

HOW THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY HAS CHANGED

'I am an African' – but you are not

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ELEVEN years ago, on May 8, 1996, Thabo Mbeki made what will surely go down in history as his most important speech. The occasion was the adoption of South Africa's final constitution. The speech by Mbeki, who was then deputy president, began with the words: "I am an African." Few more lyrical calls to arms have been made, certainly in this part of the world. Its ambit spread from one proud community to another, from one evocative place to the next. Its message of unity and of inclusiveness was unambiguous and compelling.

At the time, many commentators could hardly believe their ears. Here, at last, was a leader with the intellectual vision and historical depth of memory to carry the people of this country forward into a new era, an era in which we could all be African, an era in which we could all be South African.

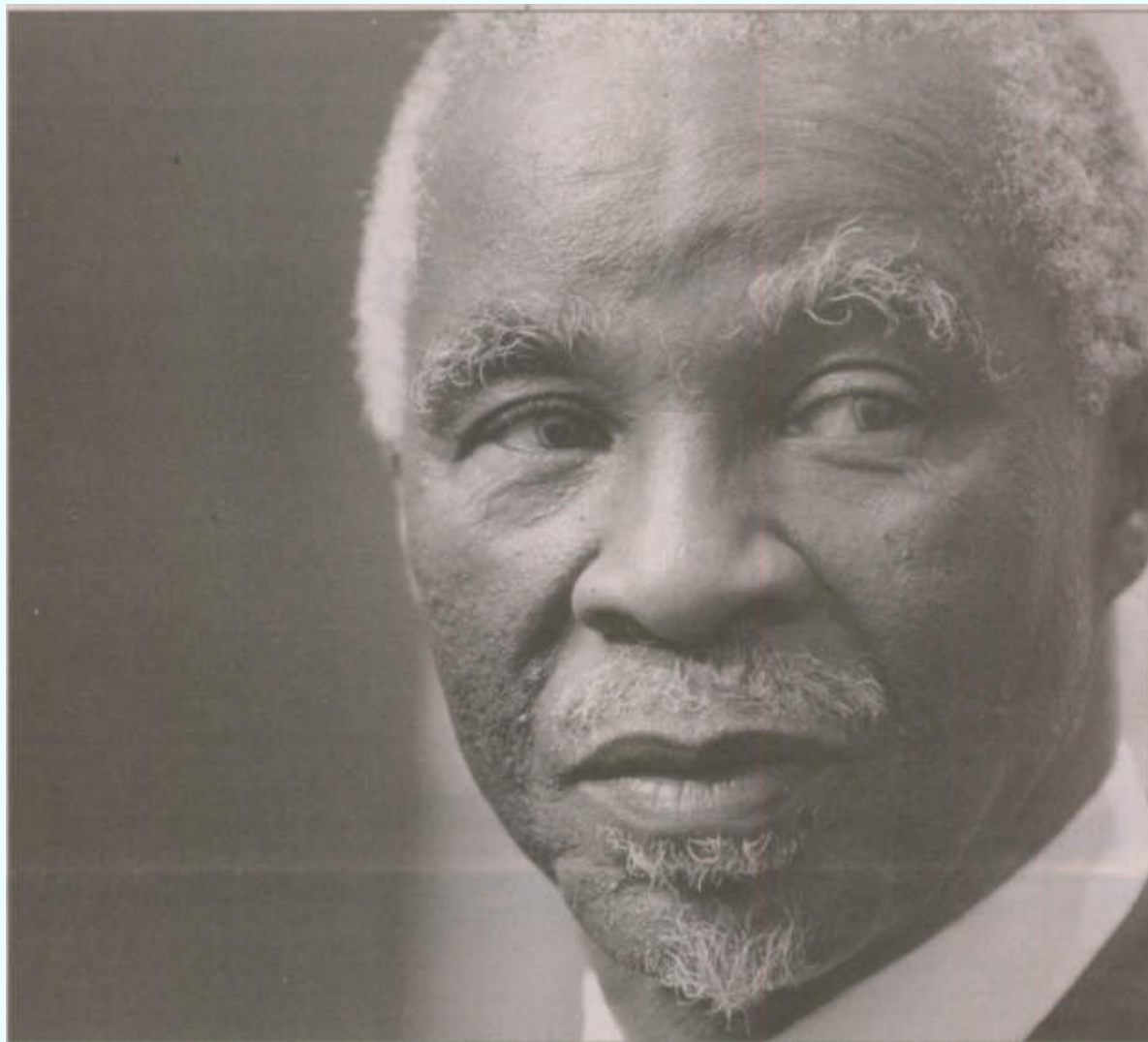
But then something changed. The vision began to blur. It seemed the call to arms was not intended for everybody. There were limits to African-ness.

Two contemporary analysts, Xolela Mangcu and Ivor Chipkin, recently pondered what the reasons for the change might be and what consequences might flow from it. At a "Development Dialogue" hosted in Cape Town by Isandla Institute, Mangcu and Chipkin wrestled with the question: "What is a South African identity?"

Mangcu, a visiting scholar at the Wits University Public Intellectual Life Project, confessed he was one of the observers who jumped to their feet to applaud Mbeki's 1996 speech. Hailing from the black consciousness movement, Mangcu had long bemoaned the ANC's refusal to grapple with identity. Here, at last, was an ANC leader who seemed to understand. "I wrote this long piece in the *Mail & Guardian* celebrating the arrival of Mbeki, welcoming his construction of South African identity and welcoming the ANC finally seeing the light of day. For a very long time, the ANC denied these discussions of identity," Mangcu said.

But what had perhaps started as a genuine attempt to grapple with the thorny issues of identity in 1996 has now floundered into what Mangcu describes as "nativism". "What is happening today is a departure to nativism. An explanation for that is power. It is how people who come to power find ways to sustain themselves."

In the search for identity, the powerful have appropriated "race", argues Mangcu. Both identity and



A QUESTION OF IDENTITY: Is President Thabo Mbeki ruling over a 'Rainbow Nation' or a 'Black Republic'?

race are now being used to determine who is "in", who is "authentic" and who is being spoken to by the country's leadership. "I am an African" no longer means we are all African. It means that I am an African, and you are not.

Chipkin, a chief research specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council's democracy and governance research programme, agrees that it appears the fundamental values being pushed by the national executive have changed over the past 13 years.

According to Chipkin, the values being pushed by the country's highest echelons these days resemble ANC rhetoric in the days before the Freedom Charter was adopted in Kliptown in 1955. These new views assign a racial patina to governance issues that some call a "black republic" attitude.

"The idea being supported by some is that any criticism of the South African government is ultimately in the service of a white agenda and represents white values.

Criticism is an affront to an African government as it serves to criticise black people in general and casts doubt on the sovereignty of a black government. It therefore undermines democratic space rather than consolidates it," Chipkin said at the event this month.

"Although there has been a strong Africanist tendency within the ANC, it was trumped from 1955 and then again at the Morogoro Conference in 1969 with a notion of blackness that emphasised its democratic and political (aspects). What we are dealing with here is a revolt against this tradition."

Both Mangcu and Chipkin argue the shift from Mbeki's "I am an African" speech in 1996 to the racial prism represented by the "Black Republic" is the result of a crisis of support being experienced by the current presidency.

Mangcu said that as controversial issues such as corruption, the arms deal, crime and even HIV-Aids developed into serious national problems, "I began to sense a cynical

use of the language of identity to defend things that were truly horrible. I once listened to the president giving a talk on HIV/Aids at Fort Hare explaining that Aids was a racial construction concocted by white people and why crime is a figment of the white imagination.

"In all of this there seemed to be an appeal to black consciousness, an appropriation of Steve Biko's ideas, to man these defences of the government and I found this unacceptable."

Mangcu explained how he had spent much of his political life in the black consciousness camp.

The manipulation of Biko's ideology on identity by powerful state figures had forced him to confront the contradiction in "a real and personal way". He had realised, however, that both sides had made cynical use of the identity debate.

While some over-emphasised the importance of identity and ascribed everything to its functioning, others thought it an unsolvable dilemma that led to a dead-end. "I hail from

the black consciousness movement and identity was very crucial ... However, I became sceptical of this reliance on identity."

The argument that some people are more authentic than others is one of most dangerous things imaginable, said Mangcu.

He said he had looked back in South African history to examine how important black intellectuals such as Steve Biko, Robert Sobukwe, Tiyo Soga and others, had wrestled with the notion of identity and discovered a rich and sophisticated analysis.

"What we need more than anything is for identity to have a notion of inclusion. The cynical use of race is unfortunate. Whether and how we get out of this conundrum will require a redefinition of how we talk about identity."

The path forward may be to consider citizenship rather than identity, Mangcu argued: "Citizenship makes us who we are and to try and stretch it beyond that becomes a little bit dicey."

Chipkin, who recently published a book on the topic entitled *Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy and the Identity of "the people"*, said blackness had come to mean two different things in South Africa.

One meaning, developed since 1955, suggested that blackness was not simply a measure of race or culture, but was a commitment to certain kinds of democratic values. These values included equality and tolerance.

This view was predominant between the mid-1950s until fairly recently. It included the notion that real power is invested in democratic institutions and not in a political party or executive.

More recently, a second measure of blackness had begun to emerge. According to this perspective, blackness is privileged both as a race and as a culture. "It is the degree to which one acts upon native values. There is a sense that being black has a culture that is above universal or democratic values."

Chipkin suggested that if this latter definition was to win through, "great danger" would be posed to the consolidation of democracy in South Africa.

As the struggle for supremacy between the Rainbow Nation and the Black Republic gathers momentum, it remains to be seen whether Mbeki's famous "I am an African" speech will go down in history as a prelude to fame or as a badge of infamy.

● *Hadland is a director at the Human Sciences Research Council. He writes in his personal capacity.*

