

# Collective leadership during Thabo Mbeki's presidency: A rhetorical perspective

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When Thabo Mbeki succeeded Nelson Mandela as the President of a democratic South Africa, there was a generally-held view that he was just what the nascent post-apartheid South Africa needed.<sup>1</sup> Touted as “Africa’s Renaissance man”, he was determined to make Africa — as a whole — stable, democratic and less poor.<sup>2</sup> The then President of the United States, George W. Bush, once called him America’s “point man” in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Mbeki’s critics described him as enigmatic, aloof and arrogant.<sup>4</sup> Others viewed him as paranoid.<sup>5</sup>

Whether these were accurate characterisations or not, Thabo Mbeki as the President of both the ANC and South Africa left a lasting imprint on the country’s political landscape. He is accredited, *inter alia*, with the founding of institutions like the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), and the African Union (AU).<sup>6</sup> His international standing, however, took a knock in 2000 when it emerged that he had questioned the link between HIV and AIDS.<sup>7</sup> He equally courted controversy over his handling of the crisis in neighbouring Zimbabwe.<sup>8</sup>

While there have arguably been many outstanding individual leaders in the

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<sup>1</sup> Alec Russel, “Thabo Mbeki: Aloof leader who fell from grace” (2008): <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/0433e6b6-87d3-11dd-b114-0000779fd18c.html#axzz1RmW86Xen>. (Accessed 5 September 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Adekeye Abajo, “Africa’s Renaissance man”: <http://www.crascdz.org/IMG/ARB%20Pdf/Africas%20Renaissance%20Man%20by%20Adekeya%20Adeba%20jo.pdf>. (Accessed 5 September 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Tim Butcher, “Bush gives way to South Africa over call to topple ‘evil’ Mugabe Regime, (2003): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/4188518/Bush-gives-way-to-South-Africa-over-call-to-topple-evil-Mugabe-regime.html>. (Accessed 5 September 2012).

<sup>4</sup> William M. Gumede, *Thabo Mbeki and the battle for the soul of the ANC* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2005): 34.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in “Thabo Mbeki: A man of two faces” (special report), *The Economist* (2005): <http://www.economist.com/node/3576543>. (Accessed 05 September 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Burke, “Misrule in Africa: Is NEPAD the solution?”, *Global Dialogue* 3-4, 6 (2004): <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=312>. (Accessed 5 September 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Furman, “Mbeki’s AIDS denialism” (2011): <http://thinkafricapress.com/south-africa/mbeki-aids-denialism>. (Accessed 06 September 2012).

<sup>8</sup> “The many failures of Thabo Mbeki”, *The New York Times*, (2008), [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/27/opinion/27iht-edmbeki.1.13244922.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/27/opinion/27iht-edmbeki.1.13244922.html?_r=0). (Accessed 5 September 2012).

African National Congress (ANC), one of the hallmarks of the party has been a reference to “collective leadership”. According to Raymond Suttner, the concept of “collective leadership” commenced in the 1950s. In this regard, Suttner maintains:

The importance of collective then was that an individual did not decide, but that it was more democratic. See, collective has been referred to as having a number of different potentialities. On the one hand, in war situations, it restricts what you can do. But in the context of the ANC of that time, when it started, to have collective leadership made it much more democratic than to have individual leadership. But it also meant that having discussed it fully, the collective would abide by that decision until individuals had persuaded others to depart from it. So this was the democratisation of the ANC.<sup>9</sup>

The underlying assumption in the ANC’s *modus operandi* is that “the whole” is greater than “the part”. This then translates into a propensity where those in a leadership position often speak in the third person, using a pronoun “we” that, at times, makes it almost impossible to say with certainty whether the views expressed are those of the speaker or if the speaker speaks on behalf of the organisation. Until or unless explicitly stated, the assumption is that the speaker is a spokesperson of the collective.

In 1997, the ANC reflected on the features that those at the highest echelons of the party should possess. The discussions centred on the new challenges that the party faced as it was then in power. This paradigm shift had implications for the character and leadership of the organisation, with new emphasis on building the capacity to govern and implement programmes to transform the country. The success or otherwise of the ANC depended on how it performed on this front. After much deliberation on the issue, the party resolved, pertaining to its membership, in general, and the members of the National Executive Committee (NEC) — the party’s highest decision-making body between conferences — in particular, that:

- An NEC member should understand ANC policy and be able to apply it under all conditions in which s/he finds her/himself. This includes an appreciation, from the NDR [National Democratic Revolution] stand-point, of the country and the world we live in, of the balance of

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond Suttner (interview), “Models of ANC leadership”, *Polity* (2010), <http://www.polity.org.za/article/models-of-anc-leadership-2010-08-20>. (Accessed 18 June 2012).

forces, and how continually to change this balance in favour of the motive forces of change.

- An NEC member should constantly seek to improve his/her capacity to serve the people. S/he should strive to be in touch with the people all the time, listen to their views and learn from them. S/he should be accessible and flexible and not give her/himself the status of being the source of all the wisdom.
- An NEC member should win the confidence of the people in their day-to-day work. Where the situation demands, s/he should be firm, and have the courage to explain and seek to convince others of the correctness of decisions taken by constitutional structures, even if such decisions are unpopular. S/he should not seek to gain cheap popularity by avoiding difficult issues, making false promises or merely pandering to popular sentiment.<sup>10</sup>

By virtue of being at the helm of the ANC NEC, the ANC President is expected to embody all the afore-mentioned qualities. This, however, does not prohibit an ANC President from having leeway or taking an initiative provided that this is done in the interests and within the confines of the constitutional structures of the party. As Mandela asserted:

There are times when a leader must move out ahead of the flock, go off in a new direction, confident that he is leading his people the right way.<sup>11</sup>

In its discussion document, titled “Through the eye of a needle: Choosing the best cadres to lead the revolution”, the ANC National Working Committee (NWC) — the most politically influential leadership collective in the country, comprising the ANC President, Deputy President, Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-General, National Chairperson and Treasurer-General — expanded on Mandela’s view on leadership and argued:

A leader should seek to influence and be influenced by others in the collective. He should have the conviction to state his views boldly and openly within the constitutional structures of the movement and without being disrespectful. He should not cower before those in more senior positions in pursuit of patronage and should not rely on cliques to maintain his position.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> African National Congress (discussion document), “Challenges of leadership in the current phase” (1997): <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=307>. (Accessed 18 June 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (London: Macdonald Purnell, 1995): 627.

<sup>12</sup> African National Congress “Through the eye of a needle: Choosing the best cadres

Again, in his closing address during the 1997 State of the Nation Address, Mandela made the following remarks on leadership:

Leadership means leadership. It implies sometimes moving ahead of one's constituency and — not seldom — taking unpopular decisions in the interests of the country and all its people.<sup>13</sup>

Moeletsi Mbeki, a brother to Thabo Mbeki, concurs with Mandela and opines:

A leader is someone who identifies political and/or economic opportunities that can lead to the solution of overwhelming social problems or challenges facing his or her community and successfully persuades others to work with his or her to implement those solutions.<sup>14</sup>

Mbeki's definition of a leader underlines the centrality of deliberative rhetoric as he argues that while a leader should exercise some discretion, it is incumbent upon him or her to persuade his or her followers of the advantage(s) that will accrue to them if they choose to initiate a particular course of action for the future. A leader does not have to impose his/her views on his/her followers. On the contrary, he/she has to argue his/her point of view persuasively always bearing in mind that "[n]o single person is a leader unto himself or herself, but a member of a collective".<sup>15</sup> From an organisational perspective, when a person has a view on how to improve things or rectify mistakes, he/she should state them within organisational structures and seek to win others to his/her own thinking.

This paper looks at the arguments advanced by Thabo Mbeki during his tenure as President of the ANC and South Africa. The focus is on the "African Renaissance" and the racism debates. An attempt is made to analyse the rhetorical techniques used or arguments advanced by Mbeki as he had been mandated by the ANC or the Tripartite Alliance — the alliance between

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to lead the revolution" (National Working Committee discussion document, 2001): <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/2001/eye-needle.htm>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Mandela, "Closing address on the State of the Nation Address, 12 February", *Debates of the National Assembly* (Cape Town: Hansard, 1997): 148.

<sup>14</sup> Moeletsi Mbeki, *Advocates for change: How to overcome Africa's challenges* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2011): 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> African National Congress "Through the eye of a needle: Choosing the best cadres to lead the revolution" (National Working Committee discussion document, 2001): <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/2001/eye-needle.htm>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) — to lead the ANC and South Africa. As he exercised these dual roles, was Mbeki doing so within the ambit of “collective leadership”, as expected of an ANC leader? Is there any discernible evidence that he deviated from the norm?

### **Speech at his inauguration as President of South Africa — 16 June 1999**

Following in Mandela's footsteps — someone revered as an international icon and on whom a “saintly” status had been conferred — would have been an almost insurmountable task for anyone. In an attempt to shake off Mandela's shadow, Mbeki chose the “African Renaissance” as one of the rallying points for his presidency. He called for an “African Renaissance” as a doctrine for Africa's political, economic and social renewal:

Being certain that not always were we the children of the abyss, we will do what we have to do to achieve our own Renaissance. We trust that what we will do will not only better our conditions as a people, but will also make a contribution, however small, to the success of Africa's Renaissance, towards the identification of the century ahead of us as the African century.<sup>16</sup>

Mbeki's call for an “African Renaissance” might have elicited mixed reaction from his audience. Some, especially the minorities, might have wondered whether this was not the ANC's turn towards narrow Africanism, a notion which risked excluding them from the new South Africa. Indeed, others dismissed it as “confusion”.<sup>17</sup> Others might have understood it from a mythical perspective, a celebration of and a call for Africa that reportedly existed prior to slavery, colonialism and apartheid. It was therefore imperative for Mbeki to define the “African Renaissance” concept so that any possible misconception would have been dispelled. A failure to do so would have resulted in, *inter alia*, alienating certain South Africans and this could have made Mbeki's task of continuing with the transformation of the country that Nelson Mandela had initiated an almost impossible mission.

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<sup>16</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “Speech at his inauguration as President of South Africa”, (16 June 1999): <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1999/mbek0616.htm>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Eddy Maloka, “The South African “African Renaissance” debate: A critique”: <http://www.polis.sciencespobordeaux.fr/vol8ns/maloka.pd>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

## Speech at the Launch of the African Renaissance Institute — 11 October 1999

The notion of the “African Renaissance” was first mooted within the ANC in 1997 at the party’s 50<sup>th</sup> National Congress as a key component of its ideological outlook, particularly pertaining to international matters. The ANC’s contention was that South Africa’s destiny was intrinsically linked to that of the African continent.<sup>18</sup> It followed then that South Africa could not succeed without the success of the African continent. Through this lens, the “African Renaissance” debate could be characterised as a classic example of an argument of inclusion.<sup>19</sup>

On 11 October 1999, Mbeki launched the African Renaissance Institute in Pretoria. He used this occasion to elaborate on what he meant by “African Renaissance”. According to him, the concept meant “rebirth, renewal, springing up anew”.<sup>20</sup> Mbeki told his audience that throughout its existence, the ANC had “been exposed to the inspiring perspective of African unity and solidarity and the renewal of our continent”.<sup>21</sup>

Acknowledging that the idea of an “Africa Renaissance” was not his own invention — which can be viewed as a commonplace of precedent — and conceding that its attainment had previously been merely a pipe dream, Mbeki expatiated:

Accordingly, what is new about it today is that the conditions exist for the process to be enhanced, throughout the continent, leading to the transformation of the idea from a dream dreamt by visionaries to a practical programme of action for revolutionaries. What, then, are these conditions! These are:

- The completion of the continental process of the liquidation of the colonial system in Africa, attained as a result of the liberation of South Africa;
- The recognition of the bankruptcy of neo-colonialism by the masses of the people throughout the continent, including

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<sup>18</sup> African National Congress, “Discussion documents: Developing a strategic perspective on South African foreign policy (1 July 1997): <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2348>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*, J. Wilkinson and P. Weaver, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969): 231.

<sup>20</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “Speech at the launch of the African Renaissance Institute, Pretoria (11 October 1999): <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1999/991011345p1001.htm>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

- the majority of the middle strata;
- The weakening of the struggle among the major powers for spheres of influence on our continent, as a consequence of the end of the Cold War; and,
- The acceleration of the process of globalisation.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Mbeki made use of the common topic of possibility.<sup>23</sup> He sought to persuade his audience that the existence of the conditions that he enunciated made the realisation of the “African Renaissance” possible. Although this argumentative technique has a persuasive effect, its success hinges on the interlocutor believing that the proposed course of action is feasible. A common way of inspiring an audience with confidence in the practicality of the particular proposed course of action is to cite examples of people who have accomplished a similar or identical thing.

### **State of the Nation Address — 25 June 1999**

This was Mbeki's inaugural State of the Nation Address. It was arguably one of his most crucial speeches as there were still questions as to whether his presidency would continue with Mandela's nation-building and/or reconciliation project or it would mark a departure from this and, if so, what this meant for the country. Mbeki told his audience that he would lead the country according to the dictates of the ANC:

To these masses we owe the obligation to recommit the government on whose behalf I speak, to the construction of a people-centred society. This I am happy to do with all the authority at my command.<sup>24</sup>

Mbeki's argument was predicated on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which advocated for a people-driven development. The RDP outlined the democratic mechanisms that had to be put in place, fostered and implemented so that South Africa could deal with the socio-economic challenges that it was confronted with. The RDP was a culmination of much discussions, consultations and negotiations between the ANC, SACP,

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical rhetoric for the modern student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990): 119.

<sup>24</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “Address of the President of the Republic of South Africa at the opening of Parliament (25 June 1999): <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1999/9906281018a1006.htm>. (Accessed 26 July 2012).

and COSATU, as well as mass organisations in the wider civil society.<sup>25</sup> By undertaking to base his presidency on the tenets of the RDP, it may be argued, Mbeki created the impression that he subscribed to the notion of “collective leadership”.

Perhaps in an endeavour to allay the fears of the sceptics and/or to assure investors, in particular, Mbeki promised continuity as regards the implementation of policies aimed at improving the lives of the people. In this regard, he contended:

The Reconstruction and Development Programme... and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR) were implemented by our first democratic government to achieve socio-economic transformation and macro-economic stability... The RDP and GEAR will remain the basic policy objectives of the new government to achieve sustainable growth, development and improved standards of living.<sup>26</sup>

However, Mbeki's insistence that his government would continue with the implementation of GEAR put him at loggerheads with the Tripartite Alliance. This was so because the SACP had expressed its objection to GEAR:

We remain convinced that GEAR is the wrong policy. It was wrong in the process that developed it, it is wrong in its overall conception, and it is wrong in much of its detail.<sup>27</sup>

Echoing the sentiments of the SACP, another Tripartite Alliance ally, COSATU contended:

We have stated from the beginning that it was impossible for GEAR to meet some of its key targets, such as employment creation and growth, because of the contradictory fiscal and monetary that it pursues.<sup>28</sup>

In sharp contrast to the RDP document which had been intensely discussed

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<sup>25</sup> African National Congress, “Policy documents: A basic guide to the Reconstruction and Development Programme”: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=234>. (Accessed 2 May 2012).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> “SACP slates GEAR”, *Mail & Guardian* (1998): <http://mg.co.za/print/1998-07-01-sacp-slates-gear>. (Accessed 14 September 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Congress of South African Trade Unions, “COSATU's response to the 1998/9 budget” (1998): <http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/subs/1998/budget98.htm>. (Accessed 14 September 2012).



within the Alliance partners, GEAR was reportedly preceded by no consultation within the ANC. It is argued that even top ANC figures were not acquainted with its details before its public release. Indeed, COSATU bemoaned this departure from the modus operandi within the Alliance:

One of the critical problems is the fact that the formulation of policies... has been driven by technocrats, the bureaucracy, and Ministries. *The ANC, and the Alliance more broadly, has found itself dealing with these policies as they emerge, rather than driving their development* [my emphasis]. The result is that we often have to react to policies which are directly opposed to the thrust of the platform outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme. The introduction of GEAR... is the most serious example of this problem. GEAR in this respect, however, was not unusual. It followed a pattern of treating the Alliance with contempt by certain Ministers on issues of governance and policy formulation.<sup>29</sup>

It is evident from the two aforementioned passages that both SACP and COSATU felt that they were sidelined from the decision-making processes and that their views were not accommodated by Mbeki and his Government. As COSATU stated, “a pattern of treating the Alliance with contempt” had taken root.<sup>30</sup>

### **State of the Nation Address — 4 February 2000**

After highlighting some inroads made into creating a “humane and people-centred society”, Thabo Mbeki argued that racism still remained one of the challenges that had the potential of jeopardising the gains that had been made. To buttress his argument, he extensively cited from an electronic mail in which a certain company engineer had made the following racist remarks:

I would like to summarise what the Kaffirs have done to stuff up this country since they came into power... If a white buys a house, he pays transfer duties. If a kaffir buys a house it is free of duties because he was ‘previously disadvantaged’... More than 20% of the GDP is embezzled by the kaffir politicians and corrupt civil servants.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Congress of South African Trade Unions, “COSATU 6<sup>th</sup> Congress” (1997): <http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=2154>. (Accessed 2 May 2012).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “The State of the Nation Address” (4 February 2000): <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2000/000204451p1001.htm>. (Accessed 2 May 2012).

It is worth noting that the issue of racism predated Mbeki's presidency. It had earlier on been raised by the ANC as one of the issues that had to be tackled in the democratic South Africa. Delivering its January 8 statement — an annual occasion on which the ANC celebrates its anniversary — the party contended:

The distribution of wealth, income and opportunity in our society continues to be determined in terms of race and colour, a situation that will perpetuate itself if we do not elaborate policies and implement programmes to end this continued entrenchment of racism.<sup>32</sup>

When Mbeki cited the company engineer, he had recourse to an argument by example.<sup>33</sup> This was intended to give credence to his contention that racism was still an issue in the new South Africa. Mbeki's technique had the potential to persuade his audience to concur with him that this was, indeed, the case. Conversely, some of Mbeki's interlocutors might have argued that the example he had given was just an isolated incident and therefore was not a true reflection of the general thinking of the majority of the White South Africans.

## **Response to the debate on the State of the Nation Address — 10 February 2000**

During this debate, Mbeki read a letter that he had received from a White South African, Paul A. Dunn, who was reacting to his assertions on racism. In the letter, Dunn maintained:

It is with great shame that I write to you today as a white citizen of the RSA. I live in Russia temporarily for study reasons and read this morning of the absolutely abominable and offensive e-mail from a fellow white citizen. Certainly in your wisdom you know that not all South Africans, despite their colour, are racists. However, I know that in the Afrikaans segment, where I also come from, there are still those who are racists... Be assured that you have my own individual support in the struggle against racism. In my heart I long for the day

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<sup>32</sup> African National Congress, "Statement of the National Executive Committee on the occasion of the 84<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ANC (8 January 1996): <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=64>. (Accessed 2 May 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Chaïm Perelman, *The realm of rhetoric*, W. Kluback, trans. (Notre Dame: University of Notre, 1982): 106.

when we will not refer to each other as black and white, but as fellow South Africans!<sup>34</sup>

Mbeki made reference to a second letter from another White South African, Mr Lemmer, who “was sceptical... when the ANC first won the elections”.<sup>35</sup> Confessing that he used to revel in the ANC's shortcomings and would cite these as an indication of incompetence on the part of the ANC, Mr Lemmer asserted that he had had a change of heart and had committed himself to making a positive contribution to the creation of a non-racial South Africa.

The two cases chosen by Mbeki, rhetorically speaking, qualify as an argument by model.<sup>36</sup> The actions of the individuals cited serve as models of the kind of behaviour that should be emulated. The fact that the individuals that Mbeki referred to were Afrikaners might have persuaded some in Mbeki's audience to argue that the individuals in question demonstrated that despite his contention that there was racism, there were people who were ready to embrace the new South Africa. Indeed, one would further argue that this category of people might far outnumber the one that still harboured racist views.

Thabo Mbeki was often accused, especially by the opposition parties, of playing the “race card” with a view to justifying the incompetency of his leadership, as far as dealing with the challenges confronting the country was concerned.<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding this charge, Mbeki was adamant that not sufficient progress had been made to bring about a non-racial South Africa that the country's Constitution envisioned.<sup>38</sup> He constantly made referrals to the country's Constitution which states that South Africa has one of its values a commitment to promote “non-racism and non-sexism”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Thabo Mbeki, “Response to the debate on the State of the Nation Address (10 February 2000): <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2000/000210227p1007.htm>. (Accessed 2 May 2012).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Perelman, *The realm of rhetoric*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence Schlemmer, “Thabo Mbeki's strategy” (2000): <http://www.hsf.org.za/resource-centre/focus/issues-11-20/issue-20-fourth-quarter-2000/thabo-mbekis-strategy>. (Accessed 4 April 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Thabo Mbeki, Statement at the opening of the debate in the National Assembly, on “Reconciliation and nation building” (29 May 1998): <http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0529.htm>. (Accessed 4 April 2012).

<sup>39</sup> *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996): 3.