

Ethnicity and Cultural Rights

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A. Introduction

The concept of race has no scientific basis - there is no basic difference between groups of people as there is for instance between men and woman. Certainly perceptions about race are a major force in people's consciousness. But - as Alexander has pointed out in *Sow the Wind* the claim that genetic or hereditary characteristics determines fundamental difference in human behaviour is biologically and sociologically unfounded.

This is very different from the question of ethnicity. Ethnicity, it is said, corresponds roughly to *volk*; the term is used by anthropologists to refer to a "people". Emotional bonds, preservation of their kind, speak the same language share a common cultural heritage ... believe these things, and support these beliefs with myths as well ... not necessarily a nation or united under a single government.

Just as no people can be taken out of history - so no-one can be free of a cultural context, despite professions to the contrary. (Sometimes cultural influence is dismissed as something that a dominated or marginalised groups has (e.g. references to ethnic music, dress, etc); at other times it is used by a dominating or colonising group to define their superiority.) But culture is the context - material and immaterial - that we are born into; from our earliest years it writes on us like a blank page, conditioning or influencing our deepest responses as well as the methods we use for survival.

Culture comes both from people's history and the demands of the reality they live in.

I'm not taking a shot at any absolute definition of culture here. But there are four key windows if one wants to delve into the subject of culture (I draw from core curriculum outline of Foundation for Education with Production):

1. Ideas knowledge and beliefs this would include ideology, religion, mythology, systems of thinking etc.
2. Material culture: physical products of society (e.clothes, drum, houses, etc); levels of technology, social organisation etc.
3. Patterns of behaviour; customs, traditions sports and games.
4. Art forms: graphics, music, drama and the performing arts, writing.

Furthermore we should recognise ( I draw from a textbook on Community Studies; Australian History: aboriginal Society and Culture) the following basic principles.

- 1) All humans have a culture.
  - 2) These cultures differ slightly or greatly.
  - 3) All cultures are dynamic rather than static.
  - 4) Your culture is as valid as any cultures past and present in any part of the world.
  - 5) Different cultures encompass different value systems which sometimes result in clashes.
- I add another (6) All cultures have positive and negative aspects.

I would add another important point of departure: that ethnicity or cultural differences should not be overemphasized, and dare not be ignored.

#### B. Specific cultural issues relevant to transformation

We now should address specific issues around culture in South Africa.

1. That ethnicity in all its complexity is sometimes overshadowed by the black white conflict and tension our society. Progressives have spent less time putting it under the microscope of research and debated, and in some quarters dismissed as a figment of apartheid imagination.
2. That there exists in S.A. other distinctions - between Africans and people of Indian or mixed-group origins. The robust tensions between Africans and Indians are well known and has on several historical occasions broken out in violence. Apartheid stratification has immensely privileged the Indian and Coloured group: they had relatively greater access to resources in the area of education, housing, and access to state resources - although both groups contain a working class suffering the burden of impoverishment, joblessness and acute impoverishment.
3. Within the African community there are roughly 10 subgroups, distinguished mainly by different languages but also perceptions and experiences of different cultural-historical traditions. The process of urbanisation and industrialisation provided a melting pot situation in various areas before 1948; but the white ruling bloc after that drove home the wedges of separateness, suspicion and parochialism.
4. Cutting across all of these is the tension between people with rural and urban experience. While those in rural areas are less exposed to other cultural traditions and outlooks, are more loyal to tribal customs, are more impoverished and denied resources, we in the urban areas are more "westernised", educated, and generally speaking more politicised; we are also increasingly losing touch with tribal customs. Different views of life has often led to conflict and bitterness.

5. The white tribe is to a greater or lesser degree estranged from its countrypeople. This alienation has run so deep that most of the electorate for a long while could not see the contradiction of referring to South Africa as a democracy. It also accounts for the lame response in that constituency to excesses committed by the state e.g. Sharpeville and Soweto 1976. Until the early seventies newspapers also had peculiar way of describing events: a simple "man" or "woman" meant whites, and black people were given an ethnic tag such as bantu and coloured.

Apart from this, the white group is split into Afrikaner and English, as well as other sub-groups which are not viewed as politically significant. The struggle between the English and Afrikaners has taken a back set with realignment of power and political sea changes, although in the past - before they mobilised to gain economic and political power, Afrikaners were viewed as more rural and unsophisticated. A small cluster of Afrikaners are presently rallying around ethnicity and threatening to mobilise working class white communities to destabilise a future non-racial order.

Liability or asset?

This is a reality of tension and conflict, in which diversity is being punted more as a liability as an asset. Many of us do not take pride in, or value, cultural diversity, nor do we see that South Africa is enriched by these cultures communicating and interacting with each other. Further analysis and evaluation, rather than a mere description of the underlying forces, is also crucial to developing a clear way forward.

#### B. Domination: superiority and inferiority

South Africa has seen the most brutal forms of oppression: slavery, colonisation, white supremacy etc, all going together with economic exploitation. The minority group imposed itself on the culture of the majority of people and used their institutions to negate the value of their culture and then to resurrect it distorted, static and introverted forms. This was coupled with obscene exploitation that leaves SA today with one of the highest income discrepancy in the world and the division is along black white lines. Also the black community is suffering the blight of almost every conceivable backlog and deficit.

The systematic imposition has meant that for a long time large sectors of the black community were victims of inferiority complexes and destruction of self esteem, as so cogently pointed out by Steve Biko. This process was well described by Margaret Legum (Outlook Jan 1991): "If I perceive you as inherently stronger than I, and I need your approval, I will take on board what you think of me ... I will accept that you are the norm and it is my aspiration to be like you".

The coin's flipside is the superiority of the dominant group which advances its interests at the expense of others, employing elaborate justifications. And when that dominated start to free themselves assume that they are indispensable in guiding the process to a society with acceptable norms, values and standards.

But as mass conscientisation took place through struggle, we have seen the growth of non-racialism. But we also have seen bitter and violent confrontation which has led to hardened racial views among both blacks and whites who see their way of life as targets of mass militancy and armed attacks.

### Internal

But the tensions also turn inward. We begin to confront the reality of groups fighting against one another for survival in a harsh social, political and economic environment. There are economic divisions overlaid with rural and urban divisions. In the townships the squatters and hostel dwellers, driven from rural areas that are strangled by stagnation and underdevelopment, find themselves set against those in housing schemes.

In the political context there are those like Inkatha (but also the Labour Party and other groups) who have seen the potential of using ethnicity to mobilise people, and do so in a way that is destructive, divides and furthers personal political ambitions.

At this point their strategies dovetails neatly with the state's broader policies of insulating communities from one another through relentless propaganda and censorship, through official stereotyping and a racist education system.

Thus while ethnicity cannot be ascribed completely to the apartheid system, it has sought "to accentuate all ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural divisions there might be." It has exacerbated the factors of conflict and waged war on the factors and potentialities of coexistence.

The response of political organisations has been to "bring out the similarities in the conditions of the ... people as a whole". This was one of the key ideological and strategic pillars at the founding of the African Native Congress in 1912 and it persists to this day. Of course this objective has itself come under attack as state propaganda sought to demonise the PAC, SACP. The liberation movement's appeal was to non-African communities particularly undermined, and the ANC was cast as an ethnically (Xhosa)-dominated organisation, giving space to mobilisation by moderate opportunists.



### C. Weaving a Non-racial National Consciousness

Given these realities, how will we set about building a national consciousness, and a common loyalty to South Africa coupled with tolerance and respect for different cultures.

\* Popularise the notion of respect for various cultures. This would be embedded in the removal of all laws which enforce racial discrimination, giving individual equal political rights without regard to backgrounds, language or religion.

\* The need for affirmative action policy to remove imbalances and victim psychology.

\* Development programmes targeted at the most marginalised regions and communities NGOs, the private sector and the state should be pushed to develop economic programmes that are sensitive to the interests of the poorest sectors.

\* Education. In many new nations breaking free of colonialism, education - wider provision and new content - has been critical in creating new awareness and national consciousness. Such an education should also advance values that are regarded as qualities a new society should strive for such as democracy, non-racialism, non-sexism and economic equity.

\* The question of a single unifying language needs to be addressed. At the same time all other languages spoken should be recognised developed. People should be entitled to use, study in and speak their home tongue both in private and public.

\* The present official cultural structures (performing arts council and state broadcasting) - set up to serve the dominant group - need to be radically restructured to reflect the kaleidoscope of SA cultural forms. Cultural institutions should be governed by policy-making bodies that are representative in all respects - ethnic diversity, women, rural/urban and different regions.

### D. Legal and Policy Framework

What legal and policy framework is needed for seriously moving beyond the divisive and destructive cultural legacy of apartheid?

The ANC constitutional guidelines provides some pointers to a legal protection for cultural rights. These are contained in:

\* The Bill of Rights part:

- which guarantees fundamental human rights, freedom of expression and political diversity.

\* The National identity clause:

- calling for state recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity of the people and provision of "facilities for free linguistic and cultural development".

\* The woman clause:

demanding equal gender rights and pro-woman affirmative action for woman.

How far would the rights of ethnic groups extend? The guidelines seem to suggest that there would be boundaries defined by the outlawing of racism, fascism and Nazism. The details of this are likely to throw up new problems.

Would the law permit groups to follow ethnically exclusive policies through a kind of "right of admission" reserved; when would this be viewed as racism. The CPs Fanie Jacobs, in an article by Darius Sanai, says that anti-discriminatory laws would be "interfering with the private domain". People like Jacobs - the "personal choice" school - say it would hurt individual freedom if the state made it a crime to refuse a black person entry to a shop, or to refuse to rent accommodation or to refuse to consider a job application. The issue of schools (a big issue for the Indian community) and media with an ethnic orientation will also be an issue.

Sarnia quotes with approval the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the US and the 1965 Race Relations Act in Britain as well as similar laws in Scandinavian countries and West Germany which have been vital in combating racism.

A useful guideline that would help us negotiate the tightrope of freedom to exercise culture rights and a sanction on racism is to ask whether a particular institution really has been set up to advance legitimate cultural activity - and if so, such institutions would be open to all, regardless of race who take an interest in such activities, and who want to be exposed to such activities.

#### E. Conclusion

The path we are taking to democratisation can be seen as having three stages: liberalisation, constitutional change, and finally socialisation, the stage at which values and principles enshrined in a constitution becomes the norm, the dominant way of life. Legal protections and guarantees are critically in transforming our society. However, as important is the example, the strategy and the programmes of progressive politicians and those engaged in the development of culture in our society.