

The African in my dream

26 July 1996

**Keynote Address: Black Management Forum - 20th anniversary banquet
held at Gallagher Estate**

At the launch of democratic South Africa's Constitution on 8 May 1996, Thabo Mbeki, then Deputy-President of the Republic of South Africa, made a profound statement in an address titled simply; "I am an African". The speech was as compelling as it was comprehensive, as inclusive as it was inspiring, as philosophical as it was poetic.

The flame of inspiration for my address to the Black Management Forum's 20th anniversary was sparked by Mbeki's epoch-defining declaration. The African I see in this dream manifests essentially in the spheres of management and leadership. The kind of leadership that, in my humble opinion, should launch and manage an African renaissance. Leadership that appreciates that Africa has a date with destiny.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Black Management Forum, it is fitting that there should be introspection, a review of where we come from and what we have achieved. It is a time to hold the mirror up to ourselves, to recognise ourselves for who we are as a people. The leadership of the BMF are well-placed to review the past 20 years.

I am here for a different reason. I am here to help hold up a mirror, not so that we can see ourselves for what we have become, but so that we can see ourselves for what we may become.

On the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of the Republic of South African Constitution Bill, 1996, Thabo Mbeki made an eloquent declaration and affirmation. He said: "I am an African."

The African Mbeki described is each one of us. The African described is a proud one; an African who has been shaped by a somewhat unforgiving environment both physically and sociologically; an African just assuming his rightful place among a community of nations; an African harking back to his roots, to founding principles. I wish to speak of this African. I now hold up the mirror that reflects the African of the future, the African who is not shaped by events and the environment, but an African who shapes events and the environment.

In closing his address to the Constitutional Assembly on that day on 8 May 1996, Mbeki's closing words were:

'Whoever we may be, whatever our immediate interest, however much we carry baggage from our past, however much we have been caught by the fashion of cynicism and the loss of faith in the capacity of the people, let us err today and say - nothing can stop us now'

Mbeki started the discussion. It is our responsibility to continue the discussion. So let us continue : The African I want to speak of, the African that in the words of Mbeki cannot be stopped, is the product of a dream. The dream is in each one of us, uniquely experienced by each one of us, the dream belongs to us all. Permit me to share with you the African that I see in my dream :

I see an African who is master of his destiny
I see an African who has a vision
I see an African who is known for what he stands for
I see an African who is a profoundly moral being
I see an African who has integrity
I see an African who is able and competent
I see an African who leads a renaissance
I see an African who takes responsibility for his actions
I see an African who builds the future
I see an African who when he looks in the mirror, sees the hand of God

Great republics

The African I dream of will not fondly reminisce about the empires of Gao and Monomatapa, he will found the great republics of the future.

The African I dream of will not lament the bountiful granaries and prize herds of a millennium gone by, he will feed the world of tomorrow. The African I dream of will not boast of having been pre-eminent in the technologies and the economy of the Stone Age and the caravan trade, she will define new frontiers of knowledge and the economy of any time, any place, any how.

The African I dream of will not pride himself only on his philosophy of humanness, he will be renowned also for his capacity to create and sustain human life in its most glorious form, nourished as much materially as it is spiritually.

The African I dream of will not boast about the military conquest of a pre-colonial age, he will make war unnecessary. The African I dream of will not be understood through the studies of archaeology, history and anthropology, she will be understood only through an understanding of a timeless mythology of achievement.

The African I dream of will not dream most of his dreams in his sleep, he will dream his most profound and most fondly held dreams in his waking moments.

The African I describe is each one of us, each with a deeply held belief in the power within ourselves to profoundly influence our future and to determine our destiny. Each one of us must accept the responsibility that we are leaders, that we have a responsibility to ourselves, to the world and most importantly to the future. Each one of us, as the African of the future, brings a perspective to the understanding and practice of leadership. Our notion of leadership is informed by many qualities and has many dimensions.

We understand that leadership is the product of vision, of a sense of efficacy, of integrity and of ability. We understand that we are not leaders because we have power, public acclaim, wealth or privileged access.

We do not confuse cause and effect. We do not go on to compound the conundrum of leadership by elevating the effects of leadership, i.e. power, wealth and acclaim, to ends in and of themselves, sought and exercised for their own sake. We fully understand that the pursuit of these as ends in and of themselves will lead us down pathways where it matters not how we acquire these, nor to what purpose we employ them. It leads us to corruption.

We have a responsibility to have a vision. At all times the responsibility to determine where we are going is uniquely ours. The African of the future whom I see seeks and employs the advice and skills of others only to speed the journey to a chosen destination - she does not rely on the advice and skills of others to determine what the destination ought to be. She understands that the agenda is ours. The agenda is of Africa.

Each one of us individually, even in ostensibly our most insignificant acts, understands that we have a profound effect on the world in a manner that may not be visible.

The agenda is of Africa

We understand from the lessons of Chaos Theory that there are no random arbitrary events, that every event, even the most seemingly random, is part of a pattern and has a cause. We understand from this Chaos Theory, that the butterfly in China, flapping its wings, creates atmospheric waves that gradually magnify, creating climatic conditions that manifest themselves as a thundershower in the Amazon.

We understand that as butterflies we will not always know beforehand the nature, place nor timing of the effects of the flapping of our wings. Therefore, we accept no breach nor lapse in our integrity and morality because we know that everything counts.

We understand that there is no distinction between private and public morality, no distinction between private and public behaviour, that even our innermost thoughts are acts of leadership. We understand that each waking moment for each one of us, is an act of leadership. We understand that even our most private actions and thoughts are therefore based on principles and morality instead of expediency.

In one of his books on leadership, Warren Bennis recounts an ancient Oriental allegory of a bird called a cormorant, which is used by local fishermen for fishing. The technique involves a man in a rowboat with about a half-dozen cormorants, each with a ring around its neck. When the bird spots a fish, it dives into the water and catches the fish. Then it comes back to the boat.

The ring prevents the cormorant from swallowing the larger fish, and the fisherman takes the fish from the beak of the cormorant. The cormorant then dives for another fish and the cycle repeats itself.

The African I see in the mirror is not a cormorant, she does not have a ring around her neck, harnessed by others to serve interests other than her own. The African I see in my mirror is a fish eagle, master of her own destiny, harnessing her ambition, skills, talent for her own chosen purposes, not using her talents, her skills, her ambition to be enslaved for the purpose and greed of others.

The African I see in the mirror invests for the generations of the future and not consumption

of today. He affirms and encourages success. He understands that the success of others does not diminish his own, that it adds to the common wealth.

The African I see makes the present the springboard for her children's dreams, not their nightmare. It is an African who understands that the dreams we have in our waking moments today become the reality of tomorrow.

Achievement at all levels, from the most mundane to the truly stupendous, is a product of creative ignorance. Achievers are people who do not know what they don't know. They do not understand that it is impossible to achieve the things they go on to achieve.

Moses did not know that he could not cross the Red Sea
David did not know that he could not take on Goliath
JF Kennedy did not know that man could not go to the moon
Chris Chataway did not know he could not run a sub 4-minute mile
The students of 1976 did not know they could not take on the might of the apartheid state.
Mohammed Ali did not know he could not beat Sonny Liston and go on to become the Greatest
Mandela did not know he could not wear a casual shirt to a state dinner with the Queen of England.

The African I see in the mirror will be truly creatively ignorant. This African will not understand that all of the things I have spoken of are impossible. This African will not understand that the African I speak of cannot exist.

This African will not understand that she cannot create the world in her image, reflecting Africa's fondest dreams, Africa's deepest ambition.

Somebody with far better economy and choice of words summarised all that I had to say in one paragraph. It is a paragraph that the African we speak of would commit to heart as a guiding philosophy. In closing therefore, I borrow the words of James McCune Smith, commenting on the success and contributions of Frederick Douglass, a 19th century African American leader of great stature:

"When a man raises himself from the lowest condition in society to the highest, mankind pays him the tribute to their admiration; when he accomplishes this elevation by native energy, guided by prudence and wisdom, their admiration is increased; but when his course, onward and upward, excellent in itself, furthermore proves possible what had hitherto been regarded as an impossible reform, then he becomes a shining light on which the aged may look with gladness, the young with hope, the downtrodden as a representative of what they themselves may become"

Yes, I know. It is only a dream.