

Sustaining identity in a diverse society:

The implications for national liberation

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I do not know of any people who really have “developed along their own lines”. My fellow white South Africans, enjoying what is called “Western civilization”, should be the first to agree that this civilisation is indebted to previous civilisations from the East, from Greece, Rome and so on. For its heritage, Western civilisation is really indebted to very many sources, both ancient and modern. – Chief Albert Luthuli, “Our Vision is a Democratic Society”

In his 1958 speech to a public meeting organised by the white Congress of Democrats, Luthuli emphasised that apartheid was the antithesis of democracy. He argued that it was designed to reinforce the mirage of “separate but equal” development for Africans. The false slogan of developing “along one’s own lines” masked the real intention, which was development along lines designated by the government through the Native Affairs Department: namely, tribalism.

Luthuli was clear about the multi-racial democracy he wished for South Africa, dispelling the mistrustful notion that, if freedom were shared with black man, the white man’s heritage was at risk. He argued that it is impossible to preserve your heritage by detaching and isolating yourself, or by expecting others to do so. Human values, he claimed, could only be preserved “by propagating them and creating a climate where these values will flourish. Apartheid does not furnish that kind of climate” (Luthuli, 1958).

He believed that South Africa would set an example for the rest of the world by ridding itself of apartheid, as the country could develop, not on the basis of colour, but of human values:

It is often suggested, quite rightly, that democracy was developed in homogeneous communities – in Europe, possibly in Asia to an extent – in communities that were homogeneous in colour. Here in South Africa we are not a homogeneous community, not as far as race and colour are concerned, nor possibly even in culture. It is suggested that people in homogeneous communities can very well speak of democracy being shared, but in a community like ours, diverse in very many respects, you can’t hope to share democracy. But I personally believe that here in South Africa, with all our diversities of colour and race, we will show the world a new pattern for democracy (Luthuli, 1958).

The African National Congress’s Strategy and



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Tactics discussion document of 2007 speaks of the South African nation as a “product of many streams of history and culture, representing the origins, dispersal and re-integration of humanity over hundreds of thousands of years” (ANC, 2007).

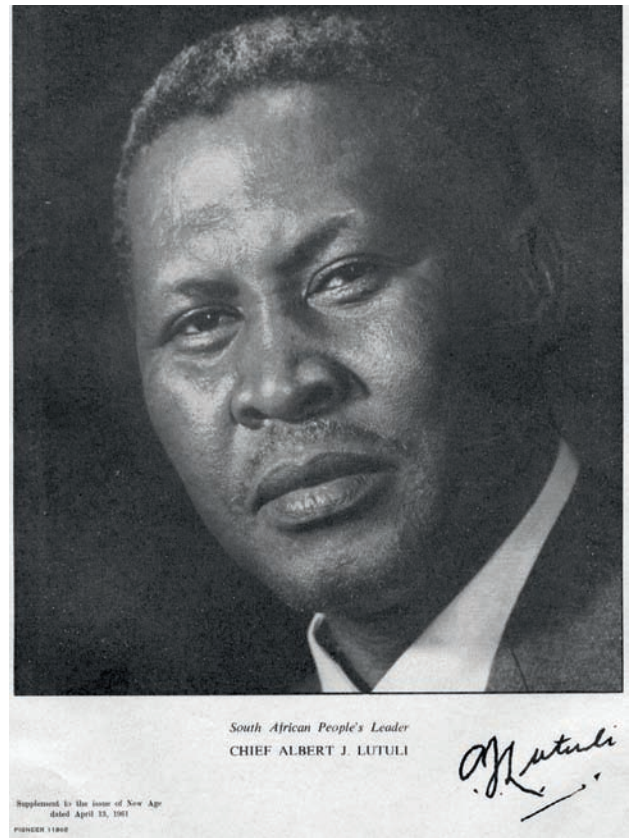
The era of colonialism brought with it slavery and forced labour. Four hundred years of slave trading on the continent took its toll and impeded the development of African societies. From the Dutch settlement of the mid-17th century until the 19th century, characterised by British colonial power, the conquest and dispossession of the African tribes and their land were the main goals for the Dutch and the British alike:

Besides the African inter-communal co-operation and wars of nation-formation, the greatest impact on the evolution of the South African nation-state was made by European colonial settlement. On the one hand, colonialism interrupted internally driven advancement of indigenous South African communities along the ladder of human development. It resulted in the subjugation of the African population, including the Khoi and the San who were subjected to genocidal campaigns, as well as Malay and Indian communities. On the other hand, the advanced industrial base of the colonial powers which made such subjugation possible, introduced into the South African geographic entity the application of advanced forms of economic production and trade (ANC, 2007).

COLONIAL DOMINATION AND ITS “CIVILIZING MISSION”

British imperialism in South Africa, particularly after the South African War (1899–1902) between the British and the Afrikaners, saw the British set out to consolidate their victory by instituting policies that strengthened British dominance. Alfred Milner, the British high commissioner in South Africa, encouraged large numbers of Britons to emigrate to South Africa to bolster the size of the English-speaking population. He further planned to “institute policies of denationalisation and of Anglicisation so that Afrikaners would lose their sense of a separate identity and would assimilate into British culture. To ensure the successful implementation of both policies, he intended to rule South Africa directly without local representation” (Byrnes, 1996).

His policies to impose a British hegemony on the Afrikaners did not succeed. After the war, Afrikaners drew closer to one another and presented a united force. They preserved and celebrated their language, organised schools to ensure that Afrikaans shared equal status with English as a language of instruction, and established political parties to fight for self-determination.



Milner was also steadfast in his view that the white and black man were not equal and that this country was a white man's. He was more successful in separating black and white, especially when the South African Native Affairs Commission (SANAC) concluded that political equality between blacks and whites was not to be. The Zulu Bambatha rebellion, an armed attack led by Chief Bambatha kaMancinza, head of the Zondi clan in the Mpanza Valley in the Greytown district, was a last ditch attempt to gain some measure of power. Frustrated at the imposition of a poll tax, British rule, harsh policies (particularly in Natal) and the second-class treatment of blacks, Chief Bambatha and his supporters fought a bloody battle against the colonial forces but were defeated.

Similar “civilizing missions” in India and East Asia attempted to “establish British institutions and ideas in place of the local political culture, through the ideological hegemony inherent in such a mission” (Shan-Loong, 2000). While British imperialism did indeed have a significant impact on India's transformation to a modern parliamentary democracy, it did not succeed in establishing an ideological hegemony over Indian political culture. Shan-Loong (2000) argues that this is because

British colonial practices, being themselves symbiotic in nature, attempted to impose an indirect rule on India through the maintenance of a local administrative elite. It was this failure to completely



abolish elements of the pre-colonial culture... [and assimilate] it completely to the British image that identified the failure of British ideological hegemony. Consequently, the failure of colonial rule to expand its own ideas and propagate them throughout colonised society marked its hegemonic failure, in that local beliefs ultimately prevailed over those imposed by British colonialism, shaping to a substantial extent the post-colonial political culture of Indian society.

Colonialism carried that “civilizing mission” to all conquered territories in the presumptive belief that whites are supreme beings and have the responsibility to govern and impart their culture to non-white people. This approach also devalued indigenous cultures and religions and stressed the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity – a Christianity that was adulterated to justify the enslavement and colonisation of African people.

In South Africa, black people and Africans in particular were subjected to “colonialism of a special type” which is marked by three interrelated antagonistic contradictions: class, race and patriarchal oppression. These antagonisms found expression in national oppression based on race; super-exploitation directed against black workers on the basis of class; and triple oppression of black women based on their race, their class and their gender (ANC, 2007).

The 20th century saw the imposition of increasingly rigid ethnic or tribal categories, giving each black African a tribal label, or identity, within a single racial classification. Separate residential areas, which later morphed into bantustans, were assigned according to “perceived” ethnic and linguistic identity, and black South Africans became outsiders in their own country, robbed of their citizenship.

The apartheid government’s “tribal designations” and the intensity with which it enforced the “ethnic character” of black life led to blacks eschewing these labels and downplaying their ethnicity or, in some cases, renouncing their heritage altogether. Many developed inferiority complexes as they became accustomed to their own cultures, languages and literature being reduced and ridiculed by the oppressor. The richness of these cultures was thus not fully explored. Even the advent of democracy has failed to remove these deep feelings of inferiority: white supremacy is still prevalent in the South African psyche, both white and black.

AFFIRMATION OF AFRICAN CULTURE

In their anti-colonial struggles, African people did not use racial hatred as a mobilising tool, but infused *ubuntu* into their political ideology.

In his 1906 public lecture, “The Regeneration of Africa”, ANC founder Pixley ka Isaka Seme called for the creation of a unique civilisation for Africa and Africans that would not be based on a racial ideology.

“This opens the gate for the infusion of *ubuntu* values into the global moral discourse on the problems of greed, corruption, the widening gap between the rich and poor, racial and religious conflicts caused by lack of self-knowledge and, in particular, our oneness or unity-in-diversity as the human family.”

A 1917 speech by the second president of the ANC, Sefako Mapogo Makgatho, called for the creation of a non-racial society. In 1921, Rev. Zaccheus Mahabane (ANC president, 1924–27 and 1937–40) observed that African people had been degraded and dehumanised, rendered landless, homeless, hopeless and destitute. He maintained that the recovery of African humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) was a prerequisite for the recovery of the humanity of all the people of South Africa. In response, the 1923 ANC National Conference adopted a bill of rights that asserted the humanity (*ubuntu/botho*) of African people and their right to participate in the economic life of the country. As quoted above, Chief Albert Luthuli maintained that the ANC would surprise the world by creating an inclusive democratic society based on human values in a culturally, religiously and linguistically diverse South Africa.

This vision was vindicated by the 1955 Freedom Charter. Produced by South Africans of every colour, its opening paragraph asserts that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. Sections of the oppressed and the oppressors reached out to one another. Even more importantly, the Freedom Charter recognised the differences in culture, religions and languages, but consolidated the idea that the people of South Africa are one in diversity.

Nelson Mandela, our foremost struggle icon and the first democratic president of South Africa, wrote:

Western civilisation has not entirely rubbed off my African background and I have not forgotten the days of my childhood when we used to gather round community elders to listen to their wealth of wisdom and experience. That was the custom of our forefathers and the traditional school in which we were brought up. I still respect our elders and like to chat with them about olden times when we had our own government and lived freely. (Mandela, 2010: 22)



Mandela was adamant that as a clearer understanding of Africa emerged, the opportunity to see our own African identity would gain prominence. He told a public meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies that the three great religions of Africa – Christianity, Islam and African religion – could play a role in African renaissance, renewal and development, if Christianity and Islam could tolerate one another and both of them could tolerate African religion.

A further influence in Mandela's idea of racial harmony was Mahatma Gandhi's belief in *satyagraha* (loosely translated as "insistence on truth"), which freed India in 1947. Since Gandhi also lived and worked in South Africa from 1893 to 1914, his emancipatory vision greatly influenced Madiba. In many ways, this served to bring the ANC closer to the Indian population in South Africa and a strong bond was formed. The ANC leadership adopted a multi-cultural and multi-religious approach towards achieving a common goal.

IN TOUCH WITH OUR ROOTS

Cultural regeneration in a democratic South Africa must begin with a return to our abandoned roots in order to harness those resources for development in all areas of our life and in our society.

For the longest time African communities have combined their knowledge of plant and animal behaviour with their knowledge of astronomy to predict the weather for the coming season. Indigenous African astronomical beliefs and practices must be recognised and explored, as they could prove beneficial in the many challenges we face.

The ancient African people of Meroe, Dendera, Great Zimbabwe and Maphungubwe inscribed their intangible cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems in zodiacs upon which the African calendar is based. Similarly to the Hindu and Muslim religious calendars, African festivals are determined by the lunar cycle. The African festivals are as follows:

- 23 September. African New Year
- 21 October. Rain-making ceremonies
- 21–25 December. Birthdays of the Grand Ancestors, symbolised by First Fruits festivals
- 6 January. Sacrifice of a black bull to mark the beginning of the harvest season symbolised by the coronation of Faro or Thobela, the harvest god
- 21 March–20 April. During Easter, when the Sun enters the zodiacal sign of Aries, special rituals are performed to thank God and gods for the successful harvest
- 7 May. This is called Mohale's Day and all work is prohibited. People brew beer, drink and celebrate the goddess of heaven and earth, known by various names

- 25 May. The Birthday of the Word or Son of the Goddess and beginning of initiation schools.

It is thus important that we return to teaching and learning how to use the lunar cycle and the calendar that dictates life.

AFRICAN CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

African culture and religion have always informed the evolution of African political ideology. In recognition of this, the Organisation of African Unity adopted the African Cultural Charter in 1976. The African Union replaced this in 2006 with the Charter for African Cultural Renaissance and the UN declared 2011 as an International Year of the People of African Descent. These two instruments provide for the renewal and development of the African cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems.

This opens the gate for the infusion of *ubuntu* values into the global moral discourse on the problems of greed, corruption, the widening gap between the rich and poor, racial and religious conflicts caused by lack of self-knowledge and, in particular, our oneness or unity-in-diversity as the human family.

UNESCO's 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity recognises that unity in diversity (cultural pluralism) leads to social cohesion:

In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

SECOND PHASE OF OUR TRANSITION

The ANC National Policy Conference in June 2012 identified that unemployment, poverty and inequality required a radical shift and focused programmatic interventions to deal decisively with the persistent structural legacy of apartheid, colonialism and patriarchy (ANC, 2012:1). Importantly, the second phase of our transition must ensure that we effect decisive socio-economic transformation and continued democratic transformation.

However, the spiritual malaise Mandela spoke of in 1997 remains with us and the degeneration that has taken hold in our communities threatens to derail our national democratic revolution. We are a resilient nation and acknowledge that a lasting solution requires



a strengthening of our moral fibre as a people. The underlying values that bind us together are human compassion and solidarity, which find expression in the maxim: “I am because we are” or “I am through others” (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/ motho ke motho ka batho*). This principle ensures that Africans express their humanity communally and shun greed and crass materialism.

Perhaps more importantly, *ubuntu* inspires care for the whole, governed by justice and fairness. In practical terms, it says: “an injury to one is an injury to all”. Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation or redemption is mine as well. The loss of those values has led to crass materialism and a deepening moral degeneration that manifests in such behaviour as the abuse of women and children, the killing of innocent people, drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, and a widening gap between rich and poor.

Daily media reports bring home to us the injustices perpetrated through a lack of morality. The moral crisis facing us is the direct result of the loss of spiritual humanism (*ubuntu/botho*) that started in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. The West has lost the moral compass and the capacity to lead the world in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, this degeneration is being transplanted to Africa in the name of modernity and cultural dynamism. The crass materialism of western countries has bloomed here and the youth in particular appear directionless. Blame has been cast on our educators and religious leaders for their lack of guidance to the youth. However, the responsibility of parents and the family unit to instil responsibility and discipline, as well as empowerment and support, in the spiritual development of their children cannot be over-emphasised or shifted elsewhere. As primary custodians of our next generation, parents need to avoid passing the buck to others.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu philosophy is adequate to our current challenges because it covers personal, familial and communal ethics. In South Africa, we successfully infused *ubuntu* values and principles into our body politic to ensure that race, culture, religion and gender do not become the basis for political mobilisation.

The Nation Building and Social Cohesion Summit in July 2012, initiated by President Zuma in response to growing levels of intolerance among the various groups in the country, served as a platform for a national conversation about strengthening social cohesion. While some sceptics poured scorn over the event and dismissed it as yet another talk shop, the encouraging deliberations and outcomes of the summit consolidated a commitment to build a non-

racial, non-sexist and democratic society. Those who attended committed themselves to

- enhance sound family and community values
- uphold honesty, integrity and loyalty
- ensure harmony in culture, belief and conscience
- show respect and concern for all people
- strive for justice, fairness and peaceful coexistence and to protect the environment. (DAC, 2012)

The ANC supports the summit declaration, which also commits all stakeholders, led by government, to hold provincial and local summits in the coming year, leading to a national summit in 2014 to coincide with South Africa’s 20 years of freedom.

As long as we place *ubuntu* at the centre of all our endeavours we cannot but succeed in laying a firm foundation for a nation and society based on human solidarity, respect, accountability, appreciation, tolerance and caring for another.

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