

# What else

## was at stake in the Zuma rape trial?

The Jacob Zuma rape trial raised a host of important questions. **Irma Du Plessis** looks at the aspect of ethnicity and argues that we ridicule this at our peril.

It can be said that the Jacob Zuma rape trial hastened a moral panic and a social crisis that has been in the making for a long time. Answers to questions about presidential succession, the locus of power in the ANC, the status of the tripartite alliance, and the form and future of our nation all seemed to be pinned on the outcome of the trial.

These are important questions. But despite their importance, the rape trial and its outcome could not possibly provide answers to all these questions. So why is it that this case seemed to tell us something about the future of our nation?

For one, the trial was like a TV soap opera. Like *Isidingo*, it was screened regularly on TV. It was also widely broadcast on radio and covered in depth in the print media. It had a central story line, that of a senior politician accused of raping a family friend, and a number of strong characters. In other words, it was a play on a national stage. The audience represented a broad range cutting across class, race, gender and other social categories. The trial was a show that everyone had seen.

Since the entire citizenry knew about the trial and had some opinion on it, it was easy for social

commentators to use it as a way of talking about broader social issues. In other words, the trial became a metaphor for the nation. As a result, it created an unusual opportunity for public and practical intellectuals, of a variety of persuasions, to speak out in public about the state of the nation in order to influence immediate politics. Not unlike the case of Bush and the Iraq war, now was the time for South Africa's intellectuals to speak out and change history.

As a result, we saw frank, exciting and vibrant public debate in the country. From the gravity of the crisis, beyond the important personal tragedies and injustices suffered, was born a new sense of political engagement and energy. It became a moment for advocacy, strategy, and intervention.

But taking part in the debate in public fora required a form of partisanship. Again, not unlike a play or TV soapie, stories work best when there is a hero and a villain and when opinion is divided on who the villain is and who the hero is. Facing up to the possibility that Zuma may be in power, many intellectuals who oppose Zuma as president, seemed to have considered what strategy they should adopt to help shape the political outcome of this drama.

I think this proved to be a risky enterprise indeed. In the long run, it may lock us into a dangerous false opposition. I am referring here to a debate that flared up during the Zuma trial which concerns an apparent tradition/modernity divide.

Simply put, I'm talking about the dominant account of Zuma's so-called backwardness. The contents of this account are a well-known mix: Zuma is a polygamist, a loose cannon, he didn't finish school, he is a sexist, if not a rapist, he is avowedly patriarchal, he is charismatic. He is also ignorant or plain stupid. He appeals to deep rural sensibilities, he is superstitious, he is someone who dares to speak Zulu in public. He flaunts Zuluness and he is not afraid to play the ethnic card.

This figure is contrasted with the sophisticated, market-savvy, British-trained, urbane, worldly and cosmopolitan leader found in Thabo Mbeki. Framing this analysis is a question about the presidency: what kind of person should become the next president of the ANC and the country?

Backward or sophisticated? What future do we choose? But this public debate does not take place in neutral times. This vibrant discussion is possible precisely

because Zuma was on trial. The commentators are not simply talking about the future of the nation, but are invested in a specific political outcome. Hence, the debate about tradition and modernity is a judgement that provides part of the answer as it states the question: Zuma it cannot be!

The danger is that this debate, with its focus in the immediate present, emphasises ideas of Culture, Tradition and Ethnicity, making the use of these concepts suspicious. As a result, talking about the place of culture and tradition is seen as taking a strong position. The figures of Zuma and Mbeki, each with their own histories, characteristics and flaws, are presented as two options for the nation-in-the-making. Tradition or modernity? We are safest, the debate seems to suggest, if culture, ethnicity, language, and tradition are kept in Pandora's Box.

This kind of thinking does not differentiate between softer and harder practices of tradition and culture. It does not recognise that many of the characteristics pinned to Zuma and his supporters are in fact far more widely shared across class and social position in the country. It does not acknowledge that ordinary South Africans want to recognise themselves in the state. And it does not recognise that more than a decade after democracy there must be a space for speaking languages other than English



without that amounting to playing up ethnicity, buying into victimhood or demonstrating anti-modern sentiments. Yes, Zuma was making a statement in his choice to speak Zulu during the trial. But he could make this statement only because he did so in conditions that made speaking Zulu in public a public statement!

The tradition/modernity divide shifts the debate away from issues critical to our political future. It leaves little room for important discussions about culture, ethnicity, and tradition and their role in our society. A key question is how have the ANC, the state and civil society institutions produced the conditions that made it possible for Zuma to play the ethnic card, to claim tradition in his name?

I am neither an apologist for Zuma nor a proponent of Zulu or for that matter, Afrikaner ethnic projects. But in opposing nativism and a return of political mobilisation around ethnicity, I am worried that we might be embracing a thin cosmopolitanism. That is, a kind of cosmopolitanism that is stripped of local content, a city-centeredness that does not

engage, reflect or represent the everyday cultural practices of our citizens. That is, a kind of cosmopolitanism that fails to see culture and tradition as resources that can be used. It marks a failure to understand that citizens want to recognise themselves in the state and in the world they inhabit.

Indeed, the strong affirmation of ethnicity is a spectre that haunts us. But the Zuma trial has produced a false opposition: A choice between modernity and tradition, between being cosmopolitan or a country bumpkin. It is a false opposition in terms of the choices we have for president and the kinds of debates we need to mend the social fabric and produce a society that is both outward-looking and locally grounded. Beyond the current struggles against inequality there are other social issues that we need to talk about and face up to. That is, if we don't want Culture, Tradition, and Ethnicity - with capitals - to bite us in the back. It surely has done so before...

LB

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