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South Africa: On the Tortured Road to Reconciliation
Antjie Krog, Cape Argus (Cape Town)

Cape Town - One wants to understand this country. One wants to live an informed life here to the benefit of all South Africans. So one is listening. But it is difficult to make sense of our daily diet of contradictory codes. And how to interpret them into one's own small life?

But we have, for the first time in history, a leader who likes engaging in debates on important issues. Unfortunately, we are not used to debating things. Thus the important debate on reconciliation did not really get the attention it deserved.

Before looking at some of the neglected parts of Thabo Mbeki's speech in Parliament on the issue of "two nations", it is important to realise that reconciliation is not a magical moment, an instantaneous act, but that it consists of several identifiable phases.

We have been led to believe that if only we ask forgiveness, we will be forgiven. Sometimes the proper words have been spoken on every side, yet in people's hearts the hurt and isolation remain. People are forgiven, but not reconciled. In his article The cycle of reconciliation, Ron Kraybill, an American academic who worked at the Centre for Conflict Resolution at the University of Cape Town, says that the internal commitment to reconciliation is an intellectual event. It deals with the will to reconcile, combined with the knowledge that it will entail risks and disappointments.

But let us look at the two nation speech by Mbeki. Its title deals with reconciliation and reconstruction. He talked about a well-off white nation and a poor black nation and was sharply criticized for such a facile definition. But seen in the light of who is supposed to reconcile with whom, this differentiation is entirely appropriate. Reconciliation in this country is not between actual operators and victims, but between the beneficiaries (the whites) and the exploited (the blacks).

After he has identified the two nations, Mbeki asks: how does one weld these two nations which coexist in South Africa? " in conceptual terms we have to deal with two interrelated elements. The first of these is that we must accept that it will take time to create the material base for nation-building and reconciliation.

The second and related element is that we must therefore agree that it is the

subjective factor accompanied by tangible progress in the creation of the new material base, which must take the lead in sustaining the hope and conviction among people that the project of reconciliation and nation-building will succeed."

Although Mbeki goes on to mention the use of a 7,5% surcharge and solidarity tax and transfer of resources from West to East Germany after reunification, he proposes something much more unassuming for South Africa.

(It remains one of the most baffling elements of the majority of the country's population, that they always demand much less than the minority expects. The other amazing fact is that this same minority always reacts as if the ultimate sacrifice has been demanded; that the final trenches must be dug.)

After the modest request that everyone must accept that it is the Government's priority to create a material base that can eventually help to improve the lot of the country's poor, Mbeki says: "we must therefore return to the question we posed earlier. "That question is - are we all, as the various parties in this Parliament and our society at large, behaving in a manner which promotes the objective of reconciliation and nation building, without which the kind of South Africa visualized in our Constitution will most certainly not come into being?

"Again, my answer to this question would be a very definite - No!" Mbeki's reasons for the conclusion that we do not behave in a manner conducive to reconciliation are mainly the following: many corporations are not registered for tax purposes, people demand more money, complain about affirmative action, do not apply for amnesty, spread false rumors and resist transformation.

All of this pushes "us away from achieving this goal (of national unity and reconciliation) and is producing a rage among millions of people". Ostensibly, it seems that this may be true. There is a general rage - among blacks (according to Mbeki) and whites (according to Constand Viljoen) and it steadily seems as if people might tear at each other's throats. But for some reason it is not these two nations that are at each other, not white and black, but Zulus killing each other in the KwaZulu Natal midlands or coloureds on the Cape Flats. (Whether the killing of farmers is about black and white is still being debated.)

When one speaks to whites, they complain that they have no more power. According to blacks, whites still actually control everything. Where does the power in the country lie then? In both the nations: the financial power with the white nation and the political power with the black nation.

Mbeki asks whether people in the country behave as if their main priority is reconciliation? Then he says: "My own answer to this question would be a definite No!" But it is exactly at this point that one has to consider the different phases of reconciliation. Currently, South Africans seem to be further apart than

before. But the answer to Mbeki's question on whether we behave as if reconciliation is a priority - the answer is, Yes! Because the first necessary stage of reconciliation is withdrawal.

The two nations are both affected, one by injury, one by guilt, and their first reaction is to withdraw from each other. People withdraw physically or mentally from each other after injury. We have heard in the Truth Commission how a mother says she doesn't want to even see a white person. We see people leaving the country or pulling back into their own family or group spaces and homelands.

This withdrawal from each other may last a second or centuries, says Kraybill. But withdrawal is regarded as a necessary and healthy psychological response to injury. To want to be among the people whom you trust, whom you know will not injure or accuse you - that is a natural response.

This kind of withdrawal is essential because the unthreatening space of one's own people makes it possible to start thinking about the next step towards reconciliation. The academics say that before you can reconcile, you have to understand who you are and where you come from. The first casualty of painful conflict is identity: self-esteem for individuals and confidence in its identity as a group.

So within this withdrawal and safe space, people start participating in this two-fold process of self-awareness and self-affirmation. Sometimes the injury to a group is so vast that they themselves are not aware to what extent the injuries have taken place. But as a group one must now affirm one's pride in being a member of that group. What makes us so remarkable? What do we have to offer?

The two nations treat this phase differently. Mbeki's two speeches in East Asia about the African Renaissance and his utterly beautiful "I am an African" speech are prime examples of affirmation. In them, he painstakingly identifies reasons why Africans can be proud of themselves, citing examples of how the achievement of Africans have been ignored.

The redefining of what is African is not new on the continent, but what makes this important is that Mbeki is functioning within the first phases of reconciliation. Not by being kind to whites, but by redefining himself, his people, this country and the continent, he is working towards reconciliation.

The academics are unanimous that the reformulation of the identity must begin in caucus, within the safety of the closed circle of those who shared the injury or the guilt.

The white nation does the affirmation differently. And although this redefining

seems have elements of antagonism towards other groups, to reclaim old identity symbols like flags or anthems or accents, is an important gesture, say the academics. And this is the way the Afrikaner is working through the withdrawal phase. It is looking for a new definition in its current obsession with the Anglo Boer War; in redefining the speakers of Afrikaans.

In the weeks after Mbeki's speech a long polemic played itself out in Die Burger. Parents who have gloated about how much better off their emigrated children were, were attacked in a stream of letters by parents whose children have decided to stay. "Parents of hensoppers" they were called - hensoppers are those who have surrendered to the enemy.

Kraybill says that if this phase is neglected, or if a group is denied this space to redefine its identity, a group can become frozen in a permanent quest for identity that often expresses itself in rigid ethnicity and nationalism. People need uncritical and enthusiastic support in reclaiming their identity.

And indeed, as if out of a textbook, in his second speech, Mbeki goes out of his way to emphasize what he perceives as good in whites in general and in the Afrikaner in particular. However, the voices of whites encouraging black people to put the blame for apartheid where it should be, are not heard. But to withdraw at some levels, says Kraybill, one needs social and physical safety and complete respect for the basic human needs of the groups in question. So the high crime rate may in a sense destroy the opportunity the two nations need to redefine themselves.

Out of this should follow the intellectual decision - to move into a relationship with the other group. Looking at Mbeki's speech it is clear that there is not yet the trust to take a risk with the other nation. The hope is there. But not the trust. Concrete suggestions of what this relationship should be, would be a sign of trust. Those of us here try to work out the conditions of our remaining here. We are here for better or for worse. We want to be here, but we have to accept that we can no longer stay here on our terms. That people of our skin color decided for 300 years on what terms black people could stay in this country. This is now over. We have to accept that we have little say over how we as whites want to remain here. Therefore I prick up my ears and try to hear what the new conditions for my existence are.

Taxes. Does Mbeki mean all that is required from whites is to accept the priority to create a material base and to pay taxes? Our money, but please dear God, not our little souls? Is he saying that whites can continue to make as much money as they want, that they can isolate themselves from the country in separate privileged pockets like whites in Zimbabwe, as long as they remain prepared to pay big chunks of tax money? And be subsequently prepared to give up jobs to black candidates? Is that it?

He is not telling everyone in the civil service over 50 years of age: make groups of architects, lawyers, teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses, etc. - auxiliary teams to be sent to provinces, regions and towns to bolster police resources, help with math and English in the schools, help sort out the financial administrations of small towns. He is not telling each model C school that they have to take as many children as possible and for the sake of all of us teach them until one day the education problems are sorted out. He doesn't say that you can only stay here if our priorities are the same: and that is changing the lives of the poor. And for how long are we needed? Are we needed but not our children?

Risk is the foundation of any positive relationship. Until there is restoration of risk, there can be no restoration of trust. The nature of the risk is of less importance than the fact that a risk is taken and that this is the first concrete step towards reconciliation.

We have taken the risk to vote together for our first elections. We have taken a risk with the rugby World Cup. And we have not been disappointed. But the risk of reconstruction is maybe too big. We all have to trust that people will sacrifice according to what they have received in the past and that those who govern have the interest of the poor at heart.

One of the more noticeable aspects of the reconciliation debate was that this kind of risk and trust was nowhere to be found in any of the speeches. But according to Kraybill, negotiation may be an answer. And let's face it - we are nimble negotiators. Risks should be accompanied by negotiations so that both parties understand exactly what is at stake. That they know there is a real transparency to build trust.

If genuinely undertaken, negotiation frees both sides to return to normal relationships. The injured needs negotiation to move beyond the paralyzing clutches of guilt; the injured needs negotiation to let go of blame. And so we'll become one.

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