

RACE, RHETORIC AND A POSTMODERN WORLD

by Sanya Osha

ABSTRACT. The question of race continues to generate a lot of debate and interest. It also continues to provoke heated passions which sometimes lead to dangerous situations of conflict and even genocide as history has repeatedly demonstrated. Indeed, the connections between genocide and race are not only long standing, but are constitutive of the entire experience of modernity and even the condition to which we now refer as the 'postmodern' following Lyotard, the poststructuralist philosopher. In the same vein, the phenomenon of race continues to be very topical within the post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa. Consequently, academic studies of all kinds are still being published on the issue. Philippe-Joseph Salazar, a French philosopher based in South Africa tackles the matter of race in present-day South Africa from a rather interesting angle. He explores the phenomenon of race by employing an uncommon assemblage of discursive approaches that draw from rhetoric studies, Greek antiquity and postmodern forms of discourse, to explain how it intersects with post-apartheid constitutionality, public deliberation and space. In this way, Salazar suggests that the matter of race need not always be violent. Instead, the question of race can offer ways of exploring the multiple possibilities of postmodern democracy and cosmopolitan life. More specifically, this essay examines the different rhetorical constructions of race within the contemporary South African context and their implications for the establishment of a so-called 'rainbow nation'. Finally, it links the conceptual understandings of race in the present age of molecular biology with the possibilities for postmodern democracy or what the sociologist, Paul Gilroy has termed "cosmopolitan democracy."

KEY WORDS: de-apartheidization, rhetoric, race, cosmopolitan democracy

Recent literature on the conundrums of African development continue to demonstrate that the entire contours of argumentation are structured along a basically binary model in which either forms of Western progressivism dominate or discourses of indigenization hold sway. This model of discursive binarism extends to virtually all aspects of contemporary African intellectual production. Thus, it has been noted that

“the classical debate in African philosophy between ‘academic’ or ‘modern’ philosophy and ‘ethnophilosophy’ is not so much about whether African philosophy should

have roots in Africa; both sides agree on this. The contested question is whether the roots of African philosophy should consist of a direct cultural continuation of indigenous African traditions or consist of critical work concerned with African issues and practiced by Africans.”¹

However, it is not just the field of African philosophical discourse do we observe this deeply structured and structuring discursive dichotomy. Achille Mbembe notes also that two tendencies have shaped the trajectories of contemporary African academic discourse and are more or less ensconced within the “framework of developmentalism” or what he terms “disciplines of nativism.”² Of course two of the most sophisticated critiques of the discourse of nativism remain Paulin Hountondji’s *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983) and Anthony Kwame Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (1992).

Indeed it is always inspiring to encounter debates, discourses and texts that disrupt the long established hegemonies of this discursive binarism in African intellectual production. Philippe-Joseph Salazar’s *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in Africa* (2002) has many fine attributes. First, it adopts the Barthesian (Salazar was a student of Roland Barthes) mode of French theorizing in reflecting on the question of South African subjectivities within the context of a constantly transfiguring postmodern public realm. Second, it is a sustained critique of the rhetorics of democratization and the problematics of deapartheidisation. Third, Salazar advances an articulation of non-racialism which many debates of multiculturalism especially in the US have much to gain. In other words, he develops a poetics of non-racialism in a world experiencing in varying degrees the entrenchment of various forms of ethnicity, ultranationalism, fascism and fundamentalism. Finally, it reconfigures the numerous insights of classical Greek thought along with several interesting postcolonial African political discourses, scenarios and categories of thought. The results that emerge from this alchemy of discourses are truly inspiring.

Apartheid was an ideology of violence and repression *par excellence* yet

¹ Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Introduction, in: Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, ed., *African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy*, special issue, *Quest: An International Journal of African Philosophy*, Vol. XV No. 1-2, 2001, p. 6.

² Achille Mbembe, ‘Introduction’, *African Studies Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2001 p. 3.

“the apartheid restriction the public space led ironically to the concentration of dissident oratory in highly charged sites, whereby speeches acquired in a more far-reaching potency.”³

Salazar consistently makes the question of rhetoric and its impact in the making of the new South African nation his primary concern.

The ghastliness of apartheid did not reduce all levels of South African life to the state of barbarity. Instead, various rhetorical devices and discourses flourished to fabricate other treads of commonality and belonging. Public acts, figures and spaces were inflected by modes of counter-articulation that constantly subverted and bypassed the hegemony of the apartheid regime. Not surprisingly, these various modes and sites of counter-articulation covered a wide spectrum of spaces and figures. For instance, Desmond Tutu’s rhetorical stance in relation to apartheid was different in relation to Steve Biko’s or Chris Hani’s. Also, Nelson Mandela’s rhetorical status as a legendary and actual anti-apartheid figure, as to be expected, is somewhat different from Tutu’s. This has a lot to do with attributes of charisma, personal histories and the instrumentalisation of public space and social memory.

Salazar contextualizes Desmond Tutu’s place in the making of the post-apartheid nation as one marked by considerable religiosity for what is post-Enlightenment temporal frame. These words can be regarded as the signature of Tutu’s rhetorical value;

“Friends, like you I abhor violence. I condemn the violence of an unjust system such as apartheid and that of those who want to overthrow it. In the beginning God... in the end, God.”⁴

Tutu was after all a man of God whose wish was to see a ‘rainbow nation’ of God established on South African soil. Salazar points out⁵ that

“rarely indeed in modern history has the emergence of a democratic nation been guided by such strict religious oratory.”

³ Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in Africa*, New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

⁵ Ibid. p. 16.

Whereas,

“in traditional European democracies, rooted in 18th century free-thinking, the exercise of the public mind and the achievement of reasonable participation in the exercise of power are carefully separated from religion; religion is often perceived as the fossilized remnant of a predemocratic system of deliberation.”⁶

On the other hand, Nelson Mandela’s rhetorical gifts and strategies are markedly different. For one, he is a politician and this particular vocation exhibits a tension between *homonioia and homologia*:

“in other words, the tension between the “concord of minds,” which is respectful of plurality and difference, and the concord of words.... That is, the showcase of political verbiage in which politicians use words to achieve a semblance of agreement, or, even, an appearance of disagreement.”⁷

In this particular mode of public deliberation, Mandela

“eulogizes the powers of his own *phone*, of his own voice, as any good Sophist would.”⁸

In the post-apartheid context of a new South Africa, new rhetorical orientations evolved that certainly have similarities with other more established democratic traditions in contemporary times and also in antiquity. As such, we are to note that:

“nineteenth-century democratic deliberation deliberately placed a “mute” command on the voice of the President, with its potential for garnering power; the President’s was after all the only unmistakably solo voice speaking from the seat of executive power – while the two correlated powers, the legislative and the judicial, were multi-personed, dislocated, dissonant, even cacophonous.”⁹

These cacophonous seats of political deliberation and power are deemed to be more representative of the spirit of democracy. However, they are significant moments in political history and the history of democracy in particular

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. p. 32.

when what Salazar terms “rhetorical caesarism” flourished.¹⁰ And important political figures who demonstrated instances of rhetorical caesarism include Abraham Lincoln, F. D. Roosevelt, Churchill, Kennedy and de Gaulle. In spite of the rather overbearing rhetorical postures of these important figures of modern democracy, generally,

“in theory, presidential rhetoric is dangerous to deliberation and dangerous to democracy.”¹¹

The relationship between deliberation and political power is quite central for the study of rhetoric. Indeed,

“deliberation in a nondemocratic public sphere tends to mold itself (as rhetorical studies on imperial Rome and early modern Europe have shown) into a concerted praise of the Prince.”¹²

Thus, there is an often problematic conjecture between political power, praise and what Salazar defines in this context, as prudence. In addition, it is interesting to note that

“the most comprehensive system for the political ecology of praise was developed in *ancient regime* France.”¹³

Praise in modern and postmodern political deliberation creates several contextual problems. The Machiavellian prince attracted and courted praise. He had a whole court of praise-singers. But as we have noted, this sort of political figure belonged to another time and another ethos of political activity. His immediately noticeable autocratic leanings and attributes would seem unbearably offensive to the postmodern democratic palette.

Salazar discusses the numerous contradictory peculiarities of history and context that informed Mandela’s presidency. First, there are tensions between rhetorical caesarism and postmodern democracy, between the secular and the sacred, the private and the public, between tradition and postmoder-

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 33.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

nity and the different and competing ideologies of raciology. In a passage, Salazar captures this multiplicity of contextual tensions:

“...the celebrations accompanying Mandela’s 80th birthday (usually only monarchies or autocracies celebrate their leaders’ birthdays as national events) assumed the dimension of public festivity on July 18, 1998, spawning numerous public involvements. Massive media interest was brought to bear on Mandela’s marriage to the widow of Mozambique’s president Samora Machel. (Like national birthday celebrations, such marriages are the stuff of monarchies, particularly if one considers the hint that this was really a republican version of a royal morganatic union....”¹⁴

Such insights give deeper theoretical dimensions to South Africa’s ongoing democratic experiment and the various tensions between premodern and post-apartheid forms of political deliberation. But Mandela’s presidency had other telling implications. His widely celebrated birthday event, his version of a royal morganatic union as it has been described, and his various glamorous public appearances are

“elevated to the rank of public deeds in order to affirm the “integrity” of the President: his integral ethos, his *arête*.”¹⁵

This rhetorical and public positionality leads to a situation whereby

“private ethos and public ethos can become confused.”¹⁶

Moreover,

“by one of those bittersweet ironies of dialectics, this renders his successors’ rhetorical treatment of private and public virtues even more problematic.”¹⁷

The precise situation of the presidential successor (in this case, Thabo Mbeki) can be conceived in these terms;

“removed from the praise-laden function of the founder of the nation, yet in contact with the praise manipulation of the virtuous acts that ensued, how can a presidential

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 40.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 39.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 40.

successor's rhetorical intervention escape authoritarianism or timidity?"¹⁸

Here, we have two distinct rhetorics of presidency within the new South African nation, the first, exemplified Mandela in which political power, praise and prudence are held together in precarious balance and the second, typified his successor who in the aftermath of the euphoria of political liberation has to contend with the strictures of a presidency that must actively seek to distinguish between the public and the private, the secular and the sacred, the premodern and the postmodern etc. In this way, these various contextual typologies exemplify rather more frequently the condition of the postcolonial instead of the postmodern. Of course this observation is not appropriate for all the existing scenarios in South Africa.

The rhetoric of political power is followed by the rhetoric of collective empowerment in the economic domain. After the attainment of de-apartheidisation, which is primarily the signature of political liberation, the discourse of empowerment is compelled to assume more concrete forms, forms which relate not only to the structures and practices of everyday life but also seek to transform them. Thus political liberation has more far-reaching implications when it confronts the irresistible dynamics of the purely economic realm. Within this unavoidable configuration, the persistent trope of race is reinserted and reappropriated by the social body. Also, consumer culture becomes a marker of race,

“black consumers buy more, faster and better quality than their white counterparts”¹⁹

as a newspaper reporter enthusiastically recounts. Within the context of racialised discourses of consumer culture, South Africa's much-touted multi-colorism becomes problematic as it recedes in the face of a banal and clichéd raciology. It is instructive to note here that

“empowerment is the public sphere derivative of what has been called an “African Renaissance.”²⁰

The rhetoric of an African Renaissance has become more persistent and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 43.

²⁰ Ibid.

consequently has received considerable media attention. In addition, it has also received a sizeable amount of academic scrutiny.²¹ From some of the academic discussions available, the concept of an African Renaissance or Ubuntu philosophy is really nothing new.²² It is largely derivative of discourses of nativism we mentioned earlier at the beginning. It is this persistent strain of nativism that cultural and political ideologies in Africa must strive to overcome. Indeed,

“in the European renaissance period the ambition of culture-makers was not to simply reinstate classical values, classical themes and classical ideals, but to surpass them. The promise of an African Renaissance may lie not in a fixation on African heritages as such, but in the ambition to re-appropriate them critically and creatively and so surpass them.”²³

Indeed, commentators have not failed to notice in terms of discursive orientation, the current notion of an African Renaissance is not very different from other earlier raciologically based concepts relating to the black subject such as Senghor’s Negritude.²⁴ Also, there are a few theoretically sophisticated raciologically derived concepts of blackness available that surpass the general horizons offered by the current articulation of African Renaissance. For instance, Senghor’s concept of Negritude is far more sophisticated than many of his contemporaries assumed. By contrast, Wole Soyinka’s famous

²¹ See for instance, *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XV, No. 1-2, 2001 which is a special issue on “African Renaissance and Ubuntu Philosophy.” This special edition has contributions by figures such as Thabo Mbeki, Dirk J. Louw, Priscillia Jana and a few other prominent names.

²² Indeed a political ideology such as Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa is motivated by similar preoccupations. See his publications particularly; *Freedom and Unity / Uhuru na Umoja*; a selection from writings and speeches 1952- 1965, Oxford University Press, 1966 and *Freedom and Development / Uhuru na Maendeleo*; a selection from writings and speeches, 1965- 1967 Oxford University Press, 1968.

²³ Pieter Boele van Hensbroek, Introduction, *Quest: An International Journal of African Philosophy*, Vol. XV No. 1-2, 2001, p. 7.

²⁴ See Janheinz Jahn, *History of Neo-African Literature*, London: Faber & Faber, 1968; Sylvia Washington Ba, *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; and Irving Leonard Markovitz, *Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude*, New York: Atheneum Press, 1969.

taunt that “a tiger needs not proclaim his tigritude” in relation the Senghorian aesthetics of blackness now seems to be ill-conceived.

Senghor was reacting to an incapacitating political ecology of racism which shook his faith in Enlightenment modernity and its claims to universal humanism. And rather than succumb to nihilistic despair he fashioned instead an ideology of humanism that tried to grapple with the particular and universal in human experience. During the Second World War, Senghor had been incarcerated for a couple of years at German prison camps near Poitiers. Within the deathscape administered by the political technology of the time, he still managed to compose poetry, read Goethe and Western philosophy. He also reconnected with fellow Africans who shared songs and tales from their homelands thereby fostering an alternative understanding of humanism and sociality.

It is very attractive to suggest that Senghor’s prison experiences, his deep knowledge of Western intellectual traditions and his love and respect for African values, traditions and cultures combined to produce a subjectivity that was transcultural and transnational in its sympathies, accomplishments and aspirations. Arguably, Senghor has laid down the bases for a post-anthropological humanism, one that truly points to the possibilities for a democratic cosmopolitan world. This is the kind of world that Anthony Appiah has been agitating for since the publication of important book, *In My Father’s House*. It is not enough to promote an ideology of blackness in direct response to a raciological universe and without also preferring an ideal of wider solidarity as a counter-measure as the concepts of African Renaissance and Ubuntu philosophy might end up doing if any form of complacency is allowed.

Salazar does not suggest this possibility in a disconcerting way. Instead, he analyses the scenarios that might encourage true postmodern democracy using as usual Athenian conceptual parallels. Accordingly, he avers, “the “rainbow nation, “ the “constitution” of the nation, and the very means to communicate these notions inscribe²⁵ in the ethos of the President the

“friendship that binds citizens – the *politike philia* – of Aristotelian democracy.”

²⁵ Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in Africa*, p. 70.

However, Aristotelian democracy alone cannot rebuild the new South African nation. New forms of solidarity, forgiveness and constitutionality are required. Indeed,

“the splintered identity of the South African nation under apartheid had to reconstruct itself, not merely through universal suffrage or via the iconic charisma of Nelson Mandela, but through a storytelling process, the narrative of peace.”²⁶

The South African Truth and Reconciliation was an outcome of this process. The *Report* of the Desmond Tutu led TRC sought to proclaim the truth about the evil of apartheid and also to promote reconciliation. Finally, “the *Report* is both an exposure and a weighing of South African diversity, dissent and specific vices that make up the nation.”²⁷ As Salazar correctly affirms,

“the TRC also created a new vocabulary, one that is now pervasive in the political lexicon, both in South Africa and in other fractured democracies.”²⁸

Nigeria, Rwanda and Bosnia are nations that have followed the South African example with varying degrees of success.

However, for South Africa, the rhetoric of peace and multiracial democracy had to work. After all,

“apartheid was the ultimate transgression against “democracy” (the common standard); it excluded Blacks from the social compact and perverted, for the Whites, the social link.”²⁹

A credible rhetoric of peace was required to erect a “New South Africa,” a rainbowism that announced in undeniable terms, a racial diversity as well a demographic egalitarianism. Needless to add, this is easier said than done.

An appropriate rhetoric that set loose the discourse of ethnic diversity and multiracialism was unleashed:

“Many rights, one constitution”; “Many voices, one parliament”; “Many parties, one

²⁶ Ibid. p. 75.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 81.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 83.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 87.

democracy”; “Many paths, one direction”; “Many ideals, one freedom.”³⁰

How was all this to be accomplished given the horrendous history of apartheid that had scarred the South African nation? Salazar argues that the South African rhetoric of peace is what we must investigate to better understand its courageous attempts at multicolorism. Here, he undertakes a very interesting theoretical manoeuvre that is genuinely Barthesian in both intent and effect.

Salazar reconfigures Roland Barthes’ semiotics of fashion and glamour within the South African context in order to theorise and traverse a complex ecology of identity and race. It is this configuration of fashion and glamour that grants the new South Africa its distinctive postmodern complexion. *Elle*, *Marie-Claire*, *Gentlemen’s Quarterly*, *FHM*, *Men’s Health*, *Conde Nast Garden and Home* have all taken root in South Africa. As Salazar informs us,

“glamour magazines are...powerful agents in the public sphere.”³¹

He demonstrates how these magazines employing the power of glamour and the seductiveness of wealth are actively articulating a new politics of identity, belonging and racial diversity within the geo-body of South Africa. Salazar makes an important contribution in not only identifying glamour magazines as a fertile resource for reading the new semiotics of the body and race but also in actually theorising them according to their various cultural potentials.

But this reconfiguration of the rhetorics of peace, glamour and beauty can only acquire its most complete meaning when situated in its proper historical context. Since medieval times, it has become established to civilize competition either in the realm of beauty or battle.³² Salazar reminds us that tournaments or tourneys were developed in medieval times

“as a means to redirect chivalry’s demand for military action in principalities where

³⁰ Ibid. p. 101.

³¹ Ibid. p. 109.

³² Ibid. p. 123.

political structures were adopting a more modern and peaceful shape.”³³

As such, there is a historical and structural relationship between glamour, war and sport. Salazar, in two graphic instances recounts this structural relationship in the new South African nation. The first instance:

“In South Africa people deliberately and enthusiastically marked the end of a warring culture by adopting new symbols of public glamour, peaceful competition and “derealized” competition...”³⁴

The second instance;

“Signs of apartheid have been converted into cosmeticized rhetorical markers of diversity.”³⁵

Next, Salazar turns to the reality of space and its various possibilities for public deliberation. Unquestionably,

“social space is entertaining. Social space is conducive to self-celebration. Social space is an occasion for social conversation.”³⁶

And accordingly, golf courses in the new South Africa have become

“powerful loci for an unfolding public deliberation on safety, gentility, affordable luxury, and, by capitalization of symbols, cross-racial integration.”³⁷

As South Africa struggles to construct its own Acropolis, a number of issues come to mind; the prospects of establishing a universe of genuinely transcultural, transracial and democratic values. The possibility for birthing a mode of post-anthropological cosmopolitan democracy has become³⁸ a seri-

³³ Ibid. p. 125.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 126.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 127.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 153.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 150.

³⁸ For instance, Paul Gilroy makes a very bold attempt to grapple with the issue in his book, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

ous matter in contemporary times. Salazar's treatment of the possibilities for the establishment of a postmodern democracy within the racially problematic South African context is admirable in many ways. First, he deparicularises the South African present with his numerous skillful allusions to Greek antiquity. Second, he advances a discourse on democracy that is both novel and refreshing. Third, his Barthesian reconfiguration of glamour, beauty and sport commends itself not just as an exquisite piece of culture critique but also in the manner it broadens the scope for understanding a new semiotics of the body in Africa. Finally, he points the way for popularizing a racialogical discourse that promises many connections between democracy and cosmopolitanism.

