



Reflections on Identity Conflicts and Nation Building in Contemporary South Africa

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Abstract

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen a noticeable transformation of the notion of identity. Cluster identities of black and white, created by apartheid, have evolved to reflect the real racial and ethnic character of the country, including indigenous black, white, Indian and colored communities, in addition to an increasing African immigrant population. Contemporary identity conflicts in South Africa mainly emerge as these various identities seek to assert and re-assert themselves in the context of a multicultural post-apartheid society. This article seeks to advance the idea that it is possible to establish a supra national identity, which cuts across ethnic and racial divides, by mobilizing all ethnic identities to participate in a common national culture. Cognizant of the many challenges to creating a national identity, the article emphasizes the concept of civic nationalism as it offers a progressive opportunity to mobilize South Africans around a shared national vision.

Author profile

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Introduction

The end of apartheid in 1994, and the attendant changes in the economic, political and socio-cultural fronts saw the transformation of the concept of identity in South Africa. Contemporary identity conflicts in South Africa are to be understood within the context of competing identities seeking to assert or re-assert themselves in line with the new dispensation. For instance, some indigenous black ethnic groups have been advocating for Black Nationalism based on communalism through concepts such as *ubuntu*.¹ On the other hand some white nationalist groups have also been advocating for exclusive racial privileges. However, in a multicultural society such as South Africa Black Nationalism or White Nationalism can be exclusionary. Identity conflicts are by definition a clash between the concepts of nation(al) and communal identities. It is of paramount importance to outline from the outset that current identities found in South Africa were inherited from the apartheid era. However, there have been marked changes among some of the identities with the end of apartheid. Cluster identities of black (where "black" included indigenous African, and Indian and Coloured communities) and white, created by apartheid, have also evolved to reflect the real racial and ethnic character of South Africa, with the Indian and Colored identities emerging as distinct identities from the previous generic "black identity" forged during the apartheid struggle. Identities found in South Africa today are, the indigenous black community with various identities denoting the various indigenous ethnic groups found in South Africa, white community (Afrikaner and English), Indian Colored. An ever increasing African immigrant population also weighs in heavily on contemporary identities found in South Africa. This article seeks to argue that within the myriad identities found in South Africa today, there exists the possibility to have a shared national identity which cuts across ethnic and racial divides.

There are always competing configurations of what constitutes national identity in a multi racial, multi-ethnic nation-state in the mould of South Africa. Following the end of apartheid in 1994, there have been attempts by successive African National Congress (ANC) governments to forge national unity through civic nationalism. The first president of post-apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela, initially led the process to mobilize people behind a vision of a single nation guided by common values and symbols. Inspired and guided by his ideas, I therefore seek, through this article to advance the idea that it is possible to establish a shared identity in South Africa. Arguments in this article are guided by the concept of civic nationalism. The concept of civic nationalism fosters loyalty to a political community, usually the nation state, and is tolerant and inclusive. Furthermore, the concept propounds an allegiance to political institutions and principles rather than a community. In this context political institutions refer to the constitution and democracy; and principles refer to common citizenship rights and obligations. In highlighting the dynamics of the formation of national identity in post 1994 South Africa, I posit a supra national identity ahead of communal ethnic based identities.

¹ Ubuntu is an African concept of humanity towards others.

Available from <http://www.wiscomp.org/peaceprints.htm>

Background

Since the establishment of the South African state in 1910 the construction of a national identity was defined by the white community through hegemony and the use of ideological state apparatuses. The construction of a white South African identity was premised on the control of the state apparatus and access to resources by the white minority and the suppression of indigenous groups. The by-product of apartheid policies was on the whole the product of cluster identities, with sub-identities within the wider spectrum of cluster identities. During apartheid the two main identities prevalent were white and black.

The White community consisted of two main ethnic groups of European origin (English and Afrikaans) both of whom defined themselves during the apartheid era primarily in contradistinction to the black population. The narrative of 'whiteness' which informed the construction of white identity meant that race became a salient social category in South Africa.

The apartheid governments promoted an exclusive Afrikaner ethnic nationalism, as well as a broader white nationalism. The ruling "apartheid-era" party, the National Party, ideologues propagated a particular vision of South Africa as a multiracial society. They justified separate development policies in terms of primordially-conceived ethnic differences. This had the effect of collapsing individual ethnicities into white and black, us and them. The promotion of racial consciousness over other significant cultural markers was clearly a narrowly-defined form of nation building.

White nationalism was fostered by the slogans 'unity is strength' and 'unity in diversity'. The first slogan appealed to white jingoism and militarism in the face of an alleged communist-inspired attack on white 'civilization' in South Africa. The 'unity in diversity' only extended to whites as it effectively excluded others from identifying with the nation. A more accurate rendering would have been 'unity in adversity' for it was forged in the face of international hostility and internal black opposition. Even during apartheid's reform phase, a divide-and-rule strategy sought to consolidate white (Afrikaner) hegemony, co-opt the Coloreds and Indians, and perpetuate differences and divisions amongst the African population. Apartheid effectively created two nations; one white, the other black. South Africa became two political communities in a single national territory.

South Africa is composed of multiple black ethnic groups. The Zulu are the biggest of the eleven ethnic groups in South Africa, followed by the Xhosa. A closer examination of the identity conflict between indigenous ethnic groups was modeled around the struggle for economic and political emancipation. The struggle for economic and political emancipation among the indigenous black population rallied them around a common vision and cause in the struggle against apartheid. African liberation movements such as the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) mobilized

black communities around this common vision and constructed a single black identity built on common grievances, concerns and issues.

Constructing national identity after 1994

After the end of apartheid in 1994, the sub group identities encouraged by apartheid continued to exist although with a shared, strong overarching identity. In 1994, South Africa as a nation state embarked on a path to construct a single national identity from the various apartheid inspired identities. The genesis of this process was in the framing of the Constitution which in its preamble called for an effort to build “unity in diversity”. In this context active steps were taken immediately to bridge the huge divide of fear that apartheid had created between “oppressor” and “oppressed”. The national anthem of the oppressor was merged with that of the oppressed to give South Africa a new national anthem that still exists today. The national flag contained the colours of the oppressed people’s flag and colours from the oppressor’s flag and again this flag is still the official flag for South Africa and while it took long for all South Africans to embrace this flag, it became the biggest selling item during South Africa’s hosting of the Football World Cup. In the first week of the World Cup it was the scarcest item, most having been bought by South Africans of every colour and creed to fly on their cars, businesses and homes!

The first president of post-apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela, upon assuming office in April 1994, immediately led efforts to rally the nation towards a shared and common vision. Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his capacity as chairperson of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was instrumental in advocating for a just and tolerant society through the idea of *rainbowism*.² Efforts by former President Mandela and Archbishop Tutu are widely accepted as the first steps towards the advancement of the idea of a shared national identity.

To this end efforts aimed at creating a single national identity in South Africa have largely hinged on cultural and sporting events. National sporting and cultural events provide an arena for a shared public culture. Key national and cultural events such as the 1995 Rugby World Cup, 1996 soccer Africa Cup of Nations, 2003 Cricket World Cup, the 2010 Soccer World Cup, and successive South African Music Awards have mobilized South Africans around a common cultural experience.

The quest to create a common national identity in South Africa is also played out through discursive texts, particularly the media. The national broadcaster, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has adopted an inclusive policy which gives space to all available identities in South Africa. For instance, SABC 1 broadcasts in Zulu and Xhosa, SABC 2 in Afrikaans and SABC 3 in English.

In summary, identity should be defined by participation in a common national culture. This does not amount to a sort of cultural reductionism for communal cultures. By their

² The term ‘rainbowism’ was coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to denote South Africa’s multi-racial society and the peaceful coexistence of different identities.

nature national cultures are hybrid as they comprise elements from all constituent cultures. Various ethnic groups found in South Africa represent 'nations' within a nation state. My argument is that it is possible to build a single national identity by mobilizing all ethnic identities around a fair and universal constitution, national anthem and through providing a shared narrative on a history that bind them all together. Instead of being reductionist, the concept of a shared public culture produces allegiance to certain cultural common denominators and symbols.

Challenges to national identity formation

Although the possibility of having a shared national identity is possible it is of paramount importance to note that it is not easy in a multicultural nation state such as South Africa. The socio-economic status of South Africa today provides a challenge to efforts aimed at creating a shared common identity. After decades of marginalization during apartheid there are deliberate efforts by the post-apartheid administrations to empower the black community. A major challenge here is that even though black economic empowerment policies were necessary and formulated with good intentions, they have been criticized in recent years for their exclusivity and the failure to reach out to vulnerable sections of society which are 'presumed' to have been advantaged by the apartheid system. Socio-economic and political empowerment of certain groups and disempowerment of the new 'other' in contemporary South Africa poses potential dangers of identity-based conflicts.

Another challenge that hampers efforts towards a shared national identity in South Africa is multiculturalism. Within the environment of multiculturalism it has to be noted that, at times it is difficult to conceive a shared national identity because of nativism. However, in view of this challenge there is a need to reconceptualise the notion of national identity and define it along the lines of a shared common national culture which accepts and respects the cultural identity of individual ethnic groups.

The process of harmonizing identities in South Africa is well underway with the new South African national identity being constructed discursively through the media and other forums of public discourse. A critical analysis of the content on the national broadcaster highlights efforts aimed at harmonizing various cultures and identities. This is a shift from a racially constituted system of inequality and cultural identity to a national identity constituted as culturally diverse but with equality based on citizenship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to posit that even though identity conflicts in South Africa have at times manifested through nativism and apartheid exploitation of differences, it is possible to build a supra national identity. Difficult as it may be to expect an ethos of non racial citizenship to prevail unchallenged by older political perceptions of nativism and apartheid divisions, it will suffice to note that the concept of civic nationalism provides a progressive opportunity to mobilize citizens of South Africa around a shared national vision.