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# The Pan-African Gorée Institute at Thirty: A Tribute to Breyten Breytenbach and the Power of the Imagination

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## Abstract

Amid mounting assaults on political freedom and self-determination – both on the African continent and further afield, the work of the Pan-African Gorée Institute for Democracy, Development and Culture in Africa is more urgent than ever. This article reflects on the first thirty years of the Institute's existence. It pays special attention to GORIN's creative projects, developed under the motto 'Imagine Africa', and reflects on South African poet Breyten Breytenbach's formative role in the establishment of GORIN's cultural activities. The article concludes with a call for renewed engagement with GORIN's pan-African democratic endeavours.

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## Keywords

Gorée – Breyten Breytenbach – Dakar conference – democracy – imagination

In June 2022, the Gorée Institute Centre for Democracy, Development and Culture in Africa (GORIN) celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. Located on Gorée Island, off the coast of Senegal, the pan-African organisation seeks to “contribute to the establishment of peaceful, just, and independent African societies, to reinforce political dialogues aimed at the peaceful resolution of conflict; to contribute to the consolidation of political processes and institutions, and to encourage economic, social, and artistic creativity” (Gorée Institute, 2023; our translation).

The establishment of GORIN followed upon the famed 1987 Dakar Conference, which brought together figures such as Thabo Mbeki, Alfred Nzo, Steve Tshwete, Mac Maharaj, Pallo Jordan, Kader Asmal, Bridget Mabandla, Essop Pahad, Barbara Masekela, Breyten Breytenbach, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert and a group of progressive South Africans in the diaspora, to facilitate negotiations towards political transition in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> Senegalese president Abdou Diouf steered the conference proceedings, with the support of Danielle Mitterand (on behalf of La Fondation France-Libertés). The Dakar meeting initiated a new period of negotiation between Afrikaners and the exiled African National Congress (ANC). Ultimately, the conference contributed to Nelson Mandela’s release from incarceration in February 1990 and the unbanning of liberation organisations such as the ANC. On 27 April 1994, South Africa celebrated its first democratic elections. The Dakar Conference remains central to this legacy.

Under the initiative of President Diouf, GORIN was founded in June 1992, partly funded by Hungarian businessman George Soros, to build on the success of the Dakar negotiations. Dedicated to the promotion of peace and development on the African continent, the Institute brings together leaders in the fields of politics, human rights, institution building, culture and international relations. On GORIN’s website, collaboration between various stakeholders emerges as a crucial aspect of the organisation’s work: “[GORIN] achieves its missions through research, facilitation and intervention; it works in close collaboration with authorities at regional and local level in Africa, as well as with civil society organisations and with African citizens” (Gorée Institute, 2023;

1 For a full list of participants at the Dakar conference, see Slabbert (2006: 79–84).

our translation). In addition to social, economic and political topics, the Institute engages deeply with matters relating to culture and art. An example of GORIN's work in the arts is "the caravan of the imagination" – a group of nine renowned African poets coordinated by Zimbabwean writer Koyo Kouoh, who in late 1999 traversed an ancient trade route from Gorée to Timbuktu as a collective. The idea of "creative caravans" was first elaborated by French-South African artist-poet (and founding member of the Gorée Institute) Breyten Breytenbach, who regarded the voyage as a metaphorical reanimation of older patterns of inter-African exchange, as well as a future-oriented rediscovery of local creative and social genius (for more, see Kouoh, 2000).

Breytenbach was the executive director of GORIN's cultural department for eight years (2002–2010). The cultural department operates under the motto "Imagine Africa" – a phrase that gestures as much to the central role of the imagination in African cultural work as to the need for new conceptions of and engagements with the continent's past, present and future (Roux and T'Sjoen, 2020). For Breytenbach, artists have a crucial role to play in establishing creative and inventive ways of reinhabiting Africa's social and political potentialities. As Flemish scholar Geert Buelens notes, "according to [Breytenbach], an important contribution to self-awareness can be made by artists. He suggests that fifty writers should be commissioned to reinvent the black continent by describing it, to 'give it back to the people in their own language'" (Buelens, 1996; our translation).

### Gorée, the Island of the Enslaved

The island of Gorée, located off the coast of Dakar, is a site of contestation. Over centuries, the island has changed hands between Portuguese, French, British and Dutch colonisers. Among the Senegalese people it was known as Ber. The Dutch called it Goedereede, or "good harbour". Today, Gorée's name especially invokes the dark legacy of slavery. Owned by the Dutch West India Company, L'Île des Esclaves served as a transit point for the export of enslaved people to South America and the United States. Guy Thilmans's *La grande batterie de Gorée* (2006) sheds crucial historical light on the island's sinister past. Gorée is a symbol of oppression, economic exploitation and the terror of the slave trade in West Africa. As a *lieu de mémoire*, it stands as a cipher for the colonial histories and anti- and decolonial struggles of almost the entire African continent. Locating a research institute for peace and democracy in Africa hence activates numerous local, continental and global narratives of exploitation, displacement and struggle for self-determination. It gestures to

the tyrannies of Leopold II and Belgium in Congo, the Dutch and the British in South Africa, the Portuguese occupation of Gorée, and the colonial histories of Africa, South America and Asia, all of which leave traces to the present day.

Senegal (and Gorée) became independent in 1960. In the period since – classified in political philosophy as “postcolonial” – Western (or, more polemically, “white”) thought patterns have continued to shape vast swathes of academic and popular work on Africa. This is especially the case for work produced within Euro-American institutional structures (including universities, publishing houses, and governmental and non-governmental organisations). Despite the existence of a rich critical-philosophical and creative literary tradition rooted in African epistemologies, including the writings of authors such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the African continent remains in Western eyes a collection of cultures and peoples arrested in a perpetual past of oppression, economic exploitation and physical and mental abuse. In short, it continues to be presented as a place in need of full entry into Western modernity. Little wonder, then, that conversations about decolonisation, sparked by the #RhodesMustFall and #BlackLivesMatter movements and widely reported on also in this publication, prioritise not only a reckoning with colonial pasts but also serious engagement with Indigenous political and historical thought and self-representation.

### Promoting Dialogue

Eastern, South American and African epistemologies remain subject to institutional neglect, especially at Western universities. It is remarkable that African philosophical models, for instance, receive hardly any attention at European and American universities. A complex concept such as *ubuntu* might dialogue fruitfully not only with traditions of Enlightenment individualism but also with discussions on genocide at the International Criminal Court at The Hague. Literary studies, too, might benefit from broader engagement with different narrative traditions. What is considered literature, or even culture, varies greatly depending on background and perspective. Accommodating such diversity serves to broaden existing canons. It also enables new ways of speaking selves and pasts into existence. As Surinamese author Astrid Roemer (2021) argues in her magnum opus, *Onmogelijk moederland*, we need a more inclusive vision of literature and culture.

An extroverted view – one that embraces both Western and non-Western sources and frames of reference – fits into a social conversation that advocates openness and inclusiveness. Without denying or dismissing the force of so-called

*Leitkultur* (a term coined by the German-Arab sociologist Bassam Tibi), it is important to create openings, to broaden viewpoints, and to open ourselves and each other to paradigms and discourses beyond those rooted in the West (Tibi, 1998). Indeed, given the cultural-ethnic diversity that characterises the current moment, it may even be necessary to ask what a guiding *Leitkultur* might be.

We cling stubbornly, sometimes out of ignorance, to a Western gaze. And though there may be nothing wrong with that view per se, our desperate adherence to a self-celebrating monoculture (one deeply influenced by what is known in activist discourse as “white supremacy”) impoverishes both perspective and possibility. Moreover, if this Western gaze is revealed to be reductive, in the most aberrant sense racist or dehumanising, exclusive and thus exclusion-oriented, its guiding force should be viewed with nothing short of suspicion. In the light of the decolonisation movement, and in the spirit of Gorée, it is time to break open the Eurocentric canon.

### Scholars and Creatives

Academics and educational institutions, although prepared to heed the call for decolonisation and to conduct the debate openly, may deal with such conversations in a fitful way. Their impulses are often abrupt or specific, looking for quick-fire solutions rather than the deep structural change required to achieve sustainable and equitable transformation, not only in educational offerings but in scholarly thought and practice as a whole. There are reasons for this convulsion, stretching from current university funding models to economic interests, contacts with the business world and an increasingly market-driven knowledge economy.

Recent debates surrounding the activist removal of colonial images and inscriptions (such as Rhodes statues in Cape Town and Oxford, effigies of Leopold II in cities around Belgium, and Edward Colston in Bristol), have revealed something of a discrepancy between the approaches of creative workers and those of academics. Some scholars hold the conversation to a certain boundary, calling for the story – even as it is rethought and retold – to remain beholden to existing formal models. In contrast, artists break through that boundary and try to deal with the relics or ingrained stories of (post)colonial history in a creative and *imaginative* way. Thus, matters such as the decolonisation of language and customs, and reorientations in our way of imagining the past, take on different guises depending on whether they are approached *as culture* or *as knowledge*.

Is artists’ creative engagement with (post)colonial history more productive than that of scholars? Perhaps not, especially when the elimination of signs of the past in the public space becomes a *modus operandi* (the concept “cancel culture”

springs to mind). But when creative workers deal with historical remnants in inventive, socially engaged ways – giving them a visible, if contested, place from which to be reassessed and reconfigured – such work may spark forms of post- and anticolonial remembrance that exceed the potentialities of academic work.

At the pan-African Gorée Institute, the possibilities afforded by creative work are brought into dialogue with scholarly endeavours. GORIN fosters a responsive exchange designed to address challenges of postcolonial recovery and democratic growth from a variety of perspectives. Within the framework of the Institute, artists, like scholars, have a crucial role to play in this process. GORIN takes seriously the generative capabilities of the imagination.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Institute enables new depictions and imaginaries of the African continent to emerge. Today, we need more such institutions – ones that unite, join forces and share ideas – to encourage us to deal creatively and critically with the past, the present and the future.

### New Plans

A few months ago, Breytenbach returned to Gorée Island for the first time in several years. The author documented his experiences and concerns in the form of extensive travel notes. He wrote about decay – inertia, even – and about the need for plans. The foundation remains in its original island home, but the printing presses have fallen into disuse and are waiting for new projects. As the Gorée Institute celebrates thirty years, and social debates on decolonisation continue to rage, it is time to reinvigorate the energy that animated the organisation and its original members.

Amid the political and cultural upheavals presently playing out in several African countries, GORIN's work obtains renewed urgency. Or, as Breytenbach himself notes, the world needs more Gorée. Conversations are currently underway, names are being mentioned and funds are being raised, all with a view to fresh initiatives and projects. Consideration is also being given to a counterpart or sister institution on European soil. GORIN connects north and south. Indeed, GORIN not only prioritises pan-African exchange but also supports Euro-African dialogue within the framework of the Institute. Breytenbach emphasises that the operation is not exclusively focused on West Africa, or more specifically on Senegal. Rather, it covers the entire African continent, its dias-

<sup>2</sup> To date, GORIN has published three anthologies of essays and literary pieces under the title *Imagine Africa* (2011, 2014, 2017), under the literary imprint Island Position, Pirogue Collective, GORIN.

poras and its friends. Indeed, the Institute's lineage, growing as it did out of the anti-apartheid congress of 1987, continues to be respected. As "la maison pour la démocratie" ("the house of democracy"), Gorée promotes debates among people and society across the African continent and beyond.

The Gorée Institute's 2021–2025 strategic plan outlines a vision worthy of close consideration. It states: "this mission prioritizes the elaboration of new paradigms, the expansion of persons' and institutions' perspectives, and the optimisation of human resources that exist on the continent" (Gorée Institute, 2021; our translation<sup>3</sup>). GORIN's mission is a profoundly humanist and thoroughly hopeful project. Celebrating the power of the imagination in Africa, the Institute centres human potential. It maintains that the continent will flourish only if the forces of creativity and imagination are allowed to participate in the negotiation (and renegotiation) of both past and future. With the artists of the African continent, we must dare to dream further, share our visions and give such initiatives sufficient attention and respect.

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3 Our thanks to Breyten Breytenbach for making this document available to us.