

MIS-/COMMUNICATION: THE QUESTION OF RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

AFTER the apartheid regime ended in 1990, South Africa began the tedious task of rebuilding a nation, as they tried to move from a totalitarian system towards a democratic one. In this context, human rights discourses and institutions, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, proved to be central in creating a new moral and cultural zeitgeist. This paper analyzes the ways in which the process of writing a new official memory has helped construct the present in South Africa.

Keywords: *communication, culture, literature, nation-building, reconciliation, South Africa, truth.*

Motto:

*"The past, it has been said, is another country.
The way its stories are told and the way they are heard
change as the years go by. The spotlight gyrates,
exposing old lies and illuminating new truths.
As a fuller picture emerges, a new piece of
the jigsaw puzzle of our past settles into place (...)
and we have tried to weave into this truth about our past
some essential lessons for the future of the people of this
country. Because the future, too, is another country.
And we can do no more than lay at its feet the small
wisdoms we have been able to garner out of
our present experience" [1].*

Throughout the final decades of the twentieth century, countries in nearly every corner of the world were affected by the experience of genocide, spoliation, systemic human rights abuses, severe repression, and/or intense social and political problems that amplified internal social divisions and in some cases led to collective violence. Internal conflicts, massacres, and oppression by one group over another shattered the social stability of countries such as South Africa, Cambodia, Sierra Leone or El Salvador, deepening the antagonisms and leaving behind deaths, injuries, broken lives, and trauma. So it is not at all surprising that the twentieth century

is mostly remembered for its legacy of "gross human rights violations and mass atrocities" [2].

Nevertheless, as the century came to an end, the wind of political change began to be felt in several of these countries. The results took the shape of different treaties, some internationally financed, which have at least temporarily put a stop to some of the most destructive civil conflicts. This created the premises for new forms of government – some elected and some appointed – to appear and replace the older repressive and authoritarian regimes. Today, these new born administrations have to confront the multiple challenges of coming to terms with their violent past, rebuilding fractured institutions and social relationships, and healing their societies [3].

It is against this background that the need for reconciliation has become a matter of great interest – we are witnessing a globalization of the debate – and South Africa proves to be one of the fittest examples through which to consider and evaluate these problems. As a country that is still trying to deal with the cataclysmic events of the past, South Africa is very much aware of the fact that it is undergoing a period of transition "between the past of a deeply divided society characterized by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice" [4] – which is known today as the apartheid regime – "and a future founded on recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence" [4], that can only be achieved through reconciliation.

But what is *reconciliation* and how can societies implement it to make a transition from a violent, totalitarian past towards a more democratic future based on respect and mutual understanding? Can the oppressors be held responsible

without undermining prospects for reconciliation? Is it a good thing to re-explore the past, or would it be better to look towards the future? These are not just simple academic questions and providing the right answers to them gives us the necessary means to help build a brighter future for a large number of countries.

Reconciliation is a post-colonial phenomenon that should bring people together, a contemporary problem-solver. It usually appears in the case of societies that are passing through a period of transition from extended conflict and oppressive rule towards the beginning of democracy mainly because such societies are frequently faced with the realization that the systematic prosecution of those guilty of violations of human rights could plunge the country back into war. However, reconciliation is also an exercise in power, in supremacy; in different countries (in South Africa as well) the whites are very much in control, they are still the elites, and therefore, we are dealing with reconciliation between not equal powers: it is proposed by the whites who are on a position of strength.

Reconciliation should be a constructive, peaceful, moderate and objective debate towards the achievement of mutual respect and recognition of the other's identity. But in order to define identities one has to interpret the past that is why reconciliation is also a question about memory and the interpretation of history. And here is where the matter gets difficult because the action of re-interpreting the past is more devious than anything else; there is a great chance that it might create and fuel new tensions. Therefore, the process of reconciliation is not without its dangers; by trying to find it one has to redefine histories and identities, which may lead to confusion and, ultimately, a battle for identities. Moreover, there is the possibility of high-jacking the cause itself; different groups from different countries may use lobbies, blogs which may bring down the effort of reconciliation – there is a constant risk of fragmenting the process.

As a country whose past was born in blood and spoliation, South Africa had to confront all these types of problems that come with the need for reconciliation; nevertheless, it was seen as the only way in which the country could deal

with its tragic cultural heritage and rebuild the cultural present. That is why South Africa and reconciliation represents a very complex debate. In fact, if there were a scale of easiness regarding reconciliation, South Africa would place last.

Everything started with the end of the apartheid regime in 1990. The apartheid policy was one of the most notorious political facts ever to be recorded in the history of The Rainbow Nation. The term comes from the Afrikaans *apartheid* (meaning *separation*) and designates the political system of racial segregation implemented by the Afrikaners in 1948 – with the election victory of the National Party – in South Africa, where the black majority was discriminated by the white minority for decades [5]. Millions of Blacks were relocated to new townships while the whites protected themselves with more than 300 laws concerning racial segregation and with exclusive voting rights. Various jobs were reserved for whites only, and a form of education chosen as *Bantu Education* was implemented to produce a subservient and obedient Black labor force [6]. As the TRC report states:

“Apartheid was a grim daily reality for every black South African. For at least 3.5 million black South Africans it meant collective expulsion, forced migration, bulldozing, gutting or seizure of homes, the mandatory carrying of passes, forced removals into rural ghettos and increased poverty and desperation (...) One did not need to be a political activist to become a victim of apartheid; it was sufficient to be black, alive and seeking the basic necessities of life that the whites took for granted and enjoyed by right.” [1]

After the former regime ended and the new, democratic one started to take shape the two main protagonists of reconciliation in South Africa could now begin their work; they are Nelson Mandela, the first president to be elected in free and democratic elections since 1948 and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a moral and religious authority for the English speaking people of South Africa. With the inauguration of Mandela as president in 1994 concepts such as: separation

of powers, freedom of speech and religion, equality between ethnic groups became essential constituents of the new constitution, which meant the dawn of democracy in South Africa. However the biggest problem that these two great statesmen had to face was that of finding the proper way to deal with the memories of the past in order to create a new moral and cultural zeitgeist. In this context the idea of reconciliation and what it should mean for the South African people started to grow roots; should it mean a trial like the Nuremberg type in which the winners judge the losing side? Or should it refer to a sort of blanket amnesty/National Amnesia like it was the case in Chile?

South Africa had a personal interpretation for this matter, a "third way - *ubuntu*" [7] as Tutu calls it in his famous book *No Future without Forgiveness*. It chose to make a compromise: "In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past" [8]; it was this final clause of the Interim Constitution that made the elections possible and laid the foundations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1994. Thus, like most truth commissions, the TRC was born of political compromise.

The TRC was established as a temporary body whose main purpose was to investigate and make findings about acts and patterns of violence that took place during the apartheid regime. Those who committed human rights offences and gave testimony could request amnesty, and the forgiveness of the victims. While the goal of such an initiative was to bring both sides into dialogue so they could see things from the other's perspective, the hope was that a society could learn from its past in order to lessen the likelihood of a repetition of similar abuses in the future. Never until then had any country sought to move forward from despotism to democracy *both* by exposing the atrocities committed in the past and achieving reconciliation with its former oppressors [7].

At the center of this Sisyphean attempt at healing a nation has been Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whom President Nelson Mandela named as Chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission. For Tutu, reconciliation is a religious exercise, an exercise of pardon which implies going beyond revenge; it has to do with the Christian concepts of generosity and forgiveness. The future implies pardon of the crimes of the past and brotherhood under the form of partnership and respect; as the Archbishop himself puts it:

"I hope that the work of the Commission, by opening wounds to cleanse them, will thereby stop them from festering. We cannot be facile and say by-gones will be by-gones, because they will not be by-gones and will return to haunt us. True reconciliation is never cheap, for it is based on forgiveness which is costly. Forgiveness in turn depends on repentance, which has to be based on an acknowledgement of what was done wrong and therefore on disclosure of the truth. You cannot forgive what you do not know." [9]

In an article called "Coming to Terms with the Past - Truth, Justice and/or Reconciliation", Audrey Chapman analyzes the pros and cons of truth commissions. First of all, such commissions can ensure "a far more comprehensive record of the full scope of violence and human rights offenses than the prosecution of specific individuals, and they can also determine patterns and causes of the violations" [2]. The reason for this can be found in the purpose of any truth commission to offer a narrative of a specific period or, in the case of South Africa, a specific regime, in order to help restore the dignity of the victims and promote a culture of respect for law and human rights. Secondly, a truth commission can "go beyond a court of law and render a moral judgment about what was wrong and unjustifiable" [2], and by doing this "help to frame the events in a new national narrative of acknowledgement, accountability and civic values" [2]. Moreover, a truth commission does not have to make a choice between truth and justice; its work is limited to the finding of truth and by naming perpetrators they offer at least a symbolic form of restorative justice.

Nevertheless, truth commissions do have their share of limitations as well and, therefore,

may not provide “a full documentation of abuses or provide incontrovertible evidence about the role of the architects of the violence” [2]. This happens mainly because truth commissions function and are part of the same flawed political apparatus that makes the prosecution of individuals alleged to have committed crimes so difficult – weak legal institutions, political lobbies that limit their mandates, resources and options, reliance on officials from the previous regime. Furthermore, the task of attempting to document the past alone can be overwhelming: “during its four years of operation the TRC held several hundred public hearings, conducted some 20,000 victim interviews and processed approximately 5,000 amnesty applications” [2]. The final reports of the commission comprise seven volumes and they are still incomplete in many ways.

The effect that the TRC has generated in its four years of activity (1994-1998) is something that is still open to debates. Some critics have not seen in good eyes the doings of the commission and argued that although it “had more time, staff and resources than any other truth commission to date (...) its results are disappointing” [3]. The process was also criticized as offering “*cheap reconciliation* which does not demand remorse, repentance, or reparations from the perpetrators – simply acknowledgement of their deeds in exchange for amnesty” [10]. Among the highest-profile of these objections were the criticisms made by the family of famous anti-apartheid militant Steve Biko, who was arrested and killed by the security police in 1977. Biko’s family believed that the TRC was a vehicle for political expediency, which robbed them of their right to justice. On these grounds, the family opposed amnesty for his killers every inch of the way and brought a legal action in South Africa’s highest court, arguing that the TRC was unconstitutional.

The criticisms of the TRC, however, must be balanced by a consideration of its accomplishments to date; there are critics, such as Jay and Erika Vora, who consider that the TRC’s “rainbow of truths” – factual, personal, social and restorative [3] – had a great impact on the South African people, only that this was experienced differently by diverse ethnic groups: “All participants perceived the TRC to be effective in bringing out the truth, however, in varying degrees” [6].

Going along the same way is Justice Richard Goldstone who believes that “the decision to opt for a TRC was an important compromise” because “the TRC is a bridge from the old to the new” [10]. Also worth mentioning is Antjie Krog’s opinion; as a journalist who covered the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, she has studied the activity of the commission very thoroughly. Her argument is as follows:

“If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense.” [8]

Her distinction between truth in pursuit of justice and truth in pursuit of individual perceptions, experiences and stories suggests that the commission, through its activity of truth-searching, does not only have a healing and cathartic purpose, but it also has the ability to craft a new humanity [4].

So where does that leave us? My contention is that the great value of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission lies in its very method and not in its end product. Due to the fact that reconciliation is best seen as a long, drawn-out process and not a single event, the TRC should be understood as a beginning, a necessary and crucial attempt at setting the process of truth finding and reconciliation in motion. What is important and needs to be taken into consideration from now on is the formation and education of the future generation of South Africans. With a bit of luck this will happen and then, South Africa will no longer be needed to identify itself with a terrible past, but with a bright future.

Yet there is one more facet of reconciliation that we haven’t touched upon and needs to be taken into account in order to have the full picture of this phenomenon in South Africa. Besides the obvious moral and judicial results that have brought a sort of restorative justice for

the victims of the apartheid regime, the process of reconciliation also became a topic for all literary forms as well as a frequently dealt with subject in many movies. This is highly significant because if we see culture as: "the relatively stable set of inner values and beliefs generally held by groups of people in countries or regions and the noticeable impact those values and beliefs have on the peoples' outward behaviors and environment" [11] and art as the expression of culture, then the South African people went through a successful paradigm shift. In what follows, we will briefly comment upon some examples of such instances of *reconciliation under artistic disguise*.

Many South African poems written after 1995 deal with reports of the TRC; their main purpose is to capture and offer an insight into the pains people had suffered and the experiences they had lived through. "The Archbishop chairs the first session" is a powerful poem written by Ingrid de Kok which focuses on the moving scene of Archbishop's Desmond Tutu breaking down on the very first day of the hearings [12]. The poem depicts the unforeseen and sincere display of emotions that burst out at the description of the terrible crimes of the apartheid regime. The fact that "national and international cameramen" [12] are heartlessly filming the moving scene shows the accuracy with which de Kok managed to portray the event. The poem ends with a short sentence: "That's how it began" [12] referring to both the opening of the TRC as well as to the entire ongoing endeavor to create reconciliation between the people of South Africa.

Another example of a poem inspired by the activity of the commission is that of the journalist Antjie Krog, "For All Voices, For All Victims". It can be easily seen from the title that the lyrical speaker assumes a collective voice, speaking for all the people of South Africa. The poet records the positive aspects of the TRC: "I am changed forever" and asks the victims of apartheid for forgiveness "forgive me you whom I have wronged" [12]. This plea for forgiveness is repeated three times, which gives it a religious connotation and further stresses the need to be forgiven [12]. The last request to "please take me with you" [12] suggests that the lyrical speaker

has become aware of his mistakes and is, thus, begging the wronged to take him along on a path together.

The freedom of the transition towards democracy proved to be fertile not only for writers but for film producers as well since the South African filmmakers could now tell new, post-apartheid stories. While most of these focused on the retelling of history, forgiveness and reconciliation there are three movies that deal with the activity of the TRC: *Red Dust* (2004), *Forgiveness* (2004) and *Country of My Skull* (2004). In what concerns Tom Hopper's *Red Dust*, which was adapted after Gillian Slovo's novel with the same title, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that everyone should see this film as it is something that could help heal the world. The plot is very simple, but the way in which it is dealt with makes it have a huge impact on the viewer. Sarah Barcant is a human rights lawyer in New York who returns to her childhood village, in South Africa, to work on the case of Alex Mpondo, now a member of the South African Parliament. The latter is bringing charges against policeman Henricks, who beat and tortured him in 1986, because of his political activism. Steven Sizela, Alex's best friend, was arrested at the same time and suffered the same injustices but was never seen since. As the case is presented to the commission the true story of what happened begins to surface. In the end, the movie is all about the process and the growth that can occur when people are able to cope with their pasts, understand the events from the points of view of others involved, and grieve together.

We have seen how delicate and complex the problem of reconciliation is in *The Rainbow Nation*; how the political, cultural, social and judicial discourse is permeated with this idea. Still, whether the miracle of reconciliation has happened in South Africa or not is impossible to say at the present moment; what we can say though, is that the first steps towards healing have surely been made and the TRC was an extraordinary and unique exercise in this respect, an exercise that will be cited, debated and held out as an inspiration for as long as people search for ways to live with one another.

One thing is for sure: whatever we do, the past refuses to go away, it lingers and its arm is long.

So, how can we free ourselves from a past that continues to weigh down on us? In the case of South Africa, Archbishop Tutu brilliantly answered this question: "Having looked at the beast in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness, let us shut the door on the past, not to forget it, but to allow it not to imprison us" [1].

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