

An African Athens

Rhetoric and the Shaping
of Democracy in South Africa



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Merely a decade ago, who would have thought that apartheid would end soon, without a major revolution, and a new multi-cultural regime would remake the very idea of the South African nation? Who would have imagined Nelson Mandela, as president of the country, embracing the Springbok rugby team—the former symbol of white power? Who would have imagined the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's bold amnesties at the price of confession on both sides?

In this same decade we have seen other dramatic changes of regimes, of political systems, even of economic systems. But none of them has so quickly and so solidly reconfigured the idea, range, and commitment of citizenship. And none of them has so rapidly and firmly addressed and reversed racism in the state and culture. Rather, several new states have reinvigorated ancient hostilities with savage violence.

A decade ago, many were predicting just such a bloody future for South Africa, with hatred and revenge being the legacy of long-standing racial repression. But, amazingly, a new nation was born in ges-

tures of peace and was achieved in unifying words and symbols. The new South Africa is a remarkable rhetorical accomplishment, overcoming the deep wounds of class and race, forging a multicultural nation out of the former oppressed and oppressors.

The old South Africa, while claiming to be an educated nation with a modern economy, had acted with the cruelty of the imperialism of former centuries. Then, it changed. De Klerk released Mandela, power was soon transferred. The formerly outlawed African National Congress took hold of the opportunity. Through rhetorical statecraft the long-imprisoned Nelson Mandela and his associates brought into being a remarkable new polity.

This is the story that Philippe-Joseph Salazar recounts in an *African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa*. For over two decades a teacher and scholar at the University of Cape Town, specializing in the role of rhetoric in nation building, Salazar viewed the unfolding events through a very special lens. He noted the roots of the new nation in Tutu's vision of religious community to be created through the rhetoric of unity and meeting of spirits. This vision was taken up by and secularized by Mandela, who pursued the vision in political and governmental arenas. As the nation came into being the evolving vision was enacted and realized through multiple cultural sites as diverse as voting registry, corporate advertising, sporting events, glamour magazines, real estate schemes, and public parks and monuments.

The lives of nations are complex, carried out in multiple scenes of daily engagements. That is why nations and national cultures are so resistant to change, no matter what drastic events wash over them.

Yet South Africa has addressed its need to change in so many arenas, communicating new visions and new ways of being citizens, that it does stand as a guiding light for the politics of the century just being born. South Africa is still a country with a continuing legacy of problems of economy, education, disease, and dispossessed individuals inured to violence. Yet it is a country that has found a path and a vision.

Salazar is right to suggest that we take the rhetorical lessons of how new national visions can be forged to bring all people into citizenship. Most of all, Salazar reminds us that rhetoric is not just of division and overcoming, but of unity and cooperation.