

Shall We Topple the Pyramids?

They were built by slaves. The African pharaohs oppressed them, and among the oppressed were the Jews. That was an early version of systemic racism. Whites enslaved by blacks. It lasted for about 400 years until a liberator came along, one of the greatest African leaders of all time. His liberation movement freed the slaves. Let my people go!

So in the prevailing spirit of tearing down monuments that celebrate despots who ran oppressive regimes, shouldn't we tear down the pyramids? Or do we cherish our own ancient traditions enough that we are comfortable to admit to our history, including our mistakes? That is a kind of conservatism. I do not say "conservatism" on purpose – because there is no Conservative Party in South Africa. I am rather talking about conserving - or even conservation. Some things just have to stay, even if they remind us of our nightmares.

It is not hard to connect the dots in terms of the relevance of America's "Black Lives Matter" movement to the mother continent. In our case, repression has taken the form of colonialism and apartheid. Both are officially dismantled now, but they have left a legacy. We have memories that we would rather not remember. So what has happened? Just as we have retained colonial borders – drawn up in Berlin at a conference of European leaders, we have also retained other moorings from the colonial and apartheid past.

Tearing down statues is symbolic – but where do you draw the line? Will we end up going after the greatest protester of them all? Martin Luther was anti-semitic. Yet he led one of the greatest reform movements in history – the Protestant Reformation. Like the pyramids, he is a keeper.

The legacy of colonialism includes democracy, liberalism, science and socialism. Perhaps there were already African customs that approximated these? But we have adopted constitutional democracy, human rights (stemming from liberalism), scientific research and scientific socialism (in its African manifestation called Fanonism). The extent to which these were a good fit with pre-colonial African society is debatable. Was there ever a proletarian class in pre-colonial Africa? For example, liberalism brought us the anti-slavery movement (originating in Britain) and also the emancipation of women. So we have not discarded all that we imported from overseas, and we can go through these BLM rituals to redeem ourselves, but there are deep legacies that are here to stay. They may become less prevalent, but they are not leaving anytime soon. They say that everyone fears Time. But Time fears the pyramids.

We often make a distinction between the terms "political" and "economic". They are closely related but politics comes in different forms like despotism or democracy, whereas economics is usually about policies of the Centre, the Right and the Left. These are international terms, not particularly African. I think that there is a third term that should be equally important, but rarely is put on a par – the term "ethical". For example, even despots can run good economies with lots of growth, and some despots are quite benign. Pro-poor policies are as old as the Poor Laws of the Old Testament. They go back a thousand years before Solon invented democracy in Athens. The term "ethical" encompasses what we call values, justice and equality. Obviously you can do business without justice – for example, corruption. You can have a booming economy and at the same time high levels of inequality. That is measured by what we call the Gini Coefficient.

My sense is that South Africa's politics is still dominated by the fight between liberalism and socialism – two different strands of Humanism. All of the above came from Europe. Since the demise of the National Party, we have not seen the rise of another conservative star to guide our navigation into the future. Instead, we have a black hole. Nobody wants to enter that space because it is heavier than gravity. The best we can offer for conservatism are... Inkatha, a party that denies Zulu nationalism and embodies it at the same time... and the Freedom Front Plus, which again is the party of an ethnic minority. So on the left of centre, we have parties like the ANC, the SACP and the EFF competing for the economic votes. If you call the DA a “right of centre” party, they get incensed. After all, they were already there fighting apartheid while the ANC was still in exile. They are liberals, but they hate socialists almost as much as the Nats did. But they dare not step backwards into that black hole, either.

My observation is that neither the politics of liberalism nor of socialism align with African Humanism. For there are primordial beliefs and values that run deeper than the colonial veneer – whether Dutch or British. For example the well-known proverb *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. If the ethical base of our politics aligned better with such beliefs that are near and dear to most citizens, we would get some better conservatism. Do you notice how often politicians speak of “our people”? I know that Mosiuoa Lekota once asked the rhetorical question in parliament: Who are “our people”? I agree with him that the term should not exclude whites. But we need to ground our ethical base in African Humanism – not in imported colonial ideologies like liberalism or scientific socialism.

How can Africans say that they are atheists because they are Marxists? Show me an African who does not believe at least in spirits, if not in God almighty. Africans fear God, on the whole. So Marxist roots will not grow very deep in African soil.

I believe that economics would also change drastically if our contentions were less about imported ideologies and more about “our people”. But in saying this, I am in danger of stepping backwards into that black hole of conservatism. But why not? First I think that we need to upgrade “ethics” to be on a par with politics and economics. Then, dare I say that we need to conserve our cherished African traditions more than to embrace a change agenda that is shaking our foundations? For example, no more virginity testing because of women's rights... No more ukuthwala because of the imperative of consent... You can move in with a man three years before he pays Lobola. Then later perform those rituals and also compress the ukumekheza into the same ceremony (Tsambo versus Sengadi judgment). The judges' excuse was that customary marriage is dynamic, not static. In other words, African customs should conform to liberalism, even if African values don't. Houston, we have a problem! When judges are more important than indunas in validating customary marriage, we are already tearing down the pyramids.