The Multiple Meanings of Coloured Identity in South Africa

In post-1994, South African identity has taken centre stage in debates about diversity and its impact in a multicultural society. The coloured people of South Africa seem to have the most at stake in such debates due to the perceived ambiguity of their and others' perceptions of their identity. This article interrogates the symbology of colouredness by providing a symbolic interpretation of the meanings of the symbols of coloured identity. Through the engagement with relevant literature, the article seeks to identify the symbols of coloured identity and the multivocality of these symbols. Our argument is that a symbological approach to coloured identity opens up possibilities for a variety of meanings that move beyond the historically inherited stereotypical associations with the identity.

Theodore Petrus and Wendy Isaacs-Martin

Theodore Petrus is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa.

Wendy Isaacs-Martin is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political and Governmental Studies at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, South Africa.

Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa, identity has become an important part of the nation-building process. After the racial, ethnic and cultural subordination of African peoples under the apartheid system, post-1994 the assertion of racial, ethnic and cultural identity has become a critical issue, especially within the context of the resurgence of 'African pride' and the 'African renaissance'. However, for the Coloured people of South Africa, racial, ethnic and cultural identity was, and still remains, an issue steeped in ambiguity.[1] The Coloured people, historically defined as persons of mixed racial and ethnic heritage, still find themselves struggling with issues of identity, particularly the meanings that have been attached to their identity. The meanings of coloured identity are often interpreted solely in terms of racial or ethnic characteristics, cloaked in negative stereotypes of Coloured people as a group.[2] The negative and stereotypical perceptions of Coloured people have been recently exacerbated in the South African media following remarks made about them.[3] This negative perception of coloured identity has resulted in anxiety among Coloured people about their position as a group

in relation to other racial and ethnic groups in South Africa.[4]

This article posits a symbological approach to the question of what it means to be coloured in South Africa. This approach involves identifying and interpreting the symbols of coloured identity, as well as the meanings of these symbols and the contexts within which they occur. The article seeks to answer the question of how these symbols may have affected insider (those within the coloured group itself) and outsider (those external to the coloured group) perceptions of coloured identity. This symbological approach is necessary in order to dispel existing stereotypes of coloured identity and the negativity that they produce. The symbols themselves or their meanings have often been assumed to be fixed, hence the old ethnocentric stereotypes of Coloured people that have endured from the past into the present.[5] Some of these stereotypes have included the reference to Coloured people as being particularly prone to laziness, alcoholism, gangsterism, violence and drug addiction, as well as not having any recognised culture or language of their own.

There are several key concepts used in the article that require clarification. Firstly, the authors use the concept *symbology* referring to the study of symbols.[6] The article concerns identifying the symbols of coloured identity and attempting to analyse and interpret their meaning(s). As is shown in the article, not only does coloured identity have various symbols and thus various meanings, but these are also located in various contexts, including historical, political, social and economic contexts.

Secondly, the central concept of the article, namely *coloured identity*, is the most difficult to define because it encompasses a wide variety of peoples and, as we illustrate, perspectives or interpretations of this identity that influence how it may be defined. The complexity of the concept is explored in the early part of the article. However, at this point it suffices to provide a broad but in no way all-encompassing definition. The authors use the concept *coloured identity* to refer to a dynamic and fluid identity belonging to a specific group in South Africa, most often attributed to persons popularly perceived as being of mixed racial and ethnic descent who, over time and due to specific historical, cultural, social and other factors, have undergone various changes in their perceptions of their identity as Coloured people. The meaning(s) of the concept is much wider than merely race or ethnicity, as the article will show. The definition of coloured identity is a complex exercise. The authors provide various reasons for this. It is therefore necessary to stress that the manner in which the authors define coloured identity may well be open to critique by others who may define it in another way.

The third key concept used is *symbol*, which for the authors refers to anything tangible or intangible that can be used to represent something else.[7] The main symbols explored are race and ethnicity, as well as culture. How and why these could be considered symbols of coloured identity are explored in the article. Although the same could be said of white or black identities, the focus is on how these symbols apply to coloured identity.

Finally, the concepts *apartheid* and *post-apartheid* are used to refer to the periods before and after 1994 respectively. The year 1994 is generally accepted as the one when South Africa made the transition to a democratic dispensation which, for many, heralded the end of formal apartheid. Thus, the period preceding 1994 was still dominated by apartheid structures. The pre-1994 apartheid period that is relevant for this article is the period between 1950 and 1993. The rationale for this is that after

1950, apartheid legislation was passed that had a direct influence on coloured identity, and thus represents part of the historical context that formed meanings of coloured identity. The post-apartheid period referred to in the article is the period from 1994 to the present. This period is significant as it is here where the authors attempt to illustrate whether the symbols of coloured identity – and subsequently their meanings – have changed and what this implies for the Coloured people in terms of their position in the 'new' South Africa.

The article is divided into three parts. The first discusses the theoretical framework of the article, and the second focuses on the historical context of coloured identity, exploring its symbols and meanings during the apartheid context. The final part of the article examines the symbols of coloured identity in the post-apartheid period, and what possible alternative meanings these symbols could have in the post-apartheid context.

The Symbological Approach: Turner's Theory of the Polarisation of 'Significata'

The complexity of coloured identity exposes the uselessness of a simplistic understanding or meaning of this identity; one which has nevertheless dominated apartheid-era misperceptions, misinterpretations and misunderstandings that have endured into the present. The heterogeneity of the Coloured people makes a simplistic definition of coloured identity virtually impossible. Thus, instead of interpreting this identity in terms of a narrow racial or ethnic framework, as is often the case, a symbological approach is suggested to elicit multiple meanings of this identity. For this reason, the authors advocate the symbological approach of the anthropologist Victor Turner who espoused an approach to the study of symbols in his theory of the polarisation of 'significata'. Coloured identity and what it means can be understood through uncovering the meanings of the symbols that constitute this identity. Turner's theory makes this possible, hence the need to briefly outline this theoretical approach.[8]

In his analysis of rituals among African communities such as the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner argued that rituals are based on symbols that have multiple meanings attached to them, which Turner referred to as 'significata'. He defined these as 'actions or objects perceived by the senses [that have] many meanings...'[9] From the many meanings that these ritual symbols generated, a distinctive categorisation into two extreme poles could be created, which Turner refers to as the 'polarization of significata'.[10] The two poles he identified are the sensory and the ideological. The sensory pole contains the cluster of symbolic meanings that are tangible, visible or physical. By contrast, the ideological pole contains the cluster of symbolic meanings that are intangible, invisible and non-physical.[11]

The above illustrates the underlying theoretical basis of the symbological approach which strives to determine the sensory and ideological meanings of symbols. This approach is applied to coloured identity, as the authors argue that this identity also rests on a number of symbols that ascribe to it various meanings and interpretations. The focus is on the symbols of race and ethnicity, as well as culture. Each of these symbols is probed in order to determine its sensory and ideological meanings as it relates to coloured identity.

From a theoretical standpoint it is important to understand that symbols and their meanings do not occur in a vacuum but are always related to a specific context. The context of Turner's

analysis of symbols was the rituals of the cultural groups that he studied. In the context of understanding the symbols and meanings of coloured identity, there are several contexts within which they should be understood. These include the historical, political, social, economic and cultural contexts.

The authors regard the symbological approach to coloured identity as an extension or combination of the social constructionist[12] and postmodern creolisationist[13] approaches to understanding the complexities in coloured identity formation. In an excellent analysis of the main historiographical approaches to the history of the nature of coloured identity formation, Adhikari identified four changing interpretations that seem to have emerged prior to and after the 1990s.[14] According to Adhikari, prior to the 1990s the marginality of coloured identity was reflected in the lack of academically credible South African historiography on the Coloured people.[15] This 'speculative, poorly researched or heavily biased' historiography was linked to the influence of white dominance on the writing of South African history. However, since the emergence of coloured identity in the late 19th century, it has been, and continues to be, a subject of much debate, especially due to the varying interpretations of the nature of this identity. This renewed interest in coloured identity has not abated in the post-apartheid era despite, as Adhikari indicated, the unpopularity of this kind of academic research since the 1980s with the growing awareness of non-racialism in coloured and anti-apartheid resistance politics.[16]

It would appear that the resurgence in questions of coloured identity and its implications for post-apartheid South Africa emerged as a consequence of the impact of the coloured vote in the Western Cape during the 1994 election. In trying to make sense of why Coloured people voted for their old oppressors, the National Party (NP), people were inevitably led to questions around the nature of coloured identity.[17] Adhikari's argument that there has been a renewed interest in the 'coloured debate' contrasts sharply with the view of Hendricks, who argues that any debate or dialogue involving the Coloured people should not focus on the nature of coloured identity, although she acknowledges that such a dialogue is necessary.[18] However, the question is how such a dialogue on coloured identity can be separated from the nature of this identity. After all, this debate is part of a broader dialogue on rights and belonging, which, in the South African context generally, and in the context of coloured identity and the politics of belonging specifically, are directly linked to racial, ethnic and even cultural identities, not only between Coloured people and other groups, but also within Coloured groups themselves. Thus, the complex nature of coloured identity formation is at the core of such debates and dialogue, hence Adhikari's point that 'today there is intense interest in the nature and history of coloured identity, especially among people who identify themselves as Coloured...'.[19]

In both popular and academic interpretations of coloured identity, Adhikari identified four approaches that seem to have evolved throughout South African historiographies.[20] Firstly, the essentialist approach viewed coloured identity and colouredness as a 'product of miscegenation' which appears to have become the popular view.[21] This view focuses on racial hybridity and attempts to reduce coloured identity to the biological result of racial mixing. It identifies Coloured people as one of several distinct races in South African society, one which originated from the interracial mixing between the first Dutch settlers and the indigenous KhoiSan and other non-European groups

with whom they came into contact. Adhikari described this essentialist interpretation of coloured identity as typical of the older and more general historiographies of South Africa, such as those of Muller and Van Jaarsveld, in which Coloured people were not only marginalised historically, but were also denied representation as a group that had the power to influence its own identity formation – that is, as having agency.[22]

As a critical reaction to the essentialist approach, the instrumentalist school, emerging in the 1980s, rejected the idea that coloured identity could be reduced to mere biological factors, and departed from the premise that the very notion of a coloured identity was 'an artificial concept imposed by the white supremacist state ... upon a weak and vulnerable group of people as an instrument of social control'.[23] Influenced by Black Consciousness, scholars such as Hommel shifted the focus of coloured historiography from race mixing to coloured protest politics in the 20th century.[24] Since the 1990s the instrumentalist approach has lost any meaningful influence, particularly due to the re-emphasis of political parties on coloured identity as a separate identity, as well as the fact that 'inter-black racial tensions can no longer be explained away as the dastardly machinations of the white supremacist establishment...'[25], since such tensions are now seemingly being caused by some African politicians and columnists, apparently seeking to espouse some kind of fundamental African nationalism that aims to polarise African and Coloured people.[26]

The third and fourth approaches, namely social constructionism and postmodern creolisationism, are discussed concurrently by the authors as they are in fact closely linked. Adhikari identified himself within the social constructionist interpretation of coloured identity which views it as

> a product of human agency dependent on a complex interplay of historical, social, cultural, political and other contingencies...The creation of Coloured identity is ... an ongoing, dynamic process in which groups and individuals make and re-make ... their personal and social identities. The fundamental concerns of social constructionists are thus to explain how and why Coloured identity came into existence and to unravel the intricate ways in which it has found expression.[27]

Reinforcing the social constructionist approach, postmodern creolisationism, as espoused by Erasmus, illustrates coloured identity as a product of cultural creativity, a cultural borrowing from various groups under specific conditions of marginalisation.[28] In other words, far from being an imposition by one dominant group on another, coloured identity is the result of the agency of coloured people themselves who have blended elements from various South African and other cultures and fashioned them into a creative identity that, ironically, also possesses a uniqueness distinguishing it from the other cultures from which it has borrowed. Thus, coloured identity is not simply a mishmash of borrowed traits from other groups, but takes on a life and meaning(s) of its own.

The authors regard the symbological approach to coloured identity as the most consistent with social constructionism and postmodern creolisationism in that it shares the view of these approaches of coloured identity as dynamic and open to a variety of meanings and interpretations. It is for this very reason that we also view coloured identity as a symbol rather than a fixed identity, because this way it is multivocal. The authors' argument is that the multivocality of meanings has been both positive and negative, but that it should be left to coloured people themselves to choose whether

they define their identity as Coloured people negatively or positively.

The authors' position, as Coloured researchers contributing to the debate on coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa, is that there is a need to focus on its positive meanings. However, the authors remain wary of the trap that has plagued Coloured researchers historically, where debates and discussions around coloured identity have had less of an impact on the social realities of the majority of Coloured people than on the intellectualising pursuits of an elite minority of Coloured scholars and academics.[29]

Race and Ethnicity as a Symbol of Coloured Identity in post-1950 Apartheid South Africa

As a symbol of coloured identity, race and ethnicity emerged as the primary determinants of this identity since the emergence of the Coloured people as a group. It is widely accepted that the origins of the Coloured people can be traced back to the colonial contact between the European settlers and the indigenous KhoiSan communities along the Cape coast. Since the initial contact of these groups, years of contact and miscegenation not only between the colonists and the indigenous KhoiSan, but also between these groups and the slave populations emanating from the East, resulted in the creation of a racially and ethnically mixed group.[30] While scholars may speculate about the position of this mixed group in colonial society, what is evident from historical studies of this period is that, increasingly, phenotypical (racial) characteristics began to directly determine the extent to which mixed persons were accepted by their 'European' fathers and society. This was significant because it emerged within the context of growing racial and ethnic stratification in colonial South Africa, culminating in a situation where those of 'mixed race' gradually became assimilated into an 'intermediate' stratum.[31] Owing to the growing pressure on African and Coloured groups to gain access to economic and other resources as a consequence of racial and ethnic stratification, Coloured people attempted to use their intermediate status and partial affiliation with the European colonists to gain access to a position of relative privilege, particularly in relation to Africans. This they sought to achieve through closer assimilation into European culture.[32] Contrary to expectations, although in some instances people of mixed descent did enjoy certain benefits, these were systematically eroded. While on the macrocosmic level of the wider South African society there was increasing stratification between Europeans, Africans and people of mixed descent, within the mixed population itself, on the microcosmic level, race and ethnicity caused further stratification. Those mixed persons who phenotypically resembled white Europeans enjoyed privileges that were denied to those who were phenotypically darker. Thus, since colonial times and the emergence of mixed race persons, race and ethnicity became a symbol not only of the inferiority of what would become coloured identity, but also of divisions within the Coloured groups.

After the apartheid government came to power in 1948, it set about implementing its policy of racial and ethnic segregation through the creation of legislation with which to subordinate non-White groups, while advancing and entrenching the superiority of the white Afrikaner group. The most significant legislation that affected persons of mixed descent was the Population Registration Act of 1950, with which the government attempted to categorise all South Africans according to race

and ethnicity.[33] It proceeded to create a racial category for Whites, black Africans and Asians, based on the assumption that these groups all constituted separate nations with their own distinctive identities. However, persons of mixed descent were problematic as they could not be neatly categorised into any of the 'main' groups. Consequently, the government then created a separate category for persons of mixed race and called it 'Coloured'. For some scholars, the coloured category was created for a non-group – that is, people who were not White, African or Asian.[34] From this it becomes apparent that the term 'coloured' began as an apartheid construction that attempted to create a homogeneous racial and ethnic 'nation' out of a heterogeneous group of people. As mentioned earlier, the heterogeneity of Coloured people had its historical roots in the miscegenation between various groups following the arrival of the European settlers and slave populations at the Cape. The label of 'coloured' symbolised an externally created ethnic boundary that produced various negative meanings of coloured identity.[35] The absurdity of the coloured label, as defined by the apartheid government in its refusal to acknowledge the heterogeneity of this group, was exposed when the government was forced to create further subdivisions within the Coloured group as it became necessary to categorise other groups that were also considered Coloured, including the Malays, Griquas and others.[36]

While race and ethnicity emerged as a symbol of inferiority for Coloured persons during the colonial period, after 1950 the meaning of coloured identity as an inferior identity became even more entrenched in the symbol of race and ethnicity. In this context coloured identity took on the meanings not only of racial and ethnic inferiority, but also of marginalisation, as Coloured people were viewed as not belonging to any of the 'recognised' groups in South Africa. Coloured identity also took on the meaning of rejection from other groups. Since Coloured people were not racially or ethnically 'pure', although they could affiliate with any of the main groups by virtue of partial ancestry or language, they were never fully accepted into any of them. Thus, on the macrocosmic level and through the Population Registration Act of 1950, the symbol of race and ethnicity created meanings of coloured identity that were inherently negative.

Even on the microcosmic level within the Coloured group itself, the symbol of race and ethnicity, through the Population Registration Act of 1950, further entrenched meanings of coloured identity as social and economic stratification, dislocation and disintegration. As was the case during the colonial period, legislation during apartheid such as the Population Registration Act of 1950 created further divisions within the Coloured groups. After the failure of the Population Registration Act of 1950 to successfully classify Coloured people, the apartheid government introduced an amendment to make it possible for people to reclassify themselves. Consequently, many Coloured people who shared similar racial and ethnic characteristics with Whites attempted to have themselves reclassified as white, since for as long as they remained classified as coloured they would carry the stereotype of being inferior to and rejected from the 'superior' group.[37]

Reclassification had a devastating effect on many Coloured families as it led to their disintegration, especially if relatives were racially dissimilar. Those who were racially closer to Whites were able to be reclassified into the White group while those who were darker skinned remained in the Coloured group. This had the effect of not only splitting up families and communities, but also introduced

an internal racism, where Coloured people began to discriminate against each other.[38] Phenotypical traits became an important issue within the Coloured group, as those who looked like Whites began to ridicule, and disassociate themselves from, other Coloureds who did not. Also, those Coloured people who were darker skinned began to develop an inferiority complex that culminated in an identity crisis rooted in their lack of racial and ethnic purity.[39] The set of ethnic identities available to Coloured people was 'limited to socially and politically defined ethnic categories with varying degrees of stigma or advantage attached to them'.[40]

The racialised hierarchy of South African society also meant that access to economic resources was tied to race and ethnicity. Thus, coloured identity also came to mean economic deprivation and impoverishment for some, but privilege and economic prosperity for others. Racial reclassification often had a dual impact on Coloured people. Those who were successfully reclassified as white found themselves removed from the ever-increasing poverty and deprivation of the Coloured communities, and granted access to resources that were better than those of their less-fortunate counterparts. Consequently, race and ethnicity came to symbolise not only the social inferiority of coloured identity, but its economic inferiority as well. In addition, the access of a few Coloured people to resources – while the majority of them languished in abject poverty – further entrenched economic stratification within the group.

The symbol of race and ethnicity also impacted on the relationship between identity and the emergence of ethnic boundaries, as well as the meanings that were attached to this symbol. According to Nagel, 'identity and culture are fundamental to the central projects of ethnicity [which are] the construction of boundaries and the production of meaning'.[41] For some Coloured people, particularly after the emergence of Black Consciousness in the 1970s and 1980s, the enforced ethnic boundaries of the Population Registration Act of 1950 were rejected, as was the notion of a coloured identity.[42] These 'Coloured rejectionists' regarded the identity as an artificial imposition of White supremacists and therefore wanted nothing to do with it as acceptance of the coloured label was akin to collaboration with apartheid thinking. However, for others the same boundaries that were deemed to be externally enforced were ultimately internalised, which could well have contributed to the internal racial and ethnic discrimination within Coloured groups. As Nagel pointed out, '[e]thnic boundaries, and thus identities, are constructed by both the individual and group as well as by outside agents and organizations'.[43] This process in itself thus lends to ethnic identity in general various meanings from both within and outside of a particular group. In the context of coloured identity, the social construction of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries arguably presented a far more complex set of meanings than with any other group, largely due to the '...fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of [coloured] ethnic identification, organization and action...' .[44]

Coloured Identity and Culture: The Symbol of Cultural Marginalisation

As a consequence of the meanings of race and ethnicity as a symbol of coloured identity, culture also became a symbol of this identity. Culture is understood here in an anthropological sense, as a complex whole that not only includes the observable behaviour of a particular group, but also the shared and socially

transmitted ideas, values and perceptions used by the group to make sense of experience.[45] Often a connection is drawn between culture, race and ethnicity, hence the assumption that a racially and ethnically homogeneous group also shares a culture. Culture or cultural heritage is one of several criteria or characteristics that determine an ethnic identity. These criteria include a shared history of the ethnic group, shared language and a shared culture.[46] The importance of culture to ethnic identity is echoed by Nagel who argued that 'culture is most clearly associated with the issue of meaning. Culture dictates the appropriate and inappropriate content of a particular ethnicity and designates the language, religion, belief system, art, music, dress, traditions and lifeways that constitute an authentic identity'.[47] During apartheid, the racial and ethnic segregation of groups in terms of the Population Registration Act of 1950 thus also implied cultural segregation. Even within the White, African and Asian groups, further distinctions could be made between ethnic groups based on culture and language.

Given the link between race, ethnicity and culture, the racial and ethnic heterogeneity of the Coloured people thus underpinned the cultural heterogeneity of this group. Unlike the white European/Afrikaner, black African and Asian groups who all constituted separate groups each with their own distinctive ethnos and culture, the same could not be said of the Coloured group. Coloured people lacked an essentialist homogeneous coloured culture because they did not constitute a homogeneous group. Consequently, culture came to symbolise the cultural marginalisation of coloured identity. Since coloured people lacked a homogeneous essentialist culture, did not speak the same language and did not share a common history, they did not meet the essentialist criteria for recognition as an ethnic group. Culture symbolised for the Coloured people that they were a 'bastard' group, as they had no common history, language or culture that they could claim as their own, thus the cultural marginalisation of the Coloured group contributed to their racial and ethnic marginalisation. The implication of this is that the Coloured people were never considered a 'nation' as were the other groups, because they lacked the important criterion of a common culture. To illustrate the link between culture and identity, Nagel pointed out that while '[ethnic] [b]oundaries answer the question: Who are we? ... Culture answers the question: What are we?'[48] The answer to this question was not as simple for the Coloured people as perhaps for other groups, as the fragmented and multifaceted nature of coloured culture could not provide a clear answer to the question of coloured identity as an ethnos or ethnicity.

From the above it could be assumed that the Coloured people had no identity because they had no culture, but this is an erroneous assumption.[49] There is no group without culture. In the case of the Coloured people, much of coloured culture was a creolised way of life that included elements from many different cultures. Since coloured identity was linked to European, indigenous KhoiSan and Asian identities, it makes sense that the culture of Coloured people was based on a creolisation or blending of elements of these different cultural identities.[50] Most Coloured people adopted either English or Afrikaans as their preferred language. Generally, most subscribe to a Western-oriented lifestyle, while there are those who also follow African customs and can speak African languages, and still others who subscribe to the Muslim faith and lifestyle.[51]

There are several meanings that can be attached to the symbol of culture as it pertained to coloured identity during apartheid. Firstly,

the Western lifestyle as well as languages followed and spoken by many Coloured people represented a symbolic link to the dominant groups in South African society, namely the English- and Afrikaans-speaking Whites.[52] This affinity with Whites had always been important in the search for belonging for Coloured people. In fact, it had been more than merely important. Hendricks referred to this emphasis on affinity with Whites as an 'obsession ... to act civilized... [T]hey [i.e. Coloured people] were engaged in a constant battle to prove to Whites that they were capable of living up to white standards, and that [therefore] they should receive the same kinds of rights and privileges.'[53] Since they were ancestrally linked to Whites, but were subsequently rejected from the White group on the basis of race and ethnicity, culture represented the only link that they had to Whites. In addition, a symbolic link to the White group through culture also symbolised for Coloured people that they were superior to Africans. Interestingly, for some scholars such as Adhikari, this goal of assimilation into white culture represented one of several core characteristics of coloured identity during the colonial and apartheid periods that provided stability to the identity during these periods of white rule.

As was the case with the symbol of race and ethnicity, culture also symbolised the ambiguous position of the Coloured people. Owing to a lack of a clearly identifiable cultural 'essence', and the perceived blending of various cultural elements rather than something specific, a cultural ambiguity was created. The ambiguous nature of the culture of the Coloured people placed this group in a position of cultural liminality, to use Turner's metaphor.[54]

The aptness of this metaphor in relation to the liminality of coloured culture requires some explanation. In his study of the symbology of Ndembu ritual in Zambia, Turner built upon the work of Van Gennep regarding rites of passage. He identified three symbolic stages, namely preliminal, liminal and postliminal. These corresponded to Van Gennep's stages of separation, transition and reintegration. The relevance of these stages in the rites of passage not only applies to the symbol of coloured culture, but can also apply to the symbol of race and ethnicity. Race, ethnicity and culture symbolise for the Coloured people the culture or 'race' of passage or, more specifically, the stage of liminality or transition, marked by ambiguity or belonging neither here nor there. Most Coloured people thus found themselves in a transitional stage, caught between belonging and not belonging. For some, the third stage of reintegration was possible by virtue of the racial and cultural affinity they shared with the 'dominant' group and the possibility of reclassification. However, the majority of Coloured people remained locked in permanent racial and cultural transition, which consequently produced internalised ethnocentrism and discrimination within Coloured groups based on different cultural characteristics such as language, beliefs and practices. Those who affiliated with white 'European' culture were seen by those who did not, or could not, as sell-outs or supporters of discrimination against Coloured people. Those who could affiliate with white culture saw it as an opportunity to create a sense of belonging to a recognised group. These represented some of the internal meanings of the symbol of culture.[55]

The symbol of culture also impacted on the status and subsequently the identity of Coloured people. In terms of identity and status, the liminality of coloured culture symbolised incompleteness. In other words, the transitional position of coloured people meant that they were not fully human, but were merely trapped in an intermediate phase between

apartheid-imposed binary oppositions such as non-human (as represented by the black African group) and fully human (as represented by the White group), uncivilised and civilised, belonging and not belonging. To use another transitionary metaphor, this time by Marais, Coloured people were a 'twilight people', neither totally in darkness nor in light but somewhere in between.[56]

The culture of Coloured people also came to symbolise for some a rejection of their African and slave past in favour of white acceptance. Many of the KhoiSan people who became slaves of European colonialists had to abandon their traditional culture, including language, practices and religious beliefs. The emerging stratification of colonial South African society eventually led to these cultures being viewed as inferior, hence their rejection by some coloured people. The rejection of the African or KhoiSan part of their identity meant, in essence, a rejection or denial of a part of the identity of some coloured people who shared ancestry with KhoiSan groups. However, for others, the symbol of culture acquired the meaning of KhoiSan exclusivity in terms of how they perceived their identity. This implies that, in the search for a coloured cultural essence, this was to be found in the assumption that 'traditional' coloured culture originated from the KhoiSan heritage. The construction and reconstruction of culture is an important part of the internal social construction of a group's ethnic identity.[57] This process of cultural reconstruction can also take the form of a cultural revival, which Nagel described as a process whereby 'lost or forgotten cultural forms or practices are excavated and reintroduced ... into contemporary culture'.[58] Thus one could interpret the choice of some Coloured people to affiliate with KhoiSan identity and culture as an attempt at coloured cultural (re)construction.[59] In fact, Adhikari viewed this post-apartheid identification as an example of the instrumentalist approach, because those who choose this manner of cultural identification 'reject Colouredness as the colonisers' caricature of the colonised'.[60] However, this attempt at cultural reconstruction may only apply to a part of the Coloured people, specifically those who acknowledge and accept that they are linked ethnically and culturally to the KhoiSan groups. However, this assumption of 'traditional' coloured culture as emanating from that of the KhoiSan has been shown to be erroneous, given the discussions earlier on the heterogeneity of coloured culture and identity.

Symbols of Coloured Identity in post-Apartheid South Africa

Adhikari has argued that while coloured identity had remained stable during apartheid, in the post-apartheid context the identity has experienced rapid transformations since 1994. Generally, this has had an ambiguous impact on coloured identity. On the one hand these transformations seem to have compounded the already existing confusion and controversy surrounding coloured identity, but on the other hand they have created opportunities for new ways of understanding colouredness – that is, opportunities either for the creation of new symbols for this identity, or to give new meanings to already existing symbols.[61]

The 1990s had seen a resurgence in coloured assertiveness due to various reasons such as the fear of African majority rule, perceptions of coloured marginalisation and the need to counter negative stereotyping of Coloureds.[62] This resurgence, coupled with the changing context of South African society post-1994, has created an opportunity where coloured identity itself can, or has, become a symbol of South African

transformation, especially in its expression as a political, social and cultural identity. Thus, in the new South Africa, various new meanings – both positive and negative – of coloured identity can be identified.

The first of these relates to this identity as a symbol of political power as seen, for example, in the increased political influence of coloured people due to political reform post-1994. Since the landmark first democratic elections that heralded the post-apartheid democratic dispensation, the coloured vote has been seen as the 'deciding' one in elections, particularly in the provinces of the Western Cape and Northern Cape where Coloured people constitute the majority of the population.[63] However, it has been noted that this newfound identity consciousness among Coloured people has been open to political manipulation and exploitation. For example, in the run-up to the 1994 elections, the then National Party (NP) exploited the heightening race consciousness among the Coloured communities by employing *swartgevaar* (lit. 'black danger') tactics to heighten anxieties and fears among the Coloured populations of how an African-dominated government could negatively affect them.[64] Consequently, the Coloured people in the Western Cape shocked the South African political landscape by voting their old oppressors (the NP) back into power in the provincial government of the Western Cape. Notwithstanding the possibility for the political abuse of growing coloured identity consciousness, the symbol of this identity as political power has been instrumental in what Africa refers to as the 'alternation in [political] power' in the Western Cape, as it has been largely the influence of the coloured vote that has led to at least three different political parties having power in the province since 1994.[65]

In addition to coloured identity being a symbol of political power, it can be seen as a symbol of freedom of association or choice, as well as a symbol of coloured revitalisation. As a consequence of the lifting of apartheid-era restrictions with regard to racial or ethnic associations, Coloured people now find themselves with various options regarding the expression of social identities and ethnic preferences. Adhikari refers, for example, to several options that have opened up to Coloured people as modes of social and ethnic expression.[66] These include identification with a slave history; reinvention of a KhoiSan ethnic identity; coloured exclusivism; an identification with Africa; and a 'rainbow nationalism'. In addition, there are those coloureds who had adopted a more extreme exclusivist approach, as was seen in the short-lived Coloured Resistance Movement (*Kleurling Weerstandbeweging*), a coloured version of the white Afrikaner right-wing movement known as the Afrikaner Resistance Movement (*Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging* or AWB). However, it would appear that the majority of Coloured people continue to adopt a racialised conception of coloured identity as having strong resonances with white racial, ethnic and cultural identity.[67] Unfortunately, one of the negative consequences of this tendency has been an apparent hostility towards Africans.[68] However, the assumption may be erroneously made that Coloured people are more predisposed towards racism than other groups because of this newfound identification with colouredness. Some scholars, such as James and Adhikari, have argued that due to the continuing racialised thinking, stereotyping and interracial conflict between various groups in South Africa, there is no evidence to suggest that Coloured people are any more racist than other groups.[69]

Of more serious concern should be the perception that the symbol of coloured identity as freedom of racial, ethnic or cultural association has exacerbated the historical problem of

an internalised racism. Sonn has argued that Coloured people suffer from an internalised white racism which suggests that 'white is right', and has ultimately encouraged Coloured people 'to distance themselves from their African origins and seek greater identification with whites'.[70] This internalised racism among Coloured people is highly complex. It should not only be understood as a direct consequence of apartheid, where Coloured people occupied a higher status in the racial hierarchy in relation to Africans due to their partial ethnic and racial affiliation with Whites, nor should it only be viewed as externally directed towards Africans – what Adhikari calls a 'defensive racism'– but it should also be seen as internally directed.[71]

Within Coloured communities, the legacy of apartheid has created a highly stratified context where middle- and upper-class Coloured people, who have historically attained their status based on their closer racial affiliation with whites, tend to look down upon their lower-class fellows who were relegated to that status simply because they lacked 'acceptable' racial traits.[72] However, there is a danger of over-generalising when attempting to understand the dynamics involved in this perceived coloured racism. As indicated earlier, the success of the NP in the 1994 elections in the Western Cape was largely due to the influence of the coloured vote. It could be argued that Coloured support for the NP may have been the result of this perceived affiliation with Whites, and hence the need to support them politically. However, some scholars such as Giliomee have challenged this perception by arguing that not all Coloured people voted in favour of the NP: '...there were also those coloured people – mostly the well-educated – who felt most strongly about the way the NP had discriminated against them and humiliated them. They tended to vote strongly for ANC'.[73]

The continued existence of both internally and externally directed racism suggests that coloured identity also serves as a continuing symbol of division, both externally and internally, often manifested in regard to material factors such as jobs, housing and poverty. Many in the Coloured communities do not see themselves as being better-off under the ANC dispensation than they were under apartheid. Consequently, the frustrations with poor economic and material conditions of many Coloured people have found expression in racial and ethnic identity terms, particularly in relation to affirmative action and black economic empowerment (BEE) policies, which Coloured people perceive as advantaging Africans at their expense.[74] Consequently, in this context coloured identity is not only a symbol of continuing hardship for certain sectors, but also of regression, due to the perceived loss of status formerly enjoyed under apartheid.[75]

In post-apartheid South Africa, new meanings of coloured identity also symbolise the need for a shift away from identities founded on a racist ideological basis. According to Adhikari, 'the discrediting of racist ideologies and the abolition of apartheid have undermined the racial basis upon which the [coloured] identity has operated...'[76] Consequently this has encouraged new ways of expressing coloured identity and hence the need for new symbols or meanings of this identity as a means of finding 'a new basis for the espousal of the identity'.[77] However, again there are divisions as to how this should be achieved. One reaction has been to adopt an attitude of non-racialism, which Adam defined as an 'ideology...[that] rejects an ethnic nation in favour of a civic nation, based on equal individual rights, regardless of origin, and equal recognition of all cultural traditions in the public sphere'.[78] However, given the everyday realities of interracial interactions in post-apartheid

South Africa, non-racialism has often been dismissed as an unviable and impractical approach, with not only the hypocrisy of political parties that claim non-racialism and then use racial and ethnic mobilisation to achieve their political objectives, but also that racial identities continue to be a salient feature of South African life.[79]

Ironically, and in relation to the above, coloured identity symbolises the need for a new South African mindset; Adhikari refers to this as 'reflexive political practice'.[80] This suggests that Coloured people need to identify and use the new meanings which are these of coloured identity to find ways of changing the historically negative associations with this identity to contemporary – and possibly future – positive associations. Despite obstacles to this process, such as a deeply rooted racial thinking,[81] the continued emphasis on negative stereotypes of coloured identity,[82] or political parties' continued emphasis on racial mobilisation during political campaigns, Coloured people should continue to create and explore positive meanings of their identity. However, of equal importance is the realisation that the responsibility to change the South African mindset not only rests with Coloureds changing their own mindset, but that other groups need to do the same.

Conclusion

In this article we have sought to illustrate the significance of symbology to understanding coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa. As we have shown, coloured identity has been associated with negative stereotypes as a consequence of a narrow racial and ethnic understanding of the identity that views it as fixed. We have argued that a symbological approach allows for a more flexible view of coloured identity, one that encompasses a variety of different meanings and interpretations of what it means to be coloured in South Africa. We see this approach to coloured identity not only as an extension of social constructivism and postmodern creolisation, but also as a critique or challenge to stereotypical assumptions about Coloured people based on outdated racial or ethnic essentialist perspectives.

Much of the negativity associated with coloured identity has historically, and even into the present, been internalised by Coloured people themselves. This has been the result not only of centuries of negativity being imposed on Coloured people as a group, but also of the internalised racist views within Coloured groups. The notion of coloured identity as a symbol makes it possible for Coloured people to realise that they have agency and choice regarding the meanings that they feel the identity should have for them. This makes it possible for Coloured people to take control of these meanings and move them towards something positive rather than continuing to be hamstrung by the burden of historically (and contemporary) inherited negative meanings of the identity.

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