of us remain divided today on the conceptualisation of the problem by students, and over their demands.

However, what we cannot deny is the impact that the struggles by the students, and their demands, had on us as academia. Thus, what was associated with Nkrumah, Samir Amin⁹ and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,¹⁰ and their calls for the African continent to be fully decolonised, gained popular currency.

The call for decolonised universities has achieved national acceptance. Of course, like any other political and intellectual concept, there continues to be debates around what exactly is meant by decolonisation.

I do not have the time to explore what we mean by decolonisation, at least on this platform. What I wish to do, though, is to draw the link between what we refer to as decolonisation on the one hand, and African Renaissance on the other.

⁹ See Samir Amin. 1990. *Delinking: towards a polycentric world*. London: ZED Books. In this book Amin argues that for the countries of the South to ever hope to be developed, they must 'delink' from dependence on the North and develop their economies in favour of domestic development. Amin's concept of delinking has inspired decolonial scholars. See Walter D. Mignolo. 2007. Delinking: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality, *Cultural Studies*, 21(2):449-514.

¹⁰ For Ngugi's assertions on decolonisation see: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*. Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1993. *Moving the centre: the struggle for cultural freedoms*. London: James Currey.

It is my submission that the two concepts complement each other.

On the one hand, decolonisation is both a critique of coloniality and a call to de-centre (apologies to Ngũgĩ) epistemologies of the North, or what Chakrabarty calls provincialisation of Europe,¹¹ and to create an even 'ecology of knowledges'.

On the other hand, African Renaissance serves as a rallying call for Africans to stake their claim in the ecology of world systems and assert themselves as equal partners in the production of knowledge, wealth and overall human development.

Programme Director, it is possible that we, as the higher education sector, can reconcile the two in developing a sector that is free from the clutches of coloniality.

A sector that does not just free itself from these clutches as a mere epistemological exercise, but does so to produce knowledge that contributes to the development of the African continent. That, for me, is what we mean when we talk about building an African University, and not just a University in Africa.

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press



Building an *African University that is shaping futures* means that we must have a university that draws its identity from the African continent and strives to present solutions; what Nkrumah referred to as “finding African solutions to our problems”.¹²

As universities, and the University of South Africa in particular, we are ready to participate in this continuing effort to find solutions for the African continent, so that it may stake its claim in a competitive globalised world.

Dr Khoza, I wish to once again, on behalf of the Council, Management, staff and students in this University, welcome you. We look forward to learning from your wisdom.

Thank you!

¹² Kwame Nkrumah. 1961. *I speak of freedom: a statement of African ideology*. London: William Heinemann.

