

DEBATING COLOURED IDENTITY IN THE WESTERN CAPE

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The nature and form of coloured identity in the Western Cape has been vociferously debated. Coloured identity became a particular concern after the 1994 general elections when the coloured vote returned the National Party to the Western Cape provincial government. More recently, a spate of incidents in the Western Cape have propelled the group into the national spotlight.

Many coloureds have indicated that they feel marginalised in the post-apartheid dispensation, and are especially resentful at what they perceive to be a preferential allocation of resources to Africans in the Western Cape, when their needs are just as great. These tensions were highlighted when a group of coloureds protested against the relocation of Africans, whose informal housing had been destroyed in a fire, to a hostel in the coloured township of Bokmakkierie.

In June 2005 factionalism within the provincial African National Congress (ANC) executive, widely proclaimed by the media to be between the 'Africanists' and the 'non-racialists', sparked renewed tensions. The traditional practice of the ANC in the region was to ensure that the ANC executive was largely representative of the demography of the province. The 'Africanists' asserted that this norm was dated, that representivity should be reflective of the majority of people who voted the ANC into power in the province, and that

there was a need for speedier transformation in the Western Cape. Little ideological difference was discernible between the two factions within the ANC. This was essentially an internal power struggle at play. Despite intervention by the National ANC, Premier Ebrahim Rasool, selected by the president and known for his policy of creating a 'home for all', was humiliatingly ousted from the position of chair of the Western Cape ANC.

But it was an editorial on an obscure website hosted by Blackman Ngoro, the political advisor of the mayor of Cape Town, Nomaindia Mfeketo, that incited local fury and national reactions. The editorial highlighted the continued tensions between coloureds and Africans, degraded coloureds as 'drunkards', and asserted that Africans were 'culturally superior to coloureds'. In most other contexts this editorial would have been dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic, but given the above events, it provided a perfect canvas to depict the resentment that had been building up in the province. Political parties jumped onto the bandwagon, using the debacle as an opportunity to portray the ANC as anti-coloured (not surprisingly as local elections are approaching), and calls for the expulsion of Mr Ngoro and the mayor ensued.

It is evident then that racialised tensions in the Western Cape persist and may even be on the increase. If these tensions are not properly

addressed, the proclaimed unity, non-racialism or reconciliation, already splitting at the seams, will be destroyed. But how do we make sense of the problems and how do we begin to address them?

The typical response has been to debate coloured identity. The underlying assumption is that there is something fundamentally wrong with this identity and that some ideological transformation of the bearers of the identity will resolve the problems. This type of response draws on the dominant discourse that has portrayed that identity as bureaucratically constructed and therefore deviant. The onus is then placed on coloureds to change. This is a limited response that forecloses debate on the identity, does not grapple with the larger context of identity constructions in South Africa, and does not adequately address the issues that generate conflict in the Western Cape.

We cannot have a meaningful discussion on coloured identity in isolation from other identities that shape its expression. When discussing the identity we need to take into account conceptual issues (Whom are we speaking about?), discursive issues (How has the identity been constructed? By whom? In which contexts?), and perceived power relations in South Africa.

I will not devote attention to whether this group qualifies to be classified as a separate ethnic group in South Africa. This question has detained many authors on the subject and they either essentialise the group through listing attributed cultural iconography or dismiss them for supposed lack of symbolic capital. My premise is that all groups are socially constructed and all groups are diverse. It seems meaningless and disingenuous to legitimate, or delegitimate, some groups on the basis of degrees of coherence, authors of the identity constructions and/or period of the construction. What is important is whether a sufficient number of people feel themselves to be distinct and/or are 'othered' by the dominant groups in a society. This is true of the coloureds in the Western Cape.

Who are the coloureds?

Coloureds are often identified as South Africans who are of mixed race. Since everyone is of

mixed race (as there is no such thing as a pure race), the identity is *ipso facto* meaningless (but then so are all other racial identities presumed on the basis of authenticity or purity). However, we do not dismiss these identities because they have social meaning and material consequences. Coloureds are descendants of the sexual liaisons between colonialists, slaves and the indigenous Khoisan. This 'mixing' took place centuries ago and state-enforced self-reproduction has largely been the means through which the group multiplied.

However, coloureds are not simply the offspring of inter-racial liaisons. And, conversely, children of 'mixed marriages' do not automatically lay claim to a coloured identity. This is a complex historically located identity that stems from the processes of slavery, genocide, rape and perceived miscegenation. The identity construction has been cloaked by the perceived shame of 'illegitimacy' and lack of authenticity that has to a large extent psychologically disempowered the bearers of the identity. For most of the history of this community, steeped in oppression and struggles for liberation, had been erased and/or silenced by successive regimes and the group members themselves.

An uncovering and re-representation of that history will locate the community as quintessentially a sub-group of a larger African identity and negate the sense of non-belonging that remains an undercurrent of the identity. This does not imply that they lose the specificities of their own identity: there are a multitude of ethnicities in the broader African identity. However, this reconstruction is not something that is entirely dependent on coloureds themselves. It requires all South Africans to change their perceptions and ways of interaction.

Identity construction is but one of the issues that lead to tensions in the Western Cape. Coloureds form a majority in the province. Apartheid's divide and rule tactics posited the Western Cape as a preferential area for coloured labour. This preferential policy was abolished in 1986. Since the 1980s there has been an exponential growth in the number of blacks in the province. It is currently estimated that 48,000 people, predominantly from the

Eastern Cape, enter the Western Cape each year. This has placed tremendous pressure on resources and increased competition for those resources. This is most evident in the areas of employment and housing. The Western Cape has an unemployment rate of 26 per cent and a backlog of housing in the range of 360,000 units.

For a long time the national policy of affirmative action was erroneously perceived by many coloureds to be part of the reason for their inability to find work. The collapse of the textile industry, the employment of contract workers in the farming areas, and the overall shift in South Africa away from reliance on manual labour to skilled labour account for the rapid increase in unemployment. The coloured working class has largely been unable to compete for the more skilled positions.

The provincial government responded to the housing crises by primarily delivering services to those they perceived as most in need of them, that is, people in the squatter camps that had spread along the highway. This generated tensions not only in the coloured communities who felt that their housing needs were not being

catered for, but also in the informal settlements where older Khayelitsha residents felt that preference was being given to the new arrivals. The cry of marginalisation from coloureds is therefore more acutely located among urban-based working-class communities. This is reflected in the voting patterns. Rural-based working-class coloureds vote predominantly for the ANC, while their counterparts in Cape Town vote for the New National Party or the Democratic Alliance in what can be interpreted as an anti-ANC vote.

In addressing the tensions that have emerged in the Western Cape, we need a more comprehensive approach that takes into account historical, psychological and material factors, and we need to unpack the ways in which current forms of service delivery and methods of transformation exacerbate the problems. There is an urgent need for social dialogue in the province. This dialogue must not focus, yet again, on the nature of coloured identity. It needs to speak to the broader issues of rights and belonging, and create consensus on the ways in which we will make the Western Cape a 'home for all'.