

M. Ndlezana

## Introductory Remarks

When I first got the invitation to present a talk to a BMF audience, I wasn't sure what I would talk about. I couldn't think of something I can possibly say that you would find appealing. BEE perhaps, I thought to myself. But again I quickly dismissed that thought out of suspicion that you may have reached a saturation point, as far that one goes. Anyway, I thought to myself, the Mbeki brothers have sufficiently covered that topic – from both sides of the argument. Big brother, the advocate and younger brother – the critic/beneficiary.

Upon further reflection it hit me that the topic was actually starring right at me – that is the subject of black middle class, of which you and I are members. This is a subject that has featured prominently in our public discourse in the last two years or so. But, the contributions have focused mostly on the economic aspects of this class, particularly their consumption patterns – attracting both praise and derision.

Little has been said on the cultural aspects of the black middle-class. The few that have bothered to say something on this aspect have pointed an accusing finger, charging members of this class with betrayal of their black identity. Apparently, as they climb up the social ladder towards the higher income group, members of the middle have picked up cultural traits that negate their cultural background.

Gripped by guilt arising from indulging in the luxuries afforded by their elevated social station, the black-middle class has become lodged in a rear-guard mode – never missing an opportunity to offer a qualification after every indulgence. It has come to a point where, as a writer in the Sunday Times tells us, a well deserving black woman, enthralled by the prospects of matrimony, upon buying an exquisitely expensive Italian gown, feels the obligation to caution that she hasn't gone Western. As if to prove that she still remains authentically black, she points out that an ox will still be slaughtered and, by the way, the groom did present *mahadi* or *ikhazi* to her family. In some cases, others feel it necessary to issue constant reminders that, though resident in formerly white suburbia, they still make the occasional visits to their *kasie*.

The insinuation is that a township is a natural habit for all those of a darker complexion. This is frighteningly reminiscent of colonial language that all black people, because of their supposed inescapable state of primitiveness, belonged in villages. The sophistication of urban life was supposedly better suited for the civilized white folk. Interestingly, now the accusers of black betrayal have shifted the boundaries of belonging away from the villages to the townships. Suburbs are the new islands of exclusivity, supposedly reserved for their natural inhabitants, the white folk. This begs the question: Are the accusers of black betrayal latter-day native controllers? Hold onto this thought, I come back to it later.

## The Betrayal Thesis

At the heart of the charge of betrayal, rests an implicit assumption that there has always been a priori, and homogenous black identity, to which all black people ascribed. And this identity, it is implied, is essentially cultural in content.

I humbly disagree and propose to make four points in support of my disagreement.

**Firstly:** It is meaningless to measure blackness through a cultural prism alone. For, the black identity is not only cultural, but also political. So, one cannot privilege the cultural over the political. And if we are to place the two constituent elements on the hierarchy importance, then the political composite of black identity will have to take precedence. Political consciousness developed before cultural assertion.

**Secondly,** rather than a homogenous composite, black cultural identity is actually a continuum that has always allowed for degrees of adherence and variation, to a point where we can even speak of multiple cultural identities. And this is not of recent occurrence, as I will demonstrate, but originates back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of that initial encounter with colonial influence.

The very progenitors of a black identity were not themselves a personification of a black authenticity, but a representation of hybridity – a construct moulded out of an initial encounter between colonial influence and indigenous culture. I use the example of the founding-father of African nationalism, Reverend Tiyo Soga, to illustrate this point.

**Thirdly,** homogenization and the (pseudo) authentication of black culture was actually an apartheid project pursued for a political objective. This followed a shift in colonial thinking from assimilation to segregation. Anthropology was used with alarming efficiency to uncover the supposedly true and authentic culture of Africans, to re-assign each one of them to a particular tribe and thus claimed to restore them to their natural state.

**Fourth,** black thought did not capitulate to this essentialisation of black identity, emphasis was put on political, and less on cultural composite of the black identity. This was evident in the nationalist thought of the 1940/50 to the black consciousness movement of the late 1960/70s.

## **Tiyo Soga: Personification of the Political and Cultural Content of the Black Identity.**

I thought if we are to talk of an *a priori* black identity, we ought to go back to the source, to the very initial articulation of black identity. That source we locate in the person of the Tiyo Soga, upon whom the historian and biographer, Brian William, has conferred, with wide-spread unanimity, the title of founding-father of African nationalism or black consciousness.

Soga's definition of a black identity was multi-dimensional. It rested on both cultural and political content, without one being privileged over the other. Their sequence of articulation, however, differed. The political consciousness preceded cultural affirmation. This is because the evolution of a black consciousness was not triggered by a spontaneous yearning to (re-) discover the true and authentic cultural-self, but stemmed out of a political betrayal - a failure of the civilizing mission to honour its promise of giving full citizenship to the civilized black people.

Rather, than recognize his civilized status and treat him like a man, as Frantz Fanon would have said, colonial society related to him as a black man or a *kaffer*, with all the contempt and denigration that was reserved for his kind. This prompted an inward gaze right into the culture and heritage of the self. Instead of continuing to seek acceptance, that was not forthcoming, Soga dug deep in his history and culture to disprove the colonial notion of inferiority. But, the cultural self was not articulated independently, but linked to the political claims - to show worthiness to citizenship. Moreover, and equally important to bear in mind, that embrace of African culture was marked by ambivalence. He eulogized some and denounced other cultural practices.

Before we unpack this and to appreciate Soga's dilemma, lets first find out who Tiyo Soga was.

He was the first over-seas educated black South African, the first black to be ordained priest, a pioneer of African literature and a seminal public intellectual.

Soga built the first very first modern churches ever among natives in the Eastern Cape, even in the face of the skepticism among his fellow missionaries, who thought the natives were more likely to burn the churches, than fill them up.

He translated English works into Xhosa for the benefit of those who couldn't understand English and thus widened the readership among Xhosas. These included articles that appeared in missionary journals; John Bunyan's book: Pilgrim's Progress (in 1866, which he had started translating at university); the Bible (which he didn't live to see published).

His literary influence was also felt in lyrical compositions – particularly hymns that continue to be popular even to this day. He was a tireless contributor of articles to newspapers and was quit supportive of the idea of launching black newspapers and circulating them widely within the native community. In the first edition of the newspaper *Indaba* in August 1862, Soga wrote that natives will respond enthusiastically to the paper because natives are conversational people by nature, with an unquenchable thirst for news. They are always eager to welcome visitors so that they could hear news of what is happening beyond their communities.

Soga's passion for African literature partly stemmed from his self-perception as a public intellectual. He believed that: "Missionaries must show that they can speak on other questions than those in which they are more immediately interested".

So how did this extra-ordinary personality come into being, particularly at that moment in our history?

Soga was born in 1829 at Mgwali, about 30 kilometers outside of Butterworth. He died 42 years later on August 12, 1871. Quite early on in his life, he was taken in by a missionary, Rev. William Chalmers, who had taken a liking to the young lad. He thought the young Tiyo had great potential, but needed a nurturing environment to bring it into fruition. Tiyo's parents, being Christian converts themselves, were more than happy to have their son brought under direct missionary tutelage.

Chalmers got Soga admitted into the prestigious Lovedale Seminary in 1844 at the age of 15. But, his education was disrupted by an outbreak of yet another war, in 1846. Suspected of colluding with colonial authority, the missionaries, fled for the safety of Scotland. Now having adopted Soga as one of their own and fearing that he would be ostracized by his native community, they decided to take him along. And so it happened that in July 1846, Soga began what was to be a life-long relationship with a place he would come to call "home".

Two years later he completed high school studies and returned to SA in January 1849 to start missionary work. But, the war of 1850 forced him to make a choice between joining the anti-colonial struggle and remaining with the missionary enterprise, which meant siding with the enemy, as the missionaries were implicated in colonial conquest. This was a defining moment in the Soga's life, his Chief, Maqoma, had called on him personally to pick a side. Maqoma wanted Soga to translate the content of letters they had confiscated from British soldiers. He thought they might get some intelligence, which they would use in military planning against the British. Soga declined the request stating that "he would not mix himself up in a context which carried death to his fellow creatures". That decision cast him squarely behind the missionary enterprise. He thus became an accomplice in the colonial project.

Like his colleagues, Soga's life was threatened as the war proceeded. Once again, on June 1851, Soga's fellow missionaries took him along for the refuge of Scotland, where he became the first African student ever to enroll at Glasgow University's Theological School and completed his degree in September 22, 1856. He returned home the following year not only as the most learned black man, but also the only one married to a white woman, Janet Burnside, whom he had met in Glasgow.

Soga was, therefore, a beneficiary of the missionary enterprise. He not only imbibed the civilizing message from early on in life, but was also a true believer in the virtues of civilization, and refused to become part of colonial resistance. Soga believed that civilization would gain natives respect from the colonial society. For, once educated, natives would rise up beyond their servitude to colonial society and occupy respectable positions in society.

Some section of the colonial society indeed thought Soga was the very personification of excellence that debunked racial prejudice. Following a sermon he had given at a white church in Port Elizabeth in July 1857, the first by a black priest at that church and in what attracted a huge attention, even the local media: Port Elizabeth Telegraph, July 9, 1857; described him as follows: "In this person may be seen the transcendent operation and effects of Christianity, civilization, and science trampling under foot every opposing prejudice and difficulty, however formidable or seemingly insurmountable".

Such accolades made him ambivalent about colonial prejudice. In a letter written to a colleague, he expressed: "Times are changed...Although there are among certain classes here, strong prejudices against colour, yet my reception showed that these prejudices are not so much against the skin as against the circumstances and the character of those whose complexion I bear..."

Yet, Soga was guarded not to assume acceptance within white society, even with his education and status. "the Scotch education, not my black face", he wrote, "has been my passport into places where that face would not be permitted to enter". "My rule of conduct among the colonists", he continued, "is never to force myself into their company...Knowing the prejudice existing in the colony against colour, I had resolved never to break forcibly through these prejudices".

Ultimately, though, Tiyo Soga personified the paradox of the civilizing mission that sought to create citizens out of the natives with the promise of citizenship. But once it had created that citizen, it reneged on its promise. The officialdom persisted to treat the new citizen as a mere native, a subject of colonial rule by decree.

Despite his civilized status: Soga was subjected to a series of humiliating experiences, quite contrary to what he had been promised or expected as a civilized man. One of many indignities he suffered included him being stopped by

policemen demanding a pass. When he told them that he was exempted from carrying one because to his status, they led him to prison where they proceeded to interrogate him on why he, a native, didn't carry a pass.

These moments of colonial betrayal, in turn, prompted a rupture with the civilizing message, a rupture that was followed by the development of a black consciousness and an articulation of a black identity. That black identity was essentially a political one, not one that touted the virtues of African culture nor sought to preserve its purity in the face of colonial influence. Soga couldn't have spoken in defense of cultural purity, because he was a construct of the missionary enterprise - he believed in the virtues of English culture and Christianity.

But the new and spurned Soga, no longer accepted the dichotomy of white-superiority and black inferiority uncritically. He interrogated the cultural assumptions that underpinned white supremacy. Rather, than simply accept the virtues of whiteness, on the one hand, and accede to the supposed vices of blackness, on the other, Soga held them both to the same level of scrutiny. He asserted that such criminal practices as cattle-thievery among natives were just as morally deplorable as "the refined thieving of forgery, embezzlement, and voluntary insolvency" common among whites.

Soga exposition of black consciousness came out forcefully in, among other writings, a booklet titled: "The Inheritance of my Children", which he wrote around 1870 for his three sons as they left for Scotland. He had become very ill and knew death was near. Because he wouldn't be around to care for them, he sent his sons to Scotland to be cared for by colleagues and family. The booklet contained what he thought were crucial lessons they had to learn about life:

- **Black Pride:** He told his sons to regard themselves black men, even though they may be born of a white woman. He explained: "You will be more thought of for this by all good and wise people, than for the other. It will show them that you care not for the slight put by the prejudices of men upon one class of men, who happen to differ from them in complexion"
- **Black Ability:** "Under favourable circumstances the reasoning of the Black man is capable of as much improvement and enlightenment as that of the white man...God has made from creation no race of men mentally and morally superior to other races. They are all equal in these respects; but education, civilization and the blessings of Christianity have made the differences among men"
- **Black Solidarity** – "As men of colour, live for the elevation of your degraded, despised, down-trodden people. My advice to all coloured people would be: Assist one another, patronize 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....

- **Black Unity** – "Should providence make you prosperous in life, cultivate the habit of employing more of your own race, than of any other, by way of elevating them. For this purpose prefer them to all others – I mean all black people... Union in every good thing is strength; and to a weak party or race, union above all things is strength. Disseminate this idea among your countrymen, should you have any influence with them".

In Tiyo Soga, therefore we see the very first articulation, early in the 1860s, of what later crystallized into African nationalism/black consciousness. It was a political program that called for unity among all oppressed black people. Called on them to mobilization their resources and utilize them for the benefit of their collective lot.

**On Black Culture**, though, he was less lucid, but somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, observed some African norms, such as submitting to chiefly authority as its subject. He thought very highly of chiefs "Specimens of Nature's own nobility..." This is was quite unusual for a missionary, because the common view within that establishment was that chiefs are very guardian of paganism among the natives. He counseled missionaries not to denounce African customs and habits out-rightly, but work within the world-view of those they sought to convert. This required that missionaries "be prepared to identify themselves with the people" and, in the process, would actually discover that natives are not without virtues: "the student of human nature can reap a splendid harvest in the study of their history, prejudices, habits, and customs... he will find much to show that there is some good in all men; that God is the common Father of all, and therefore that no race should be despised".

On the other hand, Soga denounced African cultural practices as Pagan, especially lobola and the practice of circumcision. Soga himself was not circumcised and he barred this practice in his mission stations. At one point he expelled a couple of initiates from the mission station because they defied that prohibition.

The cultural composite of a black identity, as conceptualized by Soga, was of a hybrid nature, not the pure and authentic phenomena that some present it to be.

Soga's ambivalence towards African culture was actually a manifestation of cultural schism within the black society at large. The locals responded differently to the colonial influence. Some embraced it, whilst others rejected it. Phillip Mayer, an anthropologist, captured this cultural divide in the Eastern Cape, in his depiction of Red Xhosa and School Xhosa. Red, meaning *Bomvu*, referred to the illiterate segment of the community and was a description of how they looked – red from ochre. The School Xhosa referred to the literate section of the

community who considered themselves enlightened, but Red Xhosas referred to them disparagingly as *Amagqoboko* which essentially meant they were traitors. *Bagqobokile*, meaning they had a hole, it was through that hole the settlers infiltrated into their society and eventually colonized them. The educated ones, according to the Red Xhosas, were the intermediaries of the colonial project.

My point is that, we can never talk, at least if our time-line is confined within modern South Africa, of a homogenous black cultural identity. There were multiple identities, and individuals have always picked and chose from this cultural milieu, depending on their social influences. Interestingly, the black cultural identity that came to dominate the black imagination or personality, is actually the one that was articulated by *amagqoboka*, the very same section of the society that was considered less black by their conservative 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 authentic by any stretch of imagination – nor did its inventors lay any claims to authenticity. After all they were products of the civilizing mission, the very personification of cultural hybridity. And their definition of a black identity put more emphasis on the political than the cultural elements.

The culture-centric definition of black identity owes its prominence to colonial agency. It was a function of the shift in colonial policy from assimilation to segregation particularly after the formation of the Union. Having demarcated South Africa into white and black spaces through the infamous Land Act of 1913, the politicians left it to their intellectual cohorts, cultural anthropologists in particular, to come up with an elaborate cultural theory to justify that segregation. The 1920s in particular saw a mushrooming of Bantu/Native Studies in various universities including Pretoria University, UCT, supported by the colonial state.

The first official salvo towards (re-)subjectifying the Bantus – treating them as subjects to rule over arbitrarily, not citizens with rights - was the promulgation of the Native Administrative Act in 1927. That law decreed that, henceforth, all Africans were tribes-people, whose natural habitat was a village under the rule of a chief. It did not matter how sophisticated or urbanite you considered yourself to be, the law made you a tribesman by virtue of your black pigmentation. If by some weird reason, according to colonial logic that is, a group of you happened to tribe-less, the Native Commissioner could easily constitute you into a tribe, find you a village and assign you a chief. Ordinary folks, without any association nor linkage to chieftaincy, were made chiefs on the saying so of anthropologists, who claimed to have uncovered traces of royalty in one's lineage. Anthropologists also wrote up volumes and volumes of what they called customary law, according to which all the natives were to be ruled.

Apartheid academy, in pursuit of segregation, reduced Black identity to its cultural elements, most of which were of their own concoction, but nonetheless bestowed upon them the mantle of authenticity. The objective was not to restore



Africans to their natural self, but to realize a political goal – that was to impose and maintain white supremacy over a numerically dominant black population. The question of how to control natives – also known as the Native Problem, had always preoccupied settlers from the moment of their arrival. The officialdom offered a range of solutions to this problem beginning with annihilation, which almost wiped off the entire Khoisan population, then it was assimilation of the natives and finally segregation.

If the Afrikaner ideologues sought to ethnicise the black identity, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century African nationalists universalized it. Theirs was a re-affirmation of what had been articulated by Soga back in the 1860s. They defined blackness (or African-ness) on the basis of residence, history and experience. Africans are Africans because they occupy the continent of Africa, not because they were constituted of various ethnicities. They share a common experience of colonial oppression on the basis of their race, and have created a common history of colonial resistance.

As for the distinctiveness of the African experience – such as ethnicities, chieftaincy and ancestral worship - they did not wish to preserve them in the interest of authenticity. Rather, the Africanists wished the various tribes would fuse into one nation. They alluded to chieftaincy, not to retain it, but to accentuate its democratic practices only to illustrate that Africans were also familiar with democracy and thereby strengthen their case for citizenship in a democratic South Africa. Christian morality had to precede ancestral worship. Overall they sought a fusion of the best cultural elements in the two cultures - Western and African – a hybrid culture.

This is what Steve Biko, in the 1970s, would call **joint culture** – one made up of the best of the two cultural worlds. He spoke of the specificity of African culture, but didn't see it as immutable, it was not frozen in time and thus incapable of adapting to social changes.

Soga's definition of a black identity, as we know, was predominantly political in content, defining it, as he did, in relation to political power, experience and history. For that reason, it was a trans-racial definition encompassing all oppressed groupings – African, Indian and Coloured.

The talk about authentic blacks actually reminds me of talk given at Wits University by the distinguished anthropologist Archie Mafeje on the future of anthropology as a discipline. He didn't think the future looked bright – because anthropology was based on discovering and studying the other - that is the native other on whose behalf it spoke and informed the colonial society – on their sexual, feeding habits and on all sorts of other curiosities. Mafeje said Anthropology faced extinction because there are few aborigines or natives left to be discovered, and most importantly, the natives have now become independent and insist on speaking for themselves and to define who they are.

In light of the discourse of black betrayal, Mafeje might be encouraged to note that anthropology has gained a new lease of life. But, disappointed to realize that former subjects of anthropological nativisation, have become latter-day native controllers in search of true native to preserve them in their native state.