

## Reflections on 10 years of rhetoric studies

Klaus Kotzé

This tenth edition of the *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* (AYOR) is a jubilee. It marks ten years since its founding by republishing ten articles from previous editions. Together these articles represent the Yearbook's ambitions as well as its achievements. AYOR which is also the acronym for *At Your Own Risk*, the title we chose for this edition, recognises the risk we took with this journal, and the risk we take in treating rhetoric as a critique of democracy. AYOR is a provocation of public affairs. It interrogates the rhetorical processes that shape democratic life.

AYOR is compiled as the primary publication of the Centre for Rhetoric Studies based at the Faculty of Law, University of Cape Town. Its location at Law affords it the space to pursue multidisciplinary research in public rhetoric and argumentative culture while being firmly rooted in the South African experience. Graduates of the Centre are encouraged to publish in the Yearbook, thereby advancing their career development. By regularly publishing the work of global leaders in the field of rhetoric, AYOR has become a bastion of African scholarship.

The articles in this edition are authored by students, graduates and friends of the Centre. Together they demonstrate a broad range of multidisciplinary approaches. The articles are valuable academic contributions on rhetoric. All but one focuses and reflects on African rhetoric. The exception provides insight from Argentina, a global-south compatriot whose rhetoric has been central to several AYOR editions. Collectively, the articles of this edition form a celebration.

In a year marked by pandemic-related disruption and destruction, AYOR averts topical retort. Instead of merely responding to this dominating global episode, AYOR continues to set its own path. To develop the field of rhetoric on the African continent. With rhetoric taking place in space and time, this moment of disruption serves to recognise AYOR's critically perceptive research. When AYOR launched as *salvatory* (AYOR 1, 2010), it was founded upon the "desire to affirm that for ideas not to be transient and vanish...they have to be set and to last and to effect change". Rhetoric as celebration signifies the realisation of change. For ideas to be celebrated, they first need to be recognised. A function of the Centre and AYOR is to amplify Africa's rhetoric. Instead of narrowing specifications, the Yearbook has been a platform from which Africa can speak. It critically contributes to the study of transitional democracies and social transformation, transcending the continent's many historical and academic restrictions. To recognise is to know again or to recall meaning that is established. In order to refer to, to return to, signification must be clear and complete. With so much

perception of Africa being imposed from beyond the continent's own thinking and doing, these essentialising descriptions are often limiting and detrimental. Deeply shaped by external meaning-making, African rhetoric has often been denied its voice. Instead, it must be proclaimed in its ways and to its ends. Without latent or explicit knowledge of concepts, the act of recognition remains confounding. In celebrating its jubilee, AYOR recognises African rhetoric. Instead of being a taker of diverging meaning, the continent is itself a place where meaning originates. If we look past that which modernity has made knowable, we start to uncover meaning that runs beyond placeholders and common places.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union as argumentative counterpart, Western rhetoric has become globally dominant. "The effect has been to remove a fundamentally adversarial component and a well-argued ideology from the way in which the world transacts persuasion", suggests Philippe-Joseph Salazar.<sup>1</sup> The result is that "the diversity of the modes of argument heard in contemporary global discourse", have been diminished.<sup>2</sup> While this may be the case, meaning takes shape through argumentative culture. It is not simply the domain of some. It is universally applied and performed. Much like the exercise of power is universal to man so too the discovery and application of the available means of persuasion, along particular paths, towards specific ends, is of universal application. Salazar points to this being visible in the rhetoric of the Caliphate which is also operational in Africa. It does not simply apply the modes of argument of the dominant West. Its meaning is not derived from another. To the Caliphate its rhetoric is not the chaotic monstrosity as suggested by the Western media. True meaning is not imposed but is manifest through cultural and traditional ways. The rhetoric of the Caliphate uses analogy, poetry and hyperbole.<sup>3</sup> By denying these ways, by invalidating their persuasion, we do not prevent their significance but our own ability to see the productive force they hold. "Public discourse as an art form", argues Smith (1971) in his considerations on African rhetoric, "can only be complete when it is productive".<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric makes meaning within a specific situation. Meaning is carried by the performing subject. Their cultural essence and experience matters. Ideals are not concealed in signifiers but emanate through the expressions of life.

The agreement between political rivals in South Africa to collapse Apartheid and to reconcile took place through the recognition of each other and the exposure of crimes. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) represent a voicing of experience. The TRC was established a year after the Centre was created in 1995. Its proceedings and outcomes have contributed to the Centre's overall project to draw from experience and put to work intellectual enquiry of social concerns. All this

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ambre Nicolson. "Can the global dominance of Western rhetoric be challenged?" <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2016-02-29-can-the-global-dominance-of-western-rhetoric-be-challengeda> [accessed October 5, 2020].

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Smith, "Markings of An African Concept of Rhetoric", *Today's Speech* 19,2 (1971): 13-18.

contributed to UCT becoming the first African university to offer graduate degrees in rhetoric. Its first PhD in Rhetoric Studies graduated in 2001.

The proceedings of the TRC provided participants, researchers and the public at large an opportunity to recall through words, through confession and silence, through pain and trauma both present and buried. This all was recalled for the state and the people to hear the voice of those who before were voiceless, for all to share in the process of reconciliation. And so, the people in stating their experience of the old made the new. The TRC which was established in terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (Act) concluded after two years of recognising unbridled articulation. On 29 October 1998, the Commission released its first Report responding to its legal mandate to provide “as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights”.<sup>5</sup> Bound together over five focus-specific volumes, the Report released its findings in text. While the books captured a repository of experience, the Act instructs “the rehabilitation and restoration of the human and civil dignity”.<sup>6</sup> The Act calls for a productive force, a revelation of meaning that would not emanate from reading a text. Instead, the revival of dignity was performed at the hand-over of the Report, by Commission Chairperson Desmond Tutu and President Nelson Mandela. Together the two leaders revealed the life of the nation through dance. In a celebratory moment, they closed the confining previous period<sup>7</sup> not through a coded record but in a way that cut through difference. Together they performed the expression of achievement; a celebration.

Closing divisions through dance is a powerful example of persuasive African rhetoric. Here dancing is a mainstay of argumentative power. Under Apartheid, the politically, legally and economically repressed rallied their suppression through the impressive and militant *toyi-toyi*. In shattering the bans on assembly and movement, masses of people united to give shape to their demonstratively irrepressible will. In concert, the powerless performed power. A boisterous collective armed with the jagged movement of their bodies drummed together, not to resist but to attack. Accompanying the dance were the piercing and evocative songs that shot out towards their opponents like bullets. These “struggle songs”, writes Sisanda Nkoala in this volume, “are a fundamental part of South Africa’s political past, present and future”. Like the weapons of the successors, the songs retain historic and political power. They reverberate into the democratic era where some are used in service delivery protests. In so doing memory is instrumentalised. They are turned on the very political establishment they helped usher in. Today the performers of the songs remind that they still only have their bodies. That the promises of salvation have been deferred. The war dance and the struggle song are

---

<sup>5</sup> South African Government, *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, 1995.

<https://www.gov.za/documents/promotion-national-unity-and-reconciliation-act>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), p. 76.

intimate symbols of memory. They are employed rhetorically, to convey meaning, to inform, to please and to move.

These arguments while traditionally placed in relation to the colonial or Apartheid adversary are not of the opponent but are spoken for their own sake. The stayed reference to the colony in the description *post-colonial* denies the recognition of the expressive self. Remembering through the eyes of another maintains its power. The description post-colonial keeps the colony in place and in name. It rejects expression. To liberate and to recognise liberation is to demonstrate in the way of Mandela and Tutu. Their relentless being prevails as presence, foregrounding certain elements in the consciousness of the audience<sup>8</sup>. This approach is a testament to rhetoric's creative capacity, not simply in making a previous master fall. It extends beyond the rational to sensory experiences acting upon our sensibilities. Arguments carry the audience along an illuminating path.

The rhetoric of South Africa's democratic transition and in particular that of Nelson Mandela formed the core of the Centre's first extensive project between 2000-2010. The *admiration* of Nelson Mandela for the law served as a lynchpin in this project. Before Mandela shaped and stated the democratic nation as rhetor in chief, he declared upon the illegitimacy of the Apartheid state. It is through the admiration for the capacity of justly applied law, writes Jacques Derrida, that Mandela condemned the application of the law which outlawed him. In admiring Mandela, we admire the admiration he had of the law. "Mandela becomes admirable for having known how to admire... and for having made of his admiration a force, a power of combat, intractable and irreducible. The law itself, the law above laws. For what has he admired in the end? In a word: Law".<sup>9</sup> It is through his reflection on and speaking to the law that he frees himself from the hegemony that the state claimed over the law. His strategic communications upon leaving prison, during his presidency and the legacy he forged all aligned with invent and embody the rhetoric of the reconciliatory state. His leadership was a celebration of the act of unity; a place of becoming.

Following an earlier brief reference to Nkoala's opening piece, we will now turn to the other entries in this volume. The discussion of the articles does not align to their order here.

Rhetoric's productive force is observed throughout AYOR's editions. It is especially the case here as poignantly illustrated by Moroccan philosopher Abdelhai Azarkan's article on the statecraft and sovereignty of Mohammed V of Morocco. The king's courage and determination to claim sovereignty is a singular act of African liberation. Through proclaiming as sovereign over Morocco, Mohammed V manifest an independent state; speaking it made it so. The king understood that true liberation

---

<sup>8</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in Sonja Foss, Karen Foss and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives of Rhetoric* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Admiration of Nelson Mandela", *Law & Literature*, 26, 1 (1986): 9-30.

cannot be given, it must be claimed through the act of being sovereign. A true lesson in rhetoric and politics.

Eric Opoku Mensah piece discusses the statecraft of another great African leader, Kwame Nkrumah. Akin to Azarkan's piece; here Africa speaks. We are shown how Nkrumah opportunely used the African tour of British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to shape the debate on Africa's liberation. Nkrumah did not merely respond to Macmillan's message. Instead, he held up a mirror to the former master's policy decisions. He exhibited national power, claiming the values of the Commonwealth as an active member but rejecting simple alignment for an independent position of non-alignment. Through his rhetoric he claimed independence.

Periods of awakening, of finding and developing a voice are essentially transformative. They establish new meaning. Sifiso Ngesi's article provides an analysis of the foundational speeches of Nelson Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki's commitment to deliberative rhetoric encouraged the debate on racism and social justice. Through democratic rhetoric he helped to build the national social compact. By unpacking Mbeki's speeches, Ngesi assesses the standing of the nation beyond its formative stage. Transformation is a process that cannot simply be willed. It must be put into action. By republishing Ngesi's piece we recall the measures taken and the effects they had. We recognise the prevailing discourses and realities of social justice and racism, today.

In "The Justicialist Rhetoric of Néstor Kirchner", Mariano Dagatti looks at Kirchnerism as a reconfiguration of Peronist identification. The article is about reconfiguration. How identity and meaning are shaped through the political word. By including the piece AYOR recognises the influence and contribution of South American rhetoric over the last decade. The article cuts the divide by speaking to the practice of politics and how it is exercised universally.

Ivo Strecker's piece is a valuable exhibit of African rhetoric's vast range. From an anthropological approach, Strecker provides insight into the rhetoric of the egalitarian Hamar tribe of Ethiopia. While they remain a traditional society, little affected by global forces, the Hamar's grass-root politics function similarly to those in contemporary democratic societies. Strecker shows us that in traditional societies oratory is a productive force, "its study leads us straight to the heart of politics".

The articles by Alloggio and Thomas, Doxtader, and Teele all speak to forgiveness and transformation as productive forces. Alloggio and Thomas point to the learnings that South Africa can take from Germany's experiences. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's work on post-war Germany not recognising the horrors of Nazism, the authors "advocate for a post-apartheid pedagogy that seeks to unearth the problem of responsibility from the sinking sands of reconciled national history". Doxtader also draws from Arendt, suggesting that the acknowledgement of traumas should be an ongoing process. Without full disclosure, forgiveness and transformation remain stunted. Instrumentalising memory, ensuring that the victim becomes through finding a

voice, says Doxtader, shows forth that “transitional justice is a function of expression...a practice that takes place *through* words and an event that takes place *in* the word”. The author reminds that where there is no voice, there we must re-animate public spaces with a story. Thapelo Teele, whose debut paper appeared in AYOR’s most recent edition, looks at forgiveness in Marlene van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat*. a famed allegory for democratic South Africa. In line with Doxtader stressing the need move *on* through expression, to Teele the exercise of voice is central. The author offers a contemporary deliberation on the national ethos of forgiveness and suggests that “unlike forgiveness, reconciliation requires the victim to speak and to understand and even agree with the offender”. Here it is “the recognition of the initial violence that sets the scene for the possibility of forgiveness”.

The concluding article, by Reingard Nethersole, sums up and questions “our current state of the commerce of thinking...in a world ruled by economic rationality and fashioned by celebrity culture”. She answers by celebrating the commitment and essence, not simply the achievement, of J M Coetzee’s writing. His creativity, his pursuit of excellence, his public intellectualism that does not seek to be public but intellectual. She acknowledges his raising of difficult, African problems into the public domain. As Nethersole does to Coetzee, so we recognise the articles in this edition. In celebrating the productive force of African rhetoric, we publish this celebration.

*Klaus Kotzé is a A W Mellon-UCT Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Rhetoric Studies, University of Cape Town.*