

Chapter 1

Introduction

This research aims to clarify Thabo Mbeki's views on race through an examination of his own words on the issue and through so doing, determine the role of race in his discourse.

I. An introduction

Mbeki's own words will form the primary body of evidence under investigation: from the ANC's website, ANC Today and Mbeki's "Letters from the President" that are published weekly online; the book Africa Define Yourself (2002), a collection of Mbeki's speeches; and the State of the Nation addresses from 1999 to 2005. Various journal articles, books and newspaper articles will also form part of the discussion and subsequent analysis.

These will be explored in the context of several of the key socio-political issues of the day – African Renaissance, New Partnership for African Development (Nepad), Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), Mbeki's Two Nations' theory, and HIV/Aids.

An analysis will be made of his discourse using theoretical concepts from theorists Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe and Louis Althusser. The concepts will be operationalised in the examples in Mbeki's discourse by showing the patterns that emerge.

The main focus of the discourse will be on the use of race during Mbeki's presidency. To place this within a specific time and place, it is also necessary to provide a brief biography of Mbeki, noting his rise to power within the ANC.

The dissertation will focus on discussing and analysing Mbeki's own discourse on race – and how it impacts on decision-making. An example of this is his response to being challenged on the high rate of HIV/Aids and rape in the country, where he stated that white people thought of African people as “lazy, liars, diseased, foul-smelling, corrupt, violent, sexually depraved and savage ...”¹.

The research will explore the role race plays in his interventions in the key areas already identified. It will look at the similarities and differences the issue of race has played in each scenario, identifying the emergent patterns.

The dissertation assesses Mbeki's use of race: whether it is an inherent – passionate – part of Mbeki's psyche (passionate attachment, to use Judith Butler's term²), functions as a rigid designator, to use Slavoj Zizek's term³, or is a combination of these. I argue that Mbeki's use of race is that of passionate attachment, and that it functions as a rigid designator.

The bulk of the dissertation is thereafter devoted to unravelling Mbeki's use of race, and determining the emerging patterns.

¹ Mbeki made this statement during a Parliamentary debate on HIV/AIDS in October 2004. The full context and debate is examined in Chapter 5: Thabo Mbeki and the issues of HIV/Aids and Race.

² Butler (1997:7) argues that we have a passionate attachment to our own subjection. The upshot is that subjects become attached to the conditions of their own subjectivity, *even* if these conditions are oppressive.

³ For Zizek (1989:89), rigid designator means a nodal point, a pure signifier, a kind of knot of meanings.

II. The rationale behind the research

The purpose of the research is to subject Mbeki's views on race to close scrutiny. Just what role does it play in the politics of the President?

Although there has been public discussion of his views on race, this dissertation attempts to pull together and analyse the available evidence in a systematic and rigorous manner.

The importance of such research is supported by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who, speaking at a Nelson Mandela Memorial lecture in Johannesburg (November 23 2004), raised concerns about the lack of robust debate in the country, particularly in relation to the Mbeki government's handling of issues such as HIV/Aids and Zimbabwe. Tutu said that those who had challenged the *status quo* on these issues were labelled "racist" and "mischief mongers"⁴. "I would have wished to see far more open debate, for instance, on the views of the president of the ANC" Political philosopher Chantal Mouffe's argument on democracy and tolerance is used in scrutinising the debate between Tutu and Mbeki.

I know of no academic research this specific, critically evaluating Mbeki's use of race. This document, therefore, will be a valuable contribution as an analysis of Mbeki's discourse on race, as well as encouraging the rigorous and robust debate intrinsic to the democratic project.

⁴ The debate between Tutu and Mbeki is dealt with in Chapter 3: The key issues of Mbeki's Presidency, which investigates key issues in the Mbeki presidency, including the African Renaissance, Nepad, BEE and the Two Nations' Theory. An investigation of the different ways Mbeki and Tutu view transformation is undertaken in this chapter.

This research will extend the existing body of academic research into race in post-apartheid South Africa.

The research will, therefore, be of both an empirical and theoretical nature. From an empirical point of view its contribution lies in the comprehensive nature of its reach, bringing together in one body all the items relevant to an analysis of race within Mbeki's discourse. Theoretically, its import lies in its explanation of the reasons underpinning Mbeki's statements involving race.

III. Theoretical framework

The dissertation will outline various conceptual perspectives on the question of race, including its status as biological/social reality.

Various theories of race as an ascriptive, as well as a social and political marker of identity are examined. However, the main issue is the use of race in the theoretical underpinnings of current government policies, in particular that of Affirmative Action and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), and the particular inflexion given to race in these policies.

Government policies of Affirmative Action and BEE are critical aspects in the project of transformation from apartheid to democracy and, in the emancipatory project of Nelson Mandela, the use of the "rainbow nation" metaphor emerged in which three concepts were all important – non-racialism, nation-building and reconciliation. While these concepts are indeed progressive, it can be argued that it was empty rhetoric that did not engage fully – if at all – with the difficult problem of restorative transformation. "Indeed, Mandela once insisted that he recognised only South Africans – no longer blacks,

whites, coloured and Indians. Yet this romanticised 'rainbowism' of merging colours is contradicted by the reality of heightened ethno-racial consciousness. The legacy of apartheid still lives on. South Africa is still a deeply divided society in which racialised competition is likely to increase," according to Kogila Moodley and Heribert Adam.⁵ I agree.

My research, however, shows that Mbeki is obsessed with transformation and within his discourse a pattern of excessive attachment to race emerges.

Central to this investigation is the question of the status of race in Mbeki's discourse and the passion invested in it. The theoretical framework is the notion of "passionate attachment", in this case, Mbeki's attachment to the signifier, race, and the status of this signifier for him. In using this notion of passionate attachment what is involved is an attempt to conceptually delineate a determinate relation between the subject, Mbeki, and the signifier, race. In trying to pinpoint this, I have made use of both Butler's concept of "passionate attachment" and Zizek's concept of the ideological signifier as a "rigid designator" i.e. as circular and thus foreclosing *a priori* any empirical resistance.

The questions that inform the theoretical framework include:

- Is race some sort of absolute, a transcendental signifier that anchors Mbeki's discourse and is, therefore, beyond challenge?
- Is it a conceptual lynchpin to which he is passionately attached? This would fit into the definition of a "rigid designator"⁶, as discussed by Zizek⁷ (he used the

⁵ Moodley and Adam (2000:53)

⁶ See Torfing (1999:194) for an explanation of what Zizek means by "enemies of the nation".

⁷ Zizek (1989:147) writes that in the Stalinist universe, "supporting the rule of the Party" is "rigidly designated" by the term "People". That is why a real member of the Party is only he who supports the rule of the Party. Those who work against its rule are automatically excluded from the People and are seen as "enemies of the People".

term “rigid designator” in discussing the role of “The People” within Communist Party ideology), where in the discourse of the old communist parties, the people, is by definition attached to the cause of communism, and any anomalous real member of the People, just doesn’t belong to the People.

Besides the concept of the rigid designator, the analysis of Mbeki also deploys Žižek’s concepts of the “the gaze” and “ideological fantasy” and “master signifier”.⁸ Vis-à-vis the gaze, he explains: Imaginary identification is always identification of behalf of a certain gaze in the Other. “So, apropos of every imitation of a model image, apropos of every ‘playing a role’, the question to ask is: *for whom* is the subject enacting this role? Which gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?”⁹ There is a gap, in other words, between the way I see myself and the point from which I am being observed. In explaining the concept of ideological fantasy, Žižek using the thesis of Laclau and Mouffe says that “every process of identification conferring on us a fixed socio-symbolic identity is ultimately doomed to fail ...the function of ideological fantasy is to mask this inconsistency...”¹⁰ The master signifier is “the unconscious *sinthome*, the cipher of enjoyment, to which the subject was unknowingly subjected”.¹¹ These concepts will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

Butler makes use of theories on power and subjection from Hegel, Freud, Foucault and Althusser to develop her concept of “passionate attachment”. An attachment, argues Butler¹², is always an attachment to an object – it has the action of “binding to” (but is also tied to a warding off), which is the constitutive action of attachment. Butler’s theories

⁸ See a discussion on these concepts in Chapter 6: Conclusion: Passionate Attachment, the Rigid Designator and Ideological Fantasy.

⁹ Žižek (1989:106)

¹⁰ Ibid p127

¹¹ Žižek (2004:142) Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle, Verso London New York

¹² Butler (1997:208)

of subjection are important in this dissertation to show how, as a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. We are more accustomed to thinking of power as something external to a subject, “something that presses upon a subject”¹³, rather than the subject being, in some sense, dependent on that power.¹⁴ The main point to be used from this theory of the subject is that of “reflexivity”, the form of power that is marked by the subject turning back on his or her self, or even turning *on* his or her self¹⁵. The theory is that a subject is passionately attached to his or her subordination.

What Butler argues is that in the formation of a subject, or the emergence of a subject, there is the ability to carry around a past, which is formed by past attachments, as well as the formation of those attachments, both conscious and unconscious. To hold stubbornly on to your story, and even exceed your story, as part of the remembering process, imagined and real, is part of what passionate attachment is.

In her theory that a subject is passionately attached to his or her own subordination, Butler uses two examples, one from Hegel, of the bondsman and the lord, and the other from Althusser, of the passerby who turns, without prompting, to the voice of the law. In the former example, the bondsman belongs to the lord – it would seem, mind, body and soul – so that upon receiving freedom there is no happy consciousness. In fact it appears to be quite the reverse, because the identities were so dependent on each other. The paradox, argues Butler, is that we accept certain terms of subjection and are often dependent on those terms for our existence. As she puts it, Hegel “traces the slave’s approach to freedom and his disappointing fall into the ‘unhappy consciousness’.

¹³ Butler (1997:2)

¹⁴ Ibid (1997: 35) Butler explains Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” in the story of self-enslavement *vis-à-vis* the slave and the bondsman.

¹⁵ Butler (1997:3)

The master who at first appears to be 'external' to the slave, re-emerges as the slave's own conscience."¹⁶ This is what is meant by the turning back upon oneself.

In the second example, taken from Althusser, subordination takes place through language. The authoritative voice of the policeman hails a passerby on the street. The passerby turns, recognising himself as the one who was hailed. Yet, asks Butler, why does this passerby turn around and become thus subordinated? Is it a guilty conscience? In the end, is there an "enjoyment" of subordination?

The use of the concept "enjoyment" also appears in Žižek, but from a slightly different perspective. He argues that there is surplus enjoyment in anti-Semitism, that Jews are seen as scapegoats for all society's woes and that this gives one a sense of enjoyment.

In this dissertation, the patterns that emerge are that Mbeki has a stubborn attachment to race, and more often than not, makes whites the scapegoats in a logic that seems to say that were it not for them, all would be well in society. This, along with the excess he attaches to race, is shown in this dissertation, using several examples from his discourse.

This dissertation does not attempt to duplicate Žižek and Butler's concepts, but merely draws on them, blending them in order to interrogate the status of race as a rigid designator that reflects the passion invested in it. Such a passionate belief is *a priori* insulated and is the pivot of other beliefs, less passionately invested, and thus more open to critical scrutiny and interrogation.

¹⁶ Butler (1997:3)

The methodology used in analysing the data – to determine whether Mbeki's use of the signifier "race" is a passionate attachment or used more strategically – will be based on a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. A qualitative analysis will allow for an assessment of the patterns created in the way in which Mbeki uses the signifier. The analysis will investigate how the use of race is distributed throughout his speeches and writings, the meanings he gives to the concept, and its wider implications.

This dissertation will not rely on any quantitative measure but will advance an argument that Mbeki's approach to race is one of passionate attachment. This argument will be supported by a review of relevant material – the primary sources being Mbeki's own discourse.

IV. The main literature reviewed

On the concept of race, the chapter on *Race and Identity in the Nation* by Zimitri Erasmus (2005) has been particularly useful in putting into context the race debates in post-apartheid South Africa.

Several authors were consulted on Mbeki's history within the ANC. Adrian Hadland and Jovial Rantao (1999) provide details of Mbeki's early life and the development of his political consciousness. William Gumede (2002) gives an insight into the differences between Mbeki's presidency and that of his predecessor, Nelson Mandela. The dissertation also documents the changes within ANC policies under Mbeki. Sean Jacobs and Richard Calland (2002) give perceptions and insights into Mbeki, particularly on his concept of the African Renaissance and Nepad, while Vladimir Shubin (1999)

documents the ANC's history, which has been useful to place Mbeki's politics in a broader, international context.

On the concepts of discourse and ideology, the following theorists were consulted: Louis Althusser (1994); Judith Butler (1997) and (2000); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985); Diane Macdonell (1986); Michel Pécheux (1982); Slavoj Žižek (1989) and (2004)

These theorists have articulated concepts of meaning, understanding and language that have been particularly apposite to an analysis of Mbeki's discourse on race. The main point, taken from Pecheux and Macdonell, is that the meaning of a word or expression is not intrinsic. Rather, it is dependent on the particular context in which it is articulated.

The theories and concepts of Žižek on the rigid designator, ideological fantasy and master signifier are critical. Butler's argument on passionate attachment has also been important, as has Laclau and Mouffe's thesis on the deepening of democracy as part of the new left's project.

On Mbeki's use of race, I have referred to publications containing Mbeki's own words: Thabo Mbeki (1998) and (2002), which contain many of his speeches, and his "Letters from the President", published weekly on the ANC's website. In these letters, Mbeki articulates views on African Renaissance, what he means by Two Nations in South Africa, how he views the HIV/Aids epidemic as well as how he brings race into the issue of the South African government's foreign policy on Zimbabwe.

V. Conclusions

The dissertation comes to four main conclusions.

- i. There is an “excess” and a “surplus” attached to race in Mbeki’s discourse, as evidenced in the patterns revealed in this research. Race functions as a master signifier, operating in a rigid and circular manner, taking on a passionate investment. This is clear from the patterns that emerge from the qualitative analysis of the way the signifier “race” is distributed and deployed throughout Mbeki’s discourse and from a review of the meanings he gives to the concept.
- ii. Many of Mbeki’s pronouncements on race are also based on the need for political unity, where whites, and those with other views on transformation, are viewed with suspicion, and are antagonists rather than tolerated as legitimate adversaries. No distinction is made between enemies and adversaries, thus showing that race is rigidly designated.
- iii. The emergent pattern is that of constant reflexive turns to conditions of oppression, for instance, poverty and colonialism showing a passionate attachment to subordination.
- iv. Mbeki is overly concerned about what whites think about blacks, and this is a stumbling block for possibilities of resignification. This blockage prevents the reiteration norms by the subject in unpredictable ways, creating new possibilities for the future.

If these conclusions are drawn from an investigation of Mbeki’s words, what then does this mean for Mbeki’s decision-making processes? The effect of the role of race in Mbeki’s discourse is several-fold.

If Mbeki’s primary identity of people is done on the basis of race, meaning a certain ideological gaze, this has the effect of closing off identities, fixing identities and talking in binary opposites. This allows little room for shifts, changes or “resignifications”.

If race permeates his understanding of HIV/Aids, as I argue in Chapter 5, then Mbeki's resultant denialism in respect of the causes of the illness impacts on how the government, which he leads, has tackled the pandemic. I argue that it has, in effect, created a paralysis in dealing successfully with the epidemic.

While the implications of the role of race in Mbeki's discourse are considered in each section, the dissertation's primary focus is that of deconstructing the discourse itself deploying the analytical concepts of, mainly, Žižek and Butler.