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African Forgiveness – too sophisticated for the West

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This year South Africa is celebrating ten years of democracy. And the country is swarming with foreign journalists, film makers, writers and academics doing the Ten-Year-Democracy story. One tries not to be cynical about their enthusiasm. Of course there is nothing like a tattered miracle, or a fake reconciliation to get the journalistic juices flowing. Expose the fraud! Go to the poorest of the poor and show up the double talk of the new black elite and the racist Afrikaner rogues. In stead of asking the hard questions about America and the European Union, it is easier to fly to Africa where the goodies are still good and the baddies still bad. Especially when the weather is warm and the wine fragrant.

This past year many of us, important and unimportant South Africans, were booked back to back with interviews and discussion programmes. I remember waiting to be interviewed on an Irish radio station in the same smart hotel that Bill Clinton stayed. The team had just returned from Houtbay – a coastal village near Cape Town that has a particularly high density of squatters and posh luxurious homes with breath taking views. The interviewer looked wild. He was pacing the room angrily while his assistants were getting the sound systems ready. He stopped in front of me. “How can it be?” he asked furiously, “I interviewed this black woman, living in a shack in appalling conditions, illiterate, dirt poor, I asked her: ‘what did forgiveness and ten years of democracy brought you?’ She said: ‘freedom and peace.’ I said: ‘but here you are, see how you live, you have nothing, a few yards from here, look at that mansion and the rich whites there.’ And you know what she said? She looked at me and said: ‘ten years cannot put right what three hundred years made wrong.’ This is what she said. I can’t believe it. Is she mad? Is she stupid?” He looked at me accusingly as if I know some secret evil way that forces poor black people to give smart answers. When he mentioned that another radio team was lining

up to interview that same woman again I was suddenly wondering by myself: if the fourth or fifth white pushes a microphone into my face and asks with undisguised disgust: how can you talk about forgiveness if you still have nothing and the whites still have everything... sooner or later I would definitely say: 'You know, I am ashamed. I made a big mistake. It was so stupid to forgive. Come to think of it, I actually hate whites.'

As the foreign journalists waded their way through the country it seemed that they were more shocked about the peacefulness of the poverty than by the poverty itself. And if you listen to their encounters you realised that they made many black people feel ashamed that they had forgiven and were trying to reconcile.

The inability of whites to recognise a worldview that may be superior to theirs, is nothing new in Africa. Let me read you a poem recorded from the /Xam in the nineteenth century. /Xam is a subgroup of the Bushmen or San people. The poem says: like you read books, we read our bodies for knowledge We can feel the whole cosmos vibrating through our bodies. The Bushmen or San chose a different way of being. They chose to live lightly on the earth. The only things they left behind were stories and songs, paintings and engravings of exquisite beauty in which man, earth, animal and rain melt into oracles of a committed interwovenness. Yet, the Bushmen were hunted like animals by whites. They were slaughtered to become trophies.

/Xam premonitions

by //Kabbo

the alphabet of the bushmen is written in our bodies

the letters talk and vibrate

the letters move the body of the bushmen

if your ribs start palpitating

take your arrows

because you have already seen the springbuck with your body

you feel the sensation of blood on your thighs and calves

as if you are already carrying the springbuck home on your back

as if the springbuck is already bleeding down your thighs

that is why I always wait silently for the words of my body
I feel on my skull if they cut off the horns of the hartebees
I feel in my feet if they are moving around the hut

we lie down in front of our shelters
we lie down on the stretched out slopes of the hills
it looks as if we are sleeping
as if we are taking a nap

but we are reading our bodies
we read everything which is moving on the plains down below
the holes in the back of our knees tingle
and then we wait
and then everything comes to us.

The notion that it is a shame to forgive started as far back as the truth commission process. I remember how an Australian academic cornered me at one of the human rights violation hearings, her eyes burning with anger: "What a terrible thing you whites have done to blacks by bulldozing them into accepting this truth and reconciliation bullshit. "What you are doing *now* is worse than apartheid. You have conned and manipulated black people into accepting this without a single riot or incident of mass resistance." That she was perhaps insulting a group of people who have just overthrown the very powerful apartheid regime didn't seem to enter her mind.

Since then this remark of being conned into forgiving became flanked by another kind of remark. A television producer from Tel Aviv said to me last year: "By God, what a remarkable process. I am here to make a documentary of it all. Pity it could never work in Israel, because you need to be Christian to make it work." Two years before, an Irish journalist confessed to me with tears in his eyes: "Truly a remarkable process. Pity it wouldn' t work in Ireland- too many Catholics you know." At a recent conference on the influence of violence on language, a US journalist remarked: "It is wonderful that black South Africans could forgive, but as a world power we Americans have the responsibility to uphold right and wrong." So everyone has found their own reason why they need to kill others. The truth and reconciliation thing is good for black third

world people, but us Catholics/Christians/Muslims/Americans/Jews/Palestinians, we do it, not only differently, but better.

The list of people questioning the whole act of forgiveness and reconciliation in South Africa is quite impressive. Professor Mahmood Mamdani, teaching at the University of Cape Town during the TRC process suggested at the time: reconciliation means an embrace of evil. One of the top commentators on reconciliation in Holland, Professor Afshin Ellian, quotes Nietzsche about forgetting: "... it is possible to live almost without remembering, indeed, to live happily, as the beast demonstrates; however, it is generally completely impossible to live without forgetting." and: "that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential. Which means, without forgetting there' s no chance to be human."

Jacques Derrida says: "Forgiveness is thus mad. It must plunge, but lucidly, into the night of the unintelligible." Elsewhere Derrida says: "Forgiveness should not be normal, normative, normalising - it should remain exceptional and more or less impossible." In his essay on forgiveness, Derrida goes so far as to say that Tutu "with as much goodwill as confusion ... introduced the vocabulary of repentance and forgiveness" to an institution "uniquely destined to treat politically motivated crimes". During a lecture at the University of the Western Cape, Derrida said that to forgive the unforgivable is a miracle. In other words, important academics and philosophers bring the notion of forgiveness into the realms of evil or the miraculous, or connected to forgetting.

Let me take this argument up from another angle. The cult of the individual is one of the most enduring modern myths. As in Robinson Crusoe, the Western imagination tries to create an individual who is not dependent on any community. Although Crusoe has to find a Man Friday to start a new community, the myth of the individual lives forth as the most important condition for progress. Without the individual there can be no development. The French semiotic Dany-Robert Dufour, writes "In the present era of liberal democracy everything rests, in the final analysis, on the individual as subject – on his economic, legal, political and symbolic autonomy. Yet despite the most obsessive expressions of self-affirmation, the attempt to be oneself is fraught with difficulty. A host of symptoms testify to the "impairment of the individual" in contemporary societies. Psychic disorders, cultural malaise, the increase in violence and widescale exploitation are all vectors of new forms of alienation and inequality.' He regards the modern individual not as free, but as lost and abandoned.

Susan Sontag's description of the ruins of man's thought ties in with the obsessional disregard for a community that is more than mere nationhood: 'The best of the intellectual and creative speculation carried in the "West" over the past hundred and fifty years seems incontestably the most energetic and *true* in the entire lifetime of man. And yet the equally incontestable result of all this genius is our sense of standing in the ruins of thought, and on the verge of the ruins of history and of man himself... the need for individual spiritual counsel has never seemed more acute.'

Let me read you a Sesotho poem about being only an individual. It is part of a play about Senkatana. In this famous Basotho tale the dragonmonster Kodumodumo gobbled up the whole Basotho nation. That made him so enormous that he got stuck in the high mountain passes. Of all the people in the world only Senkatana survived. He was alone. He could do what he liked, he was free, but in a great voice he wailed:

I cannot find myself
because I am not among others

about what shall I be happy if I am only by myself?
from what shall I be freed if it is only me?

why would something be beautiful
if only my eyes are seeing it?

it is you who are calling forth the I
it is I who imagines himself through you
the you imagines me

I do not choose you
that you are there makes me

we have been made to be with others
or we will be hungry amidst great abundance

So here are black South Africans: on the one hand accused of being manipulated, primitive, confused, a-historical and mad to forgive and reconcile; on the other hand being admired, praised and rewarded for reconciling by the very people who themselves would never contemplate doing the same. At one stage France was donating millions to the South African Truth Commission at the very moment they were putting one of the former Second World War perpetrators, Poupon, on trial. The same America who immediately retaliated after 9/11, gave millions to the South African Truth Commission.

Why would people praise and support something they themselves would never dream of doing? Surely not because they think it is too difficult? Surely not because they thought: you know these South African blacks are superior to us. They know how to pull their people away from the destructive spiral of violence, but we westerners are too primitive to even try to do that. How else can one read it but that it smells of racism? Blacks ought to forgive, but whites should take revenge? Forgiveness is for the 'inferior' nations, revenge for the 'real' nations.

After World War Two a particular model of how to deal with horrendous injustice was put on the table of the world. By the end of that same century, the black people of South Africa put a powerful new model on that same table. It had two main legs: all victims were treated the same (the mother who lost her son fighting for apartheid testified next to the mother who lost her son fighting against apartheid. Thus acknowledging that people hurt the same) The second most important leg is to use forgiveness as a way of stopping a cycle of violence. And it is important to note that it was the first time that a real challenging alternative was put forward in the world. And yet, although it was hailed, praised and prized, it was not, and still is not, claimed as an alternative worth following by the First World. As journalist and poet Sandile Dikeni once remarked: "What blacks say has no value, because we are black. The philosophy which Africans put forward are treated like exotic African masks - to be hung in houses or photographed for brochures, but never to be treated with the same amount of respect as the philosophies of the West."

This kind of racist behaviour extends even further. Presidents and heads of state who would not hesitate to invade other countries will travel from all over the world to have a picture taken of themselves with former President Nelson Mandela. Although they themselves will leave no stone unturned to haul "perpetrators" in front of their courts, they hug Mandela for forgiving those who murdered his people.

Why? And let us say it with an amount of shame: Because the West understands anger, is fascinated by revenge and deeply admires hatred.

So many things now vibrate through us as we sit here in this city in this century that we no longer know how to hear stars, or smell stone, or touch air or know how to look into the heart of sky. Not so the Bushmen. Within their hunter-gatherer existence, thousands of years old, they knew the sound of the stars. The west has been aware of it only since 1930 - at Cambridge Jocelyn Bell built an enormous radio antennae to listen to the stars. But the Bushmen knew:

What the stars say

/Han#kass'o

the stars take your heart
for they are not a little hungry
the stars exchange your heart for a star's heart
the stars take you heart and feed you a star's heart
then you'll never become hungry again

because the stars are saying: 'Tsau! Tsau!'
and the bushmen say the stars curse the eyes of the springbuck
the stars say: 'Tsau!' they say: 'Tsau! Tsau!'
they curse the eyes of the springbok

I grow up listening to the stars
the stars saying: 'Tsau!' and 'Tsau!'

it was always summer when they were saying: 'Tsau!'

(ZULU LULLABY)

Thula thula Mama thula

*Samthata sambeka ekhaya
wasuke wakhala wathi hayi Bawo*

So what does one say: have 40 million people been conned into a way of going forward, or does it point to something so sophisticated yet radical that the West has problems grasping it? One can safely say that what happened here had nothing to do with Christianity, otherwise it would have worked in Ireland and the US. In fact, the Bible Belt often seems to be at the forefront of crying for revenge. It also had nothing to do with the influence of whites because the whites (and especially the Afrikaners) did not believe (and still do not believe) in the truth and reconciliation process. When they are with their own kind they would say: what is wrong with these blacks – they can not even hate properly and now we have to share a country with them.

It is also unlikely that a group of mostly young people coming out of a decade of mass action would suddenly accept something that goes against the grain simply because two old men, Tutu or Mandela, or any white person were saying so. And may I say the following: Derrida is misreading Tutu if he regards him purely as a Christian leader. Bush is making a mistake if he is reading Mandela purely as a unique statesman. Both Tutu and Mandela will be the first to tell you that how they are thinking is embedded in the black South African community. The essence of what they are, is the essence of being black in Africa. Although not easily grasped by the Western mind, it was grasped and formulated by the heartbroken and barely educated mother of one of the Guguletu Seven who's son had been brutally shot by the police.

Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of Christopher Piet, said: "This thing called reconciliation ... if I am understanding it correctly ... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all."

What she knew, and Bush does not, is that the person who kills one's son is doing it because he has lost his humanity. What she knew, and Bush does not, is that it is in her (and his) interest to help the perpetrator get his humanity back. What she knew, and Bush does not, is that if you kill the perpetrator, you destroy your own opportunity to get your humanity back. You freeze your society in inhumaneness. So the woman in the shack at Houtbay did not forgive because she thought now she would get what whites have. She forgave because she saw that whites have lost their humanity and because they are inhuman within all their wealth, she can not fulfil her full potential of being humane. She forgave in order to humanise whites. So the question should not be directed at the woman in the shack, but at the whites in the big

mansions: what have you done to show that you are overwhelmed by the fact that you have been so graciously forgiven and what are you doing now to show that you are slowly getting your humanity back. This is of course also a question to be asked to the West: you have so much blood on your hands, you have plundered half the world to be as ensconced as you are now, you have long ago lost your humanity. And because you are so in-humane, we are battling to stay humane. You need us, not to exploit, but to regain your humanity.

Horrific things happened and still happen in Christian societies. In the same way horrific things happened and still happen in African societies. But the world is poorer for insisting that what happened in South Africa was a miracle (and therefore not really applicable elsewhere) instead of recognising it as one of the biggest moral contributions of the 20th century.

Praise song

(compiled from Xhosa, Zulu, Venda and Sotho praise songs)

the earth is shaking for the whites
the valleys roar green
all the mountains quake
mighty nations are bewildered

because a small country brings turmoil
truly, a small country writhes to break loose
to retell the form of man
to retell being with and of another
the earth really shakes
the earth truly shakes

I salute you – earth-that-is-shaking
I salute you - Earth-shaker
milk-coffee son of ancestor Mandela
lively glowing coloured skin at the house of Sokhawulela

at the armed Dlomo, at Ngqolomsila
the secretary bird that is so tall that he walks with his knees
that is so tall that he measures the water with his shin

iron-eating iron at the place of Ndaba
the Axe-who-axes-branches-from the thorns
who axes the dark places of stupidity
he visits all the ribs of the earth
he stirs and the world is in turmoil
he pierces like a needle

this beautiful man
this utterly beautiful man from the house of Mthikrakra
all attires of power fit him
the necklace of chiefs and the loincloth of soft deer
everything fits him
red ochre fits him, even if he doesn't wear it

that is why the whites are shaking with worry
that is why they are walking on all fours out of fear
he sows wildly among them he stews them
he ruins them and turns them upside down

I salute you Earthquaker
I salute Mandela who opens the footpath so that it shines clearly
other nations call him remarkable
even the imbongi calls him: clean-shining-open-road

Africa beams beamingly through him
but the beams of a new light are not welcomed by all
the emerging sun scorches the bald heads of the mean ones
listen how their emptiness rattles
see how their greed drives them
you see only their humps as they gobble up everything

they soil the water as they grab everything for themselves

speak without fear, son of Zondwa, do not be scared
tell the truth to the westerners
they speak only their own language
they visit only their own people
they have no stories of others
they speak to others as if they are bundles of washing
they think gold shines more than cattle
they think the earth feels only their shadow
they live like locusts
the imbongi calls them those who are unable to share
those who easily live in disregard of their community

tell them the truth my leader
because even if death awaits you
life fits you so fittingly
you have the royalty of caring in your blood
you have come to tell the world about justice
as you speak every lost bone in Africa moves back to its true place

let them hear you
o, o, o let them hear you

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