

## Twelve Languages, Thirteen Perspectives

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[ TOM LANOYE ]

In general I am, I'm pretty sure, a privileged if still very limited witness, having been a part-time inhabitant of the Cape for nearly twenty years and remained the most passionate of lovers, for just as long, of the whole blessed glorious pandemonium there on the underside of what we so often call, both properly and improperly, *'the Dark Continent'*.

But lovers don't count here. Here I need to be at least two narrators, who speak with conflicting voices. Maybe even more than two. The more the better in a country in which it's only in the last sixteen years that each voice has counted, after four centuries of race and pass laws, murderous exclusion and lopsided colonial growth. An infant nation that is the size of Western Europe and has eleven official languages – no, twelve actually, because the sign language of the hard of hearing is official there, too, in this tender young state with the world's



Photo by Viviane Sassen.



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most liberal constitution, with same-sex marriage and no death penalty, but with some of the highest statistics on Earth when it comes to gang rape, drug trafficking, carjacking, gay murders, HIV infection and so on.

This country is everything, all mixed up together – the world in a mortar: a tourist paradise full of xenophobic violence; a political miracle that still hasn't managed to eradicate corruption and social injustice; a full member of the G20 *and* the strongest economy in the whole of Africa; with the second largest BMW fleet on the planet (after Russia), while hundreds of thousands are still waiting for their first roof, easy access to running water and elementary schooling for their offspring; the ultimate melting pot where every religion and every culture can flourish openly and freely, distinct, unhindered and exuberant, in such a cacophony of symbols and rituals that the average Westerner can no longer recognise the uniform of a single all-embracing polity and so, for convenience' sake – or should I say, Eurocentric to the bone? – decides that *no* South African state exists.

Which version would *you* like to hear? Are you prepared to believe that there is no one version?

Let me focus on the current President, Jacob Zuma, who succeeded the extremely hard-to-get-rid-of Thabo Mbeki. Zuma has the advantage of being instantly recognisable, like any caricature.

In contrast to his predecessor he is the exact image of an African leader as non-Africans, in particular, like to imagine them. He doesn't smoke a pipe, rarely wears a suit and never quotes Shakespeare. On the other hand, he has a full-fat paunch and a fistful of official wives, wears traditional leopard skins when it suits him and waves around his old-fashioned '*knobkerry*' – the African variant of our medieval mace. At every election meeting he dances around to warlike Zulu songs, grinning broadly and sweating heavily, there's a whiff of corruption about him, an air of misuse of power and an atmosphere of impending decline. With him the general degeneration that Mandela and Mbeki, and even the interim President Motlante, had managed to stave off would, after all, finally start in South Africa, as in other African countries.

Enough! With Zuma, as with Robert Mugabe in his day, the Heart of Darkness would begin to beat ever louder, until the rot set in.

At least that's how it looked last year, just before the national elections in which for the first time the governing ANC party had to face a vigorous opposition party (the DA, Democratic Alliance), a mediagenic breakaway party from its own ranks (COPE, full of Mbeki loyalists) and open dissension in its remaining ranks (in this case the ever more frustrated left wing, comprising the communist party, SACP, and the trade union, COSATU).

The election campaign was, as they put it at the time, '*unusually bitter*'. Never since Mandela took office had there been so much mudslinging, by ev-eryone, at everyone. In the process South Africa came another step closer to being a modern, contemporary society full of hysterics and populist flycatchers.

The ANC remained, as expected, by far the largest party. But it did lose, just, its two-thirds majority – which, it is true, it had never used in the past to change that liberal but strict constitution, not even to help Thabo Mbeki to a third term of office, however much he had his eye on it.

For the ANC faithful that symbolic loss of the special majority was a shot across the bows, proof of the fragmentation that happens to every militant movement as soon as it becomes a bloated ruling party and ceases to move with the times. For the biggest hypochondriacs the loss was irrelevant. What '*constitution*', what '*special majority*'? The ANC, a bunch that in every respect had been messing up or proving itself totally incompetent for fifteen years, still had enough power and popular support to get an illiterate, power-hungry, sexist, tribal and corrupt lout elected as president of the continent's biggest economy. Apparently only the Zulu population really loved him, their ethnic son. The rest of the population would, if they had the money to do so, leave the country now and head for Australia or the UK, like their relatives who had already decided to make the best of a bad job under Mbeki.

Predictions like this were spelt out in minute detail in the Western press, too. We prefer to read what we think we know already.

A year later, and not many people in Europe know this because their newspapers simply don't publish it, Jacob Zuma's popularity ratings in his own country are higher than Obama's or Sarkozy's in theirs. He has already been voted the Continent's best African leader by his peers – which, admittedly, says a lot about most other African leaders too.

The government Zuma put together was applauded even by his greatest critics. The Health portfolio has finally gone to a minister who believes that it takes more than just fresh vegetables and garlic to combat AIDS — and since then generous public resources have for the first time been earmarked for HIV medi-

cation for the very poorest. Apart from that, Zuma not only kept on the economic and organisational genius Trevor Manuel, he also made him the head of an umbrella service charged with monitoring all services provided by the government for its citizens. And for the Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries portfolio, neglected for years, he unabashedly took on a white heavyweight from another party. And that was none other than Piet Mulder, leader of the small but influential Freedom Front —the only party that might to some extent be seen as a successor to the National Party, cradle of the Apartheid regime. This move, discussed at length in the press and political inner circles, was reminiscent of Sarkozy's appointment of the socialist Bernard Kouchner to a top ministerial post (Foreign Affairs!), with the threefold result that, with Kouchner, he got a first-rate hand on board, kept the expectations of a few of the hotheads in his own party in check, and upset a rival party by depriving it of one of its crown jewels...

Zuma may have only learned to read as a prisoner on Robben Island, but he's been playing chess since he was a little boy, and not too badly either, it seems.

### **'I want it to relax'**

Do you think the above sounds like a whitewash when we're talking about a polygamist who, when accused and acquitted of rape, let slip during the trial that he wasn't afraid of HIV because he had had 'a good shower' after the act? Or too complaisant with regard to a dyed-in-the-wool potentate who, even today, is still threatening the top cartoonist Zapiro with an absurd lawsuit because of a caustic cartoon? A power politician and party militant who makes no attempt to get to the bottom of scandals concerning illegal party financing and shady arms deals that are about to lapse? Scandals which, as we all know, *never* happen in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany or Great Britain. Not to mention Italy.

Very likely - that it sounds like a whitewash, I mean. But that has done nothing to check the strange shift in appreciation for Zuma - a change which, moreover, is directly linked to a total depreciation of Thabo Mbeki's period in office. '*A year after his departure, Mbeki has become our national ogre*', wrote Johnny Steinberg recently in the business newspaper, *Business Day*. An ogre: a monster, a bogey man, a devourer of - by choice - children. '*Many (now) ponder,*' continued Steinberg, who is also a fellow of the *Open Society Institute* in New York, '*how the country went for nearly a decade with a president it did not deserve.*' (For the whole article see: <http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/Content.aspx?id=89104> )

As far as I can make out, this feeling is general, the years of paranoia are over. The problems are and remain gigantic, everyone realises that. On the political scene the arguments and discussions are as ferocious as ever, but they are also just as open - in marked contrast to Morocco, for example, where the leading periodical, *Tel Quel*, is regularly withdrawn from the shops; a paper whose front page recently announced a crushing self-examination under the title *La Silence des Intellectuels Marocains...*

They're rarely silent in South Africa. But the big difference is that, despite the worldwide economic crisis and the still huge challenges and chronic blunders, under Zuma's leadership the country seems to feel so much more at ease. By

way of explanation, Steinberg quoted one of the first democratically elected Spanish prime ministers. To the question of what he hoped to change in his country he replied: *'I don't want Spain to change. I want it to relax.'*

If that's all it comes down to, South Africa is in good hands with Zuma. The man loves parties and palavers and paying visits high and low. A man of many peoples through and through, and everyone seems to consider him if not a suitable president at least a suitable peer. If he pays a visit to a club of die-hard Afrikaners then sure enough he speaks some Afrikaans with them, praises their conscientious choice for *'hierdie kontinent'* (this continent) and their self-imposed vocation as *'the only white tribe of Africa'*. They have a cup of rooibos tea together and some *'koeksisters'*, and afterwards they give a joint press conference with nothing but broad smiles.



Nelson Mandela and François Pienaar after the victory of South Africa at the 1995 Rugby World Cup Final at Ellis Park Stadium, Johannesburg.

A Jew amongst Jews, Muslim amongst Muslims, more Indian than the Indians of Durban — wherever he goes Zuma charms more than he criticises, thus proving that he is a good successor to Nelson Mandela. In his book, *Playing the enemy. Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*, the historian John Carlin showed how shrewdly 'Madiba' (Mandela's affectionate nickname) was able to win over the whites, and in particular the Afrikaners, to the new South Africa. After years of cultural and sport boycotts, thanks to Mandela's personal support South Africa was able to host the Rugby World Cup. Rugby was and still is the one sport with which the Boers really identify.

At the start of the tournament it looked as if South Africa didn't stand a chance: it was only ranked ninth. But despite the fact that the national team only included one non-white player, the whole country was emotionally involved — for the first time in decades it was in the running for a title of any kind. The tournament became a triumphal progress for the team, known as the 'Springboks', led by their captain François Pienaar. During the final, against France, Nelson Mandela was in the grandstand. An inspired South African team won gloriously. But the real high point came immediately afterwards - the official ceremony on the pitch at Ellis Park, since time immemorial *the* sporting temple of everything white and pro-Apartheid. Mandela himself presented the cup, dressed in a Springbok T-shirt. And the captain, Pienaar, with Mandela at his side, thanked not only the sixty thousand fans present, but also all forty-three million South Africans for their support.

I watched the commentary in Antwerp, live on French television; even the two commentators, who looked like the cream of the Foreign Legion, were so choked by tears of emotion that they stopped their chattering for a full minute. Another record.

## Peaceful transition

Is Zuma the new Mandela? Of course not. Even Mandela would fail as his own successor. Icons are unbeatable, especially in a Springbok T-shirt.

But Zuma may be the least bad president that South Africa could hope for after the previous three – a demigod, an ogre and a grey caretaker. And perhaps that is the greatest gift that Mandela gave his country. He resigned and then went on living for a long time. His voice is not unimportant, but he rarely interferes. In this respect he is less a traditional African chief than the progenitor of a young but extremely important democratic tradition: that it is natural and even good that even a great leader should not remain in power for ever.

Peaceful transition is *the* key concept of every democracy. South Africa has had four presidents in fifteen years, who succeeded each other after nothing but a political struggle. In Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe has already ruled for thirty years without a break and, alas, unbroken. He could have been a Mandela, but every day he becomes more of an Idi Amin. An Ubu Roi, of whom even Archbishop Tutu says that he should be removed, if necessary by force.

But enough of flattering Zuma. 'He's only interested in short-term politics, laments Andrew X, one of the ANC's top men and a former advisor to the current President, during a lunch somewhere in Franschhoek. *'They've lost sight of the bigger picture, no-one looks further than the next PR stunt and none of the ANC big noises have any plan for this country other than staying in power themselves.'*



We'd spoken to Andrew just before the elections, too. He predicted then, rightly, that Zuma would do much better, both in the polling booths *and* as president, than everyone feared. He also forecast the election results of all the parties with chilling precision. A man who is better informed than most of the journalists I have met in South Africa, let alone outside it.

He agrees with us, now, over the meal in Franschhoek, that his criticism of Zuma sounds like an echo of what their compatriots are saying of Sarkozy and Obama: too much rhetoric and glamour, too little long-term vision. Too many words, too few results. *'Maybe then,'* I stick my oar in, *'Zuma is just a thoroughly modern politician, because he fits perfectly into an international trend in which politics has followed pop music, literature and cookery in becoming primarily a matter of personality cult. More idolatry than ideology.'*

At first Andrew responds that that's nothing new. For many people Mandela too was more of an idol than a statesman. But there is one big difference now, he says: *'From internal polls it appears that the unquestioning confidence people used to have in the ANC is rapidly decreasing, especially amongst the young. We don't even get thirty per cent any more! It's a disaster. If the ANC is doing badly, so is the whole country!'*

I will spare you the ensuing discussion, but I didn't agree with Andrew's position. It seems to me to be the very essence of democracy that the well-being of a country does *not* depend on the health of any particular party.

But the conversation in Franschhoek did remind us of something else that's obvious, though it's just as easily forgotten. South Africa is still a colossus in full transition, from a tough old basket case to a very new established order. It is good that this transition is not happening too fast — civil war has, thank goodness, been avoided. But I think that the transition process will only really have finished when it is not only the old South Africa that has disappeared, but also its most notable opponent, the militant movement which fought Apartheid for so long and which is now running the country. What is ironic is that the ANC would look completely different without Apartheid. Or no, it would, of course, simply not exist in this form, a cartel of nationalists, communists and crypto-capitalists which together govern the country as a one-party state. Sooner or later that will come to an end, and only then will the transition be complete.

## **A really different country**

It could happen even faster than the ANC leadership fears. I spoke to three young blacks in Cape Town, one after the other. The first — a youthful thirty-something, from kwaZulu Natal, a former footballer and now, amazingly, a professional dancer — had reluctantly voted again for the ANC. *'Everything I am and can do I owe to them. They deserve another chance. After all, Apartheid lasted four times as long as their rule.'*

The two others were younger and took a sterner view, perhaps because they lived in Johannesburg, the toughest business city in the southern hemisphere. The youngest, also a Zulu, who works for some 'creative bureau' or other, had voted, with no regrets, for the ANC breakaway party. *'At COPE they're familiar with the ANC's mistakes but they have the experience to govern. They are the only ones that can replace the ANC.'* Moreover, as a *moffie* ('queer' in non-politically correct Afrikaans) he had taken particular offence at Zuma's homophobic pro-

nouncements. And there was no way he would trust Zuma's apologies afterwards. *'That man says whatever suits him.'* (When I asked whether he was openly gay, at home or at work, he looked at me in disbelief. *'Is jy mál - Are you mad?'* he laughed, actually using Afrikaans. *'I would lose everything. Dis kak - It's shit, but that's the reality of it.'*)

The third, also a *moffie* but obviously 'an out and proud queen', starts by trying to insult me. *'I hate Cape Town,'* he says. He works as a marketing advisor for a British university. *'Cape Town is not Africa. It's Europe. It's only a nice town if you are rich, white, foreign and gay.'*



Immediately afterwards he surprises me - with his unashamed admission that he, a full-blooded Xhosa, voted for the DA party of Hellen Zille, the former mayor of - where else? - Cape Town. A dyed-in-the-wool politician, descended from German forebears, who earned her spurs and her credibility as a journalist during 'the Struggle', by publicising the murder of Steve Biko to the world. As a white woman and a merciless critic of the ANC elite, she has often been accused of being racist, middle-class, reactionary, counter-revolutionary, un-African, etc. etc. She usually counters her critics by reading out, in at least four of the eleven official languages, the national crime statistics, or referring to the bribes paid to high officials, or pointing out the filth lying untouched in the streets, very occasionally in the business districts but mostly in the poorest townships. She gives every bit as good as she gets, she still has a slight German accent and her nickname is Godzilla.

Photo by Viviane Sassen.



That's the woman our marketing Africanist from Johannesburg voted for. That she might be racist, like all-too-white Cape Town, he laughs away. 'She's a tough bitch,' he says, 'but a great politician. She is the only one who can change the ANC. And that's what we need now. A different ANC! So that eventually we'll have a really different country.'



Photo by Viviane Sassen.

P.S.

I wrote this piece just before a new personal scandal broke round President Zuma – the birth of his nth illegitimate offspring, the twentieth in total – or at least that’s the assumption. The criticism in the press was aimed mainly at the hypocrisy of a party leader and president who in both capacities had to support the much-needed “one condom one girlfriend” campaign, in a country with the highest HIV statistics in the world. How much longer, wondered one columnist, can a leader continue to say ‘*Do as I say, not as I do*’?

Another joked that Zuma no doubt wants to measure up to King Solomon – who had seven hundred biblical wives, as well as three hundred equally biblical concubines.

What was striking, however, was the absolutely furious tone in the more popular press, including the ever-more-popular radio talk shows and internet forums. Even *The Daily Sun*, a newspaper read by many of the working men and women who traditionally vote for the ANC, used harsh, disapproving words seldom reserved for a country’s own President and chief: ‘*embarrassed*’, ‘*shamed*’, ‘*hypocrisy*’, ‘*splitting our nation*’... Likewise, many Zulu women, who have had a bellyful of the typical Zulu machismo that goes by the name of ‘traditional values’, are raising their voices increasing loudly.

In the meantime, for his part, Zuma has recognised his love-child, smiling as always and apologising at the same time as always, too. ‘*At least I take my responsibilities*’, he seems to want to convey. The question is whether the South Africans will accept this escapade again. A French President like Mitterrand needed just two words (‘*Et alors?*’) to explain his love-daughter, Mazarine, to the notoriously broad-minded French public. In Belgium King Albert II suffered rather more loss of face because of his illegitimate child, Delphine Boël. He refuses to recognise her or even meet her or her child again.

As a proud and productive father, Zuma has saved himself from that pitfall.

It seems to me most likely that things will turn out for him as they did for that other full-blooded populist, media magnate and Italian prime minister, Berlusconi. Politically he just seems to get himself into hot water with his turbulent love life. On the other hand, though, it seems to have earned him nothing but secret admiration from many of his male voters. It would not surprise me then if Zuma didn’t suffer any real damage in the long term. If his private life could have harmed him, he would never have become President in the first place. ■