

CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN POSTAPARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA: A CASE OF HYBRIDITY VERSUS UNTAINTED AFRICANICITY?

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A postcolonial dilemma?

Ever since Charlize Theron's participation in a controversial anti-rape advertisement at the turn of the millennium (cf. Snyman 2000a) rape as a topic has been part of South African social discourse. When the police released their statistics in September 2004, they acknowledged their failure in combating this crime. However, the police commissioner suggested that rape statistics might be exaggerated because many rape victims withdraw their cases on Monday after laying charges on Friday or Saturday. Charlene Smith (2004), herself a victim of rape in 1999 and since then an anti-rape activist (cf. Snyman 2002a), reacted strongly in arguing that better treatment of rape survivors would give them the confidence to go through with their cases.

Smith's article elicited an explosive response from Pres. Thabo Mbeki (2004a:29), who condemned her for perpetuating a white image of black men as savages and rapists, citing an earlier article she wrote in *The Washington Post* of June 2000. He said the following: 'In simple language, she [Smith] was saying African traditions, indigenous religions and culture prescribe and institutionalise rape ... make every African man a potential rapist. Given this view, which defines the African people as barbaric savages, it should come as no surprise that she writes [in the above mentioned article] 'South Africa has the highest rates of rape in the world, according to Interpol.''¹

The implication in the rhetoric² is obvious: Smith's criticism of rape incidents in the country fell prey to her own racist inclinations. After all, what can one expect from her, she is white and her

¹ Mbeki cited three instances of racialised discourse: (a) In the June 2004 issue of SA Reconciliation Barometer, he refers to a study that said, *inter alia*, that race is commonly coded into everyday conversation, so that a 'hijacker' will frequently mean a young black male criminal in white suburbia. He alludes then to the mythology that whites are the primary targets merely because of their race, so that they can portray themselves as victims and the blacks as perpetrators. (b) An essay by a SA woman who emigrated to the USA, who describes her fear of crime as a daily reality of living in a wealthy 'white' suburb on the fringe of Cape Town, he describes as an outright lie. (c) From a US national in the Peace Corps, he cites the following: 'The psychological residue of apartheid has produced a psychosis among some of us such that, to this day, they do not believe that our non-racial democracy will survive and succeed. They dare not allow themselves to hope for the future, because they know that the pain of having it dashed, which they are convinced will happen, will be too great. So they look everywhere for evidence of decline... Crime in our country provides them with the most dramatic evidence of that decline... the proof that sooner or later things will fall apart.'

² A fairly balanced view on Mbeki's response was given by the editor of the *Mail and Guardian*, Ferial Haffajee (2004:26). She made the point that the country Mbeki governs, is an imagined country where everything is consensual, homogenous, safe, prosperous and settled. It is a dream. She says: 'The reality is devastatingly different, as any plain-speaking woman will tell him. Urban yuppies of all colours now include among their accessories teargas sprays and panic buttons. ... In the president's imagined country, both Aids and rape are minor vexations, which have been exaggerated by racists who think of black people as having uncontrollable sexual appetites. Instead of making and implementing policies which confront the reality, Mbeki obsesses that both play into colonial stereotypes of

participation in the antiapartheid struggle is not enough to redeem her from racism.³ But Smith was talking of South African culture in general. Mbeki narrowed it down to African culture and excluded her as the white colonial outsider. But what if she regards herself as part of African culture? Then she would be part of a culture in which rape is endemic. Or is she substituting biological traits with cultural behaviour, and thus masking her racist attack on African culture?

Twenty five years ago, in the heat of the antiapartheid struggle, Archbishop Desmond Tutu addressed a mass-meeting of white students at the University of Pretoria. In his address he explained his view of Liberation Theology within a context of black suffering amidst rampant white racism. If he wanted any chance to reach the students, he needed to prove Liberation Theology biblically, since these students' background was a peculiar Calvinism that needed to have everything related to the Bible. In a panel discussion after his paper, a former colleague of mine, J A Loader, asked him what about the Book of Joshua then, where the underdogs became the upper dogs, causing suffering to the Canaanites who would then have to become God's favourites because of their suffering. Says Loader (1987:10): 'So he answered that he did not need a white theologian's permission about how he may or may not use the Bible.'

Ten years after the advent of democracy in 1994, race and racism continue to dominate public discourse as twenty five years ago. It affects how people relate to each other as persons. But what are the chances to transcend racialised discourse if the African body remains a black body out there and the white body always already infused with racist ideology? Has this perception something to do with the way we see our identities, fixed and immutable?

Identity and the imposition of racialised identities after a liberation struggle against racism have real life consequences. For example, as a white male, how do I redeem myself from racism? Is it at all possible? Is there any hope of redemption when it is even suggested that racism permeates the philosophies one utilises in ones' thought structures (cf. Kelley 2002:3; Snyman 2004)? I experience an utter sense of entrapment and a severe depression in my inability to transcend race since each interaction over the colour line starts with the assumption of a white racist identity.

I agree with Pres. Mbeki (2004b) that to root out racism, one needs to understand the insidious and pervasive ways racism functions. To him, it means a willingness to re-examine what would be regarded as normal and everyday. But if racialised discourse is part of our inheritance of the western intellectual tradition, can *anyone* claim to be unaffected by it, especially given the influence of Western philosophy in our education system?

The aim of this paper is to provide some analysis of the current rhetorical exigency of racialised discourse within a continuous postapartheid identity debate. One should not discard the power the president exercises when he labels people as racists.⁴ He expresses a norm with which he materialises a particular body. Whether we like it or not, a racial label is attached to the body already

black sexuality. The sad thing is that the stereotype exists largely in his own mind.' And in this imagined country, anyone who dissents, receives an on-line skewering! Moreover, there is something quite paradoxical when apparatchiks of the former apartheid state are part of Mbeki's cabinet, while stalwarts of the struggle with a history of activism and solidarity, are hung out dry!

³ In the New York Times of 24 November 2004 Shadrack Gutto, the head of the Centre for African Renaissance Studies, is quoted as saying that whites could not claim to be free of racism today by virtue of antiapartheid activism a decade ago.

⁴ I am influenced here by Butler's book *Bodies that matter*. Performativity is one of the central themes of this book and she sets out to work out how a norm materialises a body. Although her work focusses on gender and not on race per se, I found the notion of performativity and materialising of a body instructive to understand racialised discourse.

at birth, and that label can be reiterated through citation, as I think happens in the Mbeki-Smith altercation. What the debate illustrates is how the reiteration of a norm eventually constitutes a particular identity that forces the subject in the end to constitute him or herself in those terms. In other words, if one keep saying long enough that a particular individual or group of persons is / are racist, he, she or they will act it. However, I doubt it that those who reiterate the norms follow a constructivist approach. To them, racism is an essential feature of being white. Hence my dilemma: I want to refuse Mbeki's label, but apartheid history does not allow me. Yet my genetic origins pose a typical postcolonial predicament of hybridity: one ancestor from Europe, the other from Asia, with offspring on a third continent! ⁵

Apartheid's 'imagined' identities and religion

To understand the biblical nature of apartheid 'Afrikaner'⁶ identity, it is important to take note of the influence of Calvinism and the subsequent Christian Nationalism of Abraham Kuyper of The Netherlands. Calvinism stressed that all authority came from God. Therefore, in state matters, God's ruling had to be followed. But where does one find what God wants? The Bible, which became central in the construction of 'Afrikaner' identity. The Bible became a text from which models for the ordering of society could be inferred. With such authority, who could have withstood Kuyper's interpretation of God's creation as a creation of diversity of races, colours, and cultures that should form the basis for a Christian-National order of society? Cultural and linguistic purity of the divinely created and mandated nation influenced Afrikaner theology and nationalism at the turn of the previous century (cf. Prior 1997:90-91).

Many young Afrikaans speaking men went to the Netherlands to study theology at Kuyper's Free University of Amsterdam. Most returned imbued with this kind of extreme nationalism. One such student was J.D. du Toit, better known as Totius, author, theologian, poet, Bible translator and composer of the Psalms in Afrikaans verse. He was perhaps too independent to be counted as a follower of Kuyper, but he is nevertheless judged as having received from Kuyper the idea that nationality and religion form a unity, so that the Bible received the final say on all the different spheres of life (cf. S. du Toit 1959?: 48). Kuyper's intellectual influence enabled him to provide his audience with principled guidance on all aspects of life, but especially politics and social order.

The biblical paradigm was employed extensively to the benefit of the nationalist identity of the 'Afrikaner'. In a spontaneous naive-realist reading of some Old Testament books, especially Deuteronomy, ancient Israelite customs and laws were read into the situation of the 'Afrikaner' of the 1930's and 1940's. It was a time Totius judged to be an exile that started with the Anglo-Boer war when the men (soldiers) were taken as prisoners of war to Ceylon, India and St. Helena and the

⁵ My own biological identity bears the fruits of colonialism which saw to it that a European identity merged with an Asian identity, procreating an offspring on a continent not belonging to either of them (cf. Snyman 2002b:8-9). The ancestral father is a Dutch-German soldier who had an affair with a slave sent to the Cape as punishment for killing her husband with a pitchfork in what was then known as Bengali. The father never saw the child and was first sent to Robben Island for his crime and then summarily deported back to Europe. The slave, Groot Katrijn, took care of the boy and became subsequently mother to a few other prominent Afrikaner families. The boy married into the French Huguenots and his offspring passed off for white ever since...

⁶ With the demise of apartheid, what used to be known as Afrikaner, disappeared from the scene. It is associated with racism, oppression and colonialism. People who used to be identified as Afrikaner, now rather refer to themselves as 'Afrikaanses', that is, people who share the language Afrikaans. It is an effort to shed the apartheid baggage and include all Afrikaans language speakers. Skin colour no longer functions as an identity marker; apparently language took over that role for the time being. However, in political discourse, as illustrated, skin colour as identity marker has still some explosive value.

women and children taken to concentration camps. After the war, a figurative exile continued, in the sense of a loss of an independent fatherland (1977:5-7). Moreover, this exile is due to what Totius perceived to be the seeking of salvation at other nations, so that the 'Afrikaner' had to deal with imperialism, liberalism, humanism, national-socialism and communism, ignoring in the end what the biblical-Calvinistic basis of being a people entails!

Joseph's independence was highly regarded. He refused to become an Egyptian. Before he died, he made his sons promise that they will bury him one day in the promised land (1977:279). In fact, Totius thought that his contemporary Jews were far from the example Joseph once set. They propagated the mixing of races, but Joseph withstood that kind of pressure! Joseph became for Totius the example that would set free the Afrikaner from poverty in the early 1930's, a time of depression and lack of resources. Totius longed for a Joseph *redivivus* in the likes of Hitler and Mussolini (1977:278).

The creation and maintenance of an 'Afrikaner' identity can best be seen in his paper at the *People's Congress on race policies* in 1944 (1977:330 ff.), where he employs the entire Scripture as proof of what would become apartheid. The creation stories depict God as the Great Separator, underscored by the story of the tower of Babel. Indeed, their refusal to disperse is contrasted with the Great Trek, when the Boers in the Cape colony decided to move away from British oppression (1977:332). Over against Colossians 3:11 Totius argues that the continued existence of the Greek, the Jew, the slave and the free person speaks against the idea of unity. Totius uses Paul's view on the role of women to justify separate development and inequality (1977:333). Although he despises slavery, Totius accepts a basic inequality or a particular subordination. Some rule, some are ruled. In his case, the Africans are ruled and under Christian guardianship. The God-given task of the 'Afrikaner' is to nurse or rear the African from its pupilage and subordination (1977:341).

Deuteronomy, especially the civil laws and the laws regarding the division of nations, plays an important part in his thinking. On the basis of Deuteronomy 22:9-11 he concurs that an interracial marriage is unnatural (1977:339). Moreover, he condemns Van der Kemp, one of the first missionaries in the Cape, for having had an African consort. In the same breath he honours the ancestral parents who refused to commit such immoral acts and thus prevented the 'Afrikaner' from sinking into the African swamps.

But obviously, Totius did not know his own history or the origins of what he admiringly call the 'Afrikaner'. His ideological interests made him imagined it to be pure. The origins of the latter is far from lily white and purely European. It is common knowledge that the slave Eve (of Khoisan descent) gave birth to at least eight of the now prominent families in what used to be known as 'Afrikaner'. The 'Afrikaner' has indeed African roots, or at least most of them.

The Bible and identity

An identity, be it personal or political, is a construction of the imagination. Identity is made, not ordained (Singh 1997:121). An identity does not signify ontological essences which are fixed and enduring. They are rather social constructions tied to a multiplicity of ideological interests and shaped by particular socio-political needs (Singh 1997:121).

Benedict Anderson (1983:15) sees the identity of a nation as a political community that is *imagined* as both *limited* and *sovereign*. It is imagined, because no one will ever know all the fellow members of a community that makes out the nation, yet in the minds of everyone lives an image of what binds them together. It is limited, simply because other nations lie beyond a particular nation's boundary. After all, no nation imagines itself as humankind. It is sovereign because any nation sees itself as

free from subordination by other nations. As a community, despite inequalities and exploitation, a nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.⁷

A nation is created in the historical and sociological imagination through identifications with communal heroes set in dramatised locations and times (Teer-Tomaselli 2001:126). It is an ideological enterprise that fails to conform to the canons of historiography and scientific method. It simply wants to retain the past and explain the lot of the community and prescribe remedies for its ills.

An example is Gerhard von Rad's search for Israel's identity in the theology he wrote of the Old Testament. Von Rad (1982 [1962]) draws a close link between the Old Testament and Israel's understanding of who she was. For example, he argues (1982:118-119) the following:

The singularly complex form with which the great historical groups of tradition (the Hexateuch and the Deuteronomistic history) have, is the result of Israel's thinking about herself, a process which was constantly operative in the history. Each generation was faced with the ever-identical yet ever-new task of understanding itself as Israel. In a certain sense, every generation has first to become Israel. Of course, as a rule the sons were able to recognise themselves in the picture handed on to them by the fathers. But still this did not exempt each generation from the task of comprehending itself in faith as the Israel of its own day, and from coming before Jahweh as this Israel. However, in this process of actualisation the tradition here and there had to be reshaped.

What happened, according to Von Rad's theory, is that elements were added and existing elements were reinterpreted on a continuous basis. The result is a tradition that is sometimes in contradiction with itself. The actualisation process suggests a development from a very basic tradition that received with each reception a particular interpretation. Thus, according to Von Rad (1982:121), one of the oldest traditions is one that connects the name of Israel's deity, Yahweh, to an act in history, namely *Yahweh who brought Israel out of Egypt*. Alongside these brief formulae, a few confessional summaries came into existence, covering an extensive span of divine action in Israel's history. To Von Rad, the most important one seems to be what he calls the *Credo* in Deuteronomy 26:5-9:

A wandering Aramean was my father; he went down with a few people into Egypt and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. But the Egyptians treated us harshly, they afflicted us, and laid hard toil upon us. Then we cried to Jahweh, the God of our fathers, and Jahweh heard us, and saw our affliction, our toil, and oppression. And Jahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders, and brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The credo Von Rad refers to, is perhaps not as ancient as he wanted it to be. It could very well have been an invention of the Deuteronomist. But what is important is his idea of actualisation as well as the contents of the credo presented as an identity. I am not sure what the influences were on Von Rad, but given Kelley's (2002) explanation of Von Rad's contemporaries in New Testament, he would have equally been exposed to the philosophy of Herder, Hegel, Kant, and probably Heidegger. If nationalism and German identity was very much on the agenda as Kelley thought it was, Von Rad would probably have followed the cue and looked for Israel's identity. Identity debates, after all, is part of modernity.

⁷ According to Anderson (1983:40) print-capitalism (especially newspapers) played an important role in this new search and construction of imagined identities. The newspaper, *par excellence*, created a community for whom on a single page marriage announcements, arrivals and departures of ships; prices of commodities, colonial political appointments would make sense (1983:62). Print-capitalism made it possible to narrate the nation and to imaginatively construct it.

The idea of identity presented in a credo was picked up in the USA by J. A. Sanders. He (1992:15) preferred to call it a *mythos* and linked it to the nature and function of canon. He regards a text like Deuteronomy 26:5-9 as an identity story based on basic elements that were common property of the people. He says (1992:17):

Whenever a history belongs to the people and has existential value for them, it, of necessity, becomes *legendum* in some sense. Therefore, what we observe in the OT is that Israel had a story of existential value for them communally, a historical *mythos* that took on a number of forms, and that functioned for the people in certain types of reflective situations.

According to Sanders, the primary authority of Israel's central tradition (which he labels as the escape from Egypt and the entrance into Canaan) resides in the power to answer two questions about self-understanding and life pattern: *Who am I? What are we to do?* Without revealing his own presuppositions, he claims that identity is a valid heuristical key to understand the Old Testament. In his view, the point is that Israel survived whereas others did not (Sanders 1992:18):

Survival is not a matter of living only, or breathing, or blood flowing through individual veins; for assimilation to another culture which has another and different identifying *mythos* is death as sure as slaughter is death. (What happened to the so-called northern ten tribes of Israel? They were assimilated into the dominant culture of eighth-century neo-Assyrian Empire. The majority lost their identity, though most of the individuals involved survived and had children.) So whether the whole of society lives, or only a remnant, a dynamic source of identity provision is absolutely necessary for that measure of continuity, within discontinuity, that can mean survival.

Survival is an important element to Sanders' view on canon. Canon gives life and survival in itself. According to him (1992:19) canon is canon not only because it survives, but because it can give its survival power to the community that recites it. It not only has survival qualities for itself, it shares those life-giving qualities with the community that finds identity in it. Sanders (1992:28-29) suggests the following scenario during the exile: A prisoner of war would not use the story of the formation of Israel as suggested by the Torah if it was not essential to his identity. Pondering the awful experience of destitution, with the cult and the palace destroyed, one faces the choice of whether one's identity as Israel should go on or be destroyed. According to Sanders, the old Torah story was vital in this death and resurrection experience of the exile. Those strands of tradition that really spoke to the people's existential problems of identity and life style became the core of the canon.

Sanders brought forward the idea of fluidity in identity in as much as canon is stable and adaptable. However, in the light of an apartheid construction of identity with the Bible as its basis, I am not sure about Sanders' claim of the canon's survival power or the life-giving qualities for the community that finds their identity in it.

Childs (1979:57) is highly critical of Sanders' existential categories which understand the growth of canon as a search for identity in times of crisis. He thinks the historical and theological forces that evoked the formation of the canon were of a very different order from an identity crisis. He finds it highly speculative as there is a total lack of information regarding the history of canonisation.

Since Childs made that remark, a lot of information about the Early Second Temple period came to light, and one of the tropes in that discussion, which led to a late dating of the Old Testament, is Israel's identity as an imagined identity.

At least, this is how I read Robert Carroll and Phillip Davies (cf. Snyman 2000b and 2003). To Carroll (1993:81) the Hebrew Bible is an ideological piece of literature of an imagined community produced in the Achaemenid or Graeco-Roman period. The function of the construction of an imagined community occupying an imagined past of which they are the inheritors, was to establish and to maintain political power of the ruling elite that was established within the Jewish community

during and after the exile. They created an identity, albeit fictive and functioning in a story world, that was able to address the needs of the people for whom the text was produced.

Davies (1992:87) is much more pronounced on the issue of Israel as an imagined community. He wants to know what motivated the authors of the biblical texts to create them or compiling a history that went back to creation, inventing a twelve tribe nation that escaped from Egypt, destroyed the inhabitants of Canaan, and ending up in exile from which they gloriously returned.

His main argument is that the Israel one encounters within the pages of the Old Testament is a reflection of a particular class consciousness of a small and elite class of an agrarian society. It is an Israel idealised by a literate class that created for themselves an identity continuous with the kingdoms that previously occupied the area of Yehud. There was, inevitably, some memory and archival material in that area, so that this group of people wrote into the history of that region an Israel that explained their own postexilic society and their rights and privileges within that society. Davies reckon with the possibility that those people the Hebrew Bible says returned to Jerusalem, were not necessarily Judaeon exiles and the beneficiaries of an enlightened policy of repatriation of wronged exiles. Under the policy of deliberate ruralisation, populations were deliberately transported within the empire to underdeveloped regions for imperial economic and political reasons (Davies 1992:78).

Davies sees the construction of a biblical Israel as the creation of an idealised Israel in Yehud where the scribal class of this new society created an identity for themselves in Palestine. They gave that identity a name: Israel.⁸ The society, in turn, transformed itself more and more into becoming the Israel of its own creation as they accepted more and more its presumed history, its constitution, beliefs and habits as its own. In effect, that displaced society, thus Davies (1992:89), started to incarnate that identity.

The idea of Israel as an imagined community denies any line of continuity between biblical Israel and either the current state of Israel or any community that seeks to link themselves through (Paul's idea of) Christ to the lineage of Abraham. Totius made the laws the lineage of Abraham was perceived to have received, directly applicable to his own people. However, his project rests upon a particular view of history and text, namely a correspondence theory where the report in the text corresponds exactly with the historical event itself. This kind of thinking, however, plays an important part in the legitimising process of the modern state of Israel in that a line of continuity between biblical Israel and modern Israel is sought to establish. In this setting, an argument for an imagined identity of Israel, mounts to sacrilege.

Albeit from different points of view, Sanders and Davies both illustrate the possibility of how the biblical texts once functioned as the end product of the construction of particular identities. The difference is that Sanders is perhaps more optimistic regarding the historical value of the stories told in the various biblical texts. Davies is much more sceptical and views the process in terms of myth in the making. Totius' construction of 'Afrikaner' identity illustrates the limits of employing biblical material in the service of ideological interests. His identity is more imagined than he realised. Obviously, Pres. Thabo Mbeki's upholding of racist white identity equally serves his

⁸ He regards the literature that eventually formed the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible as an effort that defined the origins and nature of a society that had been reintroduced in Jerusalem, the capital of a small impoverished province of the massive Persian Empire. This society comprised of people who resided there as well as people imported by the Persian Empire to bolster the economic chances of the region (cf. Snyman 2003:55). Davies (1992:82) does not see a link between the returnees and the new leaders in Yehud. He sees a group of strange people forcing themselves on the local inhabitants while they appropriate the local inhabitants' culture and history.

ideological interests, which entails silencing those dissenting voices he thinks may tarnish his project of the African Renaissance.

Construction of identity

To label someone a racist, I think, would establish an identity marker that functions on the level of personal identity. To label someone white, would be to iterate a norm that would relate to an ethnic identity. In Mbeki's iteration, personal and ethnic identity flowed together. Louise du Toit (1997:85) argues that personal identity is easily ignored when political claims are made in the name of ethnic identity. Personal identity is subsumed under ethnicity, an identity that is group based and relatively stable through time.

If one understands identity as performativity or play-acting within the limits set by significant Others as well as more remote Others (Butler 1993:13, Du Toit 1997:91), the question is whether Smith's claims boil down to a construction of identity that has to be limited by an iteration that imposes on her a racist identity. However, it looks as if preconceived ideas about whiteness caused Mbeki's remark, in the sense that culture determines certain behaviours. In this sense, identity is already constituted and certain acts are sanctioned by particular behaviour. In any case, that is what Mbeki sees in Smith's remarks, namely that African culture sanctions certain types of behaviour that underscores AIDS as a pandemic illness.

In my opinion, one identity marker is overridden by another one. The result is that the dominant culture is turned oppressive. Du Toit (1997:91) argues that the moment ethnicity is used to keep people in line or to serve the powers of the day, it loses legitimacy. People are then forced into submission by weighing them down with tales of a fixed past.

But one cannot understand Mbeki's stance without taking the apartheid past into consideration. Micah Hester (2004:73 ff.) argues that racial issues have to be taken seriously without treating them as either fundamental or necessary. He refers to the liberal and communitarian positions. The liberal position wants considerations taken from a racially motivated perspective to be shown to be either part of the universal human condition, or to be excluded from deliberations. The communitarian position emphasises the social aspects of what it means to be African American or Hispanic. We have here two opposing positions: The one argues that if the liberation struggle was against racism, why do the liberationists still employ race as a determinative category? The other argues that the culturally habitual character of the experience of race must be taken seriously, and the contingency of race must be recognised (cf Hester 2004:83).

Hester (2004:84) explains that contingency means that a person is what he or she is because of the historical and contextually, purposefully directed processes in which they find themselves and through which they operate. One can be someone else from what one is at the moment, but given the history, I am what I am now. Does this mean that I am a racist because of my imposed ethnic identity and subsequent privileging the system bestowed on me? Am I a racist because Western hermeneutics are deeply racist? Am I what I am because of the past? How do I construct a new identity if the past is continuously brought up and rubbed in? Is the only solution here to disappear from the public scene all together? Or is it a consciousness that needs to be cultivated in those interactions where race inevitably raises its head?⁹

⁹ Recently, the University of South Africa gave the former president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrande Aristide, the status of fellow researcher. His office is within the School of Religion and Theology on the main campus, on the top floor of the building. We were asked by the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities what we think about his appointment. The discussion more or less fell on racial lines: those critical of his presence were white and those supportive of his presence were black. But I cannot say the arguments raised was of racial nature, nor was Aristide's racial complexion

Ethnicity is fragile (Du Toit 1997:91). It is a powerful tool as it touches on the highly emotional issue of personal identity and its empowering nature. But it can easily be exposed by the naive like the emperor's nudity, because there is no pure identity. We are all cultural hybrids. Or as Amin Maalouf, from a French-Algerian background, suggests (2000:5), we have all complex identities: 'Every individual is a meeting ground for many different allegiances, and sometimes these loyalties conflict with one another and confront the person who harbours them with difficult choices.'

Maalouf (2000:26) refers to identities that kill. He says:

The expression doesn't strike me as inappropriate insofar as the idea I'm challenging - the notion that reduces identity to one single affiliation - encourages people to adopt an attitude that is partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers.

A murderous identity presses one to take sides and causes one not to maintain multiple allegiances any longer (2000:6).

However, personal identity becomes political. It is dependent on social recognition in as much a position can only be taken if and when the 'Other' allows it (Du Toit 1997:88). Moreover, a particular kind of negotiation of meaning is assumed. The degree of interaction between a self and an Other determines the level of creative participation in the identity formation process. Identities are established in and through interactive processes that involve the perceptions, aspirations and responses of other individuals and social groupings (Singh 1997:121). Identity construction is dialogical in nature: identity is constructed in dialogue with an Other or even in a struggle against that Other.

In this regard, it is not a negotiation between equals. One will have more power than the other, so that an identity can be overridden. Then the degree of choice involved for ordinary group members in complying with a certain image or identity will be severely limited, despite the fact that identity is complex and multifaceted.¹⁰ In a context of mobilisation, one marker of identity becomes highlighted as the only objectively significant marker of commonality or difference. In this instance, one needs to reckon with strong feelings of solidarity and animosity around claims to resources, opportunities and recognition of worth (cf. Singh 1997:121). This is certainly true for the AIDS debate in South Africa since Mbeki became president. His unorthodox views on HIV / AIDS has been a bone of contention and generates a lot of heated debates.

Postcolonial contradictions

Comaroff (2001:46) has drawn the attention to the contradiction of the colonial state, which I think, contributes to the continuing contradictory signs sent out by the current post colonial postapartheid government in the identity construction by its president.

The colonial state was able to create equality and inequality simultaneously. It could protect as well as criminalise at the same time. It yielded two counter-discourses of human rights and of modernity. On the one hand there is the liberal ethos of universal human rights, free and autonomous citizenship and individual entitlement. On the other hand there is an assertion of group rights, ethnic solidarity and primordial cultural connection. At the same time colonial rule spoke of transforming

an issue! The concerns were safety and academic in nature. The support expressed reminded one of a brotherhood sticking together. The decision to host him was political and the discussion revealed a racial division. Do we have here an example of communitarians versus eliminativists?

¹⁰ Says Singh (1997:121): 'Human beings are not reducible in their identity to the language they speak or to the cultural ascription's that they inherit or to the territory that they inhabit.'

the colonised people into civilised, free, right-bearing citizens, it naturalised ethnic difference and essentialised racial inequality.

In practice, it meant to be categorised as antimodern, governed by their own customs and rules, while at the same time, those with the power to categorise (the colonial ruler), will criminalise some cultural practices (Comaroff 2001:50). On the one hand, the colonised were said to be on the high road to civilisation and citizenship, prosperity and propertied individualism. On the other hand, they were portrayed as anonymous antimoderns, condemned to live in the primal mire of ancient customs (2001:51). It is as if colonialism denied the colonised the self-Other dynamics, so that the otherness of the colonised became colonised and appropriated by the coloniser (cf. Fuss 2000:1104). The coloniser is seen as monopolising otherness to secure an illusion of unfettered access to subjectivity whereas the colonised is disenfranchised of his or her subjectivity.

There is a double command from the coloniser: be like me, don't be like me (Fuss 2000:1107).¹¹ Thus, when in terms of identity politics the claim is made that identity is constructed in the midst of other people, one should be aware that one of these other people could be the one with the political power and thus having exclusive property of subjectivity: 'The colonized are constrained to impersonate the image the colonizer offers them of themselves; they are commanded to imitate the colonizer's version of their essential difference.' Is there any use of mimesis if mimesis is a tool of cultural and political dispossession?

In terms of a political or national identity, I experience a similar situation in South Africa at the moment, in as much as two counter discourses are continuously offered. On the one hand, there is the drive to forge a new South African nation, but on the other hand, race keeps on cropping up as a dividing factor.¹²

I think Hester makes an important observation in juxtaposing the liberal position's eliminativist stance and the contingency of racism. Hardt and Negri (2001:190 ff.), though, give a more disturbing picture that can be linked to the eliminativist stance. They argue that antiracism, which positions itself against the notion of biological essentialism and which operates on the belief of social constructivism, is attacked from the rear by what they call imperial¹³ racist theory and what Balibar (1991:21) calls differentialist racism or neo-racism.

Imperial racist theory is a racism without races. It is a theory built on the insurmountability of cultural differences. It does not postulate the superiority of certain groups, but foregrounds the

¹¹ Mbembe (2000:145) calls it an identity *concocted* for the colonised. It is an identity that allowed the African, for example, to move in the kind of spaces where he or she was always being ordered around. It is a space where he or she had unconditionally to put on a show of submissiveness.

¹² During a recent visit to Sudan Pres. Mbeki noted that the two countries both had to work amid the dynamics of diversity, filled with tensions and antagonisms. He said that although South Africa did not experience the violence Sudan is experiencing, there is perhaps what can be described as a cold rather than a hot war conducted by those who are unwilling to accept the end of white minority rule.

¹³ Empire refers to the rapid moving across borders with ease of money, technology, people and goods, with the nation-states becoming more and more impotent to regulate this moving of primary factors of production. The new empire does not refer to the modern state, but rather a new kind of sovereignty, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule (Hardt and Negri 2001:xii), i.e. the multinational corporation.

harmfulness of abolishing frontiers (Balibar 1991:21).¹⁴ Biological racism is rejected, and culture is made to fill the role that biology played. Antiracism is attacked from the rear in that behaviour and aptitudes are described in terms of historical cultures. Anthropological culturalism that once provided the antiracism theorists with their arguments, is taken on its word (Balibar 1991:22), so that culture is set to function like nature. The consequence is the following: if insurmountable cultural difference is the natural context, the abolition of differences will lead to defensive reactions, such as interethnic conflict. It is a natural reaction. In Balibar's mind (1991:22), this line of reasoning allows differentialist racism to explain racism and to ward it off. Racist conduct becomes naturalised.

In other words, differences are contingent effects of social history. Hardt and Negri (2001:192) says:

Imperial racist theory and modern anti-racist theory are really saying very much the same thing, and it is difficult in this regard to tell them apart. In fact, it is precisely because this relativist and culturalist argument is assumed to be necessarily anti-racist that the dominant ideology of our entire society can appear to be against racism, and that imperial racist theory can appear not to be racist at all.

To Hardt and Negri, imperial racist theory is a theory of segregation, not a theory of hierarchy. Racial hierarchy is an effect of social circumstances and an effect of cultures. Racial supremacy and subordination arise through free competition, a market meritocracy of culture (2001:193). Imperial racism, as differential racism, integrates others with its order and then orchestrates those differences in a system of control (2001:195).

Hybridity or untainted Africanicity?

A postmodern world view and a postcolonial critique have not liberated us from racism. It seems to have re-entered discourse through the backdoor. Postmodernity's challenge of the fixed boundaries set by modernism and the postcolonial consciousness of hybridity to counter colonial essentializing binary positions, are regarded by Hardt and Negri (2001:216) as an empty gesture risking to reinforce the power of empire.

Wan (2000:120) is suspicious of any (postmodern) theory that confines a hybrid identity to a perpetual state of marginality, preventing one to participate in the broader discourse where authority, legitimacy and recognition reside. He is also suspicious of a theory that abolishes the subject the moment that subject constitutes itself as an empowered subject. Within the African Renaissance project of Mbeki, or Nepad, this could very well be the reason for his reaction. Africa is constituting

¹⁴ Balibar (1991:17) defines racism as follows: 'Racism - a true, 'total social phenomenon' - inscribes itself in practices (forms of violence, contempt, intolerance, humiliation and exploitation), in discourses and representations which are so many intellectual elaborations of the phantasm of prophylaxis or segregation (the need to purify the social body, to preserve 'one's own' or 'our' identity from all forms of mixing, interbreeding or invasion) and which are articulated around stigmata of otherness (name, skin colour, religious practices). It therefore organizes affects (the psychological study of these has concentrated upon describing their obsessive character and also their 'irrational' ambivalence) by conferring upon them a stereotyped form, as regards both their 'objects' and their 'subjects'. It is this combination of practices, discourses and representations in a network of affective stereotypes which enables us to give an account of the formation of a racist community (or a community of racists, among whom there exists bonds of 'imitation' over a distance) and also of the way in which, as a mirror image, individuals and collectivities that are prey to racism (its 'objects') find themselves constrained to see themselves as a community.' Balibar (1991:18) postulates that the destruction of the racist complex presupposes the revolt of victims as well as the transformation of racists and the decomposition of the community created by racism, a process similar to the revolt of women and the break-up of the community of males.

herself now as an empowered subject, and criticism is regarded as disempowering this newly empowered subject.

But Wan (2000:110) also draws attention to the hybrid nature of colonial identity. The colonised were expected to be at two places at once: that of the dominant culture as well as that of the dominated culture. But the same applied to the coloniser who did the dirty work for the colonial metropole, only to have his or her offspring denied citizenship of that metropole. Membership of what Anderson (1983:52) calls 'creole communities', disqualified the offspring of the colonisers to claim, for example, English or Spanish identity, yet they became visible social groups within the colonies.¹⁵ The colonizer too experienced hybridity. According to Wan, then, hybridity is a common condition shared by both the coloniser and the colonised. Thus, it can provide a kind of common ground for a universal discourse between the two groups.

Wan (2000:111) warns against nativism where the unconditional affirmation of a particular culture merely reinstates the prejudices embodied in the unconditional affirmation of the previously colonising culture. His wish is to get 'beyond vengeful sorrows and lamentations over our colonial histories, necessary and therapeutic as they have been in our coming to terms with our colonial past and present postcolonial identities, and toward entering a new forum of equality in which we participate as confident dialogic partners.'

In Mbeki's imagined South Africa, 'White' culture is not worth being an equal dialogic partner. Whiteness remains very much what Wallerstein (1991:189) calls 'a status-group category' that resembles the existing international social structure of a bureaucratic class in the world economic system. For this reason, perhaps, Africanicity includes the Arab nations in Africa, but still excludes white settlers on the continent.

But, says Parry (2000:715), the process that demystifies the binary oppositions as rhetorical devices may not be enough (my italics - GS):

[A] reverse discourse replicating and therefore reinstalling the linguistic polarities devised by a dominant centre to exclude and act against the categorized, does not liberate the 'other' from a colonized condition where heterogeneity is repressed in the monolithic figures and stereotypes of colonialist representation, and into a free state of polymorphous native 'difference'. To dismantle colonialist knowledge and displace the received narrative of colonialism's moment written by ruling-class historiography and perpetuated by the nationalist version, the *founding concepts of the problematic* must be refused.

The founding concepts seem to be to relate identity to fixed immutable features overagainst the possibility to regard identity as open-ended, fluid and constantly in the process of being constructed. The result is inevitably a fragmented and context-dependent identity over-against an identity that was imposed from above in making race and ethnicity the sole markers of identity. An essentialised identity is an impoverished identity (Zegeye 2001:3). But one should bear in mind that a changed political hierarchy in favour of the previously disadvantaged groups in 1994 did not mean that a consciousness of socially constructed difference in terms of race has disappeared (Zegeye 2001:14).

Conclusion

¹⁵ They were a menace to colonial power, yet crucial, says Anderson (1983:60): 'They were to be economically subjected and exploited, but they were also essential to the stability of the empire. One can see, in this light, a certain parallelism between the position of the creole magnates and feudal barons, crucial to the sovereign's power, but also a menace to it. Thus the *peninsulares* dispatched as viceroys and bishops served the same functions as did the *homines novi* of the proto-absolutist bureaucracies [...] fully dependent on his [sic] metropolitan master.'

It is not without irony that identity is again a topic in South African political discourse. At the height of apartheid in the 1970's and 1980's, various 'Afrikaner' organisations discussed the possible markers for that identity. Then, race was employed as an ethnic marker that exclude others. Now it continues to be an ethnic identity marker, only it is used to exclude those who excluded others! Afrikaner identity cannot be separated from Calvinist Christianity. Identity became closely associated with and directly related to the identity of Israel. That the identity of Israel within the pages of the Old Testament was an imagined one, would have been a sacrilegious thought in those days, as the bible was believed to be historically true.

Remarkably, and probably due to the influence of modernity's idea of a nation-state, some Old Testament scholars read the text as evidence to a particular identity of Israel. The canon was believed to provide indications of identity and life style of the ongoing community who read the stories. Scholars known for their critical appraisal of the Old Testament as an ideological text, continue to see the text in terms of identity construction. Only, for them the construction took place quite late.

The Bible as an ideological text illustrates the imagined character of the construction of identity. As apartheid history has shown, it is not a useful tool with which to construct an identity. I think an indisputable outcome of the demise of apartheid was the revelation of the modernist cloak behind the association of Calvinist Christianity with political identity. Ironically, stripped from religion's essentialist connotations, the current identity discourse stimulates rather than abates racial categories.

Pres. Thabo Mbeki's views on rape and HIV / AIDS show how our identities are still shaped by race. Under colonialism, race was constructed as an essence, a natural phenomenon whose meaning is prior and beyond the reach of human intervention. Mbeki regards Smith's reference as an implied reference to innate violence within Africa. Could it be that racism is entering at the back door by way of an implied differential racist point of view when certain kinds of behaviour are linked to a specific culture? I am not sure that there is in Smith's arguments a direct line between behaviour and culture as if it is natural. In other words, culture takes the place of biology, so that behaviour is determined by cultural contexts.

Rather, she argues that there are certain cultural practices that makes women vulnerable to rape and thus being infected with the HI virus. I tend to see in her arguments not a racist motif, but rather an element of redemption in that new cultural identities need to be constructed as the current ones oppress women. Is it racist to identify sexual practices that oppresses women? Would it be racist if those practices are linked to particular ethnicities? It would be if Smith uses these practices to preserve her own 'white' identity. But she is far from doing this. Her concern is the broader South African culture of which she is part and not the narrow African culture Mbeki sees. Her concern is the empowering of women who suffers under oppressive cultural norms.

Pres. Mbeki's reaction to Smith reveals his own essentialist bias. Her whiteness excludes her from being part of the African community. She remains part of a special-status group who is perceived to hold the current economic power. That she may have constructed for herself a hybrid identity, which I think is a prerequisite to have been part of the antiapartheid struggle, is not taken into consideration.

As long as the frame of reference remains essences, we will continue to be embedded in a racialised hierarchy where whiteness now constitutes the evil other of the colonial past. There does not seem to be a space for a hybrid identity. In fact, some might deem it politically expedient to accept such an identity. The hybrid should not be romanticised or idealised. Hybrid identities are the historical

outcome of a colonial expansion that trampled indigenous cultures and degraded them to nothingness.

A racialised discourse like this creates within my own postcolonial sensitivities an extreme discomfort and estrangement. I am forced to recognise the consequences of a racial identity that have overridden other identities. In that process, I experience a defamiliarisation of my own identity, which is not as lily-white as it was believed. I am also faced with the historical fact that the past privileged my imposed identity. In the process of forging a new identity, a hybrid identity offers fluidity and openness.

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