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Dreaming of a new kind of freedom

By Muff Andersson

Will South Africa survive? Can we break the chains of abuse from the past? Have we survived colonialism? And what sort of future relationship should our continent forge with the United States in an age of American domination? Five leading academics provide vastly differing perspectives on the transformation of our continent.

Will South Africa survive? Can we break the chains of abuse from the past? Have we survived colonialism? And what sort of future relationship should our continent forge with the United States in an age of American domination?

For five leading academics who straddle eight disciplines — history, anthropology, literature, culture, psychology, economics, politics and law — these questions are central to their research into contemporary transformations in "Africa and its elsewheres", a term coined by Achille Mbembe. He is a research professor in history and politics at Wits University and a senior researcher at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research.

These five academics do not always see eye to eye. They have different theoretical backgrounds, unusual views on colonialism — colonialism as "progressive", or no worse than pre-colonialism and post-colonialism, for example — and they donÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t trot out nationalist diatribes that have passed their sell-by date. These thinkers, simply, want to change the world.

For all of them the relations of abuse must go. There is consensus about redefining value systems globally and introducing a politics of care. This hinges not simply on political and economic change but requires shifts in thinking — consciousness raising — within formerly oppressed individuals.

They talk about the need to break out of victimhood, to "out" the skeletons of racism and abuse from our closets — the shameful "family secret" — and to confront our responsibilities as individuals and community members.

There is global insecurity, so much so that we are seeing a retreat into traditional religions. The insecurity comes not just from HIV/Aids but from AfricaÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s "death economy", the consequences of ongoing wars in our region. The threat to world peace posed by US domination looms large, but South Africa (and its youth) has an important part to play in changing the world, particularly through using the "ties that bind" between Africa, the former colonised world, the Caribbean and the Americas.

Achille Mbembe

MbembeÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s ground-breaking work on the "postcolony" rethinks resistance and oppression. He asks: "What remains of the promise of African self-determination after the colony?

"My term 'postcolonyÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ refers to the relationship established, after the colony, between the exercise of power and the process of becoming savage."

His book On the Postcolony (2001) started "as a conversation with Frantz Fanon", he says. "In trying to take seriously the possibility of stating 'we are the masters of our destinyÃ¢â‚¬â„¢, I encountered power wrapped up in the clothes of a beast. It was nothing but the disguise behind which the thing maintains an intimate relation with its excrement. This, I called the 'postcolonyÃ¢â‚¬â„¢."

MbembeÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s "beast" is entirely different from the bestiality, irrationality and atavistic behaviour Joseph Conrad believed lay in AfricaÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s heart.

Colonial rule in Africa operated as a prison. The native was a convict, living in a house of detention. The relationship between settler and native was one of abuse. The native could be exiled, wounded or amputated, his or her body seized and the marks of power branded on it. Did these power relations transform in the postcolony?

In an earlier essay, Mbembe has the departing coloniser handing over the reins of power to the native commandement, who reproduces the excesses of the coloniser in a grotesque performance of power rapidly embraced by the masses.

In African Modes of Self-Writing (2002) Mbembe argues that Marxism and nationalism in Africa throughout the twentieth century gave rise to the narratives of nativism and Afro-radicalism. Both "faked philosophies" failed, he says, because they relied on a moral economy, notions of "good" and "evil" and on the "cult of suffering and victimisation". They were premised on a belief that "the African cannot express himself or herself other than as a wounded and traumatised subject".

For Mbembe, colonialism was a "co-invention", "the result of both Western violence and the work of a swarm of African auxiliaries seeking profit".

Now the dream of freedom "is receding in the contemporary African imagination", Mbembe believes.

There is radical uncertainty. "In most parts of Africa today, life may suddenly take unbearable turns. The starkness of the violence may assume a nightmarish appearance," he says. He calls this politics "the work of death" or "necropower".

"Necropower exists where the debt between the rulers and the ruled is transformed into a debt of blood. Politics is no longer imagined as the forward movement toward freedom."

Most people now seek protection from danger. "Staying alive and surviving, being free from death: these are the new names of freedom," he says.

The new freedom struggle is to revive "the ethics of care 'reciprocity, hospitality, rethinking justice and happiness, and creating the conditions for a new kind of freedom, freedom from deathÃ¢â‚¬â„¢. It means re-addressing the central questions of life and what denies it."

N Chabani Manganyi

Writer and academic psychologist N Chabani Manganyi is struggling with the concept of "the triumph of the vanquished" in his forthcoming book, whose short title is On Becoming a Democracy.

"I am dealing with why liberation has not succeeded. Why has Haiti failed after 200 years of freedom; why has Liberia failed?"

The question must be extended to post-colonial Africa, he says, and to any prognosis of what could happen in South Africa.

"IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not sure about what has happened to those who have been defeated. Should we be triumphant about it? IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m not sure the defeated see the victory the same way we do. IÃ¢â‚¬â„¢m talking about both those who lost power and also of others who have power … Where are they taking the country?"

Manganyi, number two to the principal at Pretoria University, says liberation is possible with an ideological and value victory but no power.

" The question of impunity is a big issue. ThereÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s a psychological hurdle where people are supposed to move on in terms of change. On a superficial level, itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s working. But thereÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s a grim silence in society about what each one of us is really going through."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission had a strong ethos of reconciliation, understandably, he says, but the leaders of the negotiation process had "frozen the outer limits of what was possible, speakable".

What happened to the anger, the "violent reverie" Manganyi described as simmering beneath the surface in his book MashanguÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s Reverie (1977).

"It is in retreat. In all areas." The vanquished, Manganyi claims, didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t have enough time to get angry or show anger (in transition). "The anger of black people also went into retreat. It would have been unusual [in 1994] not to be overwhelmed by a sense of victory, to celebrate. ItÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s to be expected there will be that kind of break in between. Some have found a substitute like joining the oligarchy. They were given assets. We see unemployment and poverty going on at the same time as the other success story."

Can this "retreating" anger be transformed?

"As a mental health professional I like to believe itÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s one of those things we could work around. My biggest headache is the denial of racism in the country — 'racismÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ in its broadest possible sense, not only white-against-black but black prejudice. ItÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s so big that it is pushed under the carpet.

"ItÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s the 'family secretÃ¢â‚¬â„¢. We keep it in the closet. We had an opportunity and didnÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t take it."

Manganyi wants a future "where our children are completely free of our sins", but "something triggers an old memory and then it all goes wrong".

Kamari Maxine Clarke

Kamari Maxine Clarke, a Canadian associate professor of anthropology at Yale University and a research associate at the Yale law school, has a lot to say about the descendants of slaves and their relationship with Africa.

She has spent a decade researching the popular revival of ancestor worship and various other forms of religious and legal movements, particularly in West Africa but also in "the West" — the US.

From the 1960s, she says, there has been a steady increase in the fervour to reclaim cultural roots. "Insecurity and therefore the search for certainty is an important factor in the proliferation of religious revivalism. Beyond economic factors, there is a 'socialityÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ of religion. HIV/Aids has signi-ficantly altered the numbers of new converts to occult practices."

But there have been shifts in religious practices too. Various West African "occult" practitioners are no longer as significant as they were in their own communities.

Where practitioners used to be predominantly black Africans whose family obligations or lineage brought them entry to training in the mysteries of traditional religion, there are now different criteria for inclusion. Increasing numbers of whites are getting involved.

Mapping Transnational Networks In her new book, , Clarke describes the way in which Africanness is "performed" through the reclamation of West African religious practices.

"They understand their connection to African cultural citizenship, African belonging, in ancestral terms. They are their ancestors who were enslaved and transported to the Americas."

"To understand the violence of poverty and disenfranchisement in African states today is to recognise that they are deeply rooted in an already violent past. Power and hierarchy have already structured African familial divisions, social organisation and its forms of interpretation."

Central to ClarkeÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s findings about African traditional revivalism in the West is a focus on race. As she says, "blackness continues to be the trope of African belonging". She frames this "Afro-centric" approach in the history of racism in the West and the colonies. "But frankly the notion of citizenship and our criteria of belonging need to be transformed. We need to believe there is a world beyond racial hierarchies that we will one day outgrow. Forms of world citizenship are worthy of striving for in the long term."

Clarke urges African-Americans, particularly, to rethink the question of power. "Being a victim of abuse and enslavement does not preclude the possibility of reproducing that behaviour."

Njabulo Ndebele

Author and University of Cape Town vice-chancellor Njabulo Ndebele has also been dealing, in fiction and theory with the consequences of abuse and the use of abusive power.

"It could be argued," he says, "that colonialism was one long history of abuse. Part of the colonial project was to break the spirit of the colonised and shatter their identity. In this way they became depersonalised tools in the hands of the colonialist. Colonialism turned people into objects in a grand way." For him it is not enough to represent victimhood in writing; the emphasis must be on breaking the cycle of violence.

"The mechanisms of this depersonalisation assumed a more specific form in apartheid. Here an entire government on behalf of its constituency abused another group of people. In Rediscovery of the Ordinary, I said the mining industry was the most visible, most obscene manifestation of mass abuse where black miners were depersonalised into numbers in a prison.

"In our writings we tended to reflect this picture rather uncritically — to confirm oppression rather than challenge it, which would be to re-imagine the oppressed as multidimensional, complex human beings."

Ndebele says there was a risk in tackling such a project. "One could be accused of undertaking a 'bourgeois projectÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ in exploring the inner life of characters. However, doing so is to accord the highest respect to the oppressed, though they would have to accept the responsibility for being either 'goodÃ¢â‚¬â„¢ or 'evilÃ¢â‚¬â„¢, depending on circumstances.

"For the latter, we could not always blame the oppressor. When oppressed black men abuse their women and children, there is a limit to which they can blame oppression for their cruelty. Even the oppressed have to learn to accept responsibility for their actions. That is where their freedom begins."

NdebeleÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s novella Fools (1983) focuses on the black schoolmaster, Zamani, who, brutalised by apartheid himself, treats those weaker than him — his wife, his pupils (one of whom he rapes) — in an abusive fashion.

The Cry of Winnie Mandela He says of his latest work, (2003), "the novelÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s character Winnie was partly a product of her experience of torture. At the same time she was a product of her own use of power. It gave her certain gratifications that corrupted her."

Ndebele is currently trying to confront contemporary abuse at the international level. "The useless war in Iraq reveals the United States (with the assistance of its British ally) as a contemporary abusive power. This is different from the abusiveness of colonialism, which, in the total scheme of things, could be seen as ultimately progressive. At that time, the European colonial powers had simply travelled the road of technical development much further than their colonial subjects," he states.

"The United States as an anti-colonial state gave technical progress a democratic political vision. But now the US can only brutalise the rest of the world through its superior technical proficiency, which has outstripped its visionary eminence. It is a condition driven by the industrial-military axis. The US has run out of ideas for the world. It has lost the authority to lead."

In NdebeleÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s opinion, "we need a new world". South Africa, along with "an emergent class of countries" such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and China, will play a major role in shaping this new world. "The Brazilian liberation theorist Paulo Freire long ago saw the possibility of this. Only the oppressed can liberate both themselves and the oppressor."

Bhekizizwe Peterson

Bhekizizwe Peterson, writer, film-maker and associate professor of African literature at Wits Fools University, wrote the screenplay of NdebeleÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s novella .

He is a great defender of youth culture, currently under attack as materialistic, consumerist and overly influenced by the US.

His rather sober response is to suggest critics take an historical look to understand the importance youth culture has played in the black public sphere across the decades, because youth constantly redefine themselves.

"The youth of 1976 went through a similar experience. Looking at it in historical terms should help one avoid the kind of apocalyptic responses to changes. Common anxieties concern morality or a supposed degeneration of the aesthetic — that the music is not as good as it used to be. YesterdayÃ¢â‚¬â„¢s pop culture is now mainstream and is used to police the next generation of culture. There is a tendency not to think about youth culture except in forms of social deviancy or in a dismissive way," he says.

This crass way of approaching youth culture stems from the obsessions of "high culture", Peterson continues, which wails that society is doomed if we let in the popular.

Where rap and hip-hop are branded American forms, and where kwaito is considered meaningless, these same arguments were used against jazz when it entered South Africa in the 1920s, he points out.

There has been a long, historical trajectory of the "ties that bind", a complex history, common knowledge and experiences shared by all black people. The dangers of Americanisation must be scrutinised but they should not be flattened, Peterson says. "It is a complex engagement, not always one-way directional. South African popular culture also influences America. In rap, reggae and hip-hop there is the lineage of the three Ms: Martin [Luther King], Malcolm [X], Mandela."

He links expressed anxieties about consumption with unexpressed anxieties abut the lower classes and working classes. "Is the assumption that your scholars and intellectuals can deal with consumption, with global influences, but not poor people?" he asks

"Youth preoccupation with materialism must be seen as an attempt to project success, refusal to remain invisible and defeated. Not just be stuck in the ghetto."

In a recent paper on youth culture, Peterson has looked at the implications for the economy when desired consumer goods cannot be afforded — for example, the fong kong trade.

"I donÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t think a sense of pleasure can be bought. Whether you are enjoying a good conversation, a good friend, a different experience of sensuality … you canÃ¢â‚¬â„¢t go to the supermarket and get them.

"Ordinary people are limited in their choices because of poverty, inequality and the legacy of the assault and attack on families before 1994. We need not seek just a more humane ideology but to commit ourselves to meaningful societal transformation, the kind of legacy we could feel happy to leave …"

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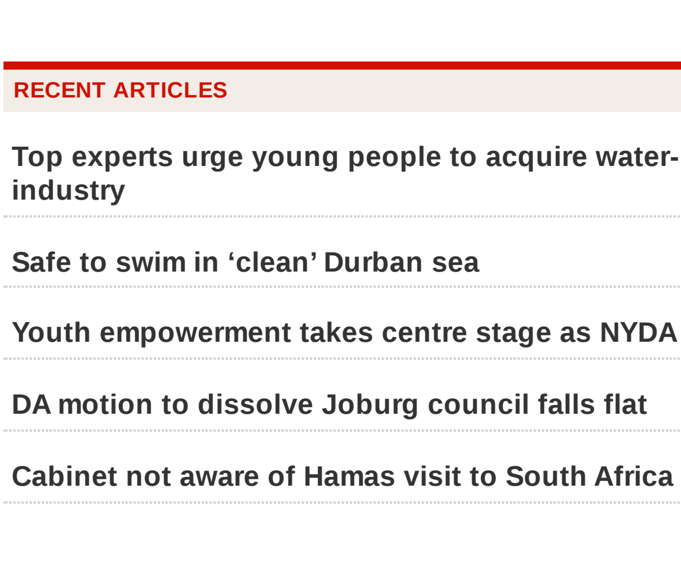

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