

# So who's an African then?

BY ANTHEA GARMAN

**E**XCEPT for Thabo Mbeki (no doubt he's an African given that impressive speech in Parliament on the day the Constitution was accepted) and Professor Willie Breytenbach (lecturer in political science at Stellenbosch who proclaimed "I am an African and I'm proud of it" to subdued response), there were many puzzled people at the African Renaissance Conference in Johannesburg asking this vexed question.

Somehow all the discussions and workshops and behind scenes hubbubbing to kickstart the Deputy President's new campaign depended on getting to grips with this one issue.

At a press conference afterwards organisers Thami Mazwai, managing director of Mafube Publishing, and Prof Malegapuru Makgoba, said categorically being "African" was not a matter of race.

However, it was a distinctly uncomfortable experience being white at the conference. Or Arab.

Professor Kwesi Kwaa Prah from the Centre for Advanced African Studies at the University of the Western Cape was quite convinced that those in the far north of the continent, because of their political allegiance to the Arab states and their non-membership of the OAU, were simply not Africans.

That comment had a northern delegation on its feet to vociferously protest that those of Arab origin were as African as those further south.

It was a tense moment. Especially at a pan-African conference. Professor Mahmood Mamdani, lecturer in African Studies at UCT, tried to repair the damage. "African" cannot be simply geography and culture, but it is also political.

"There are three creolised cultures in Africa: 1. the African diaspora; 2. the Arabs in North Africa and 3. the 'coloureds' in South Africa of African/Asian/European descent.

"Are they wholly African? Do they wholly belong? The answers depend on politics and how people think of themselves. It is best to start with an inclusive answer: they are all Africans."

But in his categories, creolised or otherwise, was no mention of the white progeny of the colonialists and settlers.

Kwaa Prah again: "People not black can be Africans, they can be part of the cultural production hinged and rooted in Africa. To be an African is a process. Not all blacks are Africans, not all Africans are blacks."

Then Thabo Mbeki weighed in using an example from a meeting he had recently had with Afrikaner youth who told him: "Yesterday is a foreign country, tomorrow belongs to us."

Mbeki commented: "South Africa reborn constitutes their own heritage. Our first task is to transform our own society in line with this vision. Our second task is to join hands with like-minded people all over the world to make sure the new century is the African century."

And Nthobeni Moahloli, Engen General Manager of Corporate Affairs, added: "An African is a person whose home is Africa, whose loyalty is to Africa, who is willing to commit his/her energies to Africa."

Having exhausted the shades and shapes of what constitutes an African, the second question to be taken on was: What is a Renaissance? (and closely related: how to pronounce the word?)

Mamdani, ending his presentation to the approximately 500 delegates, was pointed: "I have some questions: 1. When did the Renaissance begin? In 1994? 2. Is it going to be a South African export to Africa? 3. Does it have a single parentage or does it come from many streams? And 4. Will it be pushed forward by debate or sung by a chorus?"

During the two-day conference there was lots of appropriation going on. Egypt, Timbuktu, Great Zimbabwe. Great thoughts from Kwame Nkrumah, Henry Sylvester Williams, Kenyatta, Du Bois, Tom Mboya scattered throughout conversations. A heady feeling that all things important through the centuries on this continent were coming to fruition here and now in the reborn SA.

This can produce a lot of cynicism and a feeling of being forced into a falsified process. Mamdani addressed this issue: "Every renaissance is first and foremost ideological. While you can't dictate intellectual processes and outcomes you can create enabling environments."

Intellectual processes. According to Makgoba the conference was a gathering of intellectuals (and lots of powerful business people) to give the renaissance its best start possible.

And what preoccupied them?

● **The cultural infidelity of the African elite:** Kwesi Kwaa Prah: "The African elite has so heavily bought into the cultural world of the West, the consumptive patterns born in the US and Europe, the inability to create autonomously while learning from elsewhere."

● **Self-definition and naming:** Mahmood Mamdani: "The intelligentsia of Africa walk with one foot in Africa and one elsewhere. When I first came to South Africa in 1991 I was struck by the negative images intellectuals had of themselves and of Africa. 'Intelligentsia' is a Russian word meaning all who deal in the world of ideas. By itself the intelligentsia can't create a renaissance but without the intelligentsia the renaissance can't start."

● **The intelligentsia's self-doubt:** Thami Mazwai said: "We the African intellectuals must define who the Africans are and where they are going in the global community. We are going to be actors as Africans. The white community says 'yes, you can rule but this is how you must rule'. The new order must define the new society it has created."

● **The media generated from outside the continent and its perceptions of Africa:** Edward Boateng, regional director of CNN: "We know ourselves through the BBC and CNN, we don't know ourselves directly." So was the conference just an exercise for the new elite to flex its muscles? Many editors must have thought so. There was a disappointing turnout from mainstream media to cover the event. Engaging in this debate just wasn't enough of an issue for them.

But the Deputy President, despite the simmering situation in Lesotho, spent two days sitting in a hotel conference room listening to the proceedings. When Mazwai proclaimed that the new AR committee headed by himself and Makgoba would be available day and night to assist him with thoughts and ideas he didn't murmur his thanks, but no thanks.

Something is going on here: alliances are being forged by those in power, those with power, and certain intellectuals and media players. Is this not an important enough development to gain the attention of mainstream media?

As for me, one of the few whites in the hall, what do I make of it all?

I don't feel African — the way "African" in African Renaissance is being defined. I'm not part of the new wave of the newly empowered.

I don't have a problem with selective memory that reaches back into the past and finds fragments of history to pull into the present to inspire and guide — especially not in a context as undermined and downgraded as ours.

I do worry, however, about movements guided and controlled by elites with great financial power, political power and communication power. This is a strong deviation from those things that defined the liberation struggle.

Some strong voices from workers, women and youth (and there were a few crying in the wilderness) would have gone a long way to root and reorientate the conference and the rolling force it is hoping to become.

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