

A credo to guide the new SA

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The credit that may not justifiably be taken from towering African figures such as Nkrumah, Kaunda and Nyerere in whom political power and theoretical originality interfaced, is the contribution they made towards the liberated Africans' alignment of their hitherto suppressed Africanness with the new realities.

These included questions relating to identity, the direction newly freed Africans had to evolve towards and modes of adaptation they would have to acquire in the face of historical change.

For South Africans, the seat of first black president after European dominance was blessed in the person of Madiba. The pressing need around 1994 was for a figurehead to articulate and defend the reconciliation route adopted by the government. A great many South Africans, black and white, picked up the cue and today we can speak confidently of a more or less unified nation.

But euphoria has a short life when placed before the reality of building a new nation, especially one in which the majority of its population has been oppressed and every aspect of its existence appropriated, distorted and crushed.

Popular politics has little to do with serious application of the mind to these very crucial matters of unlearning, relearning and building from the devastation that has been left by Europeans. This is for the intelligentsia.

Through research, practical experiment and sound social analysis, Es'kia Mphahlele's lifework, in his philosophy of Afrikan Humanism, stands begging an ear and an opportunity to grow and explore a homegrown product, not for the glory of a patriotic idea, but more for the value that can be derived from it.

My doctoral thesis – The Representation of Afrikan Humanism in the Narrative Writings of Es'kia Mphahlele – proved to be an enormous task and yet one which in the reading of the texts presents the potent possibilities of Mphahlele's philosophy easily and naturally.

This is especially true for those who are willing to acknowledge the misery in our desperate attempts to modify and massage a bankrupt colonial education system rather than throw it out in its entirety.

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka argues that "one of the primary duties of African intellectual institution" is to challenge the value of particular patterns of thought in European thinking which include distortion through "selectiveness of materials and philosophical ideas of African society."

A big problem arises when politicians ignore the wealth of intellectual output that can help in shaping and addressing the dilemmas of an emerging nation such as ours.

In my dissertation I contend that by weaving African Humanist consciousness into his fiction, Mphahlele "developed and perfected his concept of Afrikan Humanism" which resulted in the concept being "shaped into a coherent, nuanced and lucid theory or philosophy". So very many other scholars have in their own ways said much the same after grappling with both the texts and teaching practices of Mphahlele.

In explaining what he means by Afrikan Humanism, Mphahlele makes clear that the refined aspects of this ancient African way of thinking and living were inspired since the 19th century by problems facing all oppressed Africans as a common experience on world scale.

Pan Africanist and Black Consciousness ideas of African-Americans such as Blyden urged Mphahlele to ask himself what it is to be African.

He continued to search for the answer even as he observed African-American movements such as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the negritude movement in the 1930s in Francophone Africa with its emphasis on black pride.

When the Black Consciousness Movement gained momentum in South Africa in the 60s and 70s, Mphahlele, though in exile, continued to put together building blocks of the Africanist consciousness.

This is why Professor of World Literature Ntongela Masilela argues that “no other South African intellectual who spent time in exile can match Mphahlele” on the conceptual level of meaningfully distilling building blocks of world cultures, and “in his extraordinary intellectual engagement with Africa”.

No serious intellectual or leader anywhere in the world cannot but be stimulated by Mphahlele’s definition of Afrikan Humanism. To this day this definition lends an Africanist lens to the world as it presents itself to humankind. It is always fulfilling to analyse ideas like globalisation, African Renaissance and ubuntu in terms of Mphahlele’s philosophy.

South Africa needs to ensure that Mphahlele’s heritage is not rendered into a static relic through non-application in the life of our nation.

It is gratifying to notice that The Es’kia Institute has been established specifically to immortalise and translate into active educational programmes the views of this great son of the soil.

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