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RHETORICAL AGENCY: CONSIDERATIONS FROM AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The concept of strategic communications is still often understood in a limited way that does not take rhetorical agency into consideration. This paper seeks to expand upon the narrow perceptions that are still prevalent. For strategic communications to be employed gainfully, the agency of both the speaker and the audience must be appreciated accordingly. Here, we first examine a number of terms that are useful to the practice of strategic communications. These include agency, recognition, rhetorical sovereignty, and rhetorical imperialism. We then apply these terms in relation to the story of Africa, first as has been predominantly told by non-Africans and then as

expressed by Africans themselves. We see that strategic communications remains limited when rhetorical agency is neglected. That to conduct effective strategic communications, an agent must always comprehend the range and intelligence of their own rhetorical agency and must appreciate the rhetorical agencies of their counterparts. With Africa set to increase its global role, its views and perceptions must be engaged and discerned. Only in doing so can outdated and counterproductive approaches be transcended.

> I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land…I am born of a people… determined to define for themselves who they are and who they should be. We are assembled here today to mark their victory in acquiring and exercising their right to formulate their own definition of what it means to be an African.
>
> Thabo Mbeki, South African Deputy President at Parliament's acceptance of the final Constitution on 8 May 1996

INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic communications is attracting broad interest. The debate regarding the meaning of this concept has engaged a range of actors, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. The discussion continues to evolve as strategic communications is employed in a growing array of fields and sectors. What we now think of as strategic communications is often called by myriad other names and often circumscribed by the prevailing understandings embedded in other sectors, such as business or public relations. The result is that while strategic communications is being employed, it is not always conceived of with the necessary scope and nuance. Strategic communications is a 'holistic approach to communication based on values and interests, that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment […]. Strategic communications is

usually directed at foreign governments and their populations […] there is often consensus around its operational components or processes of delivery: defining a message; identifying a specific audience; intending to achieve not simply an effect but real, measurable changes.'[1]

Strategic communicators further their values and interests by employing rhetorical agency to exert influence over another actor or group of actors. When communicators do not appreciate their agency or that of their audience, this task remains murky and confounding. How a communication is structured and how well it achieves its ends is determined by the agency of the communicator. However, the increasingly sophisticated conversation about strategic communications has not sufficiently analysed agency in general or rhetorical agency in particular. The constitution and performance of agency, the capacity of actors to instrumentalise will in pursuit of their ends, is a fundamental precondition for any strategic communication.

This paper contributes to the conversation by examining the role and capacity of rhetorical agents in relation to their rhetorical counterparts. In particular, the paper focuses on two interrelated and underexamined terrains of agency. The first is the rhetorical nexus between speaker and audience. The second is the complex agglomeration of African agency vis-à-vis continental interlopers. While agency in general has been underexamined, agency as it is on and from the African continent has traditionally been neglected or skewed.

OF RHETORICAL AGENCY AND RECOGNITION

Strategic communications is a term used to describe an economy of persuasion.[2] While strategic communications is about mobilising ideas, it is also, as we will discuss here, about shutting ideas and their speakers down. From a critical approach, the debate on strategic communications has taken for granted that the speaker is able to communicate, and that

1 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Volume 6 (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019).
2 Philippe-Joseph Salazar, 'Strategic Communications: A New Field for Rhetoric', September 2013.

the audience is able to understand the speaker. Both of these assumptions must be assessed.

The act of strategic communications requires rhetorical agency. According to Robert Danisch, rhetorical agency refers to the capacity to articulate oneself; to conceive of rhetoric.[3] 'If rhetorical power is relational power', stresses Danisch, 'then rhetorical agency is the ability to enact different kinds of relationships with others through discourse, speech, symbols, or communication'.[4] According to Hallahan et al., 'the concept of agency aligns strategic communication and practice and focuses on power relations in the communication process. The struggle to exert power and control is inherent in all agency, as is power. It is the ability of the agent to resist power and control that is at the core of the debate about agency.'[5] Agency, while subject to and influenced by the power relations between actors, is foremost conceived from the communicator's perspective.

Rhetorical agency occurs only as perceptible engagement between agents. So too strategic communications never takes place for its own sake and never without a counterpart. For a story to be persuasive, for an argument to be made, the audience must be able to perceive what is being communicated. Much of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is concerned with the perceptive capacity and agency of an audience. To Danisch, it is the audience that determines the outcome of discourse. This being so, the audience also possesses agency.[6] When one side is unable to perform its role, whether for historical, cultural, or other reasons, the *dynamis*, the communicative power of the exchange, remains unrealised. The character, or ethos, of each party, the rhetor and the audience, is greatly affected by the other. It is the perceptive agency of the audience that so often determines the rhetor's communicative agency.[7]

3 Robert Danisch, 'Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age: Foucault, Power, Agency, and Ethos', in Kim Hong Nguyen, *Rhetoric in Neoliberalism*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 64
4 Ibid., p. 78.
5 Kirk Hallahan, et al., 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* Volume 1 (2007): 3–35.
6 Danisch, 'Rhetorical Agency in a Neoliberal Age', p. 66.
7 Ibid., p. 68.

The capacity and willingness of an audience to engage in strategic communications is paramount. Historically, says Danisch, 'rhetorical power did not operate from one single point or person; it existed as a potentiality in between, and within, a community of citizens. Rhetorical agency belonged to both the rhetor and the audience, constraining the freedom of both while being enacted and embodied through discursive choices.'[8]

Rhetorical agency is located in the relational dynamic between speaker and audience. Aristotle suggests that the audience's role in determining the success of a rhetorical exchange makes for a complicated and always interactive practice. 'Since rhetoric is concerned with making a judgement, it is necessary not only to look to the argument that it be demonstrative and persuasive, but also to […] prepare the judge.'[9] The audience as judge, as co-responsible for the persuasive outcome, has rhetorical power. This relates to the power of recognition, ascertaining and directly determining achievement of the rhetorical ends. Recognition is central to the strategic relations between rhetorical counterparts. It forms a critical function in influence: arguments do not follow statements of fact but are effective when their intent is internalised by rhetorical counterparts who play both the role of speaker and that of hearer.

Recognition has a rich theoretical foundation. Mutual recognition or mutuality is central in the strategic communications process. In *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* Hegel states that only by 'understanding that the other's actions are intentional can we also grasp our own actions and utterances as expressions of an intentional self'.[10] Instead of being rigid or dependent on the other's intentionality, the agency of the two sides (parties, actors) is interconnected. People perceive themselves, and by implication their actions, in reference to and in recognition of others. According to Hegel, an asymmetry in recognition establishes

8 Ibid., p. 69.
9 Salazar, 'Strategic Communications', p. 66.
10 Mattias Iser, 'Recognition', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 25 April 2019.

the master-slave dialectic.[11] Robert Brandom suggests that asymmetric recognition means 'authority without responsibility, on the side of the Master, and responsibility without authority, on the side of the Slave'. He then goes on to say, 'Hegel argues that unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted'.[12] The two sides remain locked into an incommensurable relationship. By implication, effective strategic communications cannot overlook the complementarity of the involved agents.

Erik Doxtader speaks to the gridlocked power imbalance between rhetorical agents. He describes how the end of the Cold War promised commensurate recognition for diverging views. This, he says, did not materialise.[13] If it did, then normative statuses would have been instituted through reciprocity and mutually recognised. When recognition remains elusive, rhetorical agents, who are necessarily shaped and enabled by the recognition they give and receive, remain stunted. Charles Taylor provides insight into the effect of recognition in the communication process. 'Identity', writes Taylor, 'is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.'[14]

When the agency of the audience does not allow and therefore does not engage the agency of the speaker, no reciprocal transfer of information, no true communication, can take place. 'Rhetorical sovereignty' and 'rhetorical imperialism' are two useful concepts to consider here. Rhetorical sovereignty, explains Richard Lyons, offers a 'guiding story […] by which we seek the paths to agency and power […]. The people want sovereignty […] rhetorical sovereignty. As the inherent right and ability

11 In Hegel's dialectic we see an overall consciousness that is bifurcated when one (empowered) party engages another (not empowered). The self-consciousness of one is the basis for that of the other. Each seeks recognition from the other as being the true form of consciousness. Accordingly, both are kept in their place.
12 Guido Seddone, 'Transcription of the Interview with Robert Brandom', 2008.
13 Erik Doxtader, 'The Recognizability of Recognition: Fragments in the Name of a Not Yet Rhetorical Question', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Volume 48, N° 4 (2015): 379–412.
14 Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutmann (ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination, rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of […] voice, speaking or writing.'[15] Rhetorical sovereignty can therefore be regarded as the capacity to determine the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse. Rhetorical sovereignty, furthermore, is the subject's pursuit of their ideal principle. It takes place within their specific strategic situation and is based upon their goals and capacity. It also takes place in relation to others in each strategic terrain and therefore exists as relational power.

Rhetorical imperialism is a correlate to rhetorical sovereignty. Rhetorical imperialism describes the capacity of predominant powers to determine the substance of debate and thereby exhibit control. In determining the substance, these powers also establish or 'identify' the parties involved.[16] Identification, in the Burkean[17] way, establishes a common sense of meaning. To control this meaning-making process is a powerful pursuit. To describe, to attach meaning without going through deliberation, without the described presenting their argument, is the vestige of the kind of domination we now turn to.

OF SPEAKING AND HEARING

A central premise of cultural imperialism is that the imperialist is unable to overcome their subjective agency in relation to those outside their culturally dominant domain; the imperialist cannot internalise the perspective of or empathise with those who are culturally other. Compelled, in terms of the situation, the imperialist is fixed in their dominant role. Writers' such as Antonio Gramsci[18] and Gayatri Spivak[19] speak to the exclusion and subversion of what they call the subaltern—the colonial populations that were consigned to another, secondary tier of existence. It is not only that

15 Scott Richard Lyons, 'Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing', *College Composition and Communication*, Volume 51, N° 3 (2000): 447–68.
16 Ibid., p. 452.
17 Kenneth Burke, 'Rhetoric—old and new', *The Journal of General Education*, Volume 5, N° 3 (1951): 202–09.
18 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International Publications, 1971).
19 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

colonial subjugation imposed a defined, inferior status upon the subjects of the colony. The act of subjugation also restrained *the imperialist's* agency as an audience; it was fixed into rhetorical sovereignty, into perpetual description, without ever allowing its audience to exercise sovereignty.

Spivak's claim might be expressed as: It is not simply that the subaltern could not speak; it was that the imperialist could not hear. To Spivak, this master agency is the performance of Western 'worlding', the process of viewing disparate, non-Western scenarios in terms of Western norms and standards. On reflection, these modalities have remained—well after the end of the (direct) colonial projects.[20] Very little has been done to annul and replace the power relations and ideas they employed.

Furthermore, the dominance of liberal internationalist ideas and ways have attained hegemonic status in the recent period of globalisation, which coincided with the defeat of its erstwhile Soviet ideological counterpart. With the accompanying diminished diversity in contemporary modes of argument, the perception of legitimacy and prosperity in the modern age has been manufactured in and exported from a Western normative base. To assume a global identity has become akin to assuming a Western identity, as if there were no alternative. This perception served to maintain a singular rhetorical agency while imposing a successful naturalisation process of accordant norms and values.

Strategically, the approach of assuming a Western-defined global identity served its purpose during the Cold War's battle for the global mind. It has maintained its primacy in subsequent decades, mainly due to no comprehensive ideological challenge being raised beyond the aggressive, strictly affiliated dogmas such as those of the Islamic State Caliphate. While China has increased its internationalising project over the last decade and while mainstream Islam has maintained its proselytising campaign since the early Mohammedan conquests (622–750), it is the ways and norms of the West, which have morphed into being 'global', under which Africa has been accultured. Western 'worlding' or cultural imperialism, a notion problematic for its simplicity, nevertheless poses

20 Ibid.

a significant challenge for contemporary Western agents. It challenges not only the extension of Western culture and ideas to the non-West—the singular rhetorical sovereignty maintained by the West denies the communicative agency of the other, and also critically denies the engagement and perceptive agency of the Western self.

To secondary states, many of which are former colonies bound to the agency imposed by rhetorical imperialism, specific imposed norms and ways have held their place beyond the direct colonial experience. Programmes with objectives such as 'good governance' and 'structural adjustment' were conceived and instituted without understanding or regarding the local context. The political-economic power of liberal internationalism did not, nor could it, strategically accommodate difference that did not submit to its norms. The strategic weakness of this approach became clear during the unrealisable campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The incapacity to assess and attend to the situation at hand, as it was and not as it was proclaimed to be, ensured that while a situation could be tactically dominated, strategic success, always based on a lucid assessment, remained unattainable for its failure to perceive the 'other'

For an actor to truly comprehend a situation, they must first be able to perceive the views, objectives, and agency of their strategic counterpart. When denied the capacity to hear, the agent remains imperceptive to the overall strategic conditions. This sustains an unintelligent and vulnerable mode of superiority. There remain few occasions where refusing to hear is strategically astute. One example could be when illegitimate actors are denied an audience. Illegitimate actors, such as North Korea with its nuclear gambits, seek to exploit the platform of being given an audience for nefarious ends. Thus, while rarely strategic and often hubristic, the utility of refusing to hear should always be determined on a case-by-case basis. It is never strategic when applied normatively.

THE AFRICAN STORY: FROM AFAR

Despite being large, multifaceted, and composed of various rhetorical agencies, the African continent remains poorly perceived. Epistemologically, in a Western and global sense, Africa remains a dark continent; it remains unknown as it remains unheard. The "African story", discussed here for illustrative purposes, offers an example of discordant rhetorical agencies. Rhetorical sovereignty and imperialism are useful, illustrative concepts. The 'African story' has largely been and continues to be influenced from afar. By foreign thought and action. Whether considering Christian missionaries, Islamic conversion, or the colonising forces of European states, the philosophies entering the African continent have entered as absolute, speaking agents. They have proselytised in the name of a superior—a King, a God, a civilisation. They came to Africa to declare. Not to listen. Africa has suffered great rhetorical imperialism.

In Africa, rhetorical imperialists have not concerned themselves with African agency. They have regarded locals as others. The African strategies of European states held foreign powers, mostly other European states, as their strategic counterparts. That their military and economic exploits took place on African soil and chiefly impacted African people was of little concern. Furthermore, the sociological and racial determinist ethnologies of European thinkers such as Arthur de Gobineau[21] during the 19th century placed the European race as innately superior. Colonial expansion took place as a matter of European geopolitics. The infamous *Scramble for Africa*, or *New Imperialism* (1880–1914) which saw European control of Africa increase from 10% to about 90%, further consolidated the African campaign as a matter of European strategy. The Berlin Conference (1884), which regulated European colonisation, allowed the arbitrary dissection of Africa. While it served to arbitrate European ambitions, it severely unsettled local social relations and endemic ideas. Imperial forces, acting in the name of civility, performed

21 Arthur de Gobineau was an influential French ethologist and diplomat. His theories on racial determinism and the superiority of the white race held great influence in Europe during the 19th century. Erik Gergersen, 'Arthur de Gobineau', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2020.

brutal conquests of African peoples. Their inability to engage and hear the local populations deprived Europeans also of their capacity to feel for Africans, leading to the inhumane costs they wrought.

Foreign conquests were not only destabilising to local social affairs but contributed to the destruction of local norms and ways and undermined the dignity of the local people. Vincent Khapoya explains that when 120 000 Africans lost their lives in the German suppression of the so-called Maji Maji, the destruction was 'so thorough that the Africans lost faith in their ancestral spirits also. They had been assured by their leaders that they would be duly protected […]. In utter dismay and despondency, following their devastating defeat, most of these people turned to Christianity.'[22] In another case involving Senegal and France, the people 'began to wonder why, in this moment of critical need, their ancestral spirits would not come to their aid. Perhaps their gods were not true gods after all […]. Christianity offered solace in the face of a great national tragedy.'[23]

European colonialism's true power lay in imposing a modern socio-cultural modality, including the introduction of Christianity. It was this modality that Africans assumed or turned to when they turned away from their traditions. While various peoples refused to capitulate, these and other examples around Africa show how many peoples were physically and psychologically broken down. Many capitulated to the norms and values of the colonisers, whether European or Islamic. In turning away from their own order of meaning and doing, their guiding story, Africans forsook their rhetorical sovereignty while the Europeans affirmed their own. Surrender to the traditions of the colonizers, mostly because of superior European technology and the effects of the inhumane treatment that stemmed from a denial of agency, naturalised the master-slave bifurcation between rhetorical sovereign and subject. To the sovereign, the experience of the subject remained obscured.

22 Vincent B. Khapoya, *The African Experience* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 144.
23 Ibid., p. 144.

Domination did not simply correlate to direct religious conversion. The British denying the Church the right to evangelise in the Nigerian Sokoto Caliphate demonstrates that the strategic principle of not intruding upon the Muslim population was preferred to the ends of evangelism.[24] The government's choice not to interfere in religious affairs was a strategic decision. While the Church may have been annoyed, it was the local people in being overlooked as subjects in their own land who had their rhetorical agency disregarded. Instead, the strategic decision was made exclusively with the British State and Church as rhetorical agents.

Africans would be heard, that is to say be accommodated, only when they spoke in the language and ways of the imperialist. The power of language on the African continent, especially English and French, remains a standing testament to rhetorical imperialism and acculturation. The imperial refused to hear and thereby could not legitimise the local. Whereas the local heard, adopted, and thereby legitimised the imperial. Furthermore, Christian missions played a central role in the process of European acculturation. In much of colonial Africa, society was structured around churches. Those Africans involved in social organisation would mostly be those educated by mission schools. The imperial state would provide the funding and the mission's staff would administer the curriculum. Through education, Africans would assume the language, concepts, and ideas of the rhetorical imperialists. They would be accommodated and have access to influence only when they employed this guiding story. They could be heard only when they spoke their adopted language. As a result, the attraction of the European Christian voice was immense. Missions were powerful forces for shaping agency. They provided rare opportunities for aspiring Africans to earn respect and gain access to the realm of influence. From the imperial standpoint, an African could be influential only when legitimised by the mission, which stood at the core of society. As a result, various African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela were educated in mission schools. Leaders carried with them their education and adopted ethics when they assumed

24 B.J. Dudley, *Parties and Politics in Northern Nigeria* (London: Routledge, 1968).

power in the independent era. Their adopted language, culture, and religion again gained legitimation with their rise to power.

VESTIGES OF RHETORICAL IMPERIALISM: DISTANT AND RECENT

What is and what is not spoken by the rhetorical imperialist remains the standard in the rhetorical exchange between Africa and the West. This standard is based upon established rhetorical architectures. The case of Van Riebeeck's Hedge at the Cape Colony in the 1660s provides an instructive example. A wild almond hedge planted by Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch East Indian Company Commander at the Cape of Good Hope, symbolically marked the southern frontier of company territory. According to Richard Marback, the hedge established:

> [...] a boundary separating the Dutch from indigenous Africans [… It] inscribed a civilized order on the Dutch colony by distinguishing it from the expansive, uncharted continent occupied by indigenous African populations. The boundary line of the hedge gave physical expression to colonial categories. Ordered European spaces of economic power enabled and naturalised the extraction of resources and the exploitation of labour in the unordered natural spaces of Africa […]. Like the boundary marked by Riebeeck's hedge, the trading posts and cities of colonial South Africa were clearly delineated spaces of European control […]. Apartheid policy was a rhetorical reordering of the physical space of colonial South Africa. The word apartheid is Afrikaans for 'separateness'. The goal of apartheid was never genocide. The ultimate goal of apartheid can more accurately be thought of as an extension of the boundary marked with Riebeeck's almond hedge.[25]

25 Richard Marback, 'A Tale of Two Plaques: Rhetoric in Cape Town', *Rhetoric Review*, Volume 23, N°3 (2004): 253–68.

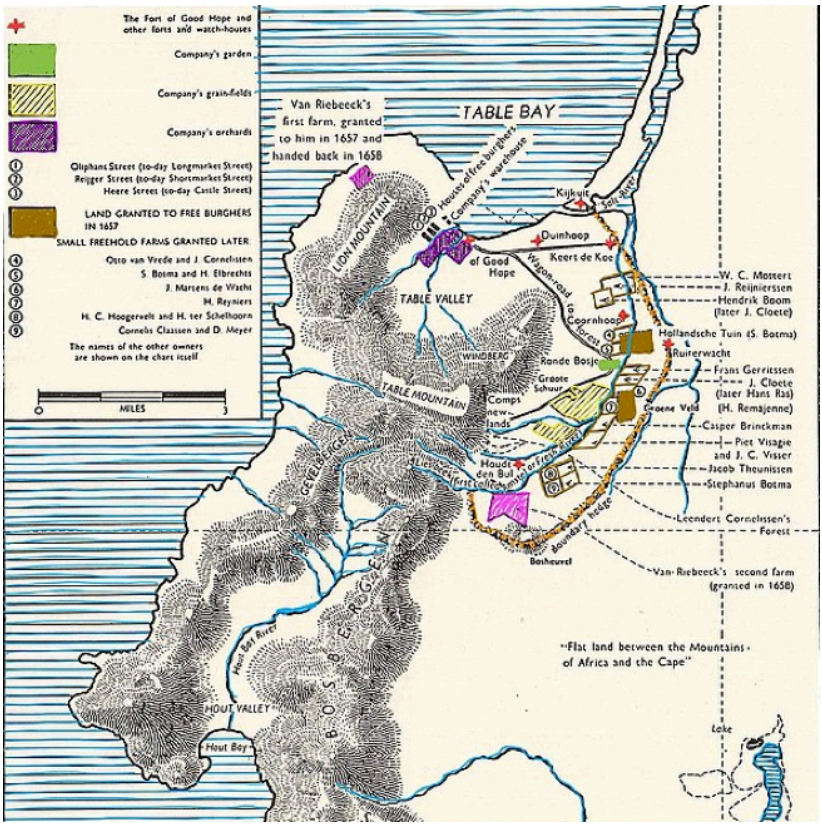

Figure 1. The boundary hedge at the Cape of Good Hope
Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Burghers

Van Riebeeck's hedge shows how settlers cut themselves off from the African land, and from its cultures and norms. The hedge did not only declare the area within the physical border as the land under law. Critically, it consigned the area beyond the hedge as an area where no law prevailed, an area of un-law. Beyond the hedge was beyond the law. Normatively, those residing beyond law could be engaged with only as the un-lawed, as savages. Their ways could have no form or signification. Simply, they could not be heard. Under these terms, Africans did not have, nor could they ever develop, rhetorical sovereignty.

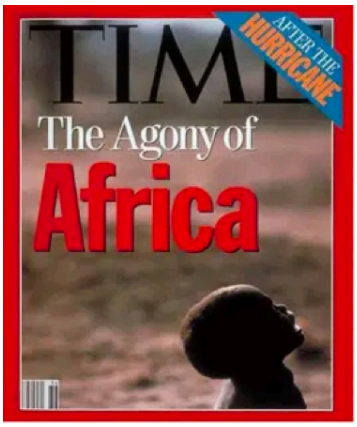

Figure 2. *Time Magazine*, Sept 1992

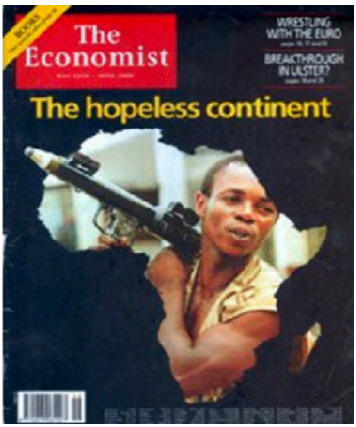

Figure 3. *The Economist,* May 2000

Figure 4. *Time Magazine*, Dec 2012

Figure 5. *The Economist,* Dec 2011

The land beyond the hedge and its peoples could exist only in reference to the imperial, only in terms of the lack of that which existed within the hedge. Structures like the hedge, imposing a normative order on a people, are what disallowed imperialist hearing. The hedge separated the imperial agency from the cognitive and normative architecture of the people and land in which it found itself.

Meaning could be recognised only when Africans entered the lawed area and abided by its norms. This self-fortifying rhetoric of the incomers exemplifies both the power and the weakness of description; consigning meaning based upon established perceptions. When an external realm is described only from within a certain logic and using endemic markers, it essentially remains unknown, or dark.

The story of Africa as told by prominent Western media outlets *Time* and *The Economist*, present an example of unyielding rhetorical imperialism. Here Africa's story is described: Africa does not have a voice; it has a reputation. When *Time*'s cover image, in 1984 and 1992, told of 'Africa's Woes' and 'The Agony of Africa', and when *The Economist* in 2000 printed 'The Hopeless Continent' above an image of the African continent superimposed over that of a weapon-toting soldier, these publications defined Africa's guiding story. A decade later, in 2011 and 2012 respectively, *The Economist* and *Time*, both published colourful covers emblazoned with the words, 'Africa Rising'. Here we see the power of self-referentiality; definitional validity is based upon a previous description. The effect of the story lies in the transition, affording legitimacy to both ends. Neither side needs to be proven; the assumed truth of the former is the basis for the assumed truth of the latter.

In a further indication highlighting the power of such publications, we have seen an about turn from various commentators after *The Economist* lamented: 'Since *The Economist* regrettably labelled Africa "the hopeless continent" a decade ago, a profound change has taken hold.'[26] Like a magnetic polar shift, Africa went from hopeless to hopeful.

26 *The Economist*, 'The Sun Shines Bright', 3 December 2011.

Yet, regardless of the marker, ascribed character remains.

These examples of *Time* and *The Economist* demonstrate the West's power of description. Africa remains mute and its reputation is maintained by others. In this modality, both speaker and hearer are fixed in their roles. Each reinforces the other, ensuring naturalisation of their roles. Meaning is accordingly not derived through rhetorical engagement but is baked into the specific roles each party plays. The development industry provides good examples of such anchored roles: Africans the receivers, Westerners the givers — simple. Colonialism's great power was to determine these roles. Today this assumption of strength and weakness continues. It is bolstered by the prevalence of indirect over direct power, where through the effective influence of the strong, the weak assume their own weakness as inherent. While states are constitutionally independent, their reluctance or inability to execute rhetorical sovereignty means they remain impotent to challenge the rhetorical agency of others.

These underlying power dynamics continue as the basis of (especially Western) rhetorical relationships with Africa. The capacity as a descriptor and described plays itself out through associated 'African' cultural products (Black Panther) and political movements (Black Lives Matter). While such products and movements may be dynamic and grass-roots expressions in the United States, they are influential in Africa and continue the course of imposed culture and meaning. Though taking different forms, these are modern iterations of hegemonic rhetorical agency. These campaigns are not directed at nefarious ends but disturb and weaken local perceptions and political articulations. They take a similar route to that of early Pan-Africanism, which too emanated from the Americas and spoke for an African identity. These are indirect pursuits of influence ascribing meaning, value, and even identity. Africans must critically engage these campaigns from a position of rhetorical sovereignty. Not only from hearing, but from a speaking agency. An investigation into historical and contemporary rhetorical power dynamics, as introduced here, is necessary to unmask evolving power relations and to appropriately equip Africans with rhetorical sovereignty. A broader analysis of these new modes of rhetorical agency,

as described in this paper, is a necessary pursuit but is not within the ambit of this paper.

Both the 'Hopeless Continent' and 'Africa Rising' are themes that get rehashed over time. Sean Jacobs contends that these rebranding exercises are banal 'totalizing narratives of the continent'.[27] Instead of engaging with developments on the continent, these labels present a stagnant and imposed understanding. Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes present a further illustration of how perceptions of Africa are not only skewed but seldom corrected when evidence of their falsehood emerges. The authors refer to the warped depiction of the African continent on global maps that show Africa to be about the same size as Greenland, which is fourteen times smaller. This projection has remained in place since Mercator published his 1569 world map. Despite knowledge of the true scale, influential platforms such as Google continue to use it as the global map of recognition.[28] Why is it that when these inaccuracies are discovered, they are not corrected? Lopes and Hirsch suggest that misperceptions about Africa go much further than cartography. When regarding 'risk perceptions, levels of conflict, political stability [...] the global perception in many minds continues to be one of an Africa uniformly beset by conflict, crisis, bad governance [...] a risky place for making investments. These negative narratives persist because of the images that are embedded in mind-sets, which translate an iconic representation of Africa, thus affecting what narrative prevails.'[29] There is very little nuance in the dominant, iconic African narrative/description. Only when African voices speak authoritatively and are accordingly heard, will the necessary nuance be injected into the debate. An accurate African representation, therefore, depends on Africans first perceiving and defining African affairs.

27 Sean Jacobs, 'Time Magazine and the "Africa is Rising" Meme', *Africa is a Country*, 26 November 2012.
28 Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes, 'Post-Colonial African Economic Development in Historical Perspective', *Africa Development*, Volume 45, N° 1 (2020): 31–46.
29 Ibid., p. 33.

AFRICA'S AFRICAN STORY

The African story is more than the imperialist's tale. Africa's pursuit of rhetorical sovereignty is like the reconstructive guiding stories of so many colonised peoples. As suggested by Lyons, it presents the 'pursuit of self-determination, a general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect'.[30] The following section discusses the pursuit of a sovereign African story, in two parts. The two should not be conflated. The first looks at Africa's rejection of rhetorical imperialism. As a relational story. Rhetoric in the pursuit of independence. The second exists only after the first. It sees sovereignty not as a pursuit but as the expression of independence.

AFRICA'S RELATIONAL STORY

As detailed above, African rhetorical agency has been deeply influenced by rhetorical imperialism. During the period of colonial subjugation, the ambitions and rhetorical claims of colonised Africa were advanced as counter-narratives. The mobilisation of ideas was explicitly in relation to the colonial ruler. To advance its rhetorical-strategic aims, Africa had to ensure its voice was heard and engaged. The pursuit of independence was the pursuit of overcoming subjugation. Strategically, it employed both concepts and language emergent from and in vogue in Europe. African Nationalism was central in Africa's 20th century strategic communications. The repurposing of 'nationalism', an authoritative term in Europe in the first half of the century, together with other concepts, such as 'democracy', allowed African subjectivity to emerge. These concepts were not aspirational as much as they were tools adopted in service of a strategic end and adapted to fit the African purpose. By ascribing them local meaning, African Nationalism presented an articulation of norms, heritage, and historical experience, and established a claim. In African Nationalism, we see a 'subjective feeling of kinship or affinity shared by people of African descent. It is a feeling based on shared cultural

30 Lyons, 'Rhetorical Sovereignty', p. 449.

norms, traditional institutions, racial heritage, and a common historical experience'.[31] African Nationalism, furthermore, was a modality through which to mobilise claims for better representation and improved opportunities.

Democracy presents a further example where rhetorical sovereignty is claimed through the repurposing of a recognised concept. Democracy as understood in the West, the state reflecting the desires of the people, was repurposed to appropriate local meaning and advance African independence. To Sunday Awoniyi, democracy is an illuminating concept as realised in the practices of groups such as the Yoruba, Nupe, and Tiv. 'Democracy cannot be said to be alien to Africa. History is replete with varying democratic practices that cut across the traditional institutions in Africa. There are existing traditional practices among African communities that are synonymous with contemporary expositions on democratic governance both in principles and practice.'[32] These expressions of democracy were articulated so as to be understood by the colonial master. They were claims for recognition.

African nationalism and the mobilisation of concepts such as democracy were tactically employed to solicit independence. Here, the party from which independence is sought remains powerful in being recognised as such. By repurposing these terms, even when used in the pursuit of independence, the pursuer accepts and keeps in place the power of the colonial agent. The same holds for concepts such as 'post-colonial', and political movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall,*[33] or *Fallism*[34] in general. While the latter pursues rhetorical agency, it maintains the placement of the original and accordingly serves as a counter-narrative, not a narrative.

31 Khapoya, *The African Experience*, p. 139.
32 Sunday Awoniyi, 'African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future', *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, Volume 17, N° 1 (2015).
33 *Rhodes Must Fall* was a student protest movement started at the University of Cape Town in 2015. It initially campaigned for the removal of a statue commemorating the mining magnate and politician Cecil John Rhodes and led to a broader movement advancing the decolonization of South African universities.
34 *Fallism* is as a decolonial paradigm and movement towards comprehensively breaking down the power of entrenched colonial knowledge systems. As a public pedagogy, it pursues knowledge creation so to 'challenge the academy's epistemic deference to Euro-American knowledge. Fallists serve as pedagogues who draw on scholars such as Frantz Fanon, activists like Steve Biko, and concepts such as intersectionality.' A. Kayum Ahmed, '#Fallism as public pedagogy', *Africa is a Country*, 7 March 2017.

They persist as referential to another, dominant agent. While useful for purposes of illustration and dismantling, these concepts are inherently limited as their rhetorical legitimacy resides in a predominant master narrative not of the subjects' own making. By contrast, the privilege of the master narrative, of Cecil Rhodes or the colonial motherland, retains its place long after political colonialism ceased to exist. Counter-narratives, as bound to the inherent meaning of the master narrative, are not sovereign narratives per se. When concepts are used only because they are perceptible to another, one subjugates one's agency to the agency of the other. To be independent, one must not only have the capacity to determine and point to one's goals, but one must also form and express one's voice.

STATING THE NATION: THE AFRICAN STORY, EXPRESSED

Rhetorical sovereignty is never bestowed by or received from another. It cannot be a latent agency any more than sovereignty can be a latent capacity. Rhetorical sovereignty is active; it is an ability that must be acted upon. It does not make sense according to another. It is the expression of self. Rhetorical sovereignty determines the strategic terrain by pronouncing upon it. It exerts power over meaning. Through deploying values and principles, it is not the act of transcending, but an enactment of being. To be rhetorically sovereign is to express an independent ethos.

Abdelhai Azarkan's discussion on the speech given by Moroccan King Mohammed V on 10th April 1947 depicts an enactment of sovereignty: a speaking of the nation.[35] In this speech, we see not a pursuit of or claim to sovereignty, but the performance of sovereignty. In his introduction, the King situates his message, as is the procedure in Islam, in his faith in Allah, 'the true and only God'. In so doing, he acknowledges that his power is not due to and does not belong to his person but emerges from Islam as an authority. King Mohammed's leadership not only stems from his faith but is guided by the Koran. In his speech, he states that:

35 Abdelhai Azarkan, 'Statecraft and sovereignty in Mohammed V of Morocco's Tangiers Speech (1947)', *African Yearbook of Rhetoric*, Volume 10, N° 1 (2020): 31–38.

> The believer distinguishes himself amongst the members of humanity by the perfection of his belief, the quietude of his conscience and the fact that he trusts his God, in his activities as in his repose, in his joys as in the misfortunes of life […]. Thus, we move into action only after firmly establishing the belief that we are truly one of Allah's faithful creatures.[36]

After observing the origin of his power, Islam's 'first ethical principle', the King continues to describe the state of Morocco and the Muslim community at large. According to Azarkan, the King moves 'from a description of the social, religious and political situation of his believer subjects, emphasising his commitment at government level to ensure the fundamental values dictated by Islam of peace, dignity and prosperity, to describing the emancipation and progress of the subjects and the nation.'[37] The misfortunes of the people are not simply attributed to foreign forces, in the way of a *Fallist* philosophy. In a coalescing manner, the King places responsibility and thereby power with his people, who, he warns, have forsaken responsibility and caved to injustice, so to 'become alienated from our sacred rights due to our ignorance, and the unity of the mistakes we have made'.[38] This recognition, critically, situates agency with the people, their subservience being of their own doing. Their salvation would come only from their own determined claim and enaction of independence.

The King's speech, which led to him being exiled by the French state, demonstrated manifest power.[39] In not mentioning independence in word, the King transcends the quest for independence in the manner of post-colonialism and *Fallism* referred to earlier. Azarkan stresses that 'unlike the political movements calling for independence at the time […] the King of Morocco is not satisfied with simply trying to attain the first step, namely national sovereignty, but also envisages the nature of the government to be constituted'.[40] Sovereignty is expressed through being sovereign, so to speak.

36 Mohammed V, Tangier speech of 10th April 1947 as translated by Azarkan, Ibid., p.23.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.

Opoku Mensah's article highlighting the rhetorical sovereignty of Kwame Nkrumah's statecraft presents another illustrative case. The author recalls Nkrumah propitiously giving shape to Ghanaian sovereignty following British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's renowned *Winds of Change* policy, first articulated in Accra in 1960. Nkrumah used the occasion to activate an independent foreign policy. He did not simply accept Macmillan's offering of decolonisation. Instead, he enacted Ghanaian independence by claiming: 'we have declared our stand in international relations: Ours is one of positive non-alignment'.[41] Nkrumah's sovereign expressions, his refusal to be brought into the Western ideological sphere, dealt a severe blow to Macmillan's influence-seeking tour of Africa.

Some months after Macmillan's visit, Nkrumah exacted African independence at the United Nations General Assembly. He declared that the 'wind blowing in Africa is not an ordinary wind, it is a raging hurricane and it is impossible for […] any other colonial power to prevent the raging hurricane of African nationalism from blowing through the oppressed and down-trodden colonies'.[42] Nkrumah's declaration of the 'dawn of a new era', wherein 'African nationalism sweeps everything before it and constitutes a challenge to the colonial powers', presents more than a vision. It uses the evidence of African independence to proclaim a fact. Critically, the new era is not assumed or imposed, but is actualised through Nkrumah's speech. His statements, such as the claim 'there are now twenty-two of us in this Assembly and there are yet more to come', set into motion the pursuit of an expanded end. By declaring upon the matter, Nkrumah actualises African independence in the name of African Nationalism.

In the rhetoric of South Africa's former President Nelson Mandela, we see the performance and personification of the democratic South African state. His embodiment of values and ideas gave shape to a transformed and thereby legitimate order. Through his candidature and then state presidency, Mandela expressed the transcendent order.

41 Eric Opoku Mensah, 'In Response to the "Wind of Change": The Statecraft of Kwame Nkrumah', *African Yearbook of Rhetoric*, Volume 10, N°1 (2020): 85–93, p. 89.
42 Ibid., p. 90.

In recognising the injustices of the past, Mandela's rhetoric, particularly in his public speeches, enacted the construction and constitution of the South African nation.[43] Through word and deed, Mandela performed the foundation of the democratic society. He realised the call to action of the Constitutional preamble: 'to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values'.[44] His speech acts, embodying the principles and values of the Constitution, were an expression of 'his ability to inspire ordinary men and women with the belief that they can and should make a difference [and gave] his presidency a lustre'.[45] Mandela's praise of the values of Constitutional democracy instilled them into the national ethos. These expressions were not only employed to expedite the process of getting elected; Mandela used them throughout his rhetorical career. Before he gave shape to the reconciled nation, Mandela was an active proponent of the just application of law. In a 1986 article on Mandela, Jacques Derrida writes that it was Mandela's admiration for justice that made him legally powerful. 'Mandela becomes admirable for having known how to admire […] for having made of his admiration a force, a power of combat, intractable and irreducible'.[46] Mandela's veneration for just law, in accordance to the judicial texts of the South African State, formed the foundation of his legal defence during the trial that led to his incarceration. Referring to documents such as the Bill of Rights, the Petition of Rights, and the Magna Carta, Mandela declared that he was an 'admirer of such a system'. He said, 'I have great respect for British political institutions, […] the independence and impartiality of its judiciary never fail to arouse my admiration.'[47]

Defending himself, Mandela did not simply respond as one accused. He used the opportunity to indict the state for upholding and applying an unjust legal system. He proposed his acquittal on this basis. According to Derrida, Mandela's passions, his admiration for the application of just

43 Philippe-Joseph Salazar, *An African Athens: Rhetoric and the Shaping of Democracy in South Africa* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).
44 South African Ministry of Justice, *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996.
45 Gaye Davis, 'No Ordinary Magic', *Mail & Guardian*, 18 July 1997.
46 Jacques Derrida, 'Admiration of Nelson Mandela, or the Laws of Reflection', *Law & Literature*, Volume 26, N° 1 (2014): 9–30.
47 Nelson Mandela, 'Statement from the dock at the opening of the defence case in the Rivonia Trial', 20 April 1964.

law (the separation of powers and judicial independence) show Mandela to be an heir of legitimate legal practice. An authentic heir is one who turns 'against those who pretend to be its depositaries, to the point of giving to see, against the usurpers, the very thing that, in the heritage, has never before been seen—to the point of giving birth, by the unheard of act of a reflection, to that which had never seen the light of day'.[48] Mandela, whose appeals are always first to the law, emphasises the lack of justice and calls for the creation of justice. His is an independent indictment of the state. He says that he is charged with inciting people to protest a law imposed on them. The government, says Mandela:

> […] must take into account the question of responsibility, whether it is I who is responsible or whether, in fact, a large measure of the responsibility does not lie on the shoulders of the government which promulgated that law, knowing that my people, who constitute the majority of the population of this country, were opposed to that law, and knowing further that every legal means of demonstrating that opposition had been closed to them by prior legislation, and by government administrative action.[49]

Mandela justifies his indictment much in the way that he is charged: 'he gathers himself in appearing before the law, which he summons as much as it summons him'.[50] Mandela's indictment is his own, his challenge is an act of rhetorical sovereignty. His orations and actions on these values afforded him authority and brought justice and stability to the new nation. On the occasion of his first State of the Nation address in 1994, a tradition copied from the United States, Mandela truly 'stated the nation'. He realised the present (and made the future possible) by transcending the past. 'In one gesture, in one voice, the nation finds itself being "stated"; mutual confidence is affirmed, and ceremony is performed.'[51]

48 Derrida, 'Admiration of Nelson Mandela', p. 12.
49 Ibid., p. 19.
50 Ibid.
51 Awoniyi, 'African Cultural Values, p. 22.

Mandela's authoritative voice, his embodiment of reconciliation, gave shape to a reconciled South Africa. This embodiment is particular to the South African case and in response to the national problem, not to the broader problems of the continent.

A final example of African rhetorical sovereignty is the celebrated *I am an African* speech given by Thabo Mbeki, then deputy President of South Africa, quoted at the beginning of this article. Mbeki's speech at Parliament's adoption of the current Constitution gives substance to modern African subjectivity. Akin to the speech given by King Mohammed V, this is not an appeal for transcendence. It is its expression of being. An enactment of the national ethos at a moment of commencement. Mbeki's poetic praise of African values, experience, and culture is an example of formative epideictic rhetoric. In his statement, he assumes representation of a variety of South African groups. 'I owe my being to the Khoi and the San […] I am formed of the migrants who left Europe […] In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves […] I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women that Hintsa and Sekhukhune led, the patriots that Cetshwayo and Mphephu took to battle.'[52] In speaking these words he demonstrates national accord, transcending varied struggles to realise a singular national identity. Representing a broad group of peoples, he shows how they, in their different ways, have together overcome the past and can now embody a new, unifying national order. By speaking for all national groups, his overcoming is the overcoming and the redemption of all. Not only is he an African, but so too are all those he speaks for: a nation reconciled.

Mbeki's speech not only expressed his sentiments. It echoed prior messages of the late ANC leaders Pixley ka Seme and Anton Lembede who both declared their being African as the core of their political being. Mbeki's assumption of this rhetorical rite claims authority both for their message and for his. In reflecting upon the past, he does not cede agency to rhetorical foes but instead rallies an inclusive spirit wherein all can find their place. Mbeki's speech forms the foundation of his call for

52 Thabo Mbeki, 'I am an African' speech, 1996.

an African Renaissance, the overcoming of continental challenges and holistic renewal. While its mandate goes back a century to ka Seme, the claim '*I am an African'* also forms a future projection. Mbeki's confident affirmation appropriates meaning, replacing negative and external projections. While the speech does not explicitly refer to a 'renaissance', his message makes the necessary connections to encourage others to advance it. He draws inspiration from a rich cultural history and creates a bridge between that history and the renewal or rebirth of continental perceptions shaped by Africans themselves, thereby establishing the authority to transcend the foreign control exerted over continental affairs. Claiming agency for Africa, by Africans.

If we follow the development of the concept of African Renaissance, we see the emergence of several key components of African rhetorical agency. According to Elias Bongmba, the 'idea of African Renaissance is part of a long struggle to articulate and actualise an African identity and consciousness'.[53] Renaissance thinking invokes a critical assessment of identity, which, according to Mbeki and in line with South African reconciliation, is not based on race (blackness) or on modernist ideas. Instead, it is concerned with ownership of a multicultural vision that collapses colonial constructions and builds forward using local perspectives. The African Renaissance signals the mobilisation of African cultural ideals and values. It is a revival of African forms of thought that can be drawn on for an African form of modernisation, ways for African agents to put forth their rhetorical sovereignty. While the initial renaissance programmes did not attain advancement beyond leaders such as Mbeki, and their outcomes and effects should be viewed critically, the process of rediscovering and building upon an array of indigenous norms, akin to King Mohammed V of Morocco, is a powerful programme of action. It establishes an approach through which African voices can be found and expressed. These are not essentialised or imposed ways, but are distinctive approaches that signal a change of paradigm, a process for creating new realities expressed through local voices.

53 Elias Bongmba, 'Reflections on Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 30, N°2 (2004): 291–316, p. 294.

The idea of the African Renaissance creates an essential bridge connecting history and future in an African timeline that far exceeds the colonial period.

Recently, the concept of renaissance has been catapulted into the African Union's institutional masterplan, *Agenda 2063*. This long-term, ambitious plan seeks to transcend post-colonial influences and establish systems of self-determination which, through a process of unlearning and learning, will visualise and then implement a new institutional arrangement for the continent. The *Agenda*, presented as a set of initiatives, gives expression to the goals and ideals first established in the *Solemn Declaration of the Assembly of the Union on the Situation in Mali*,[54] adopted in 2013. Notably, these goals and ideals—continental peace and security, democratic governance, and social and economic development—are to be founded upon an 'African identity and Renaissance'. The agenda for 2063, one hundred years following the establishment of the Organization of African Unity, is reminiscent of China's foremost long-term strategic goals for 2049, marking a hundred years following its revolution. The *Solemn Declaration* is an example of rhetorical agency, through which foundational African concepts are presented constructively and affirmatively.

CONCLUSION

This article has shone a light on the importance of including rhetorical agency in our understanding of strategic communications. Agency is central to any communicative practice and therefore should not be confined to theory but understood and implemented dynamically as circumstances demand. To conduct effective strategic communications, actors must comprehend the nature of their rhetorical agency and, crucially, must recognise but not depend on the rhetorical agencies of their counterparts. An independent sense of self, expressed through rhetorical sovereignty, is crucial for conveying meaning in the contemporary confluence of intersecting narratives where actors may hold multiple, legitimate identities.

54 African Union, *50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration*, 26 May 2013.

This is especially significant in a place such as Africa, where rhetorical agencies have not had much time to mature following the socio-cultural effects of colonialism, modernisation, and the implementation of democracy. African understandings of interposing ideational and geopolitical forces pursuing their interests on the continent are still developing. For their independence to be genuine, African polities must establish and express their rhetorical sovereignty. They must speak and thereby define themselves within the intensifying fluidity of identity and relations that comprise a networked and often oblique power order. To gain influence in the global strategic marketplace, Africa faces the demanding task of developing the rhetorical agency to engage others on its own terms, as does the global south in general. Although identifying resonant and constructive forms of expression is an intricate process, many illuminating examples of Africa finding its voice (again) light the way. Despite the violent and identity-erasing incursions it has suffered, Africa remains rich with rhetorical culture that can serve as a foundation and springboard for persuasive strategic communications.

To engage genuinely with Africa's African story, others must first overcome their own rhetorical constraints. Africa will increasingly play an important role in global affairs and, to interact effectively with the continent, others must shed their judgements and engage their perceptive abilities. They must realise that it is not Africa that is dark, but that the darkness they experience is created by their own inability to see and to hear.

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