



# Book Laying Ghosts to Rest

## Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa

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### Recommendation

Villagers in small South African towns know that to exorcise the troublesome spirits of the departed, they must address their ghosts. So, too, Mamphela Ramphele – physician, educator, author and activist – forthrightly wrangles with the ghosts that still plague South Africa 14 years after apartheid. In this 2008 book, Ramphele thoughtfully and critically examines four major issues that are thwarting her country’s progress: “racism, ethnic chauvinism, sexism and authoritarianism.” She knows well of what she writes. As a founding member of the 1970s Black Consciousness Movement led by Steve Biko, she stood at the forefront of the struggle against apartheid, suffering imprisonment and banishment. *BooksInShort* recommends her book as a sometimes searing but always forceful and unstinting appraisal of what South Africa must accomplish to realize fully its long-denied promise of equality and freedom.

### Take-Aways

- South Africa began its transition to democracy from apartheid in 1994; the intervening years have seen great progress, but the country has much left to accomplish.
- The nation has had no example to follow on its unique path to democracy.
- Nelson Mandela, with his intelligence, confidence and “Madiba magic,” was the “transformative leader” his country needed in its first years after apartheid.
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) focused on human rights abuses against individuals, not on crimes committed by the apartheid regime.
- The “ghosts” of apartheid – “racism, ethnic chauvinism, sexism and authoritarianism” – linger in South Africans’ mind-sets and behaviors.
- Blacks and whites alike are still coming to grips with how to relate to one another.
- Tribal customs prolong society’s acceptance of authoritarian and sexist values.
- Ongoing gender inequality leads to high rates of rape, AIDS and “family murder.”
- A rising black middle class – the “black diamonds” – is gradually improving the nation’s economy.
- South Africa is working with other nations to lead an “African Renaissance” that will enable the continent to negotiate in a globalizing world.

### Summary

#### “Transformation”

On May 10, 1994, South Africa officially began its “political, economic and social transformation” by inaugurating Nelson Mandela as president. The move from an apartheid-based, minority-ruled regime to a democratic government encompassing all citizens was a remarkable development for a land long torn asunder. The nation’s rebirth was a huge experiment in creating a new order built on egalitarian rights and principles. Yet its task was not merely to refashion its institutions and laws but also to heal its spiritual and emotional scars. Lacking help in doing so, and with no clear example to follow, South Africa has had to chart its own course.

“A successfully transformed South Africa would be characterized by the antithesis of all that was bad about the apartheid system: non-racialism, non-sexism, and social relationships consistent with the observance of human rights and greater equity.”

Modern South Africa was launched in 1910 when the Union of South Africa secured self-rule and Britain’s governance ended. White Afrikaners, subjugated by English occupation, had suffered atrocities during the Anglo-Boer War. Having withstood repression, the Afrikaners became the “oppressors of others weaker than

themselves” by instituting apartheid policies that defined people and the opportunities available to them by race. Decades of resistance by both exiles and “iniles” (domestic opponents of the regime) followed. “No fewer than 30,000 people died between 1976 and 1994 in the antiapartheid struggle that had all the hallmarks of a civil war.”

“The leap of faith required to fully embrace our ugly past in order to transform it is often underestimated.”

International pressures and changing US and European interests after the Soviet Union’s fall led to “talks about talks.” Nelson Mandela and his colleagues negotiated the beginning of the end of white rule while still in jail. Despite years of imprisonment, Mandela was disciplined, intelligent and willing to use new tactics to solve intractable problems. Empathizing with Afrikaners’ torment under British authority enabled him to “charm them into respecting” him. When he became president in 1994, Mandela was the “transformative leader” the country desperately needed. He “inspired confidence and self-belief” in its citizens; he was aware of the importance of ritual and symbols. At a rugby match, he wore the shirt of the South African team, known for its segregated past, to send a message of national unity. His “Madiba magic” relied on peoples’ sacrifices and contributions.

## “Truth and Reconciliation”

The new South Africa had to create a united citizenry from a black majority denied all opportunity and a white minority anxious about its future. Establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a crucial initial step. The TRC, set up in London in 1996 to hear testimony of apartheid injustices, sought “neither retributive justice nor promotion of a culture of impunity.” Rather, it sought acknowledgement of the “ritual” of confession and forgiveness necessary for the country to heal and to progress.

“The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” (Steve Biko)

Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided over the hearings, which aired human rights abuses committed upon individuals by other individuals but did not cover the apartheid regime’s political, economic or social violations. Whites and blacks alike admitted to crimes. Policemen, military officers and other apartheid government figures confessed and asked the survivors for absolution. The TRC held even recognized leaders accountable: Tutu had to cajole Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Mandela’s ex-wife, to acknowledge her involvement in the murder of a young supporter. The archbishop tried to persuade former president P.W. Botha to testify, but he “was unrepentant to the end.” Perpetrators received amnesty. Many impoverished victims forgave fully, but for no return. Even the small reparations stipulated (a payment of about \$330, plus an annual \$3,830 for six years) remain unpaid.

“Our transition to democracy is anything but a miracle. The tree of freedom...was nourished by the blood of many martyrs over the years of struggle.”

Nearly 15 years after apartheid, four “stubborn ghosts” of the past still haunt South Africa’s present and threaten the nation’s its future. They are “racism, ethnic chauvinism, sexism and authoritarianism.”

## Racism

Overcoming decades of racism is a monumental task. Apartheid’s systematic denial of rights to blacks and minorities was symptomatic of a way of thinking that predates that regime. South Africa participated in defeating Nazism and helped compose the preamble to the United Nations Charter avowing human equality. Yet within the country, “racism trumped postwar anti-Nazi idealism.” The white leaders’ assignment of intellectual inferiority to blacks created a national mind-set that led to shame, self-loathing and fury within the black majority. Each generation of blacks absorbed hopelessness and impotence from having its elders disrespected in the patriarchal society. Seeing whites succeed due to opportunities they denied to blacks reinforced the black population’s sense of inadequacy. Black people’s taxes paid for white people’s subsidized housing, while “apartheid geography” forced blacks to live in urban outskirts, isolated from jobs, opportunities and city comforts.

“The estimated 800-million population of sub-Saharan Africa represents a sizeable market for goods and services if greater collaboration could be forged across colonial boundaries.”

Breaking down racial barriers begins with confronting self-image. Both sides continue to stereotype each other because most people have had little to no genuine personal connections with the other race. Whites are used to seeing blacks primarily in subservient roles and, thus, some still feel threatened when blacks have equal or superior positions. Similarly, blacks see whites as “authority figures” and are reluctant to challenge them. In the business environment, some white managers instinctively see black job recruits as people who need extra training, because they can’t believe blacks could already be qualified. The lack of educational, employment and socialization opportunities that blacks suffered under apartheid left many ill-prepared to participate fully in the economy, and efforts to redress such inequities often backfired.

## Ethnic Chauvinism

Tribalism, normally a positive force in creating cultural unity, has become “a perversion of traditional systems resulting from colonial ‘divide-and-conquer’ politics.” Much of Africa’s modern ethnic chauvinism resulted from the colonizers’ drive to separate native peoples into “more manageable ethnic units.” For example, Rwanda’s Tutsis became its “aristocracy” because Belgian administrators gave them more resources and the best jobs. Its Hutus, whom the Belgians saw as “barbaric” and inferior, rose up in a murderous rage that culminated in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Tanzania eliminated the role of tribal leaders in government to focus on elected officials and to demote the concept of separatism. Today, “Tanzanians see themselves as Tanzanians and nothing else.” Racial profiling in apartheid South Africa led to distinctions among ethnic and tribal groups. The postapartheid government tried to mollify tribes by incorporating their practices into governance. Now, some customs hinder equality, including the following:

- The “levirate,” which makes a widow wed one of her late husband’s male relatives.
- The “sororate,” which compels a woman to have kids for an infertile older sister.
- The practice of plural marriage, called “polygyny.”
- “Child betrothal and forced marriages” to satisfy familial debts.

- Inheritance rules that convey assets only among male family members.
- The treatment of women as minors, which underpins the ban on female land ownership and economic decision making.
- “*Lobola* or *bohadi*,” which allow families to swap women for cattle and vice versa.

## Sexism

Perhaps the most intransigent ghost, sexism is enmeshed in many racial and tribal mores. Here, too, colonial attitudes imposed themselves on South African society: Colonizers forced African women to leave farming and land ownership to men and relegated them to strict roles as mothers and dependents. The society still treats women as second-class citizens and holds them down with the same arguments minority whites once used to oppress majority blacks. Pro rata, the nation ranks first globally in recorded rapes; the true number of rapes is estimated to be far greater than statistics reveal. More women than men die from AIDS and related illnesses. “Family murders,” in which an angry, possessive man kills his wife and kids, and then himself, are common. However, other parts of society have empowered women in leadership roles. The nation’s cabinet is 43% female, its parliament is 32% female (including the speaker and deputy speaker) and four of its nine provinces have women as premiers. But women have yet to make similar inroads in business. In fact, one apartheid holdover mandates that a woman seek her husband’s approval to serve as a member of a board of directors; that law is under revision.

## Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism’s power and prevalence in South Africa derive from three major influences: its stratified and patriarchal tribal heritage; British colonial rule; and Afrikaner domination, which “added a particularly harsh Calvinistic streak.” In a society new to egalitarian democracy, authoritarianism dies hard. “It expresses itself in hierarchical social relationships, high-handed leadership styles, intolerance of alternative viewpoints and disrespectful treatment of the most vulnerable.” It also manifests itself in political party loyalties, seniority rules, an emphasis on titles, rigid bureaucracies and male dominance. To tackle this mind-set, society must redefine power and, rather than seeing it as a fixed right to control, understand it as a limitless “capacity to act.”

## Governing and the Governed

Given their many ghosts, South Africans face the challenge of aligning their ways of thinking and living to democracy. The past gave citizens few examples of how to exercise their rights and obligations in a free system. While democratic political institutions now exist, citizens’ behaviors and actions still need to adapt. Living under apartheid, which “criminalized normal behavior,” blacks learned to distrust government; many of them understandably retain an innate suspicion of political institutions. The lack of opportunity created a young cohort of the population that hasn’t enjoyed the full benefits of democracy and that doesn’t know how to conduct constructive protest. Angry even more than a decade after liberation, some of them resort to violence, as they did during apartheid. Since they know no other way to react, they use aggression to be heard.

“It is not surprising that 13 years after the formal end of apartheid, South Africans still see themselves in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’.”

Meanwhile, years of struggle similarly have left the new ruling class unable to tolerate dissension. Its members see disagreement as disloyalty. South Africans must learn to question authority and to accept their differences so they can come together respectfully and constructively as one nation. Democracy requires a strong, widespread middle class. The increasing number of “black diamonds” – middle-class blacks – has contributed to solid economic growth, but its influence on entrenching democracy in the country’s political and social structures remains unknown.

“When are we unselfconsciously going to be able to call ourselves South Africans?”

South Africa is undergoing a difficult transition as it moves forward in a globalized world. Technology will allow the country to “leapfrog” ahead quickly. There are three requirements for progress: an “institutional framework,” a “values framework,” and “human and intellectual capacity.” While the government has established the first, the second calls for a return of the “idealism that fired” the nation’s “freedom struggle.” The third needs more time, effort and money. Improving “the education and training system” is an immense, crucial undertaking. Primary schools, universities and institutions that teach technical skills must supercharge a vast population new to these opportunities.

“The reference point of our own humanity is the humanity of others.”

South Africa’s belated response to the AIDS epidemic further drained scarce human capital and led to high costs in lives, health care, and social and familial disintegration. Black leaders and their white opponents couched the disease in racist terms. Former president Thabo Mbeki denied that AIDS is sexually transmitted, fearing that such an acknowledgement would confirm any lingering racist views about black promiscuity. Since AIDS disproportionately afflicted blacks, some whites even saw it as a way to rebalance their minority status. Superstition and stigmas around race and sex resulted in lowering life expectancy from 65 in 1998 to 50 in 2006, close to what it was a century ago.

## South Africa in the World

As it deals with its internal issues, South Africa has taken leadership in advancing all of Africa. To further his vision of an “African Renaissance,” former president Mbeki collaborated with leaders in Algeria, Nigeria and Senegal to create the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad), with the goals of “eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable development for African countries...enhancing the integration of Africa into the global economy and accelerating empowerment of women.” Nepad has promoted a network of pan-African institutions to enable African nations to engage collectively in global discussions and negotiations.

## About the Author

**Mamphela Ramphela**, a physician, chairs Circle Capital Ventures in South Africa. The former managing director of the World Bank, she was vice chancellor of the University of Cape Town. Her books include *Steering by the Stars*, *My Life* and *Uprooting Poverty*.

