

The Black Archive

as a Tool for Building National Unity



THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR AFRICAN STUDIES PRESENTS:

BLACK ARCHIVE VISUAL PODCAST

A project by Siseko H. Kumalo, Harvard South African Visiting Fellow



"I am the child of Nongqause." (Mbeki, 1996)

With this assertion, former president Thabo Mbeki expressed a deeply ontological claim in his I Am An African speech. His appeal was to an ideal of an inclusive national identity, whose culture was expressive of all South Africans. For him to say I Am an African was an attempt—on his part, and an invitation to the nation—to contend with a context that sought to erase indigeneity, for nearly 500 years.

The question with which he is grappling concerns how our democracy embraces an inclusive identity that incorporates even the descendants of those who sought to expunge blackness (as indigeness) from the face of this land. **Inqolobane Yolwazi/the Black Archive** project is rooted in making sense of precisely this deeply ontological question, whose expression is political. The politics of this assertion were not only witnessed nearly three decades ago but continue to be political in the production and development of knowledge in modern universities in South Africa.

My musings on the former president's philosophical proclivities seek to foreground how **Inqolobane Yolwazi, or the Black Archive**, espouses the ideal of nation-building. With the concept borrowed from the word used to describe a granary in isiZulu, it denotes the seeds of a new crop—sown with the spirit of sprouting a new harvest—that feeds the spirit of inclusion, national unity, and belonging. **Inqolobane Yolwazi, or the Black Archive**, is an investment in a national identity using the resources of historical Black intellectuals. Drawing from their music, poetry, literature, and art, this project seeks to discover new ways of seeing, being, and knowing—a predisposition that drives actions rather than merely theorising decolonisation.

The project's aims are expressive of the desire to see South Africa—as a nation—articulate for the present and the future, an inclusive national identity that holds competing ontologies in tandem. It grapples with how we understand the place of the oppressed and the oppressor in a country that must work. It portends the Mamdian ideal of a restoration of humanity without eliding the realities of those historically oppressed.

“political parties from either side of the divide try to find one another to form a functional coalition—highlights a historic moment whereby democracy is being tested.”



Inspired by Mbeki's assertion that *'I am an African'* Inqolobane Yolwazi/(the) Black Archive confronts the injustices of oppression and seeks to understand how best we attend to the historical divides of racial oppression that still manifest as economic disparities. Mbeki's historic claim vividly highlights the historio-contemporary richness embedded in the thinking of black and indigenous intellectualism in our country. The former president, with his words, urges deep and critical reflection about Africanness—a consideration taken up by Joel Mokhoathi's (2021) 'A Philosophical Enquiry of Identity and Culture'.



Reflecting on this project, with its aims and objectives, immediately after the national and provincial elections—wherein political parties from either side of the divide try to find one another to form a functional coalition—highlights a historic moment whereby democracy is being tested. This moment reflects the commitment of the oldest liberation movement in Africa to democratic values. This commitment finds its expression in the assertion:

"I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom."

Mbeki (1996)

Important to consider, however, especially at this moment, is what freedom denotes. What is the meaning of freedom and liberation—a question considered since the French Revolution in the 18th century?

Framing Mbeki's acceptance of the constitution that has entrenched democracy in South Africa as a profound ontological claim seeks to highlight my understanding of the deeply contested notion of belonging in our country. His approach petitions for a broader national vision wherein all the constitutive identities coalesce around being South African and, thus, African. Even the children of colonial settler descendants, in Mbeki logic, become African. What we must contend with is whether we choose to accept or reject this ontological framing of national identity—a choice whose implications will reverberate through the generations and be borne by our collective progeny.

Inqolobane Yolwazi, or the Black Archive, is spurred by the impetus to answer the choice we make in a historically just fashion. It seeks to do so by devising new conceptual tools that attend to this historical dilemma first identified by a critical cultural worker, Zoë Wicomb, when she asked, "How will black people, long accustomed to dispossession and deprivation, adjust to the new condition of not being racial victims?" In my scholarship, the work developed in the Black Archive is critical of the framing of Wicomb's question for its naivety.

To say Wicomb is naive is rooted in the reality that her question presupposes ontological recognition, that is to say, in 1993, she presumed blackness and indigeness would already be regarded as politically agential—a fact we are still contending with today. Addressing this reality, the project challenges and dismisses discourses that pit South Africans against one another.



It offers that this is only possible if we turn to the neglected resources developed by African intellectuals.

This project confronts how the existing theoretical tools fail to conceptualise our country's realities. Moreover, the scholarship produced from this project holds that such an ineptitude, premised on theoretical importations, demonstrates that the theoretical tools we use were never intended to understand African realities.

Inqolobane Yolwazi/the Black Archive is rooted in the theoretical and socio-historical analysis of the work of black and indigenous intellectuals who were excluded from the project of knowledge development in South Africa. This exclusion was inaugurated by the division promulgated at Lovedale College in 1870, whereby the succeeding principal—James Stuart—racially divided educational training. Black/Indigenous students were put to a practical education (bookbinding, wagon making, and agriculture), while white students

were retained in the more academic stream (i.e., geometry, Latin, and Greek). This historical division precipitated the Bantu Education and the Extension of Higher Education Acts of the following century. This legislation still haunts our country with disparate educational attainment outcomes to the present day.

For Mbeki to claim, against historical trauma, that I am an African, I sought to defend and uphold the Arendtian position—and I will quote her at length to demonstrate the point: that violence, as it were, gave birth to history, that whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, that whatever political organisation men may have achieved has its origin in crime [and that this uncontested assertion] has travelled through the centuries as one of the almost unexamined, almost self-evident assumptions of political thought". (Arendt [1966]/1967). Thinking with black or indigenous intellectuals is done with the purpose of examining this historical axiom of violence.

“ How will black people adjust to a new condition of not being racial victims? ”



Can an inclusive national identity reconcile the history of displacement, violence, and colonial derision with the future-oriented gaze of nation-building and a consolidated conception of political peoplehood? From fratricide, can we emerge as a nation against the reality of our definitive categories of coloniser and colonised?

Our research has not reached conclusive theoretical claims, but it inspires a sense of intellectual responsibility. In examining this question of national identity and belonging, the task that becomes starkly clear for the contemporary intellectuals in our country is that it is our duty to pursue scientific inquiry responsibly. Our responsibility is a commitment to academic freedom; that is, we do not serve at the behest of any political objective; however, we do serve science at the behest of the duty to advance humanity and the objectives of peace and stability globally. While ambitious, Inqolobane Yolwazi/(the) Black Archive judges its achievements against these ideals, firmly rooting it in my disciplinary home of philosophy—a humanist scientific endeavour since time immemorial.



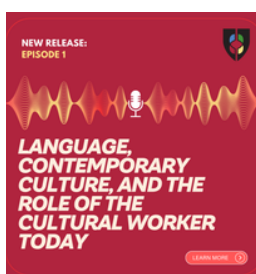
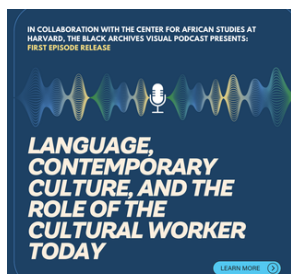
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Siseko H. Kumalo is a political theorist whose work focuses on blackness and indigenouness in South Africa. His Ph.D. examined belonging and national identity using the scholarship of two historical black intellectuals, i.e., William Wellington Gqoba and SEK Mqhayi. He read for his Master of Arts (which was awarded Cum Laude) in Political Philosophy at the University of Pretoria's Department of Political Sciences.

Formatively, Dr. Kumalo trained at Rhodes University, where he studied political and international studies, anthropology, and philosophy. His research and teaching interests centre around black ontology, national culture, and emancipatory epistemologies.

Dr. Kumalo supervises graduate students working on the Black Archive and continues to advance this area of scholarship in South Africa and across the global academy.

His most recent publications include 'Pedagogic Obligations Towards a Decolonial and Contextually Responsive Approach to Teaching Philosophy in South Africa', which appeared in the Journal of Philosophy of Education, and 'Can Iqaba Possess Ontological Legitimacy', which appeared in Critical Philosophy of Race.



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