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**The Future of Multiculturalism**  
**Is there a future for Coloured Identity in SA?**  
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Can SA have a future without coloured people?

So many academic papers and treatises have been written about coloured identity that I am not going to revisit the usual arguments set forth when this topic is addressed. Not least because it was the label that determined my entire life under apartheid, but also because it still follows me wherever I go. 1994 did nothing to save me from this classification and today I feel quite ambivalent talking about colouredness. Despite my misgivings, it is a notion that is central to a truly multicultural society. Scholarship on coloured identity includes a broad range of perspectives, which I shall mention but not go into:

1. Colouredness as a by-product of biological miscegenation and the shame that went with it;
2. The effects of legalised racial classifications particularly on brown people versus other South Africans;
3. The construction of identity by coloured political actors themselves (Sean Jacobs);
4. The construction of coloured identity within the broader understanding of non-racialism;
5. Colouredness as a manifestation of false consciousness amongst coloureds (in the sense that they “are unable to see things, especially exploitation, oppression, and social relations, as they really are; the hypothesized inability of the human mind to develop a sophisticated awareness of how it is developed and shaped by circumstances.”)

The various analytical paradigms allude to the fluidity of the concept and the difficulties sociologists and anthropologists have in pinning down what many consider to be an “imagined community.” Regardless of the fluidity of the concept, let me try to give an account of what it means to “be coloured” today? I shall use much of my own experience to weave a tapestry of the complexity of what it means to live in the interstices of race and ethnicity in the new SA.

I want to recount three anecdotes that demonstrate my point rather forcefully:

**Story No: 1**

After the last national election, Pallo Jordan asked a prominent coloured leader to convene a meeting of coloured leaders to discuss why the ANC is unable to capture the coloured vote. Many of us who went had all been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle in various ways and after 1994 followed different paths. Some got involved with the ANC very closely; others remained on the periphery; some dumped me for my critical voice; and some retained their friendship with me regardless of their loyalty to the party; some felt betrayed by the ruling party.

There was a great reluctance amongst us to initiate the conversation. So I foolishly entered where angels feared to tread. I tried to construct a narrative by stating upfront the following:

- That the ANC has always failed to capture the coloured vote, except once in the WC, because it simply does not know how to connect with the coloured people; it also simply refuses to get to know the coloured people – as this meeting demonstrated so palpably;
- That their understanding of coloured people is stereotypical and punitive based on their notion of the hierarchy of oppressions. Because the coloured people enjoyed relative privilege under apartheid, they therefore deserved to be ignored and treated as “second class citizens” in the new SA;
- Coloured people have always been portrayed as co-optable through the CRC, the Tricameral Parliament, the coloured labour preference policy, as though black Africans were never co-opted through the Bantustan policy and the traditional leaders of SA. Those coloured institutions were and are always used to demonstrate how easily we allow ourselves to be lured into the white camp, whereas similar analogies are rarely articulated about black people, the homeland governments, and ways in which they were co-opted;
- That a profound misunderstanding of the coloured people has to do with the dominant ANC leadership being imprisoned on Robben Island or living in Exile; the ANC leadership mingled more easily with whites in liberation movement than with coloureds. (Madiba in Anthony Sampson); for ANC “whiteness” is easily understood as bipolar opposites, or rather, categorising all whites as oppressors makes life simple. But dealing with people whose origins are indigenous, first nation stuff, a direct threat to the hegemony of the majority (Thabo Mbeki would not participate in the human genome project);
- That the ANC negated the origins of the coloured people, its role in various resistance movements, its leadership roles in various institutions, both conservative and left-wing; and the many different ways coloureds have tried to construct their identity prior to and post-1994.

All hell broke loose, I had hardly completed my faltering attempt to start a conversation when Pallo Jordan interjected with annoyance, as only he can: “You coloureds called Mandela a kaffir when he went to Mitchell’s Plain after he came from prison.” The outburst of the ANC’s leading intellectual portrayed a subliminal anger towards the coloured people that was so deep that he was prepared to blame an entire group for the racist utterance of one.

As much as we got together as a fragmented group with variations of loyalty to the ruling party, Pallo’s outburst united us in ways we never thought possible. Ryland Fisher retaliated and said: “Did you come here to listen or are you here to impose your dominance as is typical of the ANC towards Coloured people?” Henry Jeffreys piled on, followed by Russell Botman, and others. I almost felt sorry for Pallo. There he confronted the full might of our subterranean anger, unleashed by an African nationalist who exemplified the contempt the ANC has shown coloured people for decades.

Those of us who met with Pallo came from wide spectrum of institutions and activities, and the group included Muslim, Christian, urban, rural, and diverse professions, yet we felt united in our retaliation against him. The question is - what was it that united us? Was it Ethnicity? Age? Cultural ties? Or common historical experiences? Perhaps it was not just one thing that united us, but a combination of all of those things.

I realised that coloured people are as diverse as putting all of the following people of the same colour in the same room and asking them what unites them – J Gerwel, N Alexander, F Sonn, P De Lille, W James, Peter Marais, Allan Hendrickse, Allan Boesak, Tom Swarts, Alatheia Jansen, Cheryl Carolus, Trevor Manuel, Gerald Morkel and the swathe of Khoisan leaders vying for supremacy. It is not that easy, but you get my point.

### **Story No 2**

In 2014, I submitted a Land Claim on behalf on my family. A requirement was to write a brief narrative on how the GAA affected us as a family. I wrote a story about forced removals and their effects on us as a family – both the maternal and paternal kin. When I sent it to my siblings, they asked me to submit it to the newspaper. The editor liked the story and asked for accompanying photos. It was published in the *Cape Times*. Responses from my white friends were astounding to say the least. Many thought they knew me well, but did not really. The honesty with which they cited their ignorance about my experiences moved me but it also pointed to one big flaw in our society – that “when one is considered equal with white people by virtue of one’s class position” one is considered to have no history; or that one has escaped the vagaries of political disruptions under apartheid, when in fact they profoundly shaped one. Exposing that part of my past in the newspaper suddenly made them view me differently. And I appreciated that.

### **Story No: 3**

After our second national elections, Ebrahim Rasool, MEC of Finance, labelled coloured people who voted for DA, coconuts. Needless to say, my pen could not resist responding to this outwardly racist primordial public insult. Given Rasool’s position in the Call of Islam and as someone who promoted Ecumenism, I could not believe what I read. I wrote a column that went viral in which I stated that the only thing that vaguely resembled a coconut was the inside of Rasool’s skull. Subsequent to this outburst, I was asked to debate the issue on radio with Rasool – he chickened out and sent the honourable Yusuf Gabru to take me on. A friend, and fellow ANC member, I could hear that it was painful for him to take me on but he had national duty to defend his leader. The debate was nevertheless civil. Unable to argue with me, Rasool went on to say in the newspapers, “Rhoda is a bourgeois elitist, who, in any case, is no longer a member of the ANC.” By labelling me he continued the negation of my place in the rainbow nation on behalf of his party. I promptly produced my membership card and revealed that I had renewed my membership but that the ANC member who collected my fees and those of others I had signed up, never issued receipts and disappeared. I also proudly declared that I was one of nine children, the daughter of a township pastor, who never earned more R3 000. That revelation shut him up once and for all. The ANC does not tolerate coloureds who are uppity, who can debate, and who can assert their independence and rights to equality.

In that debate I felt it was important to assert the following – that:

- All my maternal and paternal kin were evicted from D6;
- My family was evicted from Mowbray
- That I went to five different schools because of apartheid
- That I charred for a white woman for pocket money
- That white friends paid for my education
- That I refused to go to UCT because of their subliminal racist admission policy for physiotherapists

- That I went to UWC under protest
- That I had to leave the country to be married
- That my husband and I were hounded by the police because we dared to violate the mixed marriages, immorality act and the group areas act.

This broad experience of discrimination and poverty put me squarely in the political arena with ANC blacks, who often claim that only their experience under apartheid was authentic.

As a coloured leader of an African Nationalist party, Rasool was guilty of a number of things that recur prior to every election when the ANC rabidly campaigns along racial lines.

- Coloured people are viewed only as voting fodder – and the more unpredictable the coloured vote the more frantic the ANC becomes – voted with NP, then with ANC, then DA. The ANC must realise that they make a mistake when they stereotype the coloured vote; the idea of THE COLOURED VOTE is in need of serious deconstruction!
- They perpetuate the notion of hierarchy of oppressions – I was more oppressed than you therefore you deserve to be excluded from the economic pie;
- In the greater scheme of things, coloured people are viewed as good enough only for token appointments, never as equals;
- There is a tacit understanding that Coloureds must not even entertain the idea of being president; in other words coloureds are peripheral to the ascendancy of leadership within the ANC; in fact when Minister Nene was appointed Minister of Finance, the media repeatedly claimed him as first black finance minister, in effect negating Manuel's ethnicity;
- Within the ANC, it is expected of coloureds to know their place.

What all these anecdotes reveal is that “colouredness” cannot be pigeonholed. People of mixed race, mixed origins, are difficult to define as a group, that is why the concept of coloured is elusive and often defined in the negative – non-white. Not black Not white. Almost a negation. The political football between two poles – black and white. And this is what coloured people rebel against.

Hence the resurgence of indigenous people's movements with claims to land, origins, and recognition by the UN in terms of Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; hence the demand for Coloured Economic Empowerment; hence the Constitutional Court case (Solidarity and coloured correctional services officers) against the tyranny of majoritarianism posed by laws around AA and the supremacy of national versus regional demographics.

So what we should rather be concerned about is, what is the future of identity politics in South Africa? No one really knows what that future holds, but if we look at identity through the prism of Coloured, we get a sense of the frailty of racial identities in a country where freedom of association, as enshrined in the Bill of Rights has become sacrosanct. People can now marry or live with whomever they choose, they can adopt across the colour line, they can choose to be who they want to be, paving the way for a thoroughly mixed society where race will eventually become redundant.

The ANC knows this and the more it fails to deliver, the more it will invoke race and mobilize around race and ethnicity to lay the blame for its failure elsewhere. The ignominious race debate and witch-hunts witnessed over the past weeks resurrect their heads prior to every election. And the media plays along instead of engaging in responsible journalism.

Apartheid might be dead BUT we are still trapped by racial hierarchies reinforced by new laws of racial preference – and the imperatives of racial redress through AA and BEE. That is why the case of the correctional services officers before the Constitutional Court is so important.

The real challenge is to live outside of a racial paradigm. The ruling party believes it needs to invoke race to improve society and provide opportunities for those excluded historically, yet reliance on racial categories is the very thing that has the power to destroy us. Racial ambiguity has always been a pesky problem for both the colonial and apartheid orders, and how best to deal with it for the ANC, is to reify and institutionalize it.

I am afraid, today coloured people have embraced this identity with some pride, if anecdotal accounts are taken into consideration. Coloured people seem to view the idea of non-racialism as a threat to their identity. UDF – nonracialism (all oppressed identified as black against common enemy only to realize that once the enemy had been defeated, the majority denied them “blackness”).

Coloured correctional services officers, POPCRU, my colleagues, family, coloured members within the ANC members, DA members, faith-based groups, and so on. It amazes me and reveals that when society refuses to integrate and assimilate parts of society as equal, they will construct an identity they feel comfortable with.

In conclusion the question that remains is: is there a future for coloured identity in SA? Of course there is. In fact the future is coloured. A multi-racial and multi-cultural society like SA, can only thrive if we take our Constitution seriously. Not only does it guarantee equality on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and other characteristics, but it is also a protection of the minority against the tyranny of the majority.

Wikipedia’s definition gives this perspective:

*Unity in diversity is a concept of “unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation” that shifts focus from unity based on a mere tolerance of physical, cultural, linguistic, social, religious, political, ideological and/or psychological differences towards a more complex unity based on an understanding that difference enriches human interactions.*