

Renaissances, African and Modern: Gandhi as a Resource?

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Introduction

At the close of his *India a Million Mutinies Now*, V.S. Naipaul says:

What I hadn't understood in 1962, or had taken too much for granted, was the extent to which the country had been remade; and even the extent to which India had been restored to itself, after its own equivalent of the Dark Ages – after the Muslim invasions and the detailed, repeated vandalising of the North, the shifting empires, the wars, the 18th-century anarchy¹

There is, of course, a certain irony in using Naipaul as a point of departure for this essay on Gandhi and his significance for thinking about the African Renaissance. His positioning of Islam, as the opening quote suggests, as an un-Indian phenomenon is problematic. His reflections on Africa are perhaps even more so. His Africa, as opposed to his India, is signified by a profound, almost primordial, loss of meaning – “nothing has any meaning”, his main character, Salim, says at the close of *A Bend in the River*.² Continuing, Salim describes the people in the prison in which he finds himself: “Those faces of Africa ... I felt I had never seen them so clearly before. Indifferent to notice, indifferent to compassion or contempt, those faces were yet not vacant or passive or resigned ... They had prepared themselves for death not because they were martyrs; because what they were and what they knew they were was all they had.”³ There, in this reading of his fellow human beings, is nothing to redeem. But Naipaul, like Gandhi, and particularly those elements of Gandhi's approach to the question of racial discrimination in South Africa which appeared to seek for Indians a favoured position above Africans, is more than the sum of his parts. Naipaul's interest for this essay lies in the powerful ways he presents India as a *remade* space, as a space which has been *restored to itself*. Significantly, he talks not of an actual restoration. It is not ancient India of which he talks. As a concept, that is a modern idea. But critically, he refers to an awareness which is about the self. This awareness has historical dimensions, even political, but, to put in place the thread of logic I use in this essay, is much more ontological. An important line in his argument demonstrating this is the phrase which goes “what they owe themselves”. It is this, to which I shall return, that is important in thinking about the ways in which Gandhi may be helpful in imagining an African renaissance.

Are we able to say the same about the African continent after its own million mutinies, its own invasions and its own Dark Ages, not of its own making, that it has gone through? Clearly, the desire among Africans is there to restore the continent to

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1 V.S. Naipaul, *India: a Million Mutinies Now* (Vintage House, London, 1998), p. 517

2 V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 281

3 Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*, p. 278

itself, to take it into a glorious new renaissance. But has it, like India, as Naipaul claims for it, been able to *remake* itself? The argument will be made in this essay that it has not, but that it can. What such a remaking might be, it is suggested, can now, in the twenty-first century, only be undertaken through a process of deliberate and critical reflection which centrally includes, as the Indians have, a reappropriation of their pasts. Such a reflection, however, requires new lines of engagement with this past.

It is here that I draw on Gandhi. I look at a meaning of Gandhi in terms of what it might tell us about thinking into the future out of the post-colonial context of Africa. I am aware of critiques of Gandhi which take issue with his understanding of African people and women. In terms of this, there is any number of directions one might take the discussion of Gandhi and his relevance for rethinking Africa. In working through these challenges, the most obvious way to go is to focus on passive resistance and its historical provenance in the struggles against oppression.⁴ Taking such a route allows one to focus on passive resistance not as a political strategy, but to understand the substrate upon which it rests, the kind of ethical identity, or, to put it in my own terms, the humanness which it requires. In the discussion below I look at this substrate. Following this, I begin a second section of the article which looks at key developments in the African Renaissance discussion, and in a final closing section I consider what bearing our earlier discussion of Gandhi might have on the African Renaissance.

A Remade India?

But let us return to Naipaul for a moment. What was this remaking, this restoration to which Naipaul addressed himself? It was essentially that 130 years after the 1857 Mutiny India had set itself on the path towards a new kind of intellectual life: “it was given new ideas about its history and civilization. The freedom movement reflected all of this and turned out to be the truest kind of liberation”. Despite having begun with India’s intellectual elites, he argued that the idea of freedom had worked its way down:

People everywhere have ideas now of who they are and what they owe themselves ... There was in India now what didn’t exist 200 years before: a central will, a central intellect, a national idea ... The Indian Union gave people a second chance, calling them back from the excesses with which, in another century, or in other circumstances (as neighbouring countries showed), they might have had to live⁵

There are, to be sure, many risks in using *remaking* and particularly *restoration* as hermeneutic registers in thinking about phenomena such as renaissances, not the least of them the seductive epistemologies of ancient primordial essences lying buried and awaiting rediscovery.⁶ The ontological, however, is not a site of permanence or of fixity. It is, as Zizek⁶ says, recounting the work of Schelling, an experience which in its unfolding “fails in its endeavour to absorb the Real of the Thing without remainder ... every formulation [of the process of becoming] entails-produces a remainder”. The importance of Zizek here is great as he makes clear how

4 E Reddy, “Are Gandhiji’s Ideas Relevant in a New South Africa?”, lecture at the Spring Festival of the University of the Witwatersrand, 15 September 1991

5 Naipaul, *India: a Million Mutinies Now*, p 517

6 S Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder: on Schelling and Related Matters* (Verso, London, 1996), p 56

“radically problematic” the ontological – human emergence – is, marked as it is “by a maximum gap between possibility and actuality, ... man is in *potential* the crown of creation, yet his actuality is that of a shattering Fall”. Here lies the significance of Naipaul’s observations. The *restoration* to which he points is not an original and immaculate India, but an India seeking to reflect upon its own *fall* to explain the process of *becoming* human on its own terms. Central in this *restoration* is a consciousness, deliberately cultivated, of the self and its modes and manners of expression – the experience of Indian everyday life – as a resource for thinking about being human which operates in relation to but is not dependent on the hegemony of Europe.

It is this deliberateness that is at the heart of this essay. How might Africa, or even parts of Africa, and indeed subordinate and dominated people anywhere, begin to think of themselves in rhythms, cadences, times, moods and, critically, in their subjunctivenesses, in their alternativenesses, which are not parodies of their dominators’ or conquerors’ modes, modalities and technologies of what it means to be human? How might it, without falling into the essentialist trap of looking to an unsullied and only glorious African past, *restore* to itself its right of imagining what it means to be a human being, of becoming a human being, which is not animated either by envy – the mimicking of its subordination, or by its obverse, revenge – the achievement of subordination of its subordinators? It is this desire which frames and in some ways requires the identification of a range of readings which address the question of subjunctiveness in Africa and which speak against an idea of an essential Africa.

The Ontological Experiment of Gandhi

An important biographer of Gandhi, Louis Fischer,⁷ remarks at the very beginning of his *The Essential Gandhi* that “[t]o the end of his days, Gandhi attempted to master and remake himself. He called his autobiography *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, an ‘experiment’ being an operation within and upon oneself”. Gandhi himself explained:

[It] is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind if every page of it speaks only of my experiments ... The more I reflect and look back on the past, the more vividly do I feel my limitations ... What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization ... [As] I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet but in the open.⁸

Many commentaries draw attention to the style of Gandhi’s writing and particularly its directness.⁹ There is in much of it the absence of metaphor. This directness produces, on occasion, what appears to be immodesty. More important about it, however, is the complexity, not just of the words, but of the challenge which his candour precipitates. He is unsparing of himself and demands the same of the rest of us. The self-realisation he talks about in the passage above is about being able to “see God face to face”.¹⁰ From this will come freedom from later incarnations, he

7 L. Fischer (ed), *The Essential Gandhi* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1963), p 3

8 Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi*, p 3

9 V Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and his Apostles* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976), p 4

10 Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi*, p 4

says. But its implications for this earthly life are great: to see the “Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creatures as oneself”. Most compellingly, he continues, what this demands is that “a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life”.¹¹ Free of metaphor or not, the point he makes is that he “live(s) and move(s) and ha[s] [his] being in pursuit of this goal”.¹²

India was the canvas upon which Gandhi sought to conduct this experiment. He remained in regular contact with others who sought to follow the way of *satyagraha*. Writing the foreword to a pamphlet *A Discipline for Non-Violence* by Richard B. Gregg, he concluded: “However admirable this guide of Mr Gregg’s may appear as a well-arranged code, it must fail in its purpose if the Indian experiment fails.”¹³

Presenting *satyagraha* as an experiment as opposed to a plan of action or even a manifesto is important in understanding the significance of Gandhi. He was opposed to the process of iconicisation of himself – Gandhism – taking place in India and elsewhere, as even his most vociferous critics acknowledged.¹⁴ What he and others were doing was not writing or exemplifying a script for living but attempting to live to the limits of scrupulousness.

What this scrupulousness means in thinking about remaking and restoring to itself the colonial subject is what we now need to engage. What does Gandhi’s insistence on an ethical life mean for us now in the present? There is a great deal of debate about his usefulness for managing our lives in a hyperglobalised world suffused with all kinds of terror.¹⁵ In his correspondence with a wide range of people, as can be seen in the large corpus of writing he left behind,¹⁶ the question repeatedly arises about the virtues of modernity. For example, any number of implied and explicit doubts is expressed about the benefits of modern machinery. His responses are often inconsistent and contradictory.¹⁷ As a result of this, he is on occasion projected as being against modernity and European civilisation.¹⁸ As a consequence, his relevance for thinking about how we might confront the complexity of modernity and to construct for ourselves identities which are authentic is called into question.

Gandhi, however, understood the modern moment both viscerally and cognitively. He is caricatured as a rejectionist of the benefits that came with modernity and Western civilisation. Nothing could be further from the truth. He was clear about the good and the bad contained in it and was able to cut to the quick of its janus-facedness. Talking about religious expression, for example, he says:

I believe in the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world I believe they are all God given and I believe they were necessary for the people to whom these religions revealed And I believe that if only we could all of us read the scriptures of the different

11 Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi*, p 4

12 Fischer, *The Essential Gandhi*, p 4

13 M K Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Volume 81, 18 August, 1941 – 8 February, 1942* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1968), p 14

14 See B R Ambedkar, <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/41L.What%20Congress%20and%20Gandhi%20CH>, accessed 10 August 2008

15 A Copley, <http://www.Gandhifoundation.org/discussion.htm>, accessed 10 August 2008

16 See M K Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi IV. The Basic Works* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1968), p 149

17 See Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi IV*, p 97

18 R Connell, *Southern Theory* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007), p 187

faiths from the standpoint of the followers of these faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom all one and were all helpful to one another¹⁹

In terms of this, and extending the argument, he was able to see the complexity of faith, culture and civilisation and to recognise how significantly, in their human manifestations, these systems of thought could not be simply reduced to timeless essences. Western civilisation, thus, was not intrinsically perverse. The British were also, by nature, not evil people. What their leaders did, to illustrate the point, did not encompass the complexity of who they were and the kinds of people they were. Thinking along these lines, goodness and evil were distributed in equal proportion everywhere in the world. No one group of people held either an excess or a shortage of particular kinds of moral values. His own intellectual formation was profoundly eclectic. Tolstoy and Ruskin, for example, were as important for him as was the mythological repertoire of India. C.F. Andrews, an English priest, for example, was one of his closest friends. It was how he used these resources that is important for us to pay attention to. He was therefore, as important Gandhi commentators such as Hardiman²⁰ and Nandy²¹ have argued, deeply invested in the present and the conundrums of contemporary life. He came to be, as Hardiman²² has put it, the proponent of an alternative modernity.

What does this alternative modernity consist of? His experiment with life drew variously on Indian tradition, Western philosophy and practical experience in the diverse contexts of India, South Africa and Britain. He remained in a dialogue with these different influences and experiences, and while he insistently tended towards the simplicity of the *ashram* he constantly sought to evolve for himself a moral code which recognised the complexity of thought and life. His attitude to this complexity of thought and life was that he should always be alert to its violent inclinations. He, thus, as Hardiman²³ has argued, “tried to incorporate subaltern politics into his alternative by purging it of its violent aspects, so as to give it a strong moral superiority as against the coercive and violent politics of both the colonial state and the indigenous elites”. Similarly, he separated from Western civilisation its violent and its peaceful, or, as Nandy²⁴ describes it, the recessive elements of this civilisation, to show how congruent they actually were with Hindu and Buddhist thought.

It was this ability, that of separating the distinct and contradictory components of civilisation, that led Nandy to argue that Gandhi was “not the exemplar of any cultural or psychological pattern, but ... the person who cracked the code of colonialism, who discovered the way out of the dead-ends that had defeated all other Hindu reformers”.²⁵ He became the person who worked towards “the right state of

19 A Copley, <http://www.Gandhifoundation.org/discussion.htm> n.d., p 1, accessed 10 August 2008

20 D Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Time and Ours: the Global Legacy of his Ideas* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2003)

21 A Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration”, in R Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and its Critics* (Oxford, New Delhi, 1998), pp 321-344; A Nandy, *Time Warps: the Insistent Politics of Silent and Evasive Pasts* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002); and A Nandy, *Exiled at Home* (Oxford, New Delhi, 2005)

22 Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Time and Ours*, p 294

23 Hardiman, *Gandhi in his Time and Ours*, p 294

24 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 49

25 Connell, *Southern Theory*, p 186

mind, and made it not a secret defiance but a public ethic and a political program".²⁶ Gandhi's significance, therefore, lies not in the caricatures of non-violence that we have of him but centrally in the resources he provides for us of understanding *how* we might step *outside* of the logic of dominance. Ahluwalia,²⁷ talking about Gandhi's arrival in South Africa in 1893, comments that an early theme of his was to break down the representations ascribed to Africans and Asians "who were subjected to extreme levels of discrimination. It was here that the essence of his philosophy of civil disobedience and non-violence was developed". This moment is crucial for the purposes of this article. It provides us with a *way* in which we might begin to develop an argument for thinking about the kind or indeed kinds of renaissances that an African future might consist of.

What does Nandy say then? His key point is that Gandhi offered "an alternative language of public life and an alternative set of political and social values, and he tried to actualize them as if it was the most natural thing to do".²⁸ Gandhi did so in two ways. Firstly, he challenged the complex of masculinised conceits of civilisation and what supposedly constituted it which held up colonial dominance, and secondly, he took an approach to history which questioned its determinist teleology and the way in which it appropriated what it understood to be "objective" truth.

With respect to the first, he recognised the ways in which colonialism had come to construct British hegemony as *manly* and Indian subordination as feminine and passive and the deep habituation of this in the lineaments of everyone's thinking.²⁹ It was from this that Gandhi wanted to liberate both the British and Indians: "(t)he panicky, self-imposed captivity of the dominant ... groups in their self-made oppressive systems."³⁰ Colonial culture ordered sexual identities in the following hierarchy: manliness was superior to womanliness, and womanliness in turn to femininity in man. The Indian response to this was to attempt to beat the British at their own game. To do this "they sought a hyper-masculinity ... that would make sense to their fellow-countrymen ... and to the colonizers".³¹ The problem with this response was that it homogenised the multiplicity of Indian life around warrior ideals that were only partially and episodically valorised in its history. In invoking this presumptuous ideal these interlocutors of India found themselves marooned. "Gandhi's solution was different", explains Nandy. This solution took its inspiration from the reality that women were central to the making of the everyday. As Gandhi³² put it, "I am quite conscious of the fact that in the villages generally they hold their own with their men folk and in some respects even rule them". While there is in some of Gandhi's writing what one might call a biological essentialism in which women are accorded their place as ordained by "the scheme of nature" – they ought not have to earn their living by doing what is properly man's work – he saw women as the embodiment of a future marked by sacrifice that was counterpoised to the brute power of men:

26 Connell, *Southern Theory*, p 186

27 P Ahluwalia, *Politics and Post-Colonial Theory: African Inflections* (Routledge, London, 2001), p 36

28 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 85

29 See P C Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000)

30 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 51

31 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 51

32 Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi IV*, p 354

Whilst ... I would always advocate the repeal of all legal disqualifications [which make women unequal to men], I should have the enlightened women of India to deal with the root cause. Women is the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering, and her advent to public life should therefore result in purifying it, in restraining unbridled ambition and accumulation of property.³³

Gandhi used “two orderings, each of which could be invoked according to the needs of the situation”.³⁴ The first came from the both the great and little traditions of “saintliness in India” in which manliness and womanliness were equal, but, critically, the “ability to transcend the man-woman dichotomy [was] superior to both”.³⁵ The second, specifically used by Gandhi as “methodological justification” for the anti-imperialist movement, asserted that the essence of femininity was superior to that of masculinity, “which in turn was better than cowardice”.³⁶ Compressing Nandy, the insight he extracts from this explanation pivots on the presence, not dominance, of “some traditional meanings of womanhood in India”, which suture power, activism and femininity together more potently, and indeed more dangerously, than power, activism and masculinity. Gandhi said, for example: “For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is any day superior to man, as I believe man is to woman for the courage of the brute.”³⁷ The extension of this approach, furthermore, has it that a woman as an object of sexuality was inferior to a woman as an object of motherliness and courage. Nandy concludes this exegesis by arguing that activism and courage – *caritas* – could be liberated from aggressiveness and recognised as being “perfectly compatible” with womanhood.³⁸ This position negated the very basis of colonial culture “with its built-in fears about losing potency through the loss of activism and the ability to be violent”.³⁹ Out of this position emanates a logic of agency, the will to act and, critically, its content, which is not actuated by a notion of physical superiority embodied in the sexual potency of manhood.

The second element to Gandhi’s alternative lay in a critique of dominant historiography. What he does is to subvert the teleological nature of modern history. Tellings of this modern history present historical development as an inevitable narrative of progress which requires a pathway “from primitivism to modernity, and from political immaturity to political adulthood, which the ideology of colonialism would have the subject society and the ‘child races’ walk”.⁴⁰ In this dominant trope understanding or public consciousness was seen as the *causal* product of history. The present emanated out of an unfolding teleology of a long and unchanging past. For Gandhi this past was anything but unchangeable. It was a variable construct. It was not, to use Nandy’s⁴¹ terms, one-way traffic which pre-empted where the future might go. It was, in its configuration as myth, a resource which one could use to widen rather than restrict choice and agency. Myths “widen human choices ... by resisting co-optation by the uniformizing world view of modern science”.⁴² At the core of

33 M K Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi VI. The Voice of Truth* (Navajivan, Ahmedabad Publishing House, 1968), p 485

34 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 52

35 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 53

36 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 53

37 Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi VI*, p 490

38 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 54

39 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 55

40 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 55

41 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 59

42 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 59

Gandhi's critique of Western notions of history was the post-Medieval and Enlightenment era understanding of time that chose to place emphasis on causes rather than structures – *why* as opposed to *what* and the rationality of constant adjustment to “historical reality” – pragmatic behaviour – rather than the rationality of “a fundamentally critical attitude towards earlier interpretations”.⁴³ He rejected the idea that “historical societies” were the true representatives of “mature human self-consciousness” and especially its corollary that the more human beings were able to historically objectify the past – through fact – the more control they would have over their consciousness or their egos. He inverted that argument by saying that the more one understood one's ego, the closer one would be to managing the complex processes of the id – “brain processes”. His commentary on the *Gita* is important here. He writes to his people in his *ashram* “... desire is insatiable like fire, and taking possession of man's senses, mind and intellect, knocks him down. Therefore first control your senses, and then conquer the mind. When you have done this, the intellect will also obey your orders.”⁴⁴ Powerfully, in this argument lay the opportunity of individuals and the communities to which they belonged to be able to choose their own futures “without”, as Nandy argued, “high drama and without a constant search for originality, discontinuous changes and final victories”.⁴⁵ In this narrative of life, people impose “dominion upon fact instead of surrendering to it”.⁴⁶

A New Africa

What might one then do with this in thinking about a new Africa? The relevance of Gandhi for this question has, of course been considered elsewhere.⁴⁷ Reddy is useful, for example, in rebutting the critique that Gandhi had been disrespectful of African people during his time in South Africa. He quotes Gandhi himself who said: “Indians have too much in common with the Africans to think of isolating themselves from them. They cannot exist in South Africa for any length of time without the active sympathy and friendship of the Africans.”⁴⁸ Gandhi, moreover, repeatedly made the point to the end of his life that he was an Indian *and* a South African. In terms of this, argued Reddy,⁴⁹ Gandhi did not belong to Indian South Africans, but to all South Africans.

Mazrui, similarly, is extremely insightful and provides one with an immediate point of connection to the central argument about ontology introduced earlier and which I am seeking to develop in this second part of the article. He explains that Gandhi developed a new approach to modern politics which sought its authenticity not in the logic of the imperialising project. This imperialising project, argued Mazrui, echoing Nandy's discussion above, idealised the modern Western state form: “In the total ideology of imperialism, the right to initiate violence became a

43 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 59

44 Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi IV*, p 279

45 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 62

46 Nandy, *Exiled at Home*, p 62

47 See Reddy, “Are Gandhiji's Ideas Relevant in a New South Africa?” and A Mazrui, “Africa Between Gandhi and Nehru: an Afro-Asian Intersection Background Paper for the Wits Spring Festival, 1991, Cultural Identity in a New South Africa”, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 5 September 1991

48 Reddy, “Are Gandhiji's Ideas Relevant in a New South Africa?”, p 11

49 Reddy, “Are Gandhiji's Ideas Relevant in a New South Africa?”, p 13

prerogative which only civilization and statehood could bestow.”⁵⁰ But how is the discussion about the African Renaissance being developed now? What direction is the discussion taking and of what use to it might Gandhi be?

The discussion of a new Africa takes place, of course, in the context of the continent facing many challenges. These challenges manifest themselves across a range of areas of social life. Many of them are self-inflicted, but the blight of colonialism, and only the most blind will deny this, is deep and now wholly institutionalised as a structural and even psychological reality. Against this backdrop, the question of a new Africa is insistent, urgent and beyond the sensitivities of small-minded politics. How might we begin to think of Africa, not on its own terms, because isolation from the rest of the world is virtually impossible, as the argument I will make later will hopefully show, but critically seizing hold of its own destiny.

Interestingly, and I acknowledge that the conditions are not identical, we find ourselves in a similar position to where India was at independence in 1947. For India then the question was how it might build the nation. For us now on the continent as a whole it is slightly different. But the challenge of making an identity remains. The echoes across these last sixty years are strong. In the lead up to its independence a debate was taking place between Nehru and Gandhi about modernity, modernisation and the West. At the heart of the discussion, driven by an “urge to establish a modernity of [their] own, one that differed from Western modernity” which was, therefore, also a critique of modernity, was the question of what the character of the new Indian nation state should be.⁵¹ It was here that Nehru bent one way and Gandhi another. Different as their postures were, both found themselves asking hard questions about the relationship of India’s past to its present: “What was the India that was brought into view by the people in the villages and by their cries of ‘Victory to the Motherland?’”

Nehru’s answer to what the modern India should be was “science”.⁵² He had no wish to live in a timeless Indian past, but he thought he saw in the people “an urge driving the people in a direction not wholly realized”.⁵³ To fulfil this realisation, what the Indian people had to do, he felt, was modernise Indian society – the disavowal of religiosity and the embrace of science. Such a science, however, had to grow out of India’s national roots, which were different to that of the West which had a long way to go in developing science as “a method, an approach, a critical temper in the search for truth”.⁵⁴ At the same time, in his vision of building an India that was both national and international, he was quick to rule out imitation of the West.⁵⁵ The West, and here I am aware of how the notion of the West itself is homogenised, had come to science without being able to say anything about the purpose of life. In India lay the possibility for another road to modernity – its past was not dead but alive, and ready to give direction to science and so modernity.

50 Mazrui, “Africa Between Gandhi and Nehru”, p 13

51 G Prakash, *Another Reason* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999), p 201

52 Prakash, *Another Reason*, p 207

53 Prakash, *Another Reason*, p 204

54 Prakash, *Another Reason*, p 209

55 Prakash, *Another Reason*, p 208

For Gandhi, as we saw above, it was quite a different matter. For him it was fundamentally about discarding the Western idea of modernity. This modernity represented conflict and competition which were alien to India's tradition of village life which stood for warmth and the intimacy of family. This intimacy was built on face-to-face relationships which bound people together in an ethical order in which mutual dependence forced self-discipline. As Prakash says: "Indians were to attain their freedom and become national subjects by discarding Western disciplines and returning to indigenous sources of self-subjectification."⁵⁶

The eloquence of this debate is powerful and evocative as we ponder our own modernity and ask hard questions about our own choices as nations in the making or as nations attempting to locate themselves in the global order. But the challenge in Africa is, of course, more than that of constructing national identities. It was Nehru himself who had said: "Reading through history I think the agony of the African continent ... has not been equalled anywhere."⁵⁷ He argued that the people of the continent had more to be angry about than other people. It is in this sense – of confronting the weight of historical injustice – that the challenge in Africa is greater than it might be anywhere else. Recognising the scale of this challenge, Nehru cautioned, however, that "to the extent then that the black man [sic] had more to be angry about than other men, he would need greater self-discipline than others". Gandhi, moreover, came to the conclusion by 1936 that "maybe it was through the negroes [sic] that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world".⁵⁸

But what are the Africans themselves saying? I outline in the discussion below two schools of African thought that remain current in the debate about Africa's future, the first which I call the Utopians and the second the New Modernists. There are, of course, more. These, however, are most eminent in the discussion.

The Utopians

There is an intense desire among many oppressed people in the world to "escape" from the embrace of the globalised mainstream. This view is present in the African context in particular versions of Afrocentricism and roughly approximates to what Adams⁵⁹ describes as the self-determination school of thought in the United States. This view emerged out of frustration with the mainstream establishment and sought to separate black people physically and socially from the majority society and to create an independent "environment such as a state in which blacks can implement their survival strategies".⁶⁰ This frustration is also seen in the work of indigenous-knowledge proponents elsewhere in the world. An example is that of Brady,⁶¹ arguing for restoring Aboriginal knowledge in Australia. She says that her ancestors had in place systems of education and social cohesion "which sustained them for

56 Prakash, *Another Reason*, p 219

57 Mazrui, "Africa Between Gandhi and Nehru", p 11

58 Mazrui, "Africa Between Gandhi and Nehru", p 11

59 R Adams, "Epistemology, Afrocentricity, and Ideology", in P Logan (ed), *A Howard Reader: an Intellectual and Cultural Quilt of the African-American Experience*. (Houghton Mifflin Custom Publishing, Boston, 1997), pp 439-444

60 Adams, "Epistemology, Afrocentricity, and Ideology", p 441

61 Adams, "Epistemology, Afrocentricity, and Ideology", p 421

40,000 years ... I believe that it is time we empowered ourselves to take back our education so that we can move with pride into the next 40,000 years.” African versions of this position, of course, are by no means new and go back to struggles waged by people all over the continent, many which await proper analysis. In the South African context alone the struggles on the eastern Cape frontier await a serious revision to show how much the war between the Europeans and the Africans was not just about land but fundamentally about values. What have been described as millennial uprisings, for example, can be reinterpreted. These perspectives continue in the works of writers such as Banteyergera who argues that “‘modern education’ is not satisfactorily addressing the problems of Africa to meet the needs and aspirations of the African people”.⁶² Supporting Banteyergera, Nekhwevha⁶³ makes the point that Africans need to move away from “their long academic sojourn” in the Western imagination and should struggle “to make African culture and experience the primary constituent of our world view”. For Nekhwevha⁶⁴ this approach would be integrative, empowering and liberatory.

Central to all these critiques is a very specific description of the forms of globalising hegemony against which they are fighting. These hegemonies are predatory and have no respect for local culture and local knowledges. In globalising the local, their instinct is to instantly displace or relegate non-Western forms of understanding and knowledge to the margin. Evident in the analysis of people in this group – the utopians – is a serious and sustained critique of the hierarchalising and ranking, the dividing, and indeed the “othering” proclivities of the West and its economic, cultural and social forms. The problems pointed to are real and deep.

What these challenges lose sight of, therefore, without wishing to diminish the importance of their critique of mainstream education, is how Africanisation or indigenous knowledge systems are *already* engaged in articulation with the global world. What, however, an appeal for reviving a *displaced* Africa underestimates is the extent to which African people are continuing to hold on to their own cultural practices, are taking these practices into modernity – into institutions and practices defined by ideas of rationality such as humanism, individualism, democracy, parliament, systems of justice, education and so on that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century – and are, in the process, redefining modernity and, indeed, their own traditions. Globalisation in this situation is not a one-way process. Let us hold on to that last thought as we move to looking at the second vision embodied in new modernism.

Mbeki and the Knowledge Vision: the New Modernists

Part of the difficulty of the utopian ideal is the challenge of how to live in and with modernity. In this regard, the contributions made by African leaders are important. Among these, former South African President Mbeki’s contributions are critical

62 H Banteyergera, “An Alternative Model in Teacher Education: the Classroom in Focus”, a paper presented at the Pan-African Colloquium, Educational Innovation in Post-colonial Africa: University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 1994

63 F Nekhwevha, “No Matter How Long the Night, the Day is Sure to Come: Culture and Educational Transformation in Post-Colonial Namibia and Post-Apartheid South Africa”, in C Soudien and P Kallaway (eds), *Education, Equity and Transformation* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1999), pp 159-167

64 Nekhwevha, “No Matter How Long the Night”

because he is, arguably, paying the most attention to these questions, having repeatedly expressed himself with respect to the question of Africa's relationship to the West. What he has to say, however, is important to engage with critically. Addressing the Third African Renaissance Festival in Durban in 2001, he opened his address with the following comment: "As Africans we are faced with the urgent challenge of ending poverty and underdevelopment on our Continent ... The first objective we confront ... is that we must ourselves take on the responsibility to answer the question – what are the ways and means that we must adopt to ensure that we achieve these objectives."⁶⁵ In framing his answer he begins with the comment that

... it is necessary that the peoples of Africa gain the conviction that they are not, and must not be wards of benevolent guardians, but instruments of their own upliftment. Critical to this is the knowledge by these peoples that they have a unique and valuable contribution to make to the advancement of human civilisation, that despite everything we have said, Africa has a strategic place in the global community

In so doing he presents himself, interestingly, as Nehru's heir. Here, India and Africa stand in a like relationship to the West – each with its own moral authority as it attempts to position itself to take on the task of modernisation. Critically, however, Mbeki falters, much as Nehru did, as he seeks to explain how this moral authority might be translated into a manifesto for socialising the nation *through* its past and *into* an autonomous future. For a practical solution to *how* the authority of Africa is invoked Mbeki turns to the concept, more the imperative, of recreation and leisure, "without which" he says, "technological development will create the forces for its own destruction".⁶⁶ I am not going to rehearse the full argument here but the climax it reaches after sketching the full panorama of Africa's natural and human riches, suggests that "tourism should be treated as a critical corollary of modern scientific and technological development." The argument, of course, can be read simplistically, but significantly, the point needs to be made, we are still left with the difficulty of working out the bases on which we frame our values. Mbeki's solution leaves agency in the visitor-knowledge producer. It is through the ocular example of what Africa is all about that the fullness of its glory will be made manifest. The problem is, of course, that it is we ourselves who must determine what it is that we think is important. We, therefore, need to speak for ourselves, as opposed to being spoken for.

Towards a New Space: Alongside of Gandhi

Important as these two approaches are, difficulties remain. One might argue that the first group we described above, the Utopians, present us with the challenge of how individuals and people anywhere might *actually* extricate themselves from the globalising world. The new modernists, while recognising the ubiquity of modernity, struggle with articulating a view of themselves which is not derivative. As Partha Chatterjee says about them, "the imposition of high [European] culture on society" has the effect of having to work with a "discourse ... which, even as it challenge[s] the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepts the intellectual

65 T Mbeki, Address at the Third African Renaissance Festival, Durban, 31 March 2001, p 1
66 Mbeki, Address at the Third African Renaissance Festival, p 12

premises of ‘modernity’ *on which colonial domination was based*.⁶⁷ This latter problem, I suggest, constitutes the central paradox for determining a future direction for the renaissance in Africa, and indeed everywhere else in the world. The paradox, for many, amounts to the abidingly complex puzzle of how they might engage with this “high” road and still remain alert to the challenges of including all their people and the full repertoire of their own memories, traditions and histories.⁶⁸

But do these two approaches exhaust or contain the possibilities for a new Africa? Is Africa’s future only imaginable in these dichotomised views of the world? Emphatically not. There are several ways in which the challenge might be met. I would like, however, to suggest that a productive vein of possibility is opened up by bringing a careful reading of Gandhi, and especially his attempt to uncouple masculinity from domination and history from determinism, to the challenge of renewal in Africa.

What such a hard reading forces is an abandonment of the dominant monological discourse driving the idea of Europe and those particular Afrocentric analogues which operate in its wake. I am suggesting that discourses such as these, following Gandhi, have had the effect, profoundly, of limiting description, analysis and, critically, imagination. The consequence is that it is almost impossible now to tell the story of Africa, its people and the individuals inhabiting its spaces, and indeed, any place in the world, outside of the limiting masculinised and teleological tracks of thought engraved into the dominant rules of exposition and analysis.

What a Gandhian reading of Africa might stimulate is a re-evaluation of our dominant tools of social analysis and social description, such as tribe and race, many of which find their origin in attempts to make sense of life only as social systems. As a post-structuralist, I would not for a moment suggest that these are insignificant categories of analysis, or even less, that we can do without them, but in the ways they have come to be shot through with compulsions of social reproduction which depend on *great man* tropes, they obscure how much history and life are always multidimensional. I am also not discounting the possibility that great men, and women, exist – Gandhi was after all a great man – but they exist alongside of a multitude of experiences and imaginations which dominant historiographical traditions, in their hegemonic and now near universal versions, choose to *order* in particular kinds of ways. What I am suggesting is that our current modes of engagement with the idea of a renaissance, or even its possibility, are captured by regimes of thought such as these. The possibility of a renaissance might begin through a process of unmooring Africa, or even loosening it, as some Indians have, from the epistemological imperatives of this great man history and beginning to see in it completely new, and hopefully autonomous ways of talking about itself.⁶⁹ What these new ways would be aware of is how occluded African history is. It would come to terms with the aggression prescribed for manhood and the privileged status expressions of violence which are accorded in ways of telling the story of what it

67 P Chatterjee, “Our Modernity”, a lecture published by the South-South Exchange Programme for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, Rotterdam/Dakar, 1997, p 30

68 See A Sen, 2000 “Culture and Development”, unpublished talk at World Bank Meeting, 13 December 2000, mimeo

69 See Nandy, *Time Warps* for new ways in which the globalisation discussion is being managed

means to be a human being. It would recognise the collusion between colonial and precolonial masculine hegemonies in displacing the complex stories of everyday life in Africa. And critically, it would come to terms with the teleological ways these dominances have prescribed Africa's movement into the future. Hogan,⁷⁰ to illustrate the point, explains that one of the effects of colonial denigration of indigenous culture was to create a view of indigenous cultures as feminine or effeminate and the metropolitan culture as masculine. This, as Oliphant⁷¹ argues in a recent dissertation on identity-making processes in Lesotho, had multiple effects. Working in town in Lesotho or in the South African mining towns came to be associated with masculinity, while staying home in the rural areas in Lesotho was associated with effeminacy. Being employed, especially away from home in the rural areas, either in the South African mining centres or of late, in the urban areas of Lesotho, is to fulfil a man's socially defined economic role. It is to be manly and therefore fatherly and fit for marriage, if unmarried. This stereotype, Oliphant explained, was, and remains

socially strong, sustained and promoted but controversial. A woman in Sesotho is "Mosali", which literally means "one who stays behind", especially in the home. It also has its usual suggestion of the effeminate one. If a man is unemployed and is always at home, he is derogatorily referred to as "Mosali". This is considered very demeaning and insulting to a man. Many women, too, despise such a man as not man enough. Some separations in marriage have come as a result of this phenomenon.⁷²

Reading across the grain of accounts such as these we would need to recognise, as suggested earlier, the patriarchal collusions that take place between the modern and the traditional and the new social settlements, as modern, that are emerging. But we would have to read these as constructed as opposed to biological assertions of who human beings are. Reading them literally we would not see the experimental nature of life. It is to this that I now turn. I suggest that a Gandhian reading of Africa would be significantly more aware of the experimental nature of the past and the present, and the deployment of each within the other. Resisting dominant historiography's tendentiousness, such a reading would go in search of contradiction and ambiguity instead of disavowing it. It would open itself up to the possibility that another story is always available. Alternativeness, otherness, displacement, the *subjunctive* would always be permitted, as opposed to the pre-emptive rules of history which declare these – the "what might have been" – as *unhistorical*.

Powerfully, in coming to terms with the significance of this argument, where might we begin to look for this experimental ontology in Africa's history? I would argue that important new evaluations need to be made of the stories of the last 500 years and of where we are in the present. Crucial as the heroic resistance of *men* might have been in the shaping of the story of Africa, and of course figures such as Shaka Zulu, Hintsa, Mzilikashe, Moshoeshe and countless others stand out powerfully, they have to be seen alongside of a multitude of ways in which what has come to be perceived as *feminine* qualities have played a role in shaping human behaviour. Important new recountings, therefore, are necessary for explaining who we are and how we have come to the point of the present.

70 Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity*, pp 17-18

71 J. Oliphant, "Teacher Educators' Professional Identities in Lesotho" PhD, University of Cape Town, 2009

72 Oliphant, "Teacher Educators' Professional Identities in Lesotho", p 53

What this approach makes possible is for us to come to the present with new ways of explaining our social reality, to see it not simply, or only, as a stage or a phase in the long cycle of European inevitability but as a time and a space in which human beings are, as they have been in the past, experimenting with their lives. We see, thinking like this, important new ways of reading the present.

The Experimental Nature of the Present

Discussions of the African present, predictably, abound with anxiety.⁷³ It is not preoccupation that concerns us here. More important are the range of ideas of moving away from the challenges that obviously animate this present. In the discussion that follows I make the argument that amidst the challenges of African political and economic life we have in the everyday experiences of people, not the headline news about political and economic strife, important illustrations of how people are already engaging critically with modernity. Out of these engagements, I suggest, have come powerful new ontological stances. Instead, therefore, of inventing new ways of explaining how individuals and groups of people might mitigate, overcome and even transform the corrosive and exclusionary modes of operation of our dominant modernity, our challenge in contemporary society is how to make explicit the knowledge practices that are inside of these ways of living across modernity and that are already there, and to make those the deliberate subject of public debate and dialogue.

In terms of this everyday, what is already present in African engagements with modernity is not, as many significant commentators on the African Renaissance have attempted to show us, a singular approach to living and being a part of the process of change taking place on the continent. To surface the polarities, it is neither only a singular African identity which is being cultivated, one which seeks to preserve its precolonial social and cultural lineaments uncontaminated, nor, on the other hand, a wholly overwhelmed and overdetermined African identity which has no regard, respect or self-referentiality to its past. It is, as Achille Mbembe⁷⁴ has constantly sought to remind, a myriad of diverse social practices that one ought not to be seeking a unitary origin for. What is there in front of our eyes is what we ought to be looking at sociologically and analytically. And in a deliberate and self-conscious way we ought to recover that which makes us better human beings.

It is at this point that recovery of Gandhi's two insights about the Indian experience is crucial. Gandhi has significance for us as an ontology of anti-heroism. In his view of agency and history, the two critical elements I sought to explain above resided the belief that India, as an example, had available to itself a mode of recovering history which did not depend on a determinist and masculinist causal view of the present. There, I suggest, lie important new ways of recovering ontologies of the human experience which are far more inclusionary, much more aware of contradiction and distinctly more complex around notions of our humanity that are less raced and less masculinised. In them is a whole other dimension of who we have *actually* been as human beings and which we can talk about, through the lived experience of individuals and communities everywhere in the world, empirically.

73 M Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: the New Struggle* (Mafube, Sandton, 1999)

74 A Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001), p 33

What this view does is to help us recognise, as happened in India, the profound significance for inserting new sociological and historical modes of description of the world which we inhabit and to seed these into public discourse. The analytic reflection to make here is that those forms of historical recovery of Africa which subsist in declarations of African purity, nobility of spirit and uniqueness, while interesting as strategic counters to chauvinistic, masculinist and raced accounts of an imaginary Europe, are in and of themselves problematic. They are problematic to the degree, as Prah, Mzamane and Mamdani,⁷⁵ and indeed many others say, that they remain trapped in the discursive web of Eurocentricism. Their inclination is to rebut the deep prejudice of Africa as an empty historical signifier. Important, and indeed necessary as this move might be, it has the danger of reproducing the categories of oppression embodied in the European discourse and failing to recognise how Africa has been going through its own ontological experiment in relation to modernity.

Modern anthropological work on Africa, such as that of the Comaroffs and Fabian, provides us with important resources to understand the syncretic way in which communities everywhere in Africa are remaking their lives. In this remaking they are taking elements of their contemporary existence, from the full repertoire of social experience at their disposal, and crafting new forms of social engagement. A critical move of *being* has taken place here that we have failed to understand precisely because of the dominance of European historiographical tradition. In the process of elevating the sphere of the formal – the great man in history – the pervasive significance of the everyday is occluded. Here in the everyday, I suggest, are to be seen the million mutinies of Africa that Naipaul could not see. To Naipaul’s resignation, it is suggested that in the everyday lie possibilities for seeing the persistence of agency. I could describe this agency empirically in the modes of survival and flourishing that have emerged everywhere. But it is in the modes of consciousness that have emerged that we need to look for what Africa is able to teach the world.

To understand the possibilities here we have to recover an important theoretical move that has been made sociologically, as I suggested before, by Du Bois with his idea of double vision, psycho-socially by Fanon in his discussion of what he calls the “occult zone” and in the field of cultural studies by people such as David Grossberg and Homi Bhabha talking about the “third space”.⁷⁶ I am suggesting here that much of the everyday engagement with modernity takes place in this “occult zone” or “third space”. This third space is neither inside nor outside modernity but pivots across the meaning of being both inside and outside of it. Central about this third space, it is argued here, is the fact that it already is a deep feature of everyday

75 K Prah, “African Renaissance or Warlordism?”, in M W Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: the New Struggle* (Mafube, Sandton, 1999), pp 37-61; N Mzamane, “Eurocentric and Afrocentric Perspectives on Ancient African History”, in M W Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: The New Struggle* (Mafube, Sandton, 1999), pp 173-183; and M Mamdani, “There Can Be No African Renaissance Without an African-Focused Intelligentsia”, in M W Makgoba (ed), *African Renaissance: the New Struggle* (Mafube, Sandton, 1999), pp 125-136

76 L. Grossberg, “Introduction: Bringin’ It All Back Home – Pedagogy and Cultural Studies”, in H Giroux and P McLaren (eds), *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies* (Routledge, New York, 1994), pp 23-42; H Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (Routledge, New York, 1994)

life in many societies. It is already present, for example, as young Chinese people encounter the similarities and differences of the old cultures their parents remember and cherish with the Western world presented to them in film, song, text and social practice. It is also present, as an example, as young African people take the lessons of modernity – primarily school – with them into their initiation practices and overturn initiation so that it is not simply or only a test of masculine endurance, but, critically, one of social literacy.⁷⁷ Young people such as these, described eloquently by Ngwane in his study of Eastern Cape initiation processes, take the ancient practice of going to the mountains and give it new content. The example he provides is by no means the trend, but it is an important illustration of the experimental nature of social practice.

Ngwane's example is one that I regularly refer to. What we have here is documented evidence of young people overturning the essence of their initiation into adulthood through the transformation of initiation from a physical encounter with hardship to a mental challenge of acuity. Less dramatically, and demonstrating the reverse direction of cultural flow, there is the mobilisation of tradition in managing the everyday through the frameworks of schooled forms of thinking in the creation of social networks which not only help people to survive within modernity but, significantly, to thrive. It is the merging of knowledge forms. We have locally what Sen⁷⁸ saw being used to great positive effect in places such as Japan, namely the recruitment of ancient cultural practices to help people establish very different corporate cultures in the workplace. Important about these examples is that they signify and carry embodied forms of learning. The past is always in the present. It is there, however, not as a script but as a resource. There is, therefore, intense internal negotiation taking place in people's heads and also conversations as people effect these translations between their different cultural universes and create for themselves new, call it hybrid if you like, social cultures which are deeply rooted in their everyday worlds. This learning is implicit and informal, and simultaneously intensely straightforward and deeply complex. Important about it, is that it manages to work across the epistemological frameworks of the different worlds it inhabits.

An important and urgent task facing us in the social sciences is how we might begin to make these developments that have taken place explicit with the primary purpose of understanding the nature of the agency that is being expressed in these social transactions to inform our practice as cultural activists. I have elsewhere described the difficulty of attempting to put into words the nature of this translation and suggested that it amounts to what I called a crisis of representation.⁷⁹ This crisis, I said, presents us in the historical juncture in which we find ourselves with a moment of profound pedagogical possibility, because in it one comes face to face with the possibility that one does not immediately have the words to capture meaning. The importance of this recognition is great. Because it is so complex we back off from it. Getting closer to developing a hold of it will be a powerful and critical moment for all of us.

77 See Z Ngwane, "Apartheid Under Education: Schooling, Initiation and Domestic Reproduction in Post-Apartheid South Africa, in P Kallaway (ed), *The History of Education Under Apartheid, 1948-1994* (Pearson, Cape Town, 2003)

78 Sen, "Culture and Development"

79 C Soudien, "Inside but Below: the Puzzle of Education in the Global Order", in J Zajda and R Zajda (eds), *Globalisation, Education and Policy Research: Changing Paradigms International Handbook on Globalisation, Education and Policy Research* (Kluwer Press, Dordrecht, 2004), pp 239-248

Sociologically, in trying to seize this movement between the traditional and the modern, we will see that knowledge is never capable of being faithfully and completely reproduced. It is always in a state of interpretation. Looking at it in this way, all knowledge is provisional and vulnerable. No knowledge is absolute. Modernity as a new universalism, homogeneity and standardisation as new forms of totalisation are therefore problematic. Knowledge itself must therefore be made the object of inspection and not simply accepted or rejected because of where it comes from. What is its history, its objective and its scope?

Conclusion

Significantly, in taking this way, we have here a form of Gandhi's experimentalism practised in the everyday. At the core of the experience, and here this experiment of African ontology makes a contribution and begins a process of, as Naipaul would have it, *restoring itself to itself*, is how circumstances of the last few hundred years have required Africans to live across difference and in the process come to develop what Du Bois called "double vision". What this double vision consists of is an ability to read dominance even as this dominance is being exercised over one. Fanon's *occult zone* is also, famously, precisely about this. This, of course, is by no means a peculiarly African phenomenon. Bhabha described it, as explained above, as a phenomenon of the encounter between the colonist and the coloniser.⁸⁰ But it takes on added significance in Africa where, as we heard Nehru say earlier, the "agony of [the] African continent" placed it in a distinct position and gave it a special role.⁸¹

The added significance of Africa, against its agony, is fundamentally the necessity of living across difference that colonialism has imposed on it. For Africa, this difference is expressed most acutely and most crudely in the systematisation of race as an ontology, and the humiliation of the African subject. It is experienced also in a whole range of other forms of difference, that of citizen and subject, as described by Mamdani, being an important example. The ways in which the African subject has come to manage these differences to produce a *way of living* – sometimes described as a burden by commentators in the United States because of its two-ness, its schizophrenia – is a critical source of vitality and renewal. In these terms it is a gift Africans have in leading the world by showing how one might live across complexity. This vitality, however, is not, in and of itself, virtuous or constructed around a notion of public good. Given the conditions of its genesis it is available for the full range of human inclinations, including antisocial behaviour. Crime as a social phenomenon needs to be reread sociologically, I would suggest, against these ways of understanding the African experience.

It is here that the great work of intellectual responsibility lies for us in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Our challenge is how we might theorise this experience in such a way that its *virtuous*, as opposed to its antisocial, potentialities might be revealed. This is the moment where the "agony" of Africa is turned around into its beauty and strength. We have intimations of such an intellectual response in our discussion of non-racialism and anti-racism. But even this is as yet insufficiently explicated. It remains, nonetheless, deeply significant. This

80 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*

81 Mazrui, "Africa Between Gandhi and Nehru", p 11

message and the way it has come to be articulated, almost unique in the world, was expressed as early as the middle of the nineteenth century when the new African elite began to consider the place of Africa in the world, but it took off in the 1930s when small groups of left-wing intellectuals in the Western Cape, profoundly conscious of their own subordination and simultaneously aware of the impending racial horror of World War II, made clear, at the same time as Aldous Huxley was beginning to write on race, how vacuous the concept of race was.⁸² There are many features of this project which need to be highlighted and brought into perspective in order to understand the distinctiveness of the theory as an ontology. Characteristic of much of the work of the movement is its simultaneous foregrounding and sublimation of the individual. At its core, the project was, and remains, inspired by the Enlightenment project and it is deeply committed to the notion of the individual as an agent in his or her own history. In this respect the movement is unequivocally modernist. It is the individual who must step into history. In this, the basic individual human right to the franchise is non-negotiable. Along with it have to come civil liberties. It is not sufficient, the argument goes, that people have the vote, they have to have the right “to fight and organise to change their miserable conditions ... There [has to be] the deliberate and *conscious* abolition of inequality”.⁸³

The perspicacity of this work, as an ontological route marker for Africans, lies in its attempt to provide a theoretical framework within which the “burden” of twoness, of double vision, might come to be used as a resource. This perspicacity emanates from an engagement with the historical, scientific canon long before this kind of writing appears in the work of the world’s most significant anti-racist scientists, such as Stephen Jay Gould. Its key interlocutors, such as Ben Kies, are not only familiar with the latest anthropology of the 1950s, for example the work of the Leakeys in East Africa, but also with the emerging work of South African anthropologists such as Dart and Broome who are beginning to talk of the southern African region as being the “cradle” of humanity. But it is, critically, grounded in the experience of living across difference in Africa and realising how fertile this way of life anticipates the belief and the practice of an idea of the commonness of the human race. Kies, for example, explains:

We are in no position at the present time to pronounce upon the weight of the evidence thus far produced by the newer line of research. It is *sufficient* for our purpose to say that we, the so-called “children of Ham”, together with Messrs D F Malan and Eric Louw⁸⁴ derive from the same stock, *homo sapiens*, and the Mau Mau ... The human race is now, as it was when *homo sapiens* evolved, one biological species, with the same number and formation of bones, the same brain and nerve structure, the same internal organs, the same four types of blood groups ... and the same capacity, in fact propensity, for interbreeding ... Geographical dispersal, isolation and diet, have not made the slightest difference to the biological unity of man as a single species, and provide no scientific basis for a division into what are popularly mis-called “races”.⁸⁵

82 Prah, “African Renaissance or Warlordism?”, p 43

83 S Mokone, “Majority Rule: Some Notes”, reprinted from the *Educational Journal of the Teachers’ League of South Africa* (Teachers League of South Africa, Cape Town, 1982)

84 Key politicians in the National Party who, at the time, were propagating the basic racial principles of separate development

85 B Kies, “The Contribution of Non-European Peoples to World Civilisation”, *A.J. Abrahamse Memorial Lecture* (The Teachers’ League of South Africa, Cape Town, 1953), p 12

It is out of the process of a critical retrieval of ideas such as these, as theoretical complements to the experimental approaches to living across the differences of time, space and identity that are emerging out of Africa, that the lineaments of an African renaissance might emerge.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to understand the significance of Gandhi for the discussion about the African Renaissance. The article begins with the argument that the critical process of self-reflection begun in India about its past as a resource for imagining its future is central to any possibility of a renaissance in Africa. It draws on Gandhi in terms of what an examination of his central ideas might tell us about a future post-colonial Africa. Two of these ideas relate to the role of women in society and the attendant impact this view has on dominant masculinist tropes found in colonial historiography. Using these, the article looks at Gandhi not for the political and strategic choices he makes, but for understanding the kind of ethical identity or, the humanness which Gandhi's life represents.

Opsomming

Die Renaissance'e van Afrika en die Moderne : Gandhi as 'n Hulpbron?

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die betekenis van Gandhi vir die bespreking van die Afrika Renaissance te bepaal. Die artikel begin met die argument dat die kritiese proses van self-refleksie wat in Indië oor die land se verlede as 'n hulpbron vir die voorstelling van sy toekoms begin het, sentraal in die moontlikheid van enige Renaissance in Afrika staan. Dit fokus op Gandhi in terme van wat 'n ondersoek van sy kernidees ons van 'n toekomstige post-koloniale Afrika mag vertel. Twee van hierdie idees hou verband met die rol van vroue in die gemeenskap en die gevolglike impak wat hierdie mening op dominante manlike sinnebeelding in koloniale historiografie gevind het. Met die gebruik hiervan, bestudeer die artikel Gandhi, nie om die politieke en strategiese keuses wat hy gemaak het nie, maar ten einde die tipe etiese identiteit of menslikheid wat Gandhi se lewe verteenwoordig, te verstaan.

Keywords

African historiography; African modernities; African politics; African Renaissance; African Studies; cultural studies; Gandhi and Africa; Gandhi and masculinity; post-colonialism; South-South relations.

Sleutelwoorde

Afrika historiografie; Afrika moderniteite; Afrika politiek; Afrika Renaissance; Afrika Studies; Gandhi en Afrika; Gandhi en manlikheid; kulturele studies; post-kolonialisme; Suid-Suid verhoudings.