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Coloured and Black Relations in South Africa: The Burden of Racial Hierarchy

Kendrick Brown

*It is a fact that this term [Coloured] has been unsatisfactory as a reference and a naming of the people of combined African and European blood. If these people are a product of the coming together of Africans who are Africans and Dutch and English settlers who insist they are also Africans and Afrikaners, how come, or why is it that the product of their joint loins are . . . not Africans or Europeans?*¹

Defining people's racial classification represents a challenge with which most nations must contend. The manner in which South Africa has responded legally and conventionally to this challenge has had consequences affecting how various racial groups envision themselves and relate to those outside of their group. This has particularly held true for coloured² people in their interactions with the black majority in South Africa. This essay will address the events both before and during apartheid that have served to separate coloured individuals from black people. The legacy of such events continues to shape the dealings between the two groups and likely will play a role in determining future relations in post-apartheid South Africa.

Before discussing the events that helped to mold coloured and black relations, it is necessary to describe who coloured people are. In general, South Africa utilizes four racial classifications — Asian, Black, Coloured, and White. Officially, "Coloured" refers to any person of "mixed-blood" and includes children as well as descendants from Black-White, Black-Asian, White-Asian, and Black-Coloured unions. Complicating this designation, however, is the inclusion of Sunni Arab and European Muslims in the Coloured group.³ Considering that the majority of people in South Africa are Christian, the special consideration of religion highlights the use of the Coloured category as an "other" category not just for race, but also for religion. For the most

part, coloured persons reside in the southern region of South Africa. As of 1980, at least 87% of coloured people living in South Africa resided in Cape Province. This concentration in the southern area of the country is understandable considering that the coloured population originated with interactions in 1652 between Dutch settlers and Khoi-Khoi and San people already in the area.⁴

Historically, coloured people have served as an intermediate group between whites and blacks in South Africa. While the United States and other countries have adopted a "one-drop rule" that designates anyone having any non-white ancestry as a member of a non-white population, South Africa has conceived of its multiracial individuals as having an in-between status derived from, but marginal to, both parent groups. Some coloured people benefited from their closer association with the white dominant group by obtaining better employment, educational, and housing opportunities than blacks, as well as having the possibility of becoming "Pass-Whites." Pass-Whites were individuals who obtained legal reclassification as "White" from the government.⁵ While many persons may have been motivated by potentially better opportunities for upward mobility afforded by reclassification, other considerations may have been influential, including the desire to avoid discrimination and inconvenience associated with being non-white and the facilitation of intermarriage with whites.⁶ Regardless of the motivation for passing, these individuals, often with the cooperation of white supporters, were able to take advantage of their relatively closer proximity to white social status to improve their life conditions. The option of some coloured people to pass as white was a key factor in dividing the coloured and black groups. Black people expressed wariness of coloured individuals who could be accepted as members of the white group responsible for repressing their rights.

Despite the in-between position allowing the coloured group to occupy a higher status position relative to blacks or to improve their status by passing as white, the intermediate status carried a price because coloured persons often served as a buffer group between whites and blacks. In times of crisis, dominant groups frequently use a buffer group to protect themselves from the animosity of lower-status groups in a society.⁷ Consequently, coloured people sometimes have taken the brunt of hostility that may have been considered unsafe to direct at whites. Considering both this buffer role and the possibility of some coloured individuals being able to pass, the white group constructed a social situation that effectively separated coloured and black

people even before formally passing apartheid laws. Black people were likely to view coloured individuals with suspicion and resentment because overall the coloured group benefited more from the social system than blacks located at the bottom of the hierarchy. Coloured people were likely to be wary of the black group that could vent its frustrations and displace aggression toward whites onto the more socially acceptable target that the coloured group represented.

While the white group benefited from raising the status of the coloured group above that of blacks, such elevation was not without difficulties. Identification of coloured people proved problematic because of their diverse phenotypic traits and adherence to the dominant language and religion of South Africa. Often coloured individuals confounded racial classifications because they varied in complexion from white to very dark, spoke Afrikaans as a first language, or followed the Protestant faith of the white minority. Consequently, the white group needed a method of identifying coloured people and preventing these individuals from passing as white without the approval of members of the white community.⁸ Another difficulty linked to the coloured group involved a dispute about slavery between Afrikaners and English-speaking whites. In criticizing slavery in South Africa, English-speakers often pointed to Afrikaners' sexual exploitation of non-whites that produced coloured children. Such intimate contacts were presented as contradictory to Afrikaners' claims of needing to keep racial groups separated from each other. While this criticism may have helped abolish slavery, it did not stop the exploitation until many Afrikaners decided to more firmly establish a color line that would protect the "purity" of their group.⁹

Thus, the two motivations to identify coloured people and protect white group boundaries were among the factors that gave rise to the apartheid laws established soon after Afrikaners gained control of the South African parliament in 1948. The Race Classification Act, also referred to as the Population Registration Act, mandated that the South African population be divided into the current racial classifications of White, Indian, Black, and Coloured. In effect, this law legitimated the informal hierarchy — of the white minority at the top and blacks at the bottom, with Indians and coloured people in the middle — already in place before apartheid and entrenched the belief in separate racial groups.¹⁰ This Act also satisfied the need for identification of coloured people because bureaucratic departments were established to monitor the population's racial designation and reclassifications.¹¹

Three other acts focused on segregating racial groups from each other. The Group Areas Act created “group areas,” controlled the acquisition of property, and regulated the occupation of land and premises. In essence, South Africa became legally segregated with regard to interracial property transactions and changes in residential occupation. Derived from the rationale for the Group Areas Act, “pass laws” further restricted interracial interactions by closely monitoring, and at times forbidding, travel between regions designated for particular groups.¹² Another law addressed informal social situations involving people of different racial groups. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act specified that anyone in charge of a public place could mandate that their property be used exclusively by people belonging to a specific racial group. This prerogative could be exercised regardless of whether or not adequate accommodations had been made for all racial groups.¹³ Finally, attending to possible intimate interactions, the Immorality Act barred sexual relations between people of different racial groups. Individuals could be prosecuted if they were even suspected of having “immoral” relations with someone outside of their group.¹⁴ The cumulative effect of these three laws was to officially define and monitor racial groups in South Africa while ensuring the “purity” of the white group. A related effect was the solidification of boundaries between coloured and black people. Whereas before apartheid, convention served to define how groups interacted with each other, the apartheid laws gave legal force to those conventions and ensured that coloured and black people would be divided.

The events before and after the implementation of apartheid have had consequences for the ways in which coloured people interact with blacks in South Africa. Relations between the two groups are frequently based on a perceived lack of similarity and a heightened awareness of difference. Though similarities have been obscured because of the past social hierarchy in the country, members of the coloured and black communities share common features in their identities and attitudes. The external impetus for mobilization of racial group identity is similar for each community. Individuals often draw together on the basis of shared experiences, particularly when those experiences involve oppression, discrimination, or humiliation by a dominant group.¹⁵ White regulation of opportunities and resources has

provided opposition and frequently produced negative experiences, thus promoting solidarity for coloured and black people. Because a great amount of diversity exists within the created identities of “Coloured” and “Black,” it is necessary for individuals to develop points of cohesion if they are to engage in collective action to counter external threats.¹⁶ At times, coloured and black people have been able to evoke superordinate goals beyond those used to unify their own groups that have brought both communities together.¹⁷ Particularly in the struggle against apartheid, some coloured and black persons were able to come together and actively resist policies that adversely affected each of their groups. For the most part, however, widespread, sustained mobilization has not encompassed both groups.

The coloured and black communities also express similar tolerance attitudes toward other racial groups in South Africa. In a survey of South African high school students, Smith and Stones found that coloured and black respondents did not differ significantly on scales assessing their degrees of interracial tolerance and anti-white attitudes. For the most part, respondents were neutral toward whites and endorsed acceptance of interactions between people of different racial groups. This similar level of tolerance, which could assist in the formation of coloured and black coalitions, may be overwhelmed by two major perceived differences associated with relations between coloured and black people.

Likely encouraged as a way to maintain coloured people as a buffer group and separate from blacks, a major point of contention between coloured and black people has been the stereotype of coloured individuals as “mixed-breeds” with no nationhood, identity, land, or culture. This stereotype exists in contrast with the image of black people as proud, “pure-breeds” with history, culture, and identity going back centuries. Closely intertwined with the stereotype is the idea that coloured people were elevated to a higher status position over black individuals purely on the grounds of their skin color.¹⁹ These intertwined stereotypes are problematic for coloured and black interactions because they may constantly come to mind for coloured individuals when they are in the presence of black persons, whether a particular black person believes the negative stereotype or not. Research on stereotype threat suggests that people do not perform optimally when they are focused on disproving a stereotype about their group rather than the task at hand.²⁰ When in the presence of black persons, coloured people may direct their attention to defending their group’s

heritage instead of focusing on other aspects of interaction. In addition, feeling a need to defend one's legitimacy may lead some coloured individuals to feel distant, or even antipathy, toward members of the black community. Foster found that coloured persons expressed the greatest willingness to interact with English-speaking South Africans, followed by Indians and Afrikaners, and lastly by blacks.²¹ While black people also rated English-speaking South Africans highest, they expressed greater willingness to interact with coloured and Indian people than Afrikaners, who were rated lowest. This difference in preference for interaction may result from the threat represented by the stereotype of coloured people as having no cultural heritage.

Related to these stereotypes, another difference perceived to separate the coloured and black groups is the relative instability of coloured identification with black allies against white dominance. Until the passage of apartheid laws disenfranchising them, coloured people had the right to vote and participate in the political structure of South Africa. They retained this right longer than Indians, who were disenfranchised in the 19th century, or blacks, who were never extended such power by the government. Consequently, many coloured people faced a dilemma when the white group curtailed their rights during apartheid. They could wait for the white group to reconsider and restore their rights, join with black people experiencing similar discrimination and oppression, or unify and invest their racial group with a collective identity that did not depend on white or black allies.²² The point of contention is that coloured individuals had the privilege of choosing their identification, while black persons had no choice but to struggle against white dominance. A recent study on racial attitudes supports this notion of instability of coloured identification.²³ Compared to other racial groups in South Africa, coloured people were found to have the least stable racial attitudes as measured by the Oklahoma Racial Attitude Scale. In effect, coloured individuals expressed a wider range of racial attitudes than any other group. Similar to the wariness evoked by passing, this attitudinal variability by the coloured group means that blacks may be reluctant to fully accept people toward whom they feel uncertainty in the struggle to transform the South African political, economic, and social landscape.

The establishment of coloured identity as separate from black before and during apartheid, and the legacy of obscuring similarities while promoting perceived differences, have implications for future coloured and black relations in South Africa. Those relations often center on the evolving socio-political structure being implemented by the now predominantly black government. In general, black persons express more positive attitudes toward the changes occurring in their country, while coloured individuals tend to be more neutral.²⁴ This more neutral stance adopted by coloured people may be a result of threats thought to be represented by the black group and, by extension, the new government. Some coloured people may envision themselves as being considered expendable by the leaders of the ANC-led government. They may believe that the government officials perceive members of the white group as useful because of their skills, technology, and money, and also see Indians as necessary due to their skills, business acumen, and money, but regard coloured people as having nothing of value to offer. Believing that they do not have a place in the new social structure, coloured individuals subscribing to this belief may resist changes as threats to their status.

Another threat associated with the ANC-led government is the possibility of legislation that will allow the black majority to compete with coloured people for jobs, housing, and education. Believing that they will lose opportunities associated with higher status than blacks could lead some coloured individuals to resist policies focused on the redistribution of resources.

Lastly, some coloured persons may believe that the new government will enact policies that will lead to the loss of numeric advantage in the Cape Province. Because many coloured individuals can trace their ties to the Cape Province back generations, they may feel that any policies or proposals that could potentially weaken their connection to and influence in the region should be resisted.²⁵

These perceptions of threat to representation, resources, and space associated with the new government may serve to increase willingness to protect the interests of the coloured group²⁶ and be vigilant against those outside of the coloured community, particularly blacks, given the history of interaction between the two groups.²⁷ Perception of threat played a key role in the 1994 electoral success of the predominantly Afrikaner National Party in the Cape Province. Appealing to the large coloured population in the region, National Party candidates highlighted the certainty of black usurpation of coloured people's jobs

and social spaces if ANC candidates gained offices in the Cape Province.²⁸ Many coloured voters responded to this message and assisted the National Party to secure one of its few victories in that year's elections. Despite this susceptibility to rhetoric highlighting the threat represented by the black majority, however, coloured people have not always been opposed to the ANC-led government. A year after the election that gave the National Party control of many political offices in the Cape Province, the coloured electorate was less willing to vote for NP candidates because they perceived a greater divide between themselves and white people than that existing between the coloured and black groups.²⁹

What these elections indicate is that coloured and black relations may be in a state of flux as transformation occurs on a national level. Despite the history of strained relations, coloured and black people have an opportunity to establish superordinate goals that will allow their communities to recognize similarities and address the differences perceived to separate them. From the perspective of coloured individuals, there are three options. They could choose to side with the white minority and establish an identity based on similarities, such as language, to oppose the black majority. They could attempt to maintain their group boundaries and align with neither the black nor the white group. Alternatively, they could emphasize the qualities that they share with blacks and be a part of the efforts to transform South Africa. Whereas in the past this dilemma has mainly been an issue of negotiating between a politically, economically, and socially dominant white minority and a relatively less influential black majority, the current situation in South Africa alters the dynamics of the choice for coloured people. Now, they must decide between a still powerful, yet less influential white minority and a black community that is gaining control of South African institutions. How the coloured group chooses to relate to these forces will have lasting implications for the future of their country. ●

Notes

1. Omotoso 2000, 10.

2. The appellation "Coloured" has been a subject of debate in South Africa, particularly since the end of apartheid. Some individuals prefer to call themselves "Westerners" because of their identification with the Western Cape region of the country. Others use the designation of "so-called Coloured" to highlight the imposed designation mandated by apartheid. Because consensus on a name for the group has yet to emerge, for consistency's sake the term "Coloured" will be used throughout this paper.

3. Davis 1991.
4. Ibid.
5. Breakwell 1986.
6. Davis 1991.
7. Ibid.
8. Hunt and Walker 1974. Passing as white often required the collusion of supportive members of the white community. Frequently, whites were willing to provide such support because of the personal benefits that could be obtained. For instance, some school principals in all-white schools kept up their enrollments by obtaining reclassification as white for some coloured children (Breakwell 1986). As long as members of the white community could serve as gatekeepers to attaining "Whiteness," passing was accepted although coloured individuals seeking to pass still had to be discreet and conform to the ideology of their new community (Breakwell 1986; Davis 1991).
9. Hunt and Walker.
10. Nkomo, Mkwana-Twala and Carrim 1995.
11. Hunt and Walker.
12. Nkomo, Mkwana-Twala and Carrim.
13. Ibid.
14. Hunt and Walker.
15. du Pre 1994.
16. The diversity within the coloured group has been discussed. A similar, if not greater, degree of diversity exists for the black group in South Africa. Because of the different cultural practices, languages, and traditions of these groups, black identity serves as a political unifier that allows for satisfaction of interests common to each constituent ethnicity.
17. Sherif 1966.
18. Smith and Stones 1999.
19. du Pre.
20. Steele and Aronson 1995.
21. Foster 1991.
22. du Pre.
23. Smith and Stones.
24. Ibid.
25. du Pre.
26. Bornman and Appelgryn 1999.
27. Tajfel and Turner 1986.
28. Seekings 1997.
29. Ibid.

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