



How BLACK is BLACK ENOUGH?

Seeking norms for blackness and identity

People who claim that culture is the sole indicator of blackness are in danger of ignoring black identity's political dimensions, warns MCEBISI NDLETYANA.

RECENTLY, CERTAIN MEMBERS of the black community have charged the middle-class with betraying their black identity. The accusation stems mostly from the black bourgeoisie's distinct life-style and set of norms vis-à-vis the rest of their community. For instance, after attending elite private schools, black children from middle-class backgrounds may be less inclined to use their native language, preferring English instead. The betrayal may also manifest itself in a distaste for certain cultural practices as a result of moving away from neighbourhoods where such practices are commonly observed. Does this mean that some people are more black than others? Is the observance of black culture a sufficient marker of blackness? And, since there are many cultural practices, which ones authenticate one's blackness?

Perhaps an even more crucial question is whether there has ever been a uniform black identity. Implicit in the charge of betrayal is the assumption that there is a homogenous black identity to which all black people should ascribe – an assumption that is neither historically accurate nor factually true.

Blackness – from its initial conceptualisation as such in the Cape Colony of the 19th

century by its first interlocutor, Tiyo Soga (1829-1871) – has always been multi-dimensional, comprising both cultural and political elements. Politically, blackness encompasses all those who suffered colonial prejudice and were consequently denied the opportunities for which, on merit, they were eligible. To overcome this political legacy, Soga counselled unity and co-operation among black people as the key to self-improvement: 'Assist one another, patronise 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...Union in every good thing is strength; and to a weak party or race, union above all things is strength'.

On black culture, however, Soga was ambivalent. A product of the missionary enterprise and the first overseas-educated African with a degree in theology, Soga thought highly of chiefs as 'specimens of nature's own nobility' on one hand, whilst being stridently opposed to *uhwaluko* – a ritual marking the right of passage from boyhood to manhood – on the other. His admired chiefs were guardians of the very practice he denounced.

His cultural ambivalence is not actually such a contradiction. It serves to illustrate culture not as a homogenous monolith, but as a continuum which allows for degrees of adherence and variation. Consequently, Africans have had access to multiple cultural identities since their initial encounter with colonial influence, dating back to the 19th century. Some Africans embraced modern influences; others shunned them. The result was a cultural schism between the 'educated' and the 'non-educated', known as *Amakholwa* and *Amagaba* in Natal, and *Amagoboka* and *Ababomvu* in the Cape. The latter charged the former of complicity in colonial conquest – *bagqobokile*: a hole through which settlers infiltrated the indigenous society. They thought of themselves alone as authentic Africans.

However, the black consciousness movement was not triggered by an urge to rediscover a more authentic, pre-colonial Africanness. But, rather, it grew out of a sense of political betrayal. The 'civilizing mission' had failed to honour its promise to give full citizenship to civilized black people and prompted an inward gaze into the culture and heritage of the self. However,



this cultural self was not articulated as being autonomous – it was inextricably linked to political claims of inclusion. The intention of black consciousness was to refute colonial notions of black inferiority and thereby prove worthy of citizenship.

Interestingly, the black cultural identity that has come to dominate the black imagination is in fact the one that was articulated by the *Amagqoboka*, who had been considered less African by their more traditional counterparts. If we are to posit authenticity as a qualifier for blackness, then our contemporary definition of the black cultural identity does not qualify because it is not, by any stretch of imagination, authentic – nor did its inventors lay any claim to authenticity. After all, as products of the ‘civilizing mission’, they were the very personification of cultural hybridity and their definition of a black identity put more emphasis on the political than the cultural.

Actually, the notion of a natural correlation between culture and blackness emanates from apartheid scholarship, particularly cultural anthropology. This view was a function of the shift in colonial policy from assimilation

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to segregation, particularly after the formation of the Union in 1910. Cultural anthropologists came up with elaborate cultural theories to justify segregation: because they are black, they therefore have a different culture.

The apartheid definition of African culture was, needless to say, underpinned by racial prejudice. It defined African culture as static, incapable of change and progress, and with no cultural differentiation. The 1927 Native Administrative Act, for instance, decreed that all Africans were tribespeople, whose natural habitat was a village under the rule of a chief. It did not matter how sophisticated or urbanite one considered oneself to be, the law made all Africans tribespeople by virtue of their black skin. According to this weird colonial logic, people who happened to be tribe-less could easily be constituted into a tribe by the Native Commissioner, who would find them a village and assign

them a chief. Ordinary folks, with no claims to chieftaincy, were made chiefs on the saying so of anthropologists, who claimed to have uncovered traces of royalty in their lineage!

Thus, the notion of an authentic black identity that resides solely in culture is frighteningly reminiscent of colonial rhetoric. It completely ignores cultural dynamism and heterogeneity within African society, as if African cultural norms have withstood societal changes and remained frozen in time. That there is a shared ethos within the African community as a result of common history and experience is indisputable. But insisting that there is uniform cultural behaviour among Africans assumes a causal relationship between race and culture where none exists. ●

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