

## From *The Burden of Memory:* *The Muse of Forgiveness*

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From within the same continent, two strategies of confrontation with one's history. They are offsprings of the same age, sprung from minds of a shared identity, and they appear to complement yet contradict each other. Both depend on a process of baring the truth of one's history in order to exorcise the past and secure a collective peace of mind, the healing of a bruised racial psyche. Both concepts even appear to play a game with each other – in the mind at least – since some form of mental reconciliation appears to be provoked for their cohabitation. How on earth does one reconcile reparations, or recompense, with reconciliation or remission of wrongs? Dare we presume that both, in their differing ways, are committed to ensuring the righting of wrongs and the triumph of justice?

The undeniable differences merely complicate matters – one proposal originates from a history of Africa that has become somewhat remote, attenuated by time and becoming blurred by global relationships, while the other owes its birth to an ordeal that is so immediate that both victims and violators are alive and locked within the necessity of cohabitation. This contrast in itself provides a paradox – in expectations. If anything, it is the latter condition, the contemporary one, that should mandate a call for reparations in one form or another. The victims are alive and in need of rehabilitation while their violators – as a recognizable group – pursue a privileged existence, secure in the spoils of a sordid history. Indeed, it is within the enclosure of that nation called South Africa that the principle of repar-

ations presents itself as something quite practical and feasible, indeed, clamorous, unlike the context of slavery that continues to be increasingly contumacious in the determination of responsibilities.

Just to let one's fantasy roam a little – what really would be preposterous or ethically inadmissible in imposing a general levy on South Africa's white population? This is not intended as a concrete proposal, but as an exercise in pure speculation. We are, after all, engaged in identifying all possible routes to social harmonization – from the obvious to the unthinkable. A collective levy need not be regarded as a punitive measure; indeed – since the purpose is reconciliation, such an offer could originate from the beneficiaries of Apartheid themselves, in a voluntary gesture of atonement – it need not be a project of the state. Is such a genesis – from within the indicted group itself – truly beyond conception? If, however, this attribution of self-redeeming possibilities within the psychology of guilt remains within the utopian imagination, and some external prodding proved necessary, the initiative could be taken up by someone of the non-establishment stature of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The respected cleric and mediator mounts his pulpit one day and addresses his compatriots on that very theme: "White brothers and sisters in the Lord, you have sinned, but we are willing to forgive. The scriptures warn us that the wages of sin are death but, in your case, they seem to be wealth. If therefore you chose to shed a little of that sinful wealth as a first step toward atonement... etc. etc." [...]

Despite the realization that South Africa is, like any other zone of state-engendered anomie, unique in the intricacy of motions – both internal and external – that led to her liberation, there remains a sense that the adopted formula for the harmonization of that society erodes, in some way, one of the pillars on which a durable society must be founded – Responsibility. And ultimately – Justice.

A fact that is often conveniently ignored is that the territory of culpability in the South African instance was not limited to the state. One of the most courageous admissions that I know of in the aftermath of revolutionary struggles was that of President Nelson Mandela, who openly confronted the ANC with its own dismal record of needless cruelty and abuse of human rights, especially in prisons and detention camps run by the movement within friendly frontline states such as Zambia. Torture and arbitrary executions were, apparently, commonplace, and it is not easy to forget the untidily resolved murder of the luckless “Stompie,” beaten to death by members of Winnie [Madikizela] Mandela’s football club – in reality, her bodyguards. The murder of the white American volunteer girl, stabbed to death by four Soweto thugs who were later imprisoned for the crime, is an even more harrowing reminder. A recent televised appearance of the four murderers at a meeting with the parents of the victim, exploiting in their turn the rites of open confession with the prospect of an amnesty, actually goes to the heart of a nation’s moral dilemma. The parents bestowed their forgiveness, and it does seem likely that, by classifying the crime as a “political” one, the perpetrators may also be deemed to have fulfilled all the conditions that qualify them for a remission of their sentence. Must the psychopathic opportunists of a revolutionary struggle also become beneficiaries of the balm of victory? A cowardly killing, surely, can be defined even by the internal moralities of any liberation struggle, however violent, otherwise, let us, at once and for all time, abandon all concepts of, and the exceptional deeds that attach to, heroism!

Let us, for a brief moment, superimpose the face of Pol Pot over any one of these public applicants for remission in a parallel process in Cambodia. Is it really given to the human mind to accommodate, much less annul, such a magnitude of man-inflicted anguish? The logic of “Truth and Reconciliation,” however, demands that the mind prepare

itself for the spectacle of a “penitent” Pol Pot, freed, morally cleansed, at liberty to go about his business in a humanely restored milieu!

This risk-free parade of villains, calmly – and occasionally with ill-concealed relish – recounting their roles in kidnappings, tortures, murders, and mutilation, at the end of which absolution is granted without penalty or forfeit, is either a lesson in human ennoblement, or a glorification of impunity. Admittedly, it does constitute at the very least, a revelation of the infinite possibilities of human options in the resolution of social crises – and this perhaps must remain our consolation. Even if judgment comes down eventually on the negative import of such a proceeding, there is still an inherent challenge in it that cannot be denied. It is not, after all, an occurrence in a historic vacuum. [...]

And there are other models – like Rwanda, in which the international community has again recognized and pursued a role in a process that establishes that there are certain crimes that have ramifications beyond the borders of any nation and constitute crimes against humanity. The problem with the South African choice is therefore its implicit, *a priori* exclusion of criminality and, thus, responsibility. Justice assigns responsibility, and few will deny that justice is an essential ingredient of social cohesion – indeed, I have asserted elsewhere that justice constitutes “the first condition of humanity.” And even as justice is not served by punishing the accused before the establishment of guilt, neither is it served by discharging the guilty without evidence of mitigation – or remorse.

We recognize that the application of what, in effect, is an attribution of mitigation before the proof has, in this case, only one end in view, and that is to encourage revelation, to establish truth. Could it be then that, underlying it all, is the working out of that Christian<sup>1</sup> theological precept: “The Truth shall make you free”? Or do we seek answers, for this unusual lesson of our time, in a humanism that our own poets and philosophers have ascribed, in moments of race euphoria or contestation with the European world, as being uniquely African? Poets and statesmen of the temperament of Léopold Sédar Senghor would, I am certain, endorse this largeness of black generosity. If the government of Nelson Mandela sought vindication among Africa’s poets for its “Truth and Reconciliation” option, Senghor’s poetry would provide it more than amply; advocating, as it

does, a philosophy of wholesale remission. And Senghor would root this, undoubtedly, within that generous earth of Africa's humanity that he regards as an enduring critique of Europe's soullessness. Well, the Africa of Senghor's Muse is hardly recognizable in the realities that surround us today, and with Rwanda hardly a memory beat away from even the most uninformed, we would be wise to tread warily along that path, or at least call to our aid the corrective views of contemporary witnesses – also black – such as Keith Richburg!<sup>2</sup>

But will the South African doctrine work, ultimately? Will society be truly purified as a result of this open articulation of what is known? For even while we speak of "revelation," it is only revelation in concrete particulars, the ascription of faces to deeds, admission by individual personae of roles within known criminalities, affirmation by the already identified of what they had formerly denied. Nothing, in reality, is new. The difference is that knowledge is being shared, collectively, and entered formally into the archives of that nation. So, back to the question, this procedural articulation of the known, will it truly heal society? Will it achieve the reconciliation that is the goal of the initiators of this heroic process? For it is heroic – let that value be frankly attributed. Even those of us who, conceding our unsaintliness, distance ourselves from the Christian – or indeed Buddhist – beatitudes, do acknowledge that forgiveness is a value that is far more humanly exacting than vengeance. And so – will this undertaking truly "reconcile" the warring tribes of that community? My inclination is very much toward a negative prognosis. An ingredient is missing in this crucible of harmonization and that ingredient is both material and moral.

The moral element is glaring enough, though it is much too nebulous to assess – that element being remorse and, thus, repentance. Nebulous because one can only observe that an expression of remorse has been made. Is it genuine? Impossible to tell. [...]

I remain convinced that the answer to the missing question – at least one that I never heard put – would be, "Oh yes, given the same circumstances, I would do the same thing all over again." However, let us abandon the hazy zone of remorse for now, and move to the material.

And here, I believe, is where the cry for Reparations for a different and more ancient cause suggests itself as the missing link between Truth and Reconciliation. The actual structuring of Reparations is secondary – in the case of South Africa, it is not too difficult to identify targets – from the collective to the individual – from state agencies to businesses and voluntary associations – be they all-white political parties, segregated clubs and resorts, etc., self-defense militias (the volunteer backbone of the state system) . . . a host of privileged and/or profit-generating institutions that prospered through Apartheid. The essential is to establish the principle: that some measure of restitution is always essential after dispossession.

#### NOTES

- 1 The convention that capitalizes this and other so-called world religions is justified only when the same principle is applied to other religions, among them, the Orisa.
- 2 Keith Richburg, *Out of America* (Basic Books, 1997).