

# Can Africans show un-African behaviour?

Is a single black identity possible? **Mcebisi Ndletyana** argues that African identities in the new South Africa are diversifying but that this is not a new thing, multiple cultural identities have always existed.

**A**frican-ness is back in vogue as a popular, if not contentious, subject of debate within South Africa's black community. This stems from increasing cultural differentiation and diverse lifestyles among Africans. Formerly tied together by forced residence in the same location and pressured to conform to certain cultural norms, now this community no longer constitutes a cohesive unit. It is increasingly splintering along class lines and inequality is becoming even more pronounced. As a result, Africans inhabit different social spaces, outside of traditionally African neighbourhoods, which are largely based on income status. These new social spaces are less of cultural communities, affording the middle-class space and independence for individualistic expression and/or determination of social norms.

Thus it is not uncommon for the African middle-class, as the cultural critic and author Sandile Memela often does, to be denounced 'un-African' for indulging in practices that were not associated with Africans, but is a natural expression of social status. This ranges from the phenomenon of 'excessive' use of the English language by African children of middle-class backgrounds due to private

schooling and/or residence in racially-mixed and predominantly English speaking neighbourhoods; to the visible ostentatious display or accumulation of material belongings.

This new phenomenon and the resulting discourse, begs the following questions: Does the emerging cultural and social trends among the growing African middle-class negate their black identity? Do they cease being authentically black because they do not conform to the dominant norms and practice within the African community?

The idea of blackness has never been based on cultural similarity or conformity. There were never homogenous cultural norms to which all black people ascribed. Rather than one homogenous identity, black cultural identity is a continuum that has always allowed for degrees of variation, to a point of multiple cultural identities. Attempts at 'purifying' black identity are reminiscent of colonial machinations in pursuit of political hegemony. But it was resisted by African nationalism, which persisted to affirm a universal orientation of black identity.

## EARLY IDEA OF BLACK IDENTITY

The very first conception of

African identity in pre-unified South Africa was multi-dimensional. It rested on both cultural and political content, without one being privileged over the other. Their sequence of articulation, however, differed. Political consciousness preceded cultural affirmation. This is because the evolution of a black consciousness was not triggered by a spontaneous yearning to discover the true and authentic cultural-self, but stemmed out of a political betrayal. A failure of the civilizing mission to honour its promise of giving full citizenship to the civilized black people.

The writings of Reverend Tiyo Soga was the first exposition of African identity, making him, according to his biographer, Donovan Williams, the founding-father of black consciousness. Born in the Cape colony in 1829 and with a theology degree from Glasgow University, Soga was the first African missionary in South Africa.

True to the versatility of the missionaries of the time, Soga's preoccupation went beyond conversion to public intellectualism particularly through writings in newspapers on topical issues of the day.

Soga had been a beneficiary of

the missionary enterprise. He not only imbibed the civilising message from early on in life, but was also a true believer in the virtues of civilization. So strong were his belief in Western civilization that Soga refused to become part of military resistance during the frontier wars. Soga was convinced that civilization would offer 'natives' reprieve from colonial servitude, because as civilized people, they would be extended the rights and respects that went with that social status.

Ultimately, though, Tiyo Soga personified the paradox of the civilizing mission that sought to create citizens out of the natives with the promise of citizenship. But once it had created that citizen, it reneged on its promise. The officialdom persisted to treat the new citizen as a mere native, a subject of colonial rule by decree. Despite his civilized status, Soga was subjected to a series of humiliating experiences, quite contrary to what he had been promised or expected as a civilized man. One of many indignities he suffered included being stopped by policemen demanding a pass. When Soga told them that he was exempt from carrying one because of his status, they led him to prison where they interrogated him on why he, a native, didn't carry a pass.

Such moments of colonial betrayal, in turn, prompted a rupture with the civilizing message. It was a rupture that was followed by the development of a black consciousness articulation of a black identity. That black identity was a political one, not one that simply touted the virtues of African culture nor sought to preserve its purity in the face of colonial



influence. Soga couldn't have spoken in defense of cultural purity, because he was a construct of the missionary enterprise - the very first and finest product of the civilizing mission, with a white Scottish wife to boot.

But the snubbed Soga, no longer accepted the dichotomy of white-superiority and black inferiority uncritically. He questioned the cultural assumptions that underpinned white supremacy. Rather, than simply accept the virtues of whiteness, on the one hand, and accede to the supposed vices of blackness, on the other, Soga held them both to the same level of scrutiny. He asserted, for instance, that such criminal practices as cattle-thievery among natives were just as morally deplorable as "the refined thieving of forgery, embezzlement, and voluntary insolvency" common

among whites.

Soga's exposition of black consciousness came out forcefully in a booklet titled: *The Inheritance of my Children*, which he wrote around 1870 for his three sons as they left for Scotland. He was very ill and knew death was near. Because he could not care for them, he sent his sons to Scotland to be cared for by colleagues and family. The booklet contained what he thought were crucial lessons they had to learn about life. The content of the book was a rendition of political identity, which entailed an affirmation of racial equality based on equal potential; a call for racial pride; and the importance of solidarity and unity in advancing the cause of the oppressed African population.

Seeking to instill pride in their blackness, Soga counselled his children to regard themselves as

blacks, for this will "... show that you care not for the slight put by the prejudices of men upon one class of men, who happen to differ from them in complexion". In any case, Soga went on to elaborate on the equality of races, "Under favourable circumstances the reasoning of the Black man is capable of as much improvement and enlightenment as that of the white man... God has made from creation no race of men mentally and morally superior to other races. They are all equal in these respects; but education, civilization and the blessings of Christianity have made the differences among men."

In the face of racial discrimination, however, solidarity and unity were key to the upliftment of the oppressed Africans, "As men of colour, live for the elevation of your degraded, despised, down-trodden people. My advice to all coloured people would be: Assist one another, patronize talent in one another, prefer one another's business, shops, etc. just for the reason that it is better to prefer and elevate kindred and countrymen before all others... Should providence make you prosperous in life, cultivate the habit of employing more of your own race, than of any other, by way of elevating them. For this purpose prefer them to all others - I mean all black people... Union in every good thing is strength; and to a weak party or race, union above all things is strength. Disseminate this idea among your countrymen, should you have any influence with them."

In Tiyo Soga, therefore we see

the first articulation, early in the 1860s, of what later crystallized into African nationalism/black consciousness. It was a political programme that called for unity among all oppressed black people, to mobilise their resources and utilise them for the benefit of their collective lot.



On African culture, though, Soga was less lucid and somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, he submitted to chieftaincy and was complementary of some African cultural values. For instance, Soga thought very highly of chiefs as "Specimens of Nature's own nobility...". This was quite unusual for a missionary, for missionary orthodoxy denounced chiefs as guardians of paganism that had to be nullified in order to advance Christianity within the indigenous

population. Nor did Soga share the missionary prejudice against the values of their intended recruits: "the student of human nature can reap a splendid harvest in the study of their history, prejudices, habits, and customs... he will find much to show that there is some good in all men; that God is the

common Father of all, and therefore that no race should be despised". On the other hand, Soga denounced other African cultural practices as pagan, especially lobola and the circumcision ritual. Soga himself was not circumcised and steadfastly opposed this ritual throughout his missionary life.

Soga's ambivalence towards African culture was a manifestation of a broader cultural schism within the African community in the Cape. The locals had responded differently to the colonial influence: some embraced it, whilst others rejected it. The anthropologist, Phillip Mayer, captured this cultural divide in his depiction of

Red Xhosa and School Xhosa. Red, meaning Bomvu, referred to the illiterate segment of the community and was a description of how they looked - red from ochre. The School Xhosa referred to the literate section of the community who considered themselves enlightened, but Red Xhosas referred to them disparagingly as Amagqoboko, which meant they were traitors -- they had a hole through which settlers infiltrated into Xhosa society.

### COLONIAL 'PURIFICATION' OF AFRICAN IDENTITY

African identity, therefore, had a dual orientation: political and cultural. And the cultural component had multiple forms. It was the colonial machination that actually set African identity. This was a function of the shift in colonial policy from assimilation to segregation particularly after the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. After demarcating South African territory along racial lines in 1913, the colonial administration left it to its intellectuals, cultural anthropologists in particular, to come up with an elaborate cultural theory to justify segregation.

Colonial academy, in pursuit of segregation, reduced black identity to its cultural elements, most of which were their own concoction, but nonetheless bestowed the mantle of authenticity. The objective was not to restore Africans to their natural self, but to realise a political goal which was to impose and maintain white supremacy over a larger black population. The question of how to control natives, also known as the Native Problem, had preoccupied settlers from the moment of their arrival. Officialdom offered a range of solutions beginning with annihilation, which almost wiped out the entire Khoisan population, then it was assimilation of the natives and finally segregation.

The academic foundation for segregation was customary law. It claimed to have codified what had hitherto been an unofficial set of norms and values and guided public conduct and governance among Africans. The 1927 Native Administration Act sought to define the indigenous population as

subjects to rule over arbitrarily, not citizens with rights. It decreed that all Africans were tribes-people, whose natural habitat was a village under the rule of a chief. It did not matter how sophisticated or urban the person was. If for some strange reason, according to colonial logic, a group of Africans happened to be tribe-less, the Native Commissioner could constitute them into a tribe, find them a village and assign them a chief. Ordinary people, without any association or linkage to chieftaincy, were made chiefs on the say so of anthropologists, who claimed to have uncovered traces of royalty in lineage.

### AFRICAN NATIONALISM: UNIVERSAL AFRICAN IDENTITY

If colonial establishment set black identity, 20th century African nationalists, maintained its universal and political content. They reaffirmed what Tiyo Soga said back in the 1860s. They defined African-ness on the basis of residence, history and experience. Africans are Africans because they occupy the continent of Africa, not because they were made up of various ethnicities. They share a common experience of colonial oppression on the basis of their race, and have created a common history of colonial resistance.

As for the distinctiveness of the African experience, such as ethnicities, chieftaincy and ancestral worship, the nationalists did not wish to preserve them in the interest of African purity. Rather, they wanted the various tribes to fuse into one nation. They referred to chieftaincy to accentuate its democratic practices and to illustrate that Africans were also familiar with democracy and so to strengthen their case for

citizenship. Christian morality had to precede ancestral worship. Overall they sought a fusion of the best cultural elements in the two cultures, Western and African – a hybrid culture.

The cultural fusion is what Steve Biko, in the 1970s, called 'joint culture'. It was made up of the best of the two cultural worlds. Biko spoke of African culture being specific, but did not see it as unchanging. It was not frozen in time and incapable of adapting to social changes. Biko's definition of a black identity was predominantly political, defining it in relation to political power, experience and history. For that reason, it was a trans-racial definition encompassing all oppressed groupings – African, Indian and coloured.

### CONCLUSION

The current clamour for return to a purified African identity is misleading and lacks factual foundations. There has never been a homogenous black identity. It has always been contested, hence the rise of multiple cultural identities as far back as the 19th century. The existing cultural variation within the African community is simply a continuation, not a betrayal, of what has always been. To insist on a return to pure cultural tradition is reminiscent of colonial/apartheid scholarship that sought to justify segregation and thus makes its proponents native controllers.

*All Soga quotes from Chalmers, A, J (1878) "Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Missionary Work". Mcebisi Ndletyana (PhD) is a senior research specialist: Society, Culture and Identity Research Programme at the Human Sciences Research Council.*